



Prof. Shanta Mahalanobis

Formerly of Lady Brabourne College, Bethune College and the University of Calcutta

(Interviewed by Paromita Chakravarti, Abhishek Sarkar, and Shubhankar Bhattacharya)

When did your first encounter with Shakespeare take place?

I was in Loreto House and then in Loreto College. This was the late 1940s. Shakespeare was very much on the syllabus. We read *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* in school. In our time it was the Senior Cambridge syllabus. In school the text was explained to us line by line and concepts like character and plot were also discussed. We were taught with the examination pattern in mind. We were introduced to Shakespeare in the eighth standard. We also had Shakespeare for our Senior Cambridge examination. Almost simultaneously, at our annual function and school socials we used to enact scenes from Shakespeare. Because of these productions, we were quite familiar with the performance aspect of Shakespeare from the time we were thirteen or fourteen years old. For the I.A. course in Loreto College, we had only some scenes from Shakespeare. I remember reading *Julius Caesar* at that time.

What texts did you have for the B.A. course?

For the B.A., we had *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*.

How Was Shakespeare taught at that time?

Teaching was very ordinary. There was nothing remarkable about it, but performance was emphasized a lot in college.

How was Shakespeare taught in the university? Could you tell us something about your teachers?

There were several professors who were very scholarly, such as Prof. Mohini Mohan Bhattacharya. He was then the Head of the Department. Their classes were more erudite – Shakespeare productions in Shakespeare's age, details of the Globe theatre, quarto and folio publications, the difference between editions up to the 18th century. There were questions on these in the examination. We had the Old



Arden edition and many Variorum editions where the textual variations were marked out. When we got a reference-to-the-context question, we were expected to discuss the words in the text and their correspondence to the other variations. We were expected to know about the production and publication in Shakespeare's day. We used to be questioned on these as well. There were questions on imagery, symbolism and source material. When we were students there was great emphasis on the source of Shakespeare's plays. We were asked questions on where Shakespeare borrowed his plots from – Cinthio, Belleforest, Holinshed, Plutarch – and how he handled his source material.

We had some teachers from Presidency coming in to teach us at Calcutta University. Among them, the famous Shakespeare scholar Prof. Taraknath Sen would take his classes in the evening, after university classes. He would teach the Criticism paper. Prof. Subodh Chandra Sengupta came in to teach us in the second year. Strangely enough, he taught Shaw and Modern Poetry. Amal Bhattacharya had not started teaching.

I remember that Prof. P.K. Guha and Prof. Dutta could communicate a certain enthusiasm although they might fall short of our present academic standards in terms of interpretation and theory. We learnt to love Shakespeare from the way they read and presented the scenes. They used to enact the text practically through voice and gesture. We don't do that anymore. There was that enthusiasm even in the audience. Their classes would be packed not because they were very analytical or gave us the right reading list, but because they could communicate that enthusiasm. We have probably lost that enthusiasm.

Did the teachers enact scenes in the classroom?

There were no professors in our time who would affect dramatic intonations in their voice. There was a lot of scope for that. Sushil Mukherjee might have done that since he was a performer. There was a difference between reciting and performing poetry. A performance meant that the poem was being enacted through voice, gesture and facial expression. Sushil Mukherjee could perform while he was reading the text. P.K. Guha would teach *Much Ado about Nothing*, Mohini Mohan Bhattacharya would teach *The Winter's Tale*. Sushil Mukherjee would probably teach *Antony and Cleopatra*. Amitabha Ray's Shakespeare Society of Eastern India was formed much later. The professors who taught us could not bring out the comic effect from the Porter scene in *Macbeth* or the Fools in *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*. Jyoti Bhattacharya used to act with his students, but that was after my time. Jyoti Bhattacharya had acted in Jyotirindra Nath Tagore's play *Alik Babu*. I knew Jyoti Bhattacharya and Arun Kumar Dasgupta as colleagues, not as teachers.

Did you have a separate paper on Shakespeare?

