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(Interviewed by Smt. Sonia Sahoo)

#### **When did you get your B.A. and M.A. degrees? And from which institutions?**

I did my B.A. in 1969, though the exam was held in 1970. We were lagging behind at that point of time by a year. I passed B.A. with Honours from Hooghly Mohsin College. It is an old renowned government college at Chinsurah. It was my hometown at that point of time - Hooghly, by the side of the river Ganga. It had a very good British architectural design. The college is steeped in the rich heritage of the 19th century Bengal Renaissance. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Akshay Dutta were students of this college along with others as well. There I was taught Shakespeare by eminent Professors of English. I passed M.A. from Calcutta University in 1979. And obviously Calcutta University needs no introduction. There, we were taught Shakespeare – including his drama, sonnets and criticism – by eminent teachers.

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

In my first year at college. I didn't refer to school for though I had Lamb's *Shakespeare* but that was part of my personal reading. My first encounter with Shakespeare was in college, on the very first day of the first year to be precise. It was as far as I can remember a celebration of Shakespeare's 400 years. I was in the audience for a Bengali translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by a group theatre organization belonging to the Department of Information and Culture of the West Bengal Government. The enactment was excellent especially of the play-within-the-play. When I first witnessed the scene, it left a permanent impression on my adolescent mind. I was very impressed by it, and by the reaction of Hamlet as he was observing his mother and his uncle. I can still remember the face of the characters - Hamlet, Hamlet's mother and the uncle as well. As I was just an adolescent, I hadn't yet read *Hamlet*, but the production was very impressive nonetheless. Although not connected with Shakespeare, I was also very impressed by Utpal Dutt's rendition of *Doctor Faustus*, which was performed as a radio drama during our time. He was an excellent actor. Now my students haven't even heard about radio drama.

#### **Which Shakespearean plays and poems were taught in the college and university syllabi? Who taught the texts in question?**

In college we had a detailed syllabus on Shakespeare, as far as I can remember. I could not find the syllabus. I am totally depending on my memory, so there may be certain lapses also. I have already referred to Shakespearean sonnets, Shakespearean drama and Shakespearean criticism, particularly



Raleigh, and also Bradley's critique of Shakespearean tragedy. It was almost a compulsory book for us. As far as my memory goes, in the college syllabus I was taught *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *As You Like It*. At the college level, Prof. Shanti Ranjan Banerjee, primarily taught *Hamlet*, Prof. Prafulla Chakraborty taught *Macbeth*, and Prof. Ajit Banerjee, *As You Like It*. Prof. Shanti Ranjan Banerjee introduced me to the technique of textual analysis of Shakespearean drama, connecting it with history and Shakespearean criticism, and that left a permanent impression on my mind. Later when I became a teacher, I was able to apply his insights - especially the stress on text, and that the analysis must never be abstract and full of references. I suggest these to my students as well. He was very thorough in his teaching.

At the university, I remember Prof. Jyoti Bhattacharya: he was an excellent teacher who used to teach us *King Lear*. And Prof. Amalendu Basu taught *As You Like It* - he was a veteran Shakespeare teacher. But I preferred Jyoti Bhattacharya because he was very dramatic when he was teaching, and his voice was sonorous, magnificent and excellent. And I can even now remember the entire scene that he was teaching. I have looked at the Bengali translation of *King Lear* - for me Soumitra is unique, but the translation is not good. Have you seen *King Lear*? Have a look at it, all students of English Literature feel that there is a dearth of good translations. You should try your hand at translating Shakespeare. I don't have time, but you can attempt a translation and Bengali adaptation of Shakespeare. This is very much needed. We were further taught Shakespearean criticism also, as far as I remember it was done by Amalendu Basu. On the whole the syllabi made me interested in Shakespeare. Although I didn't do research on Shakespeare, I became a lover of Shakespearean drama but fortunately or unfortunately - I don't know which - I didn't have the scope of teaching Shakespeare in class. I taught Jane Austen, I taught feminist studies, certain essays as well, but somehow I missed out on Shakespeare teaching. Nowadays, I think that I should have suggested that I teach it.

### **What techniques were used for teaching Shakespeare?**

Shakespeare was taught primarily through the lecture system and also through textual analysis as I have explained earlier. Act-wise detailed references and all the literary allusions were explained. Suggestions were given, but they were explained in class. In every textual analysis, historical background was always connected with the text. Sometimes the teacher, particularly Jyoti Bhattacharya, took the methodology of dramatic recitation to create an impression on the class.

### **Which traits of any particular teacher impressed you most?**

I was particularly impressed by the Shakespearean scholarship of Dr. Shanti Ranjan Banerjee, the Head of the Department. He was very sincere in his teaching with detailed references to the text and stress on the historical background. That attracted me. He never suggested topics for preparing for the



exams. Whenever he taught he did so with a holistic approach to the subject. He talked of the age, the theme, Shakespeare's connection with the other dramatists and this interested me very much. At the university level, Jyoti Bhattacharya was my favourite teacher. I was very sincere and regular in attending his classes.

