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(Interviewed by Arunava Banerjee)

When did you pass B.A. and M.A.? From which institutions?

I passed B.A. in 1965 and M.A. in 1967. The B.A. was from Bethune College and the Masters was from the University of Calcutta.

When did you come across Shakespeare for the first time?

It was actually in school. We came across Shakespeare in school and it was a history play of all things, *Henry V*.

Which school was this?

Loreto House, Middleton Row.

Who taught the play?

In school? It was Mrs. Morris. She wasn't an Anglo-Indian, she wore a sari, she was from the south of India. She may have been from what is today Chennai. She was a Christian, a Roman Catholic.

So how were you taught in school? What was the teaching style like?

We did enact the scenes, there was a play-reading, and there was stress on how to read Shakespeare. Shakespeare was memorized, we had to memorize, and we were asked to reproduce portions of the Shakespearean text, however boring. We liked *Henry V*, I suppose because of the patriotic element. I don't see people today reading and loving *Henry V*. So that was Shakespeare for us. Mrs. Morris had a sense of humour also, which is necessary when you are doing a serious text. And she was slightly excitable too. She once used the word 'bloody', and quickly said 'I am quoting from *Macbeth*'. Very colourful! We had another teacher, Mother Bernadine, who was steeped in drama. She never became Mother Superior, she was sent away to Lucknow. She oversaw dramatic productions of any kind,



and she did help to produce Gilbert and Sullivan on stage. But I don't remember her doing any Shakespeare. That was the school experience.

So how was your college experience of Shakespeare different from your experience in school?

I would say it was much more serious, on the flip side there weren't too many texts... There was one tragedy and one comedy. I think school was more interesting, in spite of the fact that it was *Henry V*.

Which board was this?

For Senior Cambridge our papers were sent back by ship to be corrected. I wonder if any people pay attention to *Henry V*, but it is a rather interesting play, with a little bit of humour, a little bit of patriotism, and the fervour with which you go into war.

What were the Shakespeare plays you had to study in college and university?

I remember it very well, we were actually given two tragedies, one comedy, one was by Marlowe of course, *Edward II*. It is still there in the B.A. syllabus in Calcutta University. There was *Macbeth* for tragedy and *As You Like It* for comedy. The person who was teaching us was one of the three star pupils of their time. My father spoke of them with a lot of awe and admiration. He studied with them in Scottish Church and Presidency. Mrs Mrinalini Emerson who taught us *Macbeth* and *Edward II* studied at Scottish Church. The other two were Rama Chaudhury, who taught Sanskrit, one of the very erudite Sanskrit lecturers one has come across, and Shiuli Das of Philosophy. Mrs Emerson was ageing then, it was almost time for her to retire. She would read and she would be lost in the text, and for most of the time I don't think that she was aware of our presence. Because she read and she remembered her experiences of Shakespeare, it was mainly textual. Of course there was a vast difference, there were no male teachers in Bethune College, and hence there was a marked difference between university and my college days with Mrs. Emerson. That was rather rigid, textual, and more of paraphrasing... text was important, something that tends to be important. However, memorizing portions of Shakespeare happened only in school.

What were the texts taught in university and who taught them?

It was an overwhelming change. We had an actor amongst us, Prof. Jyoti Bhattacharya. I don't know if you have heard of him. He just transformed Shakespeare for us, he gave us goose pimples, and he



treated it as a performing art. He told us about Sir Laurence Olivier, he once asked for a cup of tea in the middle of a speech and no one realized it, he was so dramatic. He was a change from what we had done so far. He was very much into getting between the lines of the text and the text was sacrosanct. There was no moving away from it or what Shakespeare perhaps intended.

Which were the university texts?

King Lear, and *Measure for Measure*. They were taught by Prof. Bhattacharya. Both were, I think. Oh, of course, *Anthony and Cleopatra* which was taught by Amalendu Bose. There was one portion which he did extensively, 'the barge she sat on'. He had a whole essay on the description of Cleopatra, on her infinite beauty and I will never forget the way he taught it. But there were a lot of teachers who had been taught by Tarak Sen, so we got a second hand Tarak Sen. The reverence for the text is now really missing.

