



### **Prof. Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta**

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(Interviewed by Dr. Paromita Chakravarti and Sri Abhishek Sarkar)

**What are the institutions you did your B.A. and M.A. from? Which were the years?**

B.A. in English, from Lady Brabourne College in 1973 and M.A. in Comparative Literature from Jadavpur University in 1975.

**Where was your first encounter with Shakespeare? Did you have any Shakespeare texts in school?**

Yes, we had Shakespeare in school, and before that there were the stories from Shakespearean plays in *Lamb's tales* from Shakespeare.

**Was that a set text?**

No, I read that out of my own volition.

**What was the text you read in school?**

In our time it was the ISC. We had *Julius Caesar*.

**Which school was this?**

Carmel Convent, Giridih, Jharkhand. My final years were there.

**What were the texts in your college syllabus?**

In college we had *Macbeth* and *As You Like It*.

**Who used to teach these texts?**

*Macbeth* was taught by Karuna Chakraborty and *As You Like It* was possibly taught by Dipti Mitra. She is no more.



Amiya Dev used to teach us at University. His classes were very popular. I remember line after line of Shakespeare just because of his teaching, and I think this was because of his engagement with the world of Bengali theatre. He used to understand acting very well, so the way he used to teach us Shakespeare, there was a lot of acting in it, but we never felt that he was acting it out for us. He used to teach us *Anthony and Cleopatra*. It is because of him that several of the lines are permanently etched in my memory. We followed Jan Kott's text *Shakespeare our Contemporary*; we had to study the text while reading Shakespeare. That had an impact also, by making Shakespeare very relevant to us. There was something else which we did that made Shakespeare memorable for us, namely, reading Shakespeare alongside Racine, where the human condition itself was tragic whereas Shakespeare's tragedy was linked with human circumstance, how Racine was essentially tragic and Shakespeare alongside that. There was a lot more as well, but essentially along those lines, to understand the tragic.

### **In what manner were you taught?**

We had the Arden edition, I remember that. We were taught from there. I remember that, I don't know what for, I had very excitedly gone and looked up the Variorum editions, I remember that. That was my first exposure to textual scholarship, and it seemed to me that it was a very useful resource. It was not discussed in class, but someone must have mentioned it, and we did find it in the National Library, it was found quite easily and that too in the readers stack, outside, in the reading room.

### **Did you have to study the Shakespeare Sonnets?**

Yes, we had the Shakespeare sonnets. We didn't have to study the sonnets as set texts, we studied them when looking at lyric as mode and other aspects. And while studying the sonnet form we studied a lot of sonnets. We liked them.

### **Were the plays taught in a dramatic manner?**

It was primarily a close reading. It used to happen to some extent for comedy for Dipti-di. and not at all with tragedy.

### **Were there any departmental productions?**

In those days such things weren't very common, but when something happened at the British Council, a trip was usually organized. The college generally kept in touch with the British Council, and we did get to see quite a few good productions. There was a certain level of exposure, even if it was not much.



### **Do you remember what performances and films you saw?**

I don't remember what I might have seen at that time. Whatever I have seen, I think I must have seen later.

I think I have seen a few lecture-demonstrations, but I wouldn't remember the names of the presenters. I remember a discussion with the theatre-personality Ganesh Bagchi. He was associated with English theatre, I don't remember whether he was associated with the British Council in any manner, but there were a few interactions with him hosted by the British Council. It was then that I think that the Shakespeare group started. The one with Amitava Roy.

### **Weren't there any Shakespeare productions in college?**

I don't remember any productions, such were those times, I remember that we had a mock parliament, and it was this kind of things that we had more of, but I don't remember any Shakespeare production.

### **Weren't there plays at the annual festival?**

Yes, there were plays at the annual festival. In fact, there was a Shakespeare play, I remember now - *Hamlet* was performed by our class. Katy Lai had started Red Curtain at that point of time. A lot of people from Brabourne, St Xavier's, Loreto took part in Red Curtain productions. They did a lot of productions like Arthur Miller. The IIT Kharagpur fest was also popular. There were a group of people from Brabourne who took this *Hamlet* there, it became quite famous.

### **Was Shanta Mahalanobish there at that time?**

Yes, She was in charge of the *Hamlet* production. There was a girl called Namita who was a part of the production. She later had a career in advertising.

### **Were any of Shakespeare's contemporary playwrights taught?**

We had to study Marlowe. *Edward II* was our text but *Faustus* was naturally more attractive to us. *Faustus* was in fact a major inspiration behind my decision to study Comparative Literature.

### **Was *Faustus* taught in class?**

No, we weren't taught it in class. Even after coming to the Department of Comparative Literature, we didn't study Marlowe and Shakespeare together, even though Marlowe was brought up often during Shakespeare classes.



