



Prof. Jasodhara Bagchi

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(Interviewed by Dr. Paromita Chakravarti and Sri Abhishek Sarkar)

When did you pass the B.A. and M.A. examinations?

I passed my B.A. in 1956 from Presidency College. The M.A. final was due in 1958, but in that year I went to Oxford. So in 1961 I completed Honours from Oxford, and three years later M.A. in 1964. So it was quite late; it was already the quarter-centenary year of Shakespeare.

And the details of the institutions concerned.

We were introduced to Shakespeare in school – at Gokhale Memorial Girls' School. After that Presidency College, and Somerville College in Oxford. And in Cambridge I shifted to Victorian Studies. I was interested in Victorian Shakespeare, not so much in Shakespeare in general.

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

We first encountered Shakespeare in school – *Merchant of Venice* of course – a favourite school text. We got an idea about the complexity of the language then. And Shakespeare was part of the college and university syllabi, as you know. My college life lasted from 1954 to '58. I completed the Calcutta University course, even though I didn't sit for the final exam.

Who taught the texts in question?

We were taught by some very famous scholars such as Subodh Sengupta and Shailen Sen. Shailenbabu was a very solemn man. He taught us *As You Like It* and its nuances beautifully. He gave us a clear idea about the pastoral. I used to really like his teaching. Here Shakespeare was taught beautifully of course, but Shakespeare was very central, like a kind of cult – it was not like that in Oxford. There were other things, like the Renaissance. My tutor, Mary Lascelles - she wrote a book on Shakespeare called *Shakespeare's Measure for Measure* - was a Renaissance scholar. Shakespeare as the epitome of the socially accepted hero in Carlyle's 'Hero as Poet'... the kind of emphasis placed on Shakespeare here in India – I didn't see that in Oxford.

What techniques were used (e.g., close reading, lecture demonstration, group discussion, seminars etc) for teaching Shakespeare? What traits of any particular teacher impressed you most?

I am not going into this question. It has been a long time.



Did the teacher enact the scenes in the class room?

We never had things like enactments. Tarak-babu could create this ambience and had a hypnotic effect. In our M.A. class we had Jyoti-babu, he didn't act, but it was very lively.

Did the teacher discuss philology and prosody while reading Shakespeare?

Reading out, incantatory effect, discussing words, these were things done in Presidency. We didn't do that much in Oxford. Etymology or the use of words –Tarak-babu would discuss those.

Were expletives and sexual references omitted?

A bit of bowdlerization would happen. In Kolkata we did not talk very openly about sexuality.

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

Tarak-babu would try to place things in relation to us. Social, historical context is very New Historicist. At that time it was about placing the author in his own day.

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

Tarak-babu used to discuss pre-Shakespeare and post-Shakespeare dramatists. There was always this interest in where a person was coming from.

Were students encouraged to think independently and challenge the teacher?

We did not have much of 'challenging the teacher' in our time. But this does not mean that no one ever did it.

What was the examination and question pattern like?

I don't remember this at all. You can look this up.

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

I remember Tarak-babu being very dismissive about Olivier's *Hamlet*. He referred to it extensively. He would talk about the authenticity of the text, more about the textuality than the production.

Was there any performance of Shakespeare at the institution?

We didn't have performances in Presidency, but in school I remember there was a performance of the courtroom scene in *Merchant of Venice*. When we were in school we were taken to the New Empire to see the Kendalls - Geoffrey, Felicity, Jennifer - perform. It was like a dream to us. Being transported to the world of Shakespeare. It was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as far as I can remember. In Oxford,



Stratford was a great attraction. I used to go there whenever I could. In Kolkata I have seen some of Utpal Dutt's plays. I always like live performances more than films.

Give us an account of classmates who later distinguished themselves as teachers, performers etc.

Distinguished themselves as performers? ... Students have, more than classmates. There's Sangeeta Datta's *Life Goes On*, there's a bit of *King Lear* at the end.

What noticeable changes in Shakespeare pedagogy and student reaction have you noticed over the decades?

There have been a lot of changes. The notion of placing him above everybody else ... that used to be pretty much above any question. This has changed now. I am interested in literature as an ideological form. In the Victorian age things were being formulated. De Quincey talks about the power of literature. The literature of knowledge and the literature of power (not in the sense that Foucault uses it) – there's a tremendous articulation of Shakespeare there. What happened to Shakespeare in Bengal happened due to the post-colonial thrust. Then there were the two volumes that came out of Miranda House – Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's *The Lie of the Land* and one other book.

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

Shakespeare texts came to us in a situation of intense colonization. Colonization is not simple. There was collaboration ... but I don't think that Indian people read Shakespeare only to get jobs, they genuinely appreciated the literature. People were looking for a secular space – a non-denominational space. Shakespeare study cannot be seen as a coerced colonial one-way thrust. There was a neutrality in it which was genuine. And in Bengal there had been a tradition of reading literature. The role of Shakespeare here is always intriguing.

How would you react to the present trend of de-glamorizing and de-canonizing Shakespeare?

That is inevitable.

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

I feel if one works a little hard and familiarizes oneself with the language the pleasure of reading is immense. But a lot of people have read Shakespeare in simplified language. A lot of the school texts use simplified language. The language has such a grip ... its really wonderful ... 'multitudinous seas incarnadine' ... a juxtaposition of multisyllabic and monosyllabic words.

For Wikipedia entry on Prof. Bagchi, [click here](#)