Was there any enactment of the scenes in college?

No, not since school. We came to a realization around the late 80's that there were two categories of students who wanted to study English literature. When we were studying, Loreto house was full of convent educated students studying English, if you didn't know how to express yourself as a student you were not included, but perhaps Bethune did later on accept a few people who came from English medium schools. The policy of not teaching English at all was not yet there. Disparagement of Shakespeare – I don't think it ever happened, in the Bengal scenario, even people who were against English confessed that they were ardent disciples of Shakespeare. People who knew Bengali very well, also somehow seemed to understand Shakespeare better, and always did Shakespeare in a comparative way which students from an Anglo-Indian School were not capable of. That's what I felt. The enactment of Shakespeare wasn't there. It was only about trying to "finish off" the text, understanding the text. We had only two students in our class and we had eight teachers, and that was the English department. And the English department in Bethune College in the mid-'60s could only get hold of two students, one was from Loreto Bowbazar and I was from Loreto House.

Were the teachers particular about pronunciation and accent?

No. Maybe in school, yes, we were corrected rather primly about what the pronunciation should be. If you compare the St. Xavier's Fathers and the Loreto Nuns, they were Irish, their pronunciation wouldn't be always the standard. I shouldn't be saying this... Mother Bernadine was very, very insistent on correct pronunciation. Mother Teresa was from Albania but she was perhaps an exception. And in any case she moved away from the order.



How were sexual references dealt with in school and college?

They were omitted.

Even in Bethune?

The same people who had the Loreto background were the people teaching at Bethune. It was just that it was a government job and that they applied through the Public Service Commission and that they teach in a government college. It is just that they were part of an Anglo-Indian community. It might not be so today, but those who were teaching then had the same kind of background. For university again, Prof Jyoti Bhattacharya was from Oxford, I don't know where he did his schooling, but Pranati Bakshi, Prof. Lal, more or less... As for sexual references, not J.B., he didn't avoid them. They were not glossed over but the bowdlerization was often mentioned rather critically. That attitude that sex was a part of Shakespeare's apprehension of the universe was accepted in the university. References to sex were not there at the school or college level.

Were Shakespeare's contemporaries given the same amount of importance in the classroom? Do you think that Shakespeare was excessively glamourized?

In the late-'60s there was a certain cloud of disparagement that was collecting about Tagore. I was surprised as he was one of the revered icons. As far as Shakespeare, this reverence has been permanent. There was no disparagement, as far as Shakespeare was considered. Ben Jonson was looked upon icily, as he looked upon Shakespeare icily. We collected the impression that he might have been critical of Shakespeare but the actual person to be critical of was Ben Jonson himself. Marlowe was adulated; a lot of adulation and grief was there for Marlowe, as he died early.

What about classroom time?

Shakespeare was given more time. Even in the university, there was a whole paper on Shakespeare, as far as I remember, Shakespeare scholarship, Shakespeare criticism, his tragedies, his comedies, of course there was a lot of time devoted to Shakespeare.

Were students encouraged to think independently and perhaps challenge the teacher?

I don't think challenging was much in vogue. As I said, up to college, it was the old canon, Tillyard for Milton, J. Steward for Shakespeare, Bradley, Stopford Brooke and so on and so forth. These were the people who we respected, there were no challenges. It was in the university that we started



thinking about the macrocosm and the microcosm. Danby, Spencer, these people had just started coming in. Other than that there was nothing revolutionary about our approach, nothing challenging.

What kinds of editions and critical material were prescribed?

Verity, we did Verity. We hadn't even been introduced to the Arden edition which had been prescribed at Calcutta University. We just started the Arden at that time, it was pretty expensive and not everyone could afford it. Our fees were about 13 rupees a month, and for us to buy a hard-bound Arden was pretty difficult. L.C. Knights and Wilson Knight, Eliot, yes, we did them, but not in college, there we stuck to the text. That was what was done. You depended on the teacher entirely, in Mrs. Emerson's phase. Reference work was encouraged in Loreto. It had a very good library in the '60s. Prof. Kajal Basu who studied at Oxford and was teaching in Presidency would often come to Loreto to use the library.

