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(Interviewed by Dr. Paromita Chakravarti)

What are the years in which you have passed your B.A. and your M.A.? What was your first encounter with Shakespeare like?

I didn't study Shakespeare in school; I was in the first batch of the School Final examination in 1952. We didn't have Shakespeare in our syllabus. We studied for the I.A. after that. After the Matriculation, the new name was the School Final. My first encounter with Shakespeare was during the I.A. There was a section from the forum scene from *Julius Caesar*. That was my first exposure to Shakespeare. I had read *Lamb's Tales* before that, of course.

I.A. was for two years from 1952 to 1954. I used to study at Loreto College then. One of the Mothers there had explained the text with care. The dramatic nature of the play was also explained to us in such a manner that the use of irony, as in 'Brutus is an honourable man' was clear to us.

Were Shakespeare plays enacted in school?

Not in our school. Not in Loreto College as well. The forum scene could have been performed at some annual function; I seem to have vague memories of such events.

Did you have elocution classes?

Yes, we did, at Loreto College. It was a regular affair, as Loreto College used to be a somewhat elitist institution. As far as I remember the B.A. students used to join in as well for elocution at Loreto College.

So did you study at Loreto College after that?

No, I studied at Presidency College. I joined Presidency College in 1954.

So, what plays did you have then? What was the atmosphere like?

We had *Macbeth*. Prof T. N. [Tarak Nath] Sen taught us that. Prof. Subodh Chandra Sengupta taught us *Much Ado About Nothing*. We had *The Tempest* as well. And Tarapada-babu taught us *Richard II*.



Could you tell us about your experience in college? About your first encounter with T. N. Sen?

I cannot describe my encounter with Prof. T.N. Sen with just a few words. It is an experience that is mixed with a lot of emotion. I have forgotten a lot of things, but I clearly remember that for the first two classes Prof. T.N. Sen tried to convey to us that to be admitted to the department of English in Presidency College was to be admitted with a huge burden of heritage. He spent at least two classes talking about the old teachers. Professor Manmohan Ghosh, P.C. Ghosh and Percival. We were quite scared, as to whether we were at all worthy of this honour. But he tried to instill it in us very carefully, that this was not studying English literature for our amusement, rather a matter of heritage. He might have spoken about Srikumar Banerjee as well. I don't remember clearly. What he did next was to hand us a huge bibliography, perhaps Angshumitra-di will have told you, it had three parts: 'Must', 'Desired', and the other was 'Optional'. Almost every three months we used to have a stock-taking, for which we used to get scared a lot, for it was during this stock-taking that we had to tell him what texts we had read, and we didn't have the courage to lie to him. Thankfully we didn't have the courage, as he used to immediately catch on to whether we had actually read it or not. So, there used to be a huge rush among us close towards the stock-taking, in order to save face. This went on for two years. We had to come prepared, we couldn't come to class like a clean slate, it wouldn't be tolerated, and somehow he managed to instill this in us. We started off in this manner.

What was the style of teaching like?

As far as I remember, of what we had read for Shakespearean textual scholarship during M.A., a large part of it had already been covered by Professor T.N. Sen. How they were printed and produced, why one was a bad quarto or another was a good quarto, when a play had been printed from the production text? He taught us that these ideas were important in order to establish a Shakespearean text. I feel that the most valuable thing I had got from him was the right approach to a Shakespearean text, which he had tried to instill within us. After that, I never became a Shakespeare scholar or taught Shakespeare, but he had managed to ingrain a model in us for reading an older text with uncertain textual status. Simultaneously we were taught about the political world view, the historical situation, or the dramatic conventions... all that everyone is supposed to read, but the information was related to the text, it is not as if there were background lectures to which we were supposed to relate it. At every stage everything was related. And by this time you would have found out that he was interested in punctuation as well, he had written an essay on Shakespeare's short lines. About the evolution of the blank verse, what it is was like in the earlier stages and about its special application in Shakespeare's more mature plays, not due to the immaturity of the author but rather as a sign of his maturity where he finishes off the blank verse with a rhymed couplet. Almost every word, every punctuation mark was important, so that we can get to the original text, and that the text was originally meant for staging was something that he didn't fail to impress upon us. How a line would have been read if it had



terminated with a full stop or a question mark or an exclamation mark, what would be its meaning in relation to the entire context... this was the level of the detail he went into. He used to often speak about a lot of editors, about how their interference in the text was misleading. He used to warn us about them, about how a lot of editors had interpreted something wrongly and how a small mistake compromises our understanding of the character. The text was of primary importance to him. I am talking about Professor Tarak Nath Sen. He went into such great detail with the text, I don't think anyone else taught in such great detail. What we got from his teaching was how every word, every punctuation mark was very important.

