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(Interviewed by Sri Abhishek Sarkar and Sri Arunava Banerjee)

Where are your B.A. and M.A. from?

My B.A. was from Ananda Chandra College, Jalpaiguri under the C.U. rules and syllabus, and my M.A. was from Jadavpur University. I passed B.A. in 1965 and M.A. in 1967.

When did your first encounter with Shakespeare take place?

At college.

Which school did you go to?

I went to Mathabhanga Higher Secondary School in the Cooch Behar district.

Was it a Bengali medium school?

It was very much a Bengali medium school; we had the Higher Secondary syllabus.

Shakespeare was on the college syllabus, and not before that, right?

At the college level.

Did you have Lamb's tales?

Tales from Shakespeare, I read some of the tales when at school.

What texts did you have for your college and university syllabi?

Syllabi at both college and university levels, of which Shakespeare texts were a major component, consisted of 800 marks. There were three Shakespeare texts and a couple of Shakespeare sonnets, at

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the UG level. For M.A., there were four Shakespeare texts for detailed study, and some six or eight, I don't exactly remember, Shakespeare plays for non-detailed study. Besides, Shakespeare sonnets and a history of Shakespeare criticism were also prescribed for study at the M.A. level.

Who were the people who taught you Shakespeare?

Shakespeare plays at the B.A. level were mostly done by Prof Dinesh Chandra Biswas, and I also met him at Jadavpur University at the postgraduate level. The Shakespeare texts and the history of criticism were mostly taught by Prof Subodh Chandra Sengupta. Some Shakespeare plays were taught by Prof Dinesh Chandra Biswas at the M.A. level, and just one text by Dr Pranati Dey.

Can you specify the texts?

Among the texts that I remember, one is *Richard III*.

Who taught it?

Prof Subodh Chandra Sengupta. *Hamlet* too was done by Dr Sengupta. *The Winter's Tale* was done by Dr D. C. Biswas. *Twelfth Night* was done by Dr Pranati Dey. And the non-detailed texts – two from comedies, one or two from tragedies, one of the history plays, and one from the Roman plays, all these texts were done by Dr Sengupta.

What were the texts done in college?

Macbeth, *As You Like It*, *Julius Caesar* – we had just these three texts.

And you had two sonnets?

No, as many as six sonnets.

And that was as per the C.U. syllabus?

As per C.U. rules and syllabus.

North Bengal University had not been set up by then?

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Noth Bengal University had been setup by then, but the syllabus had not been framed. It was the Calcutta syllabus that was followed, and the administration was guided by C.U. rules.

And how was Shakespeare taught? Could you please give us some details?

Shakespeare was taught line by line in the classroom, and there was hardly any skipping. And the Shakespeare classes continued for hours on many occasions, absolutely without the assistance of any teaching aids. And both Prof Sengupta and Prof Biswas had an exceedingly captivating teaching mode of their own, and took the students right into the text, so as to help them grasp the essentials of the characters and contexts of the plays under discussion. As a matter of fact the pedagogic skill and excellence of both the teachers instilled such an interest for Shakespeare in the learners that at least with some of them it subsequently became a passion, culminating in successful Shakespeare presentations at prestigious international conferences and congresses. So this is as much as I can summarize regarding the mode of teaching of the teachers concerned.

What traits of any particular teacher impressed you the most?

Of course there are some features of particular teachers ... while Prof S.C. Sengupta with his profound Shakespeare scholarship and with his extended exposition of the immediate topics of discussions, held the students, both average and advanced spellbound and hammered the heart of the matter home, in his own special and lucid style, Prof D.C. Biswas, a worthy inheritor of Prof Sengupta's mode, put more heart and passion into his teaching and was more histrionic, so much so that he even went on to enact parts of the text before the students to emphasize the audio visual appeal of the plays. Equally remarkable was Prof Biswas's attention to the textual and critical details.

Can you recollect anything about Pranati Dey?

I remember that on various occasions she enjoyed the reading of *Twelfth Night* very much, and the students shared her enjoyment, and there were hilarious bursts of laughter while she was teaching.

Did the teachers enact the scenes in the classroom?

Yes, both Dr Sengupta and to a much greater extent, Dr Biswas occasionally enacted parts of the scenes of the plays in the classroom, to highlight the quintessence of the varying moods and emotions of the leading characters like Hamlet, Richard III and Leontes, to name only a few.

Was the very particular about pronunciation and accent?



Yes, the pronunciation of the teacher, despite its pronounced Indianness, was flawless and perfect. He was very particular about accent.

Were the expletives and sexual references omitted?

No, these two things were neither omitted nor ignored. On the contrary, due attention to these features rather helped a proper appreciation of the text.

Did this apply to all the teachers?

