



Prof. Malabika Sarkar

Prof. Sarkar taught at Jadavpur University and was Vice-Chancellor of Presidency University, Kolkata.

(Interviewed by Dr. Paromita Chakravarti and Sri Abhishek Sarkar in 2012)

What were the years in which you passed your B.A. and M.A.?

Year of passing BA and MA: that would be 1968 and 1970.

Institutions?

B.A. from Presidency College, M.A. from Jadavpur, and thereafter B.A. and M.A. from Cambridge University.

When did you first encounter with Shakespeare take place? At school or college?

At school, because I had Elective English. And we did *Twelfth Night*, I remember.

What were the College and University syllabi like and who taught the courses?

We had absolutely amazing teachers at Presidency, those who taught us included Prof. Tarak Nath Sen, Prof. Sailen Sen, Prof. Arun Dasgupta, and Prof. Amal Bhattacharya. You can't imagine a better set of teachers for Shakespeare because they were all absolutely different in their way of handling Shakespeare and all very brilliant.

How was Shakespeare taught?

One of the things that wasn't done, was that the teaching was not performance related. Tarak-babu was so exceptional, and we were absolutely enthralled by his teaching, one of his favourite subjects were Shakespeare's short lines. He taught us *Macbeth* and he would always come late for class, never arriving before 4.30 at the earliest, and carried on till late evening, but sitting in that little cubicle downstairs next to the library, listening to him teaching us *Macbeth*, was an absolutely amazing experience. I have had the good fortune to have been taught Shakespeare by many people outside the country, but his *Macbeth* teaching stayed with me for life. It was really amazing.

But when he talked about Shakespeare's short lines, he used to say that these were gaps and that actually is when the actor or actress did this, or rather, the characters did this on stage, taking off a hat



or walking on stage, etc. And you see, I was so enthralled with this that I took his published article on Shakespeare's short lines with me when I went to Cambridge, and I gave it to Ann Barton, who was one of my supervisors. And I asked her for her comments, and then I was so disappointed when the first thing she said was that, "He has not been watching Shakespeare on stage." Which of course I later realized was true, so that was one gap in our teaching, whether it was Amal-babu or Sailen-babu, or Tarak-babu or Arun Dasgupta, nobody really thought of the play as performance. But they were all able to individually transport us into Shakespeare's world in different ways. Tarak-babu was an excellent story-teller, the way he used to present Holinshed's *Chronicles*, the way he talked about the various scenes of *Macbeth* in their setting, he brought us books from the library, with illustrations and the way he taught us the sleepwalking scene from *Macbeth*, and all that was absolutely amazing because for that time we felt we were in Shakespeare's world.

What he lost out by not relating it to stage performance, he made up by his performance, and this was absolutely amazing, the way that he could literally take us into Shakespeare's world. We were absolutely mesmerized by his teaching. He took a lot of care, and because I was in his tutorial, and that was a huge privilege, that you were in Tarak Sen's tutorial meant a big deal in Presidency, because he chose only one per year, and he would call me home and spend hours discussing *As You Like It* or *Macbeth* whereas with him, being in his tutorial, *Macbeth* was our text, it meant that I had to be familiar with every single text of Shakespeare. I couldn't get away with just *Macbeth*, he would keep referring to things and asking me questions, and I was very embarrassed if I couldn't answer that, so I had to go into all of Shakespeare, and he thought it was a normal thing, to him it wasn't surprising, that I was having to do so much Shakespeare in detail. He had this ability to get you immersed in Shakespeare, like nobody else that I have come across.

Sailen Sen, who of course had this most delightful smile I had ever seen, a very serious person otherwise, his interest was in textual annotations, so he taught us *As You Like It*, and he would spend hours in class telling us about emendations etc etc. That was what appealed to him and that was what he did for us. Amal Bhattacharya didn't teach us much Shakespeare. Basically, when I was his student, he would teach us Carlyle, and he began teaching us Carlyle by teaching us Dante, he said how can you understand 'Heroes and Hero worship' unless you know Dante, and three fourths of the session was spent on Dante and one fourth for teaching Carlyle. That was Presidency for us in our time. But then, while teaching other things, he would often comment on Shakespeare or talk to us about Shakespeare, sometimes for a whole class he would be talking about Shakespeare, although Shakespeare was not officially the text he was assigned to teach, obviously to him it was very important that you knew your fundamental things if you are doing English Honours. You knew your Dante because it was behind everything, and you had to know your Shakespeare even if you were doing a



later text. So Amal-babu's method of teaching was different entirely from Tarak Sen's and from Sailen Sen's as it was not at all text related, he talked about themes, he talked about ideology, he talked about things in that way, but not while focusing on the text as Tarak Sen and Sailen Sen did. And Arun Dasgupta again, he was not assigned Shakespeare in my time, he was assigned Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Like Amal-babu he would spend three quarters of the time teaching us *Poetics* and Greek tragedy and then one quarter teaching us *Riders to the Sea*. But then his passion was *Hamlet*, he could not resist talking about *Hamlet* while teaching us Lamb, while teaching us *Riders*. He gave us a different kind of insight into Shakespeare. So I think that all of this put together, gave us a kind of introduction to Shakespeare that was absolutely unique and was something for all of us which stayed with us for the rest of our lives. So that was Presidency.

So what about JU?