PEDAGOGY

Interview

SHAKESPEARE IN BENGAL

Centre of Advanced Study, Phase III

UGC-SAP

Department of English

Jadavpur University



We did not have a separate M.A. paper on Shakespeare. It was part of the Elizabethan paper. The plays were *Much Ado about Nothing*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*. *Much Ado* was much liked by us. It was taught by P.K. Guha. Prof. Sushil Mukherjee had a very good pronunciation. He had that special ability to communicate. We used to really love attending those classes. Later, we would prepare differently for examinations. The classes were really enjoyable.

Which editions of Shakespeare were used at that time?

We used the Verity edition in school. From college, we had Arden. For examinations, the questions were focussed on character, plot, not too much on language, when the plays were produced, different versions of the text, and variations across texts. We would often not prepare them for examinations but we were invariably questioned on those.

What kind of critical material was prescribed for Shakespeare?

L.C. Knights was recommended. Also, D.J. Palmer for comedy. A.C. Bradley was of course very much in vogue. Enid Welsford's work on Shakespeare's Fool was also recommended. *Shakespeare's Bandy* by Partridge was another book that was mentioned in the class. The University library was not badly stocked. Whatever we would get from there, we would read. When I was in college, we were asked to read essays on Shakespeare by authors from the Romantic period such as De Quincey ('On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*'), Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Hazlitt. Loreto College library had a number of these old books.

Were the teachers in your time very particular about pronunciation?

Prof. Sushil Dutt was of Toru Dutt's family. He had public school pronunciation. Prof. Sushil Mukherjee had very good pronunciation. Our professors had not studied in English medium schools. In those days, literature was taught very well in Bengali medium schools. My father was an engineer but he could quote from Coleridge, Longfellow and Shakespeare. The little discrepancies of pronunciation did not matter as they could infuse so much enthusiasm in their reading. While reading a text, they knew the lines and were not looking at the book. They were so close to the text that they would live the scenes. Arun Kumar Dasgupta, who is our contemporary, had a good accent. He however had a weak voice.

Was prosody stressed in the college classes?



Prosody was stressed at the undergraduate level. There was not much stress on scansion or metre in the postgraduate classes.

Did the teachers skip expletives and sexual innuendoes?

For the expletives and sexual innuendoes, we were referred to *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. We had a professor called P.C. Ghosh. He was one professor who would dwell extensively on sensuality, but not in a prurient way. He taught us *Mourning Becomes Electra*. We were much fascinated by his frankness. His discussion was very aesthetic, there was nothing coarse or crude about it.

How different was the teaching of Shakespeare in Cambridge?

The approach to the plays was much more analytical. Here in Calcutta the approach was slightly different, it was more interpretative. Critical works and reference material were not mentioned. The same people were being read for decades. In Cambridge we did not have too many Shakespeare lectures. There were more Shakespeare tutorials in Cambridge. Muriel Bradbook was very much a presence at the time in Cambridge. There were other big names like F.R. Leavis, C.S. Lewis and John Holloway.

By the time I came back and started teaching, new approaches had started. Criticism was moving in new directions. Marxist, Feminist, and postcolonial approaches had become influential. *The Tempest* and *Othello* were now examined from postcolonial perspectives. After Greenblatt's book, locating the text in history became very important. So all this influenced our teaching. Students had begun using the New Arden edition. When I started teaching, the *Shakespeare Survey* in multiple volumes was available. Now even the British Council library does not have the recent volumes. We used to devour them. There was a lot of information in them about performance, illustrations and reviews of other books. The illustrations in them about various performances would help us when we were preparing costumes and sets for our own college productions. It was quite an invaluable book. We used to recommend it to students.

At university, I have taught *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Winter's Tale*. The university students were not really interested in the performing aspect of Shakespeare. In school and college, they would want to perform Shakespeare as theatre. At university it was more about reference work, critical material, the books they should read, questions. They were being asked questions related to structure, dramaturgy. Nobody spoke about dramaturgy in our time.



Could you tell us something about the Shakespeare performances in the academic institutions?

We performed *Macbeth* and *Twelfth Night* at school. The productions weren't too bad. We were all very enthusiastic and given a lot of freedom to stage the plays. Nuns used to teach in our time. Mother Monica used to teach us and she would take a lot of interest in dramatics. She would guide us but gave us a great deal of freedom to do what we wanted. Thus, we were very familiar with the theatre aspect of Shakespeare. The plays would have an all-woman cast. One of the girls would do *Macbeth*, another would do *Macduff*.

