



Prof. Salil Biswas

(Interviewed by Smt. Sonia Sahoo)

Year of passing B.A. and M.A.

I passed B.A. in 1966 and M.A. in 1968.

Details of institutions concerned.

I studied at Maulana Azad College and then at the University of Calcutta. I did my M. Phil. from Jadavpur University years later in 1977 and completed it around 1983/4.

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

My first acquaintance with Shakespeare was in school through the Bengali translation of *Tales from Shakespeare* that Deb Sahitya Kutir brought out. I don't remember the name of the translator. It might have been Nripendra Krishna Chattopadhyay.

College and university syllabi (Shakespeare plays and poems).

For B.A., our texts were *Macbeth* and *As You Like It*. We had a few sonnets such as Sonnet 65 ("Since brass nor stone nor earth ..."). *Julius Caesar* was taught in the pass classes. For M.A., we had *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Titus Andronicus*, one early comedy and *Measure for Measure*.

Who taught the texts in question? 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?

We were taught in school by Tarapada-babu. He used to narrate Shakespeare's plays as tales and he would proceed through act and scene. I distinctly remember him teaching us *King Lear* in this way.

In college, Bishnu Dey was then the HOD. He taught us the sonnets and *Macbeth*. Mohit-babu taught us *As You Like It*, or maybe it was Pradyumna-babu. He used to pronounce Jacques in a funny way. We used to study in our tutorial classes in college. Nirmala-di would provide some notes though there was no regular assessment. I remember Nasir Ali of Maulana Azad who used to teach us Marlowe and



Romantic poetry. Mohit-babu used to take systematic tutorials. Nasir Ali would religiously give us all a list of 50 novels, 50 plays and 100 poems. Nobody would ever read them. I however made some headway with that list. Ramen Sen taught us *All for Love* and Amalendu Bose taught us *Antony and Cleopatra* but they had no great flair for teaching. I remember R.K. Sen reading out Antony and Ventidius's exchange where Antony laughs out loud. Krishna Chandra Lahiri taught us comedy. He was not at all impressive. Father Gomez taught us *Measure for Measure* and Jyoti Bhattacharya taught us *King Lear*.

The teacher who made the strongest impression on me in university was Jyoti Bhattacharya. Other teachers like Amalendu Bose and Ramen Sen used to teach Shakespeare texts too. I remember, Bishnu Dey used to quietly read the text. He would not explain in great detail. But he used to read blank verse in such an appropriate and engaging way that understanding it was much easier. Jyoti Bhattacharya had remarkable pronunciation. He had a flamboyant style of teaching. However, he would never let students into the class if they did not have the Arden edition.

Did the teacher enact the scenes in the class room? Did the teacher refer to stage and film productions of Shakespeare?

Bishnu Dey used to focus on performance sometimes. I remember him reciting Lady Macbeth's 'We fail?...but screw your courage to the sticking-place'. (Act I Scene vii). He used to refer to performers such as Dame Ellen Terry and Sarah Siddons. However, overall there was not much of an orientation towards performance. Old Vic had come to Calcutta once, probably with *Macbeth*. In class, there was not much discussion on acting and staging. Students were encouraged to watch productions. British Council organized performance of plays occasionally. Bishnu Dey made us listen to recorded versions in class.

Was the teacher very particular about pronunciation and accent?

Bishnu Dey had a very Indian accent and pronunciation. In university, Jyoti Bhattacharya was very particular about accent. I used to find his accent a little stilted, though. Later when I had established a more personal rapport after visiting his Golpark residence frequently, I had asked him about the need for giving so much importance to the accent. He had said that an Indian accent would not be a handicap to understanding the text.

Were expletives and sexual references omitted?

Regarding the sexual references, Bishnu Dey was opposed to Bowdlerism. S.C. Sengupta's *Macbeth* edition did not have the Porter scene and Bishnu Dey found his prudishness quite funny. Jyoti-babu would not talk much about the sexual references.



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

There was not much information offered by way of the socio-historical context of the plays.

Were students encouraged to think independently and challenge the teacher?

Discussions did not happen in class. I used to live near Dharmatala, Moulali then and after visiting Aminia with my friends, we often used to come back home and discuss answers. Often we would wind up talking about the text at hand but that was an exception rather than the rule. As students, we were never expected to challenge the teacher or even to speak up in class. If we were interested in questions, we could pursue them outside class. I remember that Professor Puroshottam Lal used to teach us T.S. Eliot. While doing *The Waste Land* with us, he had mentioned how water was a symbol of death. I often used to visit his Lake Gardens house where he would treat us to coffee and sandwiches. On one occasion, I had asked him how Williamson had referred to water as a symbol of regeneration in *The Waste Land*, but he evaded the question.

Editions and critical material prescribed and used.

