



### **Subodh Sarkar**

Poet and educator

(Interviewed by Arunava Banerjee on 2 April 2013 at his residence)

#### **What was your year of passing BA and MA?**

I passed out in the year 1978 and that was my BA and my MA was in the year 1980. We received our results a little later. Officially it was in '81, because at that time the academic sessions were very disturbed.

#### **And the institutions?**

I passed out from Kalyani University. I was born and brought up in Krishnanagar and I used to come to Kalyani. I was a commuter and I used to come to do my studies in Kalyani, and I took my honours degree from Kalyani University, which was taught in the university at that time, and later my M.A.

#### **When did your first encounter with Shakespeare take place?**

I think it was when I personally studied Shakespeare when I was in school in a small town school in Krishnanagar, where Shakespeare was not taught at all, but I had a very special interest in his plays and also in his sonnets and poems, so I personally studied them. But studying in the way that students do so in the honours course, I mean encountering Shakespeare at the honours level that was first when I was a student of second year. So that was my first encounter with Shakespeare.

#### **What was the college and university syllabi like? And who were the people who taught Shakespeare?**

Many of them, right at this moment I can remember Prof. Pralay Kr Deb, Prof. Ashok Mukherjee, who is an eminent theatre personality in Calcutta. So I specially remember these two professors of Kalyani University who taught us Shakespeare, Prof. Pralay Kr Deb and Prof. Ashok Mukhopadhyay. Ashok Mukhopadhyay of Theatre Workshop, and he has also done some Shakespearean productions.

#### **And what were the college and university syllabi like?**



You mean the plays, the plays that were on the syllabus, right? At the honours level we studied *Twelfth Night* and for our MA we had *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*. Maybe some other plays were also included in the syllabus, I can't remember exactly.

### **Was there any paper on the background to Shakespeare or on Shakespeare criticism?**

Oh sure, Shakespeare criticism was a part of our special paper in our final year of M.A. and it was considered a very important part of that particular paper, the special paper. When you are studying a play, you have to have some knowledge of the socio-historic background, and I think that my Professors did very well by us. They always wanted to explore the socio-cultural and the socio-ethnic background of the entire play, how the play is placed in time, how it is taken out of time and history. For example, Holinshed's chronicles and how it was taken out of it and how it was then remodelled from that particular structure. These were the lines along which we used to have discussions.

### **And how was Shakespeare taught in the classroom?**

It was mainly a text based class, like reading the play out or choosing certain scenes in particular or maybe we had a certain introduction before we went into the text, so after the introduction, the textual explanation and then sometimes a paraphrasing of the text was also necessary for the common students. Side by side the teachers also used to give us the scene wise summary and critically examined the scenes, the characters, the plot, and the most important critical estimates that were available, like Professor Bradley's estimate of Shakespeare, which was very popular with us, and I still believe that he is popular with the students, and a lot of other critics were also discussed. This was how we used to go about the Shakespearean plays.

### **Would you say that the latest criticism was available for discussion and circulation in the classroom?**

In the mid 70's I was a student of Kalyani University and as far as I remember we had a very good library, so we had access to the latest books like the Casebook series among others at that time. The Casebook series was coming up at that time in the mid-70s. That was a very good series I remember. I think that the way we were taught, as I have already explained, were text based class lectures, and the critical books, were available in our library. So the critical estimates of Shakespeare were available in our university, but it was not Jadavpur or Calcutta University or Delhi or J.N.U. It was a *mofussil* university. We had a lot of limitations, and it was a new university, we had started in the '50s.



**Did the traits of any particular teacher impress you more than the others, while they were teaching Shakespeare?**

Between the two professors I have already mentioned was Prof. Pralay Kr Deb. I used to follow him very intensely; each of his lectures was like a window opening for me, a new way of thinking, and also interpreting Shakespeare. That way I was very lucky that I was able to attend his classes.

**Did the teachers enact any of the scenes in the classroom?**

No, never, that was very problematic. When I teach Shakespeare for my students at City College, I always feel this inadequacy, that I am not an actor or performer. While doing the texts or reading them out, for example the sleep walking scene in *Macbeth*, so while I am doing this scene, I always feel that there is something missing. It is the male voice that doesn't working the sleep walking scene when Lady Macbeth is speaking out those fragmented words, speaking in fragmented prose, you need a woman's voice to speak like Lady Macbeth and I feel this inadequacy, and I try my best to conjure up the figure of Lady Macbeth before the students but I think that if it is performed, and I am not saying that in the technical sense, that as far as the voice acting is concerned, it is very important that they should feel that Lady Macbeth is appearing before them. That way I am saying that text based classroom lecture doesn't always work. Critically you are ok, or when you are examining a scene in a certain way it's ok, but it's not enough, it's not adequate enough.