Utpal Dutt was slightly senior to me. When we were in school, he was already producing Shakespeare plays at St. Xavier's College and he was a great success with us. Whenever we were got the information, we would go to watch his productions. The plays would take place in the St. Xavier's auditorium. His brother Nilin Dutt would also perform. Later on, he became a corporate professional. Pratap Ray and Dilip Ray Chaudhuri, who were the Raja of Santosh's son and nephew, would act too. This was quite a close knit group. When we came to college, Utpal Dutt had left but performances were still taking place. The St. Xavier's productions would have an all-boy cast. Pratap was very thin and lanky and he would often do the female roles. We were absolutely fascinated by Utpal Dutt's performances from right then. They were very lively despite being all-male performances. These were full length plays going on for two hours. In college we often used to do select scenes, but they at St. Xavier's never compromised with the text. Utpal used to take great trouble with props and setting. He used to direct the plays. Often our professors would come to watch the plays and their professors used to be present too. The St. Xavier's auditorium was very spacious and comfortable at that time. They had a teacher called Father Peter Gomes in college who used to take a lot of interest in sets, scenes, and acting. The behind-the-scenes work was Father Gomes's.

When we were doing our M.A., Utpal produced *Macbeth* at the University Institute. He was growing up theatrically as we were growing up. When we did plays in Loreto, there were provisions for costumes and properties. We had a prop room and a lot of costumes. In St. Xavier's there was a variety of props which would be rolled up and kept aside. They would use them as and when required.

There was a group at that time called "Shakespeareana". It had Geoffrey Kendal, Laura Liddell, Jennifer Kendal and Shashi Kapoor. They would come to various colleges and ask us what performances we wanted. They would come to St. Xavier's mostly. They had a few demands regarding sets and backdrops. It was not usual for a college to have all this material which was available in St. Xavier's. They kept on performing from the 1950s into the early 1960s. When I was teaching in Lady

PEDAGOGY

Interview

SHAKESPEARE IN BENGAL

Centre of Advanced Study, Phase III

UGC-SAP

Department of English

Jadavpur University



Brabourne in the 1950s they were performing in different places in Calcutta. The Lady Brabourne auditorium was very good but it did not have these elaborate sets which they wanted. But they still managed to create the sets and wings themselves. They used to charge us through tickets. We were thoroughly impressed by the performances.

After that, groups from abroad started visiting via the British Council. This was slightly later. When we were exposed to the British companies, the Kendals would strike us as very dramatic or excessively declamatory. But when we were watching them, we enjoyed a lot. They were totally lost in the roles they played. Laura Liddell would act as Lady Macbeth and Geoffrey Kendal played Macbeth. All the major roles were done by Laura Liddell and she was very good. Jennifer Kendal played Ophelia as she was very young at that time. Shashi Kapoor would also act. He would play some of the minor roles. He was very small and frail. He would stay behind the stage most often. There were no other Indians in the cast. He was the only one. Utpal Dutt did not collaborate with them. He would do his own productions. I remember Utpal Dutt had acted with them once towards the beginning.

When we performed in college, the audience would comprise parents and friends. In a woman's college, entry was restricted with cards for parents and not too many people from outside would come to watch. The students at St. Xavier's would find access to watch us. Some matchmaking was also done by bringing suitors into the audience.

When I was at university, Utpal Dutt was already performing at the University Institute. We had two guest lecturers – Prof. Sushil Mukherjee of Scottish Church College and Prof. Sushil Dutta, who took interest in theatre. Sushil Dutta taught the Restoration plays while Sushil Mukherjee taught Shakespeare. He would encourage students to perform. When we had annual socials at the university institute, he would act. He was quite stout and once played Sir Toby Belch at a performance of *Twelfth Night*. He was very lively and enthusiastic even while teaching in the classroom.