Where did you go to for critical material on Shakespeare?

I was immersed for one whole year from 9 to 5 at the National Library. That was wonderful and not like it is today. That was during the university days. For the college days it was British Council, where we had the horrible experience of all the relevant pages being cut out.

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

For film productions I remember Charles Dickens, yes of course, film and theatre productions were in school. The Kendall family, Shashi Kapoor, we saw them while in school, at a live performance and it left a kind of deep impression on me. We were very much into performance, British performance, in school. The Royal companies would come down, Old Vic would come down, we'd attend all of them. It was quite an event going to these performances.

What about in the classroom? Did you talk about them in the classroom?

Discuss what we'd seen? No. there was only time for the text; it was a very rigorous regime that we had to follow. We did of course discuss the comedies, not Shakespearean comedies, for instance, *She Stoops to Conquer* was a huge favourite. It was much looked down upon in the university, if Goldsmith is mentioned it is in a much derogatory sense. But that's what you need, you needed a dramatic translation or rendering of the text, and if you could start with a simple play it would help a lot. So we did *She Stoops to Conquer*, and *Arms and the Man*. These were the two plays we really acted



out, and one of the teachers was Mother Bernadine. She was really... she would rather have a dramatic approach to the text, a physically dramatic approach to the text and not a textual approach with paraphrases.

When the text was being discussed in the class, was it related to performance conventions?

Yes, we were given pictures of costumes and that happened in school and not in college and not in university either. It was oratorical; the reading was very poetic, and dependent on how well the professor could enact Shakespeare.

Can you remember if any of your classmates became Shakespeare teachers or performers?

No, but I remember that one of them, Ipsita [Ipsita Roy Chakraverti, Wiccan priestess], went into witchcraft, and Pranati Ghatak taught at St. Xavier's, and went into the metaphysical poets. There were the Bhagat brothers, who did a production of *As You Like It* at the National Library. We are losing our memories as our minds have become like a sieve. There was Red Curtain. Calcutta had a number of English dramatic companies. Some were directed by the Bhagat brothers, and one of the Bhagat sisters was in my class, and they were in a production of *As You Like It*. Meera Bhagat. I can only tell you about the women. Bombay, even then, English theatre in Bombay was not as well-known as the English theatre in Kolkata. They produced Shakespeare under the trees, (the Bhagat brothers, their sister was Meera Bhagat) at National Library. Terrence Redford was with Red Curtain. He must have been an Englishman, temporarily based in Calcutta. I can get through to Deepika Bhagat maybe.

Do you think Shakespeare is an overrated author? What is your reaction to the present day trend of deglamourizing and decanonizing Shakespeare?

I do not think he is over-rated. Deglamourizing Shakespeare would be a kind of egoistic approach individually to a genius whose work commands attention through the ages.

Students are no longer reading Shakespeare in the original, how do you react to that?

I just don't know, I am quite angry. Shakespeare's contribution to the English language... you know I cannot tell you the number of phrases Shakespeare has given the language. Perhaps paraphrasing isn't as modern as Shakespeare is. Perhaps we don't realize it, let me read out a few lines... why would they want a paraphrase? It makes my blood boil. Just like the denigration of Tagore. I think that individualism is surpassing all limits, worse than the Renaissance.

PEDAGOGY

Interview

SHAKESPEARE IN BENGAL

Centre of Advanced Study, Phase III

UGC-SAP

Department of English

Jadavpur University



Any noticeable changes in Shakespeare pedagogy and student reaction over the decades?

It's more according to personal interpretation and more according to what Spivak says, the modern jargon of post-modernism and post-colonialism and look at Caliban as... what do you want me to say? I haven't gone through that criticism myself. I haven't really carried on with Shakespeare after my university days.

Have you ever taught Shakespeare?

I have taught *Julius Caesar*. I must tell you that we have various categories of students, and if I have taught Shakespeare I had to make Shakespeare accessible to all of them.