**Were the teachers who taught you particular about pronunciation and accent?**

The way we do Shakespearean scenes or Shakespearean plays in India, there are tens of thousands of ways of doing Shakespeare in India. In Maharashtra there is one way of doing Shakespeare, in Karnataka there is another way of doing Shakespeare. There are so many versions of doing Shakespeare, even in the classroom. I still remember that I attended a Marathi teacher's class in Bombay, which was in a very Marathi style, and I was surprised. I realized that he was doing something absolutely different from the kind of Shakespeare that we did in our classrooms.

**Were expletives and sexual references omitted from the discussion of the plays in the classroom?**

Not always, it depended on the mental make-up of the teacher. Sometimes some sexual connotations need to be elaborately discussed but were avoided. But you know, maybe it is difficult for some teachers to explain certain things; possibly they don't want to explain it in the class. Not that it is



difficult for them to explain something, but it is more because of the fact that psychologically they don't feel good if they discuss certain things in front of the students, so that is a problem.

### **How far was the socio-historic context of the plays discussed in the classroom?**

In most cases the historical background was discussed, as without the historical background you cannot study Shakespeare. It was done well, and the social background was equally important for me, and the socio-historical positions, in the reading of Shakespeare, are very important and I believe that I was lucky that my teachers used to do it in detail.

### **Were Shakespeare's contemporary dramatists given the same amount of importance in the classroom?**

Not exactly the same amount of importance was given to his contemporary playwrights, but I should say that while discussing Shakespeare there was a tendency on behalf of the teachers to discuss the plays of the Elizabethan theatre especially with an emphasis on the University Wits, and more particularly Edward Marlowe. I was introduced to Elizabethan theatre mainly through Shakespeare and then I gradually discovered or explored the other possibilities of that time, and of course Marlowe was the next man for me.

### **But what about classroom time? Was Shakespeare given the major chunk of it?**

Exactly, Shakespeare was given the major chunk, but in classes, sometimes because of the time constraints you have a 50 minutes class, and within that framework of time, you have to complete a certain topic, and you cannot take up other playwrights in details. I think it is not very practical for teachers and sometimes we have to avoid certain things that are very prominent in the history of the Elizabethan drama.

### **Were students encouraged to think independently and challenge the teacher?**

Very rarely. I had some friends, maybe one or two or three friends who wanted to rather not contradict or put up a challenge, I should not use the word challenge, but I should say that they sometimes had a second opinion, and the second opinion goes unrewarded as it was not encouraged in our classroom. It was the first opinion propagated by the teacher that we used to nurture. But outside the classroom we used to discuss alternate opinions. There was not too much of that kind of giving and taking in the classroom.



### **What editions and critical material were prescribed for Shakespeare in the classroom?**

Most of the books available in our library, all the great critics you know, A.C. Bradley, Verity, Kenneth Moore, the Casebook series, were among other critical books recommended by our Professors, that is the way I think it was... I personally believe that if you study the text of the play and if you read two or three critical estimates, and it would be good if one were opposite to the other, then we can form the legacy of looking at the text critically. That is the way I think we used to do it.

### **What editions were prescribed for use in class?**

Which editions? You mean the text? Mainly the Arden edition.

### **Arden was readily available?**

Arden was readily available and in the mid '70s the reprints of the old Arden editions were also coming up.

### **Was it affordable for all students?**

Not for all students, I was from a very poor family and my father died young and I had to struggle to buy books and sometimes I couldn't buy my texts, but our library was very good, so I used to go to the library to borrow my books, and it was a regular process, so I never felt I was short of critical books or anything like that, my library was this bountiful giver of books to me that way.

### **What was the examination and question pattern like?**

Very traditional questions, the questions which are still going on, the traditional questions that we have for the last I should say 50 years – 60 years or more than 100 years under Calcutta University, very traditional questions, and most of the students had options for two or three questions which were very traditional questions, and if they prepared the answers and studied their notes and if they could memorize those answers for the exam, that would be the end of it.

### **Did the teacher refer to stage or film productions of Shakespeare?**

No, it was not possible, because as I was saying, it was not Jadavpur University or Calcutta University where you have a lot of possibilities, a lot of urban facilities, you have the theatre, you have CDs, well now you have CDs and now it is changing all over. I mean everywhere, even in the *mofussils*. But what



I am trying to say is that during my time the theatre or films based on a Shakespearean text was not available, a theatre production is very easily available in Calcutta right now, but at the time it was very difficult for us. I remember I came all the way from Kalyani University to Calcutta to see the Russian *King Lear* in a theatre in Calcutta. At that time I was a very young second or third year student. We, two or three of us, came to the city and it was very difficult for us to get it.