Which edition did you use?

We used the Verity edition for *Macbeth*. It is not that he used to ask us to look at a variety of editions. He used to teach us in such great detail, we really didn't need it. He used to talk about Percival's edition often. He was a student of Percival, probably. I am not sure, about this. We used to feel comfortable with the Percival edition later on as well. We followed the Arden of course, as well as the Warwick. But I never felt the need for multiple editions, as we had a lot of very detailed textual discussions. He used to criticize the Dover Wilson edition a lot.

What about Subodh-babu [Prof. Subodh Chandra Sengupta]?

Subodh-babu's teaching was of a different school altogether. He used to teach us *Much Ado About Nothing*. What I do remember about him was his pointed, precise and illuminating comments. I don't remember him getting into the textual complexities to a great extent, but in general he taught the text in detail. He taught in the Bradley school, focusing on character development, and he did that in a very interesting manner. He used to lead us on with hints throughout the text as to how the character would develop; how the same words implied different things when spoken by different characters. Using the same imagery, it would mean different things when said by a shallow character and a character with a capacity for suffering. He would point out to us that the language was the same, the imagery was the same but not the implications. His articulation wasn't very good. He taught us Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* and Shaw's *St. Joan* in the M.A. The class was huge, and the students used to get irritated, as he used to falter often, or his sentences were unfinished. So, we used to tell the others to be patient and listen, 'khoni theke onek moni berobey' ['a lot of gems will come out of this mine'].

What was the style of pronunciation in those days like? Was there an emphasis on Queen's English?

Tarak-babu's language was excellent, but his pronunciation wasn't. He used to pronounce 'essay' in a slightly odd manner. But the magic of his teaching was such that it didn't matter to us. He was quite particular about pronunciation with us. He had given me a testimonial. Our results had just come out



and we had gone to the Coffee House for coffee, and a library peon came up to us and said Tarak-babu wanted to speak to me before I left. I was afraid about the consequences and that he had come to know about my presence at the Coffee House, as coming to Coffee House was considered not all that respectable for women. So I ran back to Presidency, forgetting all about our coffee, and he told me to come back the next day at 10:30 for a certificate. I hadn't asked for it, nor was I confident about asking him for one. I have no idea for what reason, but he had praised my pronunciation in the certificate. My friends from Loreto were quick to refute it, as they thought my pronunciation was quite Bengali. They said it was nothing to recommend. But one cannot change Tarak Sen's recommendation; at most one can only get it framed.

How many people were there in your class?

There were 9 men and 9 women in our class. Three left. One of them became famous later as a journalist, Sunanda Kishore Dutta Ray, who had come from St. Xavier's, and there were 2 girls from Loreto. They couldn't adjust to the overtly Bengali ambience. However, it wasn't as if students didn't come from St. Xavier's or Loreto, I myself was one of them. One of my friends was a little *memsabehi* [anglicized], so we convinced her to change her attitudes while she was with us.

So tell us a bit about Tarapada-babu.

He was a very good teacher. We enjoyed his classes a lot. It would be wrong to call his classes histrionic, the dramatic was very much a part of his teaching style, there was a lot of gusto in the way he went about it, he didn't act it out, but there was a touch of the theatrical about the way he taught. All of them taught the text with great care. Maybe not as meticulously as Tarak-babu, but keeping all important textual details intact.

Were the classes interactive? Did you ask questions?

Not at all. We were listeners. If we had problems, we would go to them later. Tarak-babu took our tutorials, and if I had problems, I brought them up there. But not in class. He encouraged the students, but we didn't have such a scope in the university as the classes were too large. Whatever problems we had in the university, we used to take them to Tarak-babu. He used to take a class on Browning for us, later in the evening. *Hamlet* was taught to us in the university, but he taught us *Hamlet* nevertheless, line by line. Maybe he thought that it was important that he did it with us. The *Hamlet* classes used to take place in the evening in the library cubicle downstairs. They used to stretch on indefinitely. That room was rather isolated from the outside. It was a standard notification at home on those days that there would be no certainty of the hour when I would return.