During our undergraduate classes Aristotle was brought up often, and it was brought up differently here. At Jadavpur, Racine was taught alongside in order to teach us French Classicism. Voltaire was brought up as well, though not to a large extent. We used to study Dryden as well for *All For Love* as a part of the same course. That was also one of the perspectives. But after that, when we went on to teach Shakespeare, we spoke more about the reception of Shakespeare. Shakespeare in the classroom is also one of the areas that we talk about - how Shakespeare enters the classroom. Another aspect that we talk about is Shakespeare and Indian theatre, about the impact of Shakespeare's comedies on Parsi theatre. We haven't been able to develop the course to our satisfaction due to a paucity of texts, what we do at most is read a few texts alongside each other, like a few *Macbeth* texts. We try to see how Shakespeare studies begin in the nineteenth century in India, we then try to look at the origins of Bengali Shakespeare criticism, like how the Bengali reader reacts to Lady Macbeth, because it is their first exposure to a foreign culture, examining how anybody can portray a character such as lady Macbeth. Then we look at Shakespearean reception, especially in the 1930's and 40's.

### **Did you teach this course?**

I have taught it a few times, I teach a small section in it. The course didn't exist for a long time. It was an optional course. But getting texts for it was difficult, especially in terms of translations, as not everyone can read all the languages covered in it. We have to ensure that there are English translations for all general courses so that all students can access the texts. If this weren't the case, then we could have structured a very good course around *The Tempest*. Manab-da used to teach *The Tempest* alongside Aimé Césaire.

### **What Shakespeare plays are taught now?**

We teach *Macbeth* now, alongside Machiavelli's *The Prince* in the B.A. For the M.A. the person who takes the course chooses the play, I don't remember what is taught now.

### **What kind of difference in pedagogy did you notice between college and university?**

My earlier background stood me in good stead here, and I had thought that I would read the Variorum editions here as well. Sometimes I used to feel bad that I couldn't engage as deeply with the text as I would want to, because we had to read such a wide variety of texts that a very close reading of the text was often not possible. I used to miss that, but I felt that I had to reach some sort of compromise in order to engage with the wider variety of texts possible here. I'm glad that I had that background and that I had a training in Comparative Literature later.

**So how was *Antony and Cleopatra* taught? You were saying that it was taught in a very dramatic manner, could you please elaborate on that?**



It was taught alongside Racine, but the primary focus was on Shakespeare as a contemporary. Greek tragedy as referred to as well. We had to study *Oedipus Rex*, we had to study Aristophanes for comedy as well. We had a paper on literary modes for our graduation, for which we had to study Greek tragedy and Shakespeare.

**Were sexual references or profanity excluded during close readings in class?**

Not during our M.A., I do not remember what happened during our B.A.

**What about stage and acting conventions and the socio-political background?**

We were taught about that very well for our M.A. It was there to a certain extent for our B.A., but it was dealt with extensively for our M.A. I took great interest in Shakespeare and drama as such. The socio-political background was taught extensively as well, thanks especially to the influence of Utpal Dutt. Stagecraft and socio-political situations were quite extensively covered.

**Did student plays take place at Jadavpur University?**

I don't remember if they did.

**Were there discussions on film adaptations?**

Not much. There was hardly enough time, as there were a lot of texts. We have a course now where we talk about *Maqbool* among other things.

**Do you think Shakespeare is an over-rated author? How would you react to the present trend of de-canonizing Shakespeare?**

It depends on what we mean by over-rated. We have a specific history for receiving Shakespeare. There was a question which was prevalent among us then from the Comparative Literature theory point of view, from the reception angle, as to whether Shakespeare was thrust upon us or whether we received Shakespeare. I believe that a particular system takes what it needs in accordance with its own wishes, so nothing can be thrust upon us. If you thrust something upon a system it exhausts itself quite soon, and there is no lasting effect. But there was such an organic development that it seems impossible to separate Shakespeare, so we probably can't say that he is over-rated. It also depends how and at what stage in life we have received Shakespeare, and these factors become very important in deciding how we react to Shakespeare.



I think that we should do something about *The Tempest* spanning the entirety of South-East Asia. Leave alone South-East Asia, we haven't even gotten around to writing a history of *The Tempest* re-workings in India. Those are things which are still left to be done.

As for de-canonizing, have we really put him on a pedestal? If we do bring in Shakespeare in the classroom as well as Shakespeare on stage, we are immediately removing him from the pedestal, we are bringing him down among us when we look at how people are receiving Shakespeare, because that is the history of theatre. It might be that when people are framing syllabi, Shakespeare in the classroom might bring a certain value, as it is a canonized text in a culture. But if we move away from that position, we also need to realize that what happens on the stage cannot be isolated from what happens in the classroom. Whatever has happened has trickled down from there.

The history of Shakespeare reception is fascinating. Even if we consider that Shakespeare was imposed upon us, when we staged productions, we incorporated songs, fused it with the *jatra* tradition, changed the names, the registers of language, it is a very fascinating chapter in cultural history.