I did spend two years at J.U., and I was taught Shakespeare there also. In fact when I finished my B.A., I was supposed to be going to Oxford, but for personal reasons I was not able to go, and then Tarak Sen called me and said, "Now what are you going to do?" So I said "M.A.," so he said "You must go to JU, that's Subodh's department." Well, I arrived and Subodh-babu [Prof subodh Chandra Sengupta] left when I joined, so I didn't get to study with him at all. So we didn't have him teaching Shakespeare at Jadavpur. I am sure there were good teachers but after being taught at Presidency by this group, there was nobody to match them. Yes, I did go to classes, and I was taught Shakespeare, but it didn't make an impact, it didn't stay with me. And if you ask me today who taught what, it is all a bit of a blur, the Presidency experience was so good, that what mattered afterwards was when I used to go to Cambridge, that was superb also, but in a different way. But somehow at Jadavpur there were things that we were taught, Milton classes, for example, were good, Dryden classes were good. I enjoyed those. Some of the Romantic classes were very good. But Shakespeare at J.U. simply did not make any impact. That was a fact, so I have to be honest. Jadavpur today is different, but that was when I was still a student. What traits of any particular teacher impressed you the most? Well, I think that, you know, with Tarak Sen, his absolute commitment to teaching.

Did the teacher enact the scenes in the classroom?

Never.

Was the teacher particular about pronunciation and accent?

Sometimes, not always.

Were expletives and sexual references omitted?



Not omitted, but not explained in detail. Pointed out as being there. Lots of blushes. Not evaded, not explained, and we were told all about Shakespeare's bawdy and so on. Never explained in class.

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

Very much, each and every one of the teachers took care to see that we had understood the socio-historical context. We had to sit for class tests on socio-historic background, to make sure that we understood what was going on, of course in our time when we were a student, when one talked about socio-historic background, it was a different kind of a socio-historic background from the New Historicism of today. That wasn't there at all in our time, but yes, a great deal of the history of England in detail. British history in detail, it was taught and much was explained, and as I said we actually had to take class tests to ensure that we knew which king and which queen was from which time.

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

They were given a great deal of importance, and we had to know all of the dramatists of that time, right up to the Jacobean period, while always being told that nothing compares with Shakespeare.

Were students encouraged to think independently and challenge the teacher?

Students were encouraged to think independently, not challenge the teacher in the classroom but in their tutorial essays. We always got good marks if we were able to say something we had thought of on our own, so there was a lot of emphasis on thinking for ourselves.

Editions and critical material prescribed and used?

Of course it was always the old Arden Shakespeare. It was placed before us. And critical material – we didn't get much access to journals here other than *Shakespeare Survey* and a few other things, and we were all told that we should all go to the National Library and look out for books and journals, and we were actually given lists of books and journals available in Calcutta. Rather than impress us with names, so we were told that these are the things you get in National Library, and the Presidency Library and that is how you should use them.

Examination and question pattern?

There were two kinds, because Presidency was a part of Calcutta University, and so the examination pattern was set by Calcutta University and not liked at all by either Tarak Sen or Sailen Sen or Arun

PEDAGOGY

Interview

SHAKESPEARE IN BENGAL

Centre of Advanced Study, Phase III

UGC-SAP

Department of English

Jadavpur University



Dasgupta. All of them thought that was of a very poor standard, but as we were an affiliated college we had to face it. But in college there were the class tests and there was the half yearly exam and there the questions were different. In fact, there was no effort or attempt to prepare us for the Calcutta University type of questions because you know the question pattern at Presidency was quite different except just before our Part 1, and again just before our Part 2, Prof. Tarak Sen met the whole class for long sessions for about a fortnight starting from about 4.30 and going on till about past 9.30 at night, taking up all of the papers of that exam and looking at all of the questions in the Calcutta University question papers, and then trying to tell us that if you are asked a question like this, this is how you should handle it. It is not that he wanted to let us down by preparing us differently so that we wouldn't be able to cope at all, but he tried each time before the final exams.

Was he the head then?

Yes. Did the teacher refer to stage and film productions of Shakespeare? Yes, they did. And they taught us some stage history, and they referred to some productions, but those are the classic ones that they talked about.

Whether the text was related to performance conventions?

No, apart from telling us that they were all men dressed up as women on stage, other than that there was hardly any attention paid to performance conventions.

Was there any performance of Shakespeare at the institution?

Not in my time. Account of classmates who later distinguished themselves as teachers or performers of Shakespeare: Of my classmates, only one person has gone into teaching, but her specialization is 19th century and not Shakespeare. I am talking about classmates here. If you are talking about Cambridge, Peter Holland was a classmate. In fact we used to go in a small group for classes. But here only one person has become a teacher and Shakespeare is not her interest area, and nobody has gone into performance. Aparna [Sen] was a year senior to me, so not my exact year. We were all very fond of her. But I think our teachers had a problem with her. She didn't complete her B.A. Do you remember Ashok Ghosh? Ashok and Aparna was in the same year.

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

Of course, and you know, at the moment, I am teaching *The Tempest* at Presidency. And because that is one of my areas of interest I use a lot of New Historicism in my teaching. But what is much more



dramatic is that Souvik Mukherjee is also teaching Shakespeare and he is using a lot of digital material of his teaching of Shakespeare. Including *Hamlet* as a video game. Which is absolutely impressive I thought. So yes, there is a lot of change in the way things are taught, and part of that is to do with our own training over the years.

Do you think that Shakespeare is an over-rated author?

No.

How would you react to the present trend of deglamourizing and decanonizing Shakespeare?

But that is part of modern culture, people think that it is a smart thing to pull down those who have been earlier canonized, and it is not always because people believe in it, but because it is seen or perceived as a very smart thing to do. That is my own response to it.

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

Now this is something I don't like at all, and I am very old fashioned. So I think that Shakespeare should be read the way people watched the plays on stage or you know it should be read in its own language.