



Prof. Pran Kumar Mukherjee

Formerly of North Bengal University

(Interview conducted by Abhishek Sarkar in the evening of 18 July, 2012, on telephone)

I passed I.A. from Jagannath College, Dhaka in 1944. I passed B.A. (Hons.) in English from the University of Dhaka in 1947 and M.A. in English from the same university in 1948. At that time the M.A. was a one-year course. I retired from the Department of English, North Bengal University in 1993. I have also taught at Manindra Chandra College and Surendranath College, Kolkata and served several Government colleges in West Bengal.

My first encounter with a Shakespeare play took place during my I.A. classes at Jagannath College, Dhaka, where we had to read *Julius Caesar*. The teaching was not very specialized since the text was common to students from all streams. The play was only paraphrased with glosses on difficult words. Antony's and Brutus's speeches were highlighted because they were important from the examination point of view.

During my B.A. and M.A. years at the University of Dhaka we read *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *As You Like It*, although I do not remember the year-by-year distribution of the texts. We had some sonnets by Shakespeare on the B.A. syllabus. Among Shakespeare's contemporaries, we had to read *The White Devil* by Webster, *The Alchemist* by Jonson, *Dr. Faustus* and *Tamburlaine* by Marlowe, but again I am not sure about the year-by-year break-up. We had eight papers for B.A. and eight for M.A. At the B.A. level there was a separate paper dealing with Renaissance poetry and plays. There was a separate compulsory paper on Shakespeare at the M.A. level.

The method of teaching Shakespeare at that time was universally textual explanation. Dr. Alex Aronson taught us *Othello*. He came from Visva-Bharati and his specialization was actually French language and literature. His English pronunciation was quite bad and students would often correct him. He generally dealt with the meanings of words and did not go for a detailed scholarly discussion of the text. He went to Israel when the new state was formed. He was later awarded with the Desikottama.

PEDAGOGY

Interview

SHAKESPEARE IN BENGAL

Centre of Advanced Study, Phase III

UGC-SAP

Department of English

Jadavpur University



Prof. Manmatha Ray taught us *Coriolanus*, and probably also *King Lear*. He later joined the University of Delhi. He attempted a close reading of the text. I found out from the University library that he had borrowed insights from A. C. Bradley's *Miscellany* for his lectures on *Coriolanus*, although he did not acknowledge this in the classroom. I did not find the lectures very eloquent or impressive. Besides, they were not very useful for the examinations. The teachers often did not complete the syllabus. Although the Shakespeare plays were not read and discussed in full in the class, questions were based on the entire plays. I read on my own at the University library and prepared for the examinations. Among other teachers, Prof. A.G. Stock taught us Chaucer and Prof. Amalendu Bose taught us poetry of some other period. Both of them joined the University of Calcutta later on. Besides, Dr. Saroj Ray taught us Old English and Prof. Sirish Das taught us Browning.

For Shakespeare plays, we used the Verity edition. The teachers did not recommend any edition in particular. The Arden edition was not available even at the University library. As for critical works on Shakespeare, we read A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* and H. B. Charlton's *Shakespearean Comedy*. They were prescribed by the teachers in the class. These were among the very few critical works available to us.

The teachers did not discuss the socio-political background or the structure and conventions of Shakespeare's theatre. The plays were treated as poems. The teachers never enacted the scenes while reading the plays. They also did not mention any dramatic production or film adaptation of Shakespeare's plays. They did not give much importance to the expletives or sexual references in Shakespeare's plays, and most students were not in a position to follow them. The students were not encouraged to think independently or ask questions. The teachers might sometime ask the students some questions, especially the meaning of unfamiliar words. The examination questions were all on character, plot, imagery and construction of the plays. It was quite well known that Prof. P.K. Bose of the University of Calcutta set the questions every year.

My own doctoral research (from North Bengal University) was on the poetry of Dylan Thomas. I taught *King Lear* at North Bengal University for three or four years in the early 1980's, and I then offered the assignment to Dr. Ashutosh Banerjee when he joined in. I got very enthusiastic response from my students during the *King Lear* classes. I am surprised to learn that students nowadays have lost interest in Shakespeare and are all drawn towards new areas like Indian writing in English or Australian literature. I feel that Shakespeare is still very relevant and he should be given adequate importance in the academia.