### **Did the teacher enact the scenes in the class room?**

The scenes were not enacted in class as far as I remember, but depended primarily on the analysis of the text, and occasional recitation from the drama taught in the class. Now this is being done – a kind of enactment – but at that time, at least my experience was that the teacher himself became the actor, but there was no performance as such. Now I feel that it would have been very helpful if we the students had participated in some of the dramatic scenes. It would have been very helpful in understanding the drama.

### **Were the teachers very particular about pronunciation and accent? Did they discuss philology and prosody while teaching Shakespeare?**

Of course there was stress on pronunciation and accent, and they pointed out that this is Bengali accent, and that you should pronounce with a received accent. There may have been an influence over me, as I came from a Bengali medium school. Almost all the other students in that *mofussil* were mostly Bengali but only some came from missionary schools such as Don Bosco or something similar. The teacher himself was from a Bengali medium school and he belonged to erstwhile East Bengal, but he pointed out the actual pronunciation. He also mentioned the name of the writer – I forget the name – the writer who had written about Received Pronunciation in philology, he stressed on such a pronunciation, as far as I remember. We had many lapses of pronunciation, because we were not used to talking in English in our day to day life, not in our society...not as you are used to do today. At that time, those from English medium schools were laughed at, for posing as though they were the English. So we were a group that pronounced English in a very Bengali manner, and he always tried to stress on this correctness of pronunciation and spelling. He also focused on the spelling, especially the difference between the Elizabethan spelling and modern spelling of the words - meanings as well. Shakespearean spellings and meanings differ very much from the modern ones.

### **Were expletives and sexual references omitted?**

No conscious attempt at omission was made. Expletives and sexual references were explained, particularly in *Hamlet*. I remember the scene where Hamlet is laughing at Ophelia. There was no conscious attempt to omit it, though it was not highly focused on.



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

While teaching Shakespearean drama the socio-historic context of the plays was given a lot of importance, and it was the focus through which play analyses was done. I remember in *As You Like It*, as I do about *Hamlet* as well - the typical royal society, how it gets corrupted because of the wealth and absolute power of the uncle...how it corrupts and how it is so absolute that it makes him kill his blood brother, and to lust for his brother's wife, which in Bengali we call *byabichar*, something illicit, and since he is very powerful, this corruption pervades the high or feudal society.

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

Maybe not with the same amount of importance, but references were certainly made, particularly to the University Wits - Greene, Webster, and primarily Marlowe. Marlowe was thought of as a historical pioneer of Shakespeare. I remember we had to read *Doctor Faustus*, and there was a constant comparison between the language of Marlowe and Shakespeare, how Marlowe was paving the way for Shakespeare through his introduction of blank verse and how Shakespeare was using the resources of dramatists such as Marlowe and Webster. In that sense Shakespeare has not written any original drama. He may have taken his resources from his predecessors but his drama was unique. The teachers focused on such matters while discussing the text.

### **Were students encouraged to think independently and challenge the teacher?**

Not really, there was no ambience for challenging the teacher. We were very calm and quiet and we were very eager to know more since we knew very little at that time. You know much more than us because of this information age. Our students are much more informed, but at that time we can say we were in a kind of hesitant mood, as if we were trying to learn something new with a kind of wonder in our eyes, but that doesn't mean that we were not allowed to think independently. Rather I remember that this process also trained me to think independently. Even if it was not really a form of challenge, I did have a particular kind of approach towards criticism. Human relationships, society, culture, psychology - all this was taught through Shakespeare in the classroom.

### **Editions and critical material prescribed and used.**

Arden and Verity were used, and sometimes it was suggested that we compare these two editions. As far as critical material was concerned we read Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* and Aristotle's *Poetics* as well. These were almost compulsory reading. As far as the other books are concerned I cannot remember their names.



### **What was the examination and question pattern like?**

It was an annual and not a semester system. There were college exams, and there was a final exam. The questions were essay type and critical and were of 18 marks each. Some portions of the question paper focused on textual annotations and explanations and these were allotted 8 marks each. You have explanations in the question paper now as well. There were also questions on literary themes in each Honours paper and also essays on literary types. So there were not so many objective questions like what we now find in Calcutta University.

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

Very few teachers referred to stage and film productions of Shakespeare as far as I remember. Prof. Jyoti Bhattacharya referred to theatre productions of *King Lear*, and analysed the importance of the audience in Shakespearean drama while he was explaining what he meant by tragic awe. There were no regular shows in those days. Now I am teaching Alice Walker's *Colour Purple*, so I try to arrange a film screening by borrowing the film from the library. There is also a kind of film lab in Bethune, most probably one in Calcutta University also. Do you have one at Jadavpur University as well?