One day, it was raining a lot. When the class got over, it was late evening, and College Street was flooded up to our knees. Thanthania Kali Bari was famous for being flooded out. I was a North Kolkata girl, I used to live near Bethune College, near Hedua. All my friends were from South Kolkata. The M.A. class was a small one, so we all took rickshaws to my house, because other forms of transport weren't available. None of us had realized that it was so late. In those days, the teachers had the attitude that they had to give the requisite amount of time that the text demanded. We never felt any pressure to complete the syllabus as a student. When we taught we were always under the compulsion of finishing off the syllabus. In those days, the questions were quite simple, and they had no relation to what was being taught in class. We were taught at a very high standard, but the questions we were examined with were very dull. Our teachers never taught us specifically for the test. And nowadays not having enough texts in the syllabus is a disgrace. So, in order to justify your existence to the outside world, you have to show you study a lot, and as a result nobody gets around to studying anything seriously. If you learn to study two to three texts properly, you can then read eight to ten texts easily. Our students who are teaching now claim that they don't have time to thoroughly read the texts they are going to teach. We knew that our teachers were authorities on the subject, nowadays it is a hand to mouth existence, there are so many texts to teach. At the beginning of our teaching careers, there wasn't this kind of pressure.

The atmosphere at Calcutta University must have been quite different...

After a long time, I was able to admit to myself that the Presidency model of teaching had made us quite highbrow. The teachers had a code that they had their noses in the air, that they weren't answerable to anyone and that whether they taught classes or not didn't matter to them. And they expressed this code in class as well. We were Presidency students who were studying through Presidency and a few classes were held at Presidency as well. Sometimes Tarak-babu's classes would run on to the time for other classes at university, but we did distance ourselves from the University. But later on I felt that we should have been a little more patient as we had a lot to learn from the University teachers as well.

What texts did you have at university?

We had *Hamlet*, *Measure for Measure* and we didn't have the time in class for that kind of detailed line-by-line study. We could at best discuss a few issues, and maybe read the important sections of texts. *The Winter's Tale*, and another text was there for detailed study, possibly *Antony and Cleopatra*. Dr. Srichandra Sen taught us *Hamlet*, I have forgotten the others. Dinesh Chandra Sen was there as well. He was a scholarly person, but he had a problem with pronunciation. I remember my other friends, who didn't study at Presidency, used to say that it was difficult to understand his teaching. But a lot of teachers said that they had benefitted from his classes.

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SHAKESPEARE IN BENGAL

Centre of Advanced Study, Phase III

UGC-SAP

Department of English

Jadavpur University



Was there a focus on performance in the classroom?

I remember doing Jyoti Bhattacharya's classes, and he used to practically enact it out for us. That was also there with Tarapada-babu, but not with the others.

Were there performances at University?

Yes, there were performances, but not of Shakespeare as far as I can remember. When I first went to teach, I taught for five years at Muralidhar Girls' College. At that point of time I was entrusted with putting up the plays, and I recall that we did Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (which was a text that I taught) in a shortened form.

Were the girls interested in theatre?

Yes, they were quite interested.

Do you remember watching any professional productions of Shakespeare?

Yes, I remember, watching a production of *The Merchant of Venice*. It was by a famous theatre group from England, which I don't remember the name of. I think it would have been in the late fifties or early sixties. It was a traditional production.

Did you see any of the Utpal Dutt performances?

Unfortunately, no.

So when did you come to Visva-Bharati?

1967. I joined Muralidhar in 1960. I spent 6 years in Muralidhar. After that I went abroad for a year.

Did you teach Shakespeare at Visva-Bharati?

Not really, but I did teach *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing* in the M.A. class. Perhaps something for the Pass classes maybe, but I don't remember clearly.



What kind of a difference do you find in between the generations when you were a student and when you started teaching?