As a teacher, I used to come to watch Prof. Debabrata Mukherjee's productions in Jadavpur University. His father taught Bengali at St. Xavier's College and he was absolutely immersed in literature. We would be able to quote from Shakespeare very easily. That was probably owing to our school training, where we had to memorize lines from Shakespeare, such as Hamlet's and Macbeth's soliloquies, and recite them before the class. Debabrata (Mukherjee) was very good at memorizing lines. We were at university together. The Department of English organized debates and students' seminars. We used to interact a lot. We would routinely insert lines from Shakespeare into our conversation. For a seminar, I had asked Debabrata how the preparation was going on and he quoted Antony's lines from *Antony and Cleopatra*, "I'm dying Egypt, dying." Students have now moved away



from the text. Prof. P. (Purushottama) Lal once put up *Dark Lady of the Sonnets* by Shaw at the Asutosh Hall in Calcutta University. It was produced for the annual socials.

There used to be a lot of debates with exclusively literary topics, with Part I and Part II competing with each other. We had debates on Shakespeare and Shaw. They were attended by our teachers. We also published our little journal called *Bulletin* quite regularly. The professors were very encouraging and they helped us with money.

We had once put up a performance in Lady Brabourne College for a college social, physically enacting the text word by word and visualizing all the similes and metaphors to produce a comic effect. I would direct most of the plays for the annual function. We had performed scenes from *Twelfth Night* once. We had to relate to the audience and they preferred comedy. We did Chekhov, scenes from *The Rivals*, *The School for Scandal*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The audience was limited to parents and guardians.

I have also taught in Bethune and for the centenary celebrations of the college, students put up *Bhranti bilas* (Bengali adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors*). This was around 1978-79. The staff performed a play on the life of Michael Madhusudhan Dutt where I played Henrietta. Deepti Tripathy, then principal, was a very good dancer and interested in performances and theatre. As long as she was the principal, there was a lot of focus on performance. She insisted that the staff should perform.

A few colleges like Scottish Church, Loreto, St. Xavier's continued with Shakespeare productions into the '70s. Bertram Da Silva had produced *Twelfth Night* in St Xavier's College about 10 years ago. He has directed and acted in Shakespeare productions. Bertram Da Silva continued the Utpal Dutt tradition. The girls of Loreto College had once enacted the first act of *Julius Caesar*. They relied on action and gesture to realize the mob scene. It was done quite effectively.

Was there any translation of Shakespeare in those times?

Bangiya Shakespeare Parishad was formed in 1951 and they would publish a lot of Bengali translations of Shakespeare. Bangiya Shakespeare Parishad and all the theatre was happening in North Calcutta. The North Calcutta elite knew about it and some of the well-known families were involved.

In *Mashik Basumati* they would serialize a lot of Bengali translations. Nirendranath Ray and some others translated a few popular plays like *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Some of them were also produced. People who did not have access to the English would read them in Bengali. They were meant for lay readers. Even the productions were not staged by great scholars or eminent



theatre people. They were people connected to Star or Minerva Theatre. Utpal Dutt was associated with the latter. There were some people who had a repertoire of Bengali translations that could be performed.

I remember I was teaching at university when a gentleman came and said that they wanted to do a Bengali translation of *Macbeth*. He had an entire repertoire. It was not something great or literary for them but a money-making production meant for lay people. The commercial angle was dominant, nothing to do with art. It was Shakespeare for the people. I have never watched a Bangla production of Shakespeare. There were many of them in the 1950s. I knew Utpal Dutt was performing at the University Institute but I missed that production. He produced *Macbeth*, probably in 1955. I saw his non-Shakespeare productions like *Tiner Tolowar* later.

Could you tell us something about your experience of watching Shakespeare abroad?

I went to Cambridge in 1960 and hence was exposed to a lot of other influences. I was there for two years. Their approach was different. Those who were interested in acting and performing joined the theatre groups. Students had a number of groups. The moment you arrived at Cambridge you got a lot of cards inviting you to a number of events and societies. I remember an excellent production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the college gardens. It was done in open air by the students. The theatre groups from London would not perform at Cambridge. We went to watch them in London. We would go to West End over the weekend and watch three productions in a day. I remember watching *Richard III* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* this way. Only local talent performed in Cambridge. I remember an excellent production of *Doctor Faustus* in the King's College chapel.

Did you watch the film adaptations of Shakespeare in your time?

We were fascinated by the different film adaptations by Orson Welles, Roman Polanski and Akira Kurosawa. These films were screened in the British Council. A number of these film titles were kept in the BBC library. When Orson Welles' *Othello* came out, the whole class went to watch the film and then we excitedly discussed the film at the Coffee House.