[Yes we have a separate department.]

The literature students can avail of this as in the case of *The Great Gatsby*. These systems were not available at that time...that was a lacuna I think.

### **Was the text related to performance conventions?**

So far as my memory goes, only the eavesdropping scene in *Hamlet* was explained with relation to the performance conventions of Shakespearean drama. When Polonius was eavesdropping ... some characters were talking at the front of the stage and some were behind...and I think in many modern dramas these techniques are followed as well. Characters are in a kind of multidimensional phenomenon, as they are not hearing such discussions. Polonius is at the back but the audience can view him, almost a three dimensional scene is being done in Shakespeare and it is very modern, I think. Our teachers focused on this aspect.

### **Was there was any performance of Shakespeare at the institutions where you studied?**

There was a performance of *Hamlet* in Bengali as I mentioned at the very beginning, and that was very enjoyable. And I can remember another student performance of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene that was very impressive, amongst the student presentations during our union festival. And since I am a lover of drama, I also taught my students at Malda Women's College to dramatize Cleopatra's death scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*. I can even remember the names of the two students - Nibedita and Bharati – who performed the scene.



**Do you recall any classmates who have later gone on to become teachers or performers of Shakespeare?**

No, I cannot remember.

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

Shakespeare pedagogy has changed noticeably over the decades. Now you may focus on certain aspects of Shakespeare study - textuality, psychology, women's issues, study based on film productions and performance on stage, queer studies too. There are postmodern approaches to Shakespearean philosophy, and you can very smoothly and comfortably relate Shakespeare's words to the chaos of our present social context. In *King Lear* everything comes together - the chaos, the fool, the poor, the penniless, and the madman. In today's society you cannot believe in a single creed or issue, and this is what you also find in Shakespeare's plays. There are questions but no solutions as you see in his tragicomedies. The role of the fool, of the queer - in Bengali what we call the *kimbbut* courtesy Sukumar Ray - you will find a lot of that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Did you see it? Natya Academy performed it.

Student reaction... I cannot tell you directly, as I haven't taught Shakespeare, but the present students study postmodern philosophy and they raise questions related to their reading. I have seen this happen with feminist studies... these questions are very relevant when you come to Shakespeare, as he was very focused on similar issues. At Bethune College when I teach them Simone de Beauvoir I follow a similar teaching technique. I think that Shakespeare can be read with a similar kind of questioning that nothing is absolute.

**Do you think that Shakespeare is an overrated author?**

No, not at all, Shakespeare's writing, his genius, was an exceptional incident. It is a kind of exception that he was born at that time, as our own Rabindranath Tagore was born in the 19th century. During the Renaissance, Shakespeare's drama, his poetry caused an efflorescence of humanism. It is almost as if the humanist movement was caused by Shakespeare's genius. He focused on the complexities of the human mind, the fraternity of human existence, the victimization of both the powerful and the powerless, human suffering, social evils, social inequity, feudal society, women's love and the vulnerability of women's position. Through the ages that Shakespeare has been evaluated and appreciated, each age has focused on new meanings emerging from his drama and poetry. So how can he be overrated? We still cannot think of rating him. He is not at all an overrated author. He is an eternal pioneer of human literature and culture. Shakespeare has been reinterpreted and rejuvenated,



interrogated, fragmented and sometimes even satirized or laughed at. There is such a lot of obscurity in his writing, his meanings and spellings, but he is always interesting.

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

The pedagogy of Shakespeare needs critical analysis. Although de-glamourizing and de-canonizing is a modern approach, it is a supporting methodology for further development of Shakespeare's pedagogy. If we are continuously thinking of Shakespeare as a creed, (as we continuously think of Rabindranath as a guru) it is good to a certain extent but we must not create a halo behind him, so this trend of de-glamourizing is very much needed, to objectively appreciate his thinking. There was a film a long time ago on Shakespeare; I remember vaguely that it was on HBO. It was on Shakespeare and on English theatre. Do see if you can find 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?**

I appreciate it, because reading Shakespeare in a simplified language or in paraphrase is helpful for making Shakespeare popular. A paraphrase can generate interest in the reader, who can subsequently move on to the actual text. Shakespeare can sometimes appear to be very difficult if we are taught by great teachers – as it happened in my experience. By reading him in simplified language, we can tide over that difficulty as well. The easy language will make Shakespeare popular, entertaining, and interesting to all. In the broader sense it also helps in the development of Shakespearean pedagogy as more people will start working on Shakespeare. I think in this way, but maybe there is another perspective to this debate as well. We must not be highbrowed, since not everyone is elite. Shakespeare is no one's property. Recall that Shakespeare's plays used to tour villages. Aren't you researching the *Shakespearewallahs*? They have done a lot of work, and have gone to various parts of England. I think Shashi Kapoor had worked with them as did Madhur Jaffrey and many other Indian actors.