Jyoti Bhattacharya used to insist that we bring our text to class. I bought the Arden *King Lear* on loan to do his classes. He also laid a lot of stress on accent and enunciation. He used to stand and teach and his presence was such that we would all be full of awe. He briefly touched upon the social background and mentioned Sidney Walter Finkelstein, Utpal Dutt and Terry Eagleton. There were also a few general lectures on *King Lear*.

In the second year of our Masters he became the education minister. When he returned, the edge had gone.

I remember him singing *Auld Lang Syne* outside class. There were no tutorials in the university. Kalidas Bose of Presidency College taught us Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship*. He also did Coleridge and some of Wordsworth. Dorothy L. Sayers' translation of Dante was then available. I read *Inferno* and some of *Purgatorio* but could not progress to *Paradiso*. In our time, we had a lot of love and respect for our teachers though Jyoti-babu would turn me out frequently for having no text.

We were advised to read a range of critical material. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* was recommended along with Dowden, Charlton for comedy, Halliday, Granville Barker, Dover Wilson's *Essential Shakespeare*. John F. Danby's *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* used to feature on the list for *King Lear*, along with L.C. Knights, Irving Ribner, G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire*, Cleanth Brooks, Northrop Frye, Caroline Spurgeon, Kenneth Muir and Harold Wilson. For the Honours course we were prescribed Laurence Lerner's *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*.

PEDAGOGY

Interview

SHAKESPEARE IN BENGAL

Centre of Advanced Study, Phase III

UGC-SAP

Department of English

Jadavpur University



Examination and question pattern.

Generally, questions asked were puerile. The Arden edition was prescribed for classroom use. The Cambridge editions were also available in our time. Students would also use the Signet edition. Teachers would prescribe the Arden or the Variorum edition. The Variorum edition was then available in the British Council. We were asked us to write a note on an important scene or sketch a character. They would include the theme of redemption or regeneration in *King Lear* or the Porter scene in *Macbeth*. For the M.A. Criticism paper, we did cover Wimsatt and Brooks, but questions did not cover those. There were a few stage and film adaptations of Shakespeare at the time but none were screened or performed in the university.

Whether there was any performance of Shakespeare at the institution.

We had a reunion in the second year of our M.A. where an English and a Bengali play were supposed to be performed. Nobody suggested Shakespeare. We staged Shaw's *How He Lied to her Husband*.

Account of classmates or students who later distinguished themselves as teachers, performers etc.

My classmates in university were Tapati Gupta, Jharna Sanyal, Ramkrishna Bhattacharya, Debi Bhattacharya and Anupam Mukherjee who taught in Vidyasagar College.

None of my students ever worked on Shakespeare.

Noticeable changes in Shakespeare pedagogy and student reaction over the decades.

For Honours, there was no major change in orientation or question paper setting. The Porter scene and sleepwalking scene were considered important from the examination point of view. I was having a look at the M.A. syllabus of the Netaji Subhas Open University. I was quite amazed at the variety of texts. The syllabus should be designed keeping in mind that the students who will be expected to read those texts are the ones who have not got through to Rabindra Bharati University for their masters. Teachers provide bibliographies to their students who do not use it.

I tell my students to use the Internet judiciously. All information obtained should be cross-checked. E-notes are available for download, provided one pays the subscription fee. Books are still very expensive and out of reach for most students. An average student still cannot afford Harold Bloom's books. Often there is a psychological barrier in reading from photocopies. Laurence Lerner's collection of essays, 20th-century interpretations and Methuen Critical Editions are quite student friendly.



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

After the arrival of Stephen Greenblatt on the scene and the increasing importance given to postcolonial theory, things have changed. Students nowadays often benefit from seminars and workshops on the subject though many seminar papers are obscure and difficult to understand. By and large, the students' interest levels hinge on the kind of questions in the examination.

Movies can be used to foster interest so that students would consider reading the plays if they were impressed by the movie. I would screen Orson Welles's, Roman Polanski's and Akira Kurosawa's versions of *Macbeth* for my students. There are many other adaptations of *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shown on television and available on the internet. To draw students outside the confines of the syllabus, marks and examinations, interest has to be fostered. To expect the student to prepare answers to short questions is an impractical desire. Maulana Azad had 9 students in the Honours class as opposed to more than a hundred students at the university. Some of us would often visit Bishnu Dey's house where he was much friendlier and the interactions were far more informal.

On Teaching Shakespeare

I have taught *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night* and the sonnets to my students. I started bringing out *Pegasus*, a departmental bulletin and that was one major way I interacted with my students and colleagues. We try to bring out 2 issues a year. Our focus is the undergraduate syllabus but we do not provide answers to questions.

Debiprasad Banerjee who teaches in Kalyani, was an attentive student. Pradip Bhattacharya, Jharna Sanyal and Anjusree were the three students from our university batch who got a first class. I also remember Ramkrishna Bhattacharya, Ashish Lahiri and Sudeshna Kar Barua who now teaches in Gokhale College.