### **Was there ever any performance of Shakespeare at your institution?**

Again that was very rare. If there was a festival, maybe during an annual festival in the department, or maybe during the union program sometimes some particular scenes were enacted to the audience, but these were not very regular things.

### **When the text was being taught in class was it related to the Elizabethan theatre and its performance conditions?**

If you don't discuss the structure of the Elizabethan theatre, it is very difficult to do the text. I think our teachers used to do it, and we were really benefitted by such discussions, like how the stage was, what the performers were like, how they used to come to stand on the stage, how the light was placed, how the audience sat all around the stage. All these details were given and discussed in relation to the text.

### **You have been teaching Shakespeare for quite some time now, so have you noticed any changes in the way Shakespeare is taught as well as the way the students react to the way Shakespeare is taught over time?**

Of course I have noticed certain changes. Initially there was a kind of fear psychosis about Shakespearean plays, I don't know why. Is it because of his language or is it because of his imagery? I am not sure, but I noticed this fear, during my time and when I came to teach my students Shakespeare. I felt that it is now changing and Shakespeare is again and again proved to be relevant and to be contemporary. Shakespeare is made anew in every geographical site, in every different time, so there is no specific zone or time for Shakespeare. Because what happened in Macbeth is still happening, what happened in King Lear is still happening in the world, so I find that young people are also getting interested in Shakespearean texts. They want to edit, re-edit, and re-examine Shakespearean texts, give them liberty, give them free thinking, and let them think about their own contemporary situation in relation to Shakespearean texts, and this is how Shakespeare is made new again and again. I believe this kind of thing is happening and with the young teachers, with the help of senior professors, I think



we can initiate a lot of new ideas and in fact a lot of ideas are there to enact Shakespeare, to react to Shakespearean studies, to critically examine and re-examine Shakespearean texts.

### **Do you think Shakespeare is an overrated playwright?**

No, this is a mystery. Shakespeare for me is an enigma, that each and every line is a kind of wonder, it's not that its poetry, it's not that it's a very pithy remark or that it's a kind of saying or that it has proverbial content in it, but I feel that a Shakespearean play is a wonder in the sense that it never gets exhausted, it has that potential to be explored again in a new manner after many explorations throughout the ages, so you don't know what new kinds of texts will emerge out of the old interpretations of the text. So there is a possibility of a new interpretation every time. That's why I think he is explored again and again and so many books are now being published that this is also very interesting to me.

### **What is your response to the present trend of de-glamourizing and de-canonizing Shakespeare?**

What do you mean by de-glamourizing? Is it that...

### **Showing him as he is not all that he is made out to be... that there is no need to place him at the centre of the canon.**

Ok, 400 years only, but we need another 400 years to de-glamourize him, and it's very difficult to de-glamourize the status of the playwright, because you can have a lot of new theories, you can have a lot of new theories to re-examine Shakespeare, but you cannot say that Shakespeare is not relevant, you cannot say that Shakespeare is not what he was when he was writing in the Elizabethan time, you cannot say that Shakespeare is not great, because if you say that Shakespeare is not great you have to cite one example who can be placed in his place, who can be? Would you rather that Shakespeare is replaced by Marlowe or any other Elizabethan writer? We don't have that possibility. And that's why I think that he stands supreme and there is no question of de-glamourizing him. People are more interested in his... not only in his plays but also in his sonnets. There are so much scandalous research on his sonnets, that he was a homosexual, that the sonnets were dedicated to a man and not to a woman, and the new researchers are saying that Shakespeare had this and that kind of relationship with his male friend and so on... and so you know it goes on, I still find that Shakespeare remains as great as he was before.



**There is an upcoming phenomenon in the West that students are reading Shakespearean plays in paraphrase, even in Britain, so how do you react to this phenomenon?**

It is awesome, I am awed by the fact that of all places Britain, and that the students in Britain are reading paraphrases, this is very funny. But our students also attend classes, texts are read out and taught and they also read their... I am not saying that about everybody but most of the students read Shakespeare's texts, if not in between the lines, at least the most important scenes of the plays, and I believe that reading paraphrases is not reading Shakespeare, so if Shakespeare is translated, or Shakespeare is paraphrased, then Shakespeare doesn't remain Shakespeare. You can read any story, you can read any history, though you know the story of *Macbeth*, the story of *Hamlet*, the story of *King Lear*, it is there in the history, so why are you reading Shakespeare? The greatest fun, the greatest aesthetic pleasure is when we read the text, the Shakespearean text. And that is the most important thing. Because if the boys and girls of England are reading paraphrases, this is a kind of degeneration in England.