I can't speak about Shakespeare, but in general, there was a change of syllabus, and that had an impact on students' response. As the syllabus increased, their patience decreased proportionately. We had a model for teaching within us, not just for Shakespeare, but also for Romantic and Victorian poetry as well, as the same teachers had taught us these things. Tarak Sen's teaching of Browning was unforgettable. He used to get large pictures from the library to teach us 'Fra Lippo Lippi' or 'Andrea Del Sarto', the evolution from the Renaissance, how perspective developed, how the representation became anthropocentric. What others taught in 3 months we went over it for a year in Tarak-babu's class. We had an excellent teacher called Amal Bhattacharya. He was very modern. It was a little difficult to follow his classes. He taught us Keats, and later on he taught us from an edited volume of critical essays. That was around for a long time. He didn't teach us for M.A. He went away for some time to become a principal elsewhere, we were all very surprised to see a man who didn't look up while speaking take up a job as a principal. He returned later.

I wonder how old Tarak-babu was then.

He was in his late forties to early fifties, I think he was born around 1908. But he appeared quite old to us, especially as he was ill for a long period of time. We had almost 100% attendance for his classes.

Amal-babu must have been younger then.

He would have been in his mid-thirties.

What about Tarapada-babu?

He would have been close to Subodh-babu as his headship followed Subodh-babu's headship. I don't remember exactly what the rule was back then for headship. Have you interviewed Ashok Mukherjee?

He was my tutor, so obviously I am going to interview him.

Ashok has kept up the Presidency tradition by teaching there himself...

Do you know Dipendu Chakrabarti?

I know him quite well; I don't know his present whereabouts though. He taught at Visva-Bharati for some time. He was 3-4 years junior to me.



Did anyone other than Tarak-babu discuss prosody seriously?

Tarak-babu had spoken about the short lines to a great extent every time. The way you read the short lines is important as it creates a space for dramatic gestures, almost as if they are stage directions, and by regularizing them you are vulgarizing them. I remember him saying that they are insensitive readers, who don't realize that it marks the entry or exit of a character. Those moments are filled up by the syllables of a short line. Perhaps the actor is making a gesture at a moment, and therefore the line is two syllables short. His teaching wasn't dramatic, but the basis of his teaching included the dramatic. Even though he is speaking monotonously, we could feel the play taking place before us. That is an immensely enriching experience. When we later came up with the word 'subtext', we found that they had taught us about the subtext, just not under that terminology. The language of theory was new to us in the sixties; we had to struggle with it quite a bit. But the later developments of theory, we found had already been there implicitly or explicitly even, in the words of our teachers. For instance, cultural studies, you cannot really define it, anything and everything can enter into it. Then the neo-historicist studies, we did study all of it, even though we never categorically focused on it. It was already there in what we studied. If it was taught in this manner today, it would have been called an eclectic approach. It was quite comprehensive. They were quite scholarly as well, which is why I never taught Shakespearean tragedies, I could have had I wanted to, as I had been head for quite some time, but the scholarship and competence that was required, that couldn't be achieved by just looking up a few books. I thought I could teach comedy as there is a social aspect to it and it could be relatable, but I never felt like teaching tragedy.

When I started teaching, I felt inhibited as well, when I thought of my teachers...

But we have to teach, otherwise all teaching would stop. But I personally felt that I didn't want to teach tragedy. In terms of pronunciation, they were not that great, Subodh-babu's pronunciation wasn't very good, Amal-babu had some problems as well. There was another teacher who was very learned – Dr. S.K. Sen – he used to teach us Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, but pronunciation was not their strong point. The celebrated teachers back then never came from public school backgrounds. They were all from a Bengali medium background.

Did they use humour or joke around in the classroom?

They never joked, but sometimes they were sarcastic. There was no familiarity between teachers and students in Presidency College. We had a different experience at University though, as Jyoti-babu was quite young, and we had often been on stage together, and there was a friendship between us. We had done Jyotirindranath Tagore's play *Alik Babu* together; we had just passed out then. I was teaching at Muralidhar, I used to take classes and then go for rehearsals, followed by a long *adda* session at Coffee House. He always used to pay for me, and then it was no longer a student-teacher relationship. Dr.

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Probodh Chandra Ghosh used to crack a few jokes sometimes. He too was interested in theatre: he put up *She Stoops to Conquer* with students from our class as part of our reunion. *Alik Babu* was done because the old students of the university used to put up a play at the reunion, along with the current students. Probodh-babu used to take our team from the University to Delhi for the youth festival, and I was there for one of his plays in 1957. He used to lighten up a bit at the youth festival. The atmosphere lightened up later, so that students could come out of their shells and participate in class discussions.