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(Interviewed by Abhishek Sarkar)

When did you pass the B.A. and M.A. examinations? And details of the institutions concerned.

I passed B.A. from Presidency College in 1976 and M.A. from Jadavpur University in 1978.

When did your first encounter with Shakespeare take place (at school or college)?

I believe it was in school, we didn't have Shakespeare in the syllabus but I was reading it on my own. A friend received the complete works as a gift and was nice enough to lend it to me.

Which Shakespearean texts were prescribed in the college and university syllabi?

The earlier Calcutta University syllabus had Shakespeare in the third year. There was a paper on Drama where two Shakespearean texts were done along with other texts. Shailendra Kumar Sen did *As You Like It* with us. Arun Dasgupta took up *Macbeth* in the third year. At the M.A. level of course we had a full paper on Shakespeare that included his sonnets, plays, accounts of his life and the stage. *Winter's Tale*, *Twelfth Night* and *Richard III* were also done. Jagannath-da and Dinesh-da did Shakespeare with us.

Who taught the texts in question?

Shailendra Kumar Sen did *As You Like It* with us. Arun Dasgupta took up *Macbeth* in the third year. Dinesh-babu of Jadavpur University did *Twelfth Night* and *Winter's Tale*.

What techniques were used (e.g., close reading, lecture demonstration, group discussion, seminars etc) for teaching Shakespeare?

Since I graduated in 1978, this was before the theorists had impacted Shakespeare studies in India, we mostly did close reading of the texts and some performative aspects were discussed as well. Shailendra-babu was very finicky about close reading of the texts, but he pointed out how short scenes interposed with long scenes contributed to stage action in the Elizabethan theatre. The oral reception of the text was known for its punning quality and the professors always made this very clear to us. The B.A. curriculum usually incorporated any two texts therefore giving us the freedom to choose any two each year. At the M.A. we had a pool of 5-6 plays from which we chose the ones we wanted to be taught.

One could go on and on about Dinesh-babu's style of teaching. He had a booming voice which he

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used to go into the specifics of the text. Jagannath-babu (*Richard III* and *King Lear*) was more flexible and open in his approach. He didn't read the whole play thoroughly but went about it in a more interesting way. His classroom teaching was not very chiselled but he had sudden spurts of ideas that he came up with and that made us sit up and take notice.

What traits of any particular teacher impressed you most?

Kitty (Scouler) Datta unfortunately did not do Shakespeare with us, she did do Marlowe, Spenser and the vast range of her scholarship was stupendous. I was absolutely awestruck. Frankly I never liked Spenser before she did it with us. She picked up a stanza and compared it to *Shakuntala* or while talking about Crashaw she compared the image of the cherub to the image of baby Krishna in the *Padabali*. Her range was incredible. Another person who had done a bit of Shakespeare was Debabrata-babu. He was a very good actor and had the quintessential 18th century personality with the wit that came with it.

Did the teachers maintain total gravity in class or cut jokes to enliven the reading experience?

Mihir-da was a very approachable and lively man; he treated us like equals and often joked around in class. However most of the older professors were slightly conservative and maintained the student teacher equation.

Did the teacher enact the scenes in the classroom?

I believe that enactment is a much more powerful tool when teaching or reading the texts. At Visvabharati where I teach, we encourage the students to perform the plays, even if they are simply play-acting in the classrooms or reading actively with groups. Jagannath-babu had a habit of asking people to read out different characters, there wasn't any enactment.

Did the teacher refer to literature in other languages while discussing Shakespeare? For example, would the teacher mention Dante, Kalidasa or Tagore while reading Shakespeare with the students?

As I said earlier, Kitty-di was wonderful when it came to intertextuality. She seamlessly compared vastly different texts solely through imagery and created an enriching classroom experience.

Were expletives and sexual references omitted?



I don't think the sexual references were ever omitted all together but they were also not explicated either. In the Porter scene, Arun-babu would go into details about the tailor and his goose but he would never make it sound lewd.

How far was the socio-historical context of plays discussed?

As for the socio-historical contexts of the plays, something in the manner of a historic approach was referred to. At the B.A. level or more specifically at the M.A. level the stage aspects and conditions were discussed. The whole idea of Elizabethan theatre was the epicentre of the discussion. I do think Arun-babu referred to the porter coming up the trap door and it being the door to Hell.

Were Shakespeare's contemporary dramatists given the same amount of importance in the classroom?

Yes, but only at the M.A. level – Marlowe and Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*.

Which editions and what critical material were prescribed and used?

Secondary resources were always prescribed. One of the first things Shailendra-babu did was to throw at us, quite literally, a short history of Shakespeare and give us a test on it 7 days later. This did us a world of good as we got our basics right. We had a huge primary reading list which was then complemented by secondary resources. Arun-babu was fond of the new Arden; but he wasn't finicky about it though. I believe there was another guide called Signet. Some of the earlier versions of the Oxford-Cambridge series were available too.

What was the examination and question pattern like?

At the M.A. level we had 8 full papers of which one was on Shakespeare and one on the Renaissance. It's difficult to remember, but there would be essay type questions on the various themes of the play. Questions on characterisation were also common. In *Macbeth*, the Porter or Sleepwalking scene would also be there. Besides this we tackled questions about the folios and the textual sources too. We primarily had the 16 mark essay type question and if there were short questions they were usually clubbed together. We had RTC (reference to context) which was a compulsory question.

Did the teacher refer to stage and film productions of Shakespeare?

Shailendra-babu referred to the Kurosawa films and how they gave a different dimension to the texts. There were screenings of film adaptations but these were all outside the department, however we were asked to go and watch them.

Was there any performance of Shakespeare at the institution?



Not that I remember one at Presidency. At Jadavpur University we did not do Shakespeare. We did Rabindranath and Yeats instead. We performed Chekov as well but not Shakespeare. Later on there were productions by Mithu who did *Tempest*. At the first reunion there was a performance of the Dark Lady of the Sonnets. Elizabeth was played by Sutapa Niyogi, Dark Lady was played by Anindita Basu, the Beef Eater was played by Jagannath Guha and I played Shakespeare. We rehearsed at Jashodhara-di's place for a few days. Mihir-da also did a *Tempest* in Indian costume.

Noticeable changes in Shakespeare pedagogy and student reaction over the decades.

Nowadays students studying Shakespeare read it without knowing anything about the performance history or without knowing anything about the textual references. Given the scope of the paper and the semester system it isn't possible to incorporate these aspects within the syllabus.

What differences have you noticed between Shakespeare teaching in your country and abroad?

There is a huge gap in the infrastructure which is obvious but I don't think we're that far behind in terms of scholarship. Although currently academics have taken a backseat it seems in India.

Do you think that Shakespeare is an overrated author?

I think Shakespeare is being underrated now which is a pity. You can now count on your fingers the number of people doing research on Shakespeare. There is a notion that the last word has been spoken on Shakespeare, but this is not true. I would still understand if someone tried it and then said that there isn't much scope, but I don't believe this is the case.

How would you react to the phenomenon of reading Shakespeare in a simplified language or in paraphrase, now popular among students in the West?

You know once when I was in the UK for a conference, I met a Japanese professor. In Japan they don't teach Shakespeare in Shakespearean language, they teach it in Japanese, but it was surprising because there's so much in the language itself. He said that the students didn't understand the Shakespearean language. But my question is whether they are really reading Shakespeare then? When we try to do a translation of Shakespeare it is a tremendous, almost impossible task. There are puns which just do not seem to translate. I don't think it is possible to read Shakespeare without studying the Shakespearean language.