Mostly it applied to those who took up Shakespeare plays.

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

Since adequate reference to the socio-historic context of the plays is germane to the discussion of the texts, students were introduced to the relevant facets of those contexts, vis-à-vis their bearing on a thorough appreciation of the texts. Incidentally, when Dr. Sengupta read *Richard III* with us, he went on to discuss the contexts of the Wars of the Roses, and all the topics of interest related to or with special reference to the text.

Were Shakespeare's contemporary dramatists given the same amount of importance? Your specialization is Marlowe, was he given the same amount of importance?

Actually Marlowe, Webster and Kyd were occasionally taken up, when there was any scope for a comparative analysis of the popular Elizabethan themes like revenge or ambition in the plays of Marlowe, Kyd, etc. Shakespeare was occasionally taken up in addition to the contemporary playwrights, wherever the texts demanded, and the students were naturally encouraged to think independently, so much so that they went to interact frankly with their teachers.

Were the students encouraged to interact with the teachers outside the classroom?

After the teachers left the classroom, some of our classmates went straightaway into the library, particularly into the reading room, and we were there in the reading room till late in the evening, it was open till 9 p.m. in those days. Since we were hostellers, most of us enjoyed the facilities of the reading room. Besides, there were occasions when we interacted with our teachers

Could you please name the editions and the critical material prescribed?



No Indian editions, they were not available either. No editions other than those by the British scholars, like A.W. Verity, Prof Percival, etc were prescribed and reference books by eminent critics like G. Wilson Knight, A. C. Bradley, H. Granville Barker, etc were recommended for critical reading . I remember the occasions when Dr Sisir Chatterjee came to our help by referring to various texts, even on texts not taught by him.

The tutorial system was present then?

Yes, the tutorial system was rigidly followed, and in fact the evaluation of the tutorial scripts and the award was very much a part of the final exam. I don't know about the present status ...

It has been discarded ... we don't follow it so strictly.

In our days we had a ninth paper, and it was literally a ninth paper. It consisted of round-the-year tutorials, annual examination and a comprehensive viva voce.

Who were your tutors?

Prof David John Lake.

Did he come over on the exchange program?

I am rather unable to answer your question, but Prof. Lake, as far as I remember, had been with us for the entire session of two years.

And the other tutor?

Normally there were at least two teachers from UK, and we had only David John Lake at the post-graduate level. And Prof Wood was there at the undergraduate level, as far as I remember.

Who was your other tutor? Usually weren't there two tutors?

Prof A.D. Mukherjee (Prof Amulyadhan Mukherjee).

We didn't get to hear about him much, was he from a long time ago?

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No, he was a part-timer. But he was very helpful to the students, and he took individual care, and the students were benefited. Prof A D Mukherjee, who joined J.U. on his retirement from Burdwan University, individually attended to the students.

Did you get to discuss Shakespeare with them as well?

Yes, they discussed Shakespeare with us when it came to tutorial assignments.

What was the examination question pattern like?

As I was telling you, apart from an eight-paper final examination at the conclusion of the PG syllabus in the final year, there were ample provisions for round- the- year tutorial tests, rigidly held on a fortnightly basis, and an annual examination at the end of PG first year. Incidentally the tutorial tests, annual examination, and the comprehensive viva voce constituted the ninth paper of the then PG English Examination at JU, and the question pattern comprised the essay type questions and explanations only, preparations for which demanded a thorough and first- hand acquaintance with texts– plays and poems in particular. There was absolutely no provision for short and objective type questions.

What were the questions on Shakespeare like?

Apart from questions related to character studies and thematic studies, there were quite a number of questions on other topics, including the socio-political aspects of the texts and other matters. There were reference-to-the-context questions as well.

Did the teacher refer to the stage and film versions of the texts as well?

The teachers referred to the Elizabethan stages and theatre-houses, but not very much to the stage productions. They, of course, referred to film productions, particularly those where Lawrence Olivier enacted the title roles.

Were those films ever screened?

No, no screening of the contemporary films took place.

Was the text related to performance conventions?

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In some cases, the prescribed texts like *Hamlet*, *The Winters Tale*, were partly related to performance conventions, and the teachers made pointed references to those while reading the texts.

Was Shakespeare performed at the university or college where you studied?

There were amateur performances.

By the students?

By both students and teachers. Tripping down the memory lane I remember one special occasion, it was way back in 1967. There was a highly important academic event at J.U., the All India English Teachers Conference, in that year. On that occasion, a number of scenes from *As You Like It* were enacted by the J.U. English department, and specially memorable were the roles of Duke Senior and Amiens, performed respectively by Prof David J Lake, and Prof Debabrata Mukherjee, who had so much of music in his blood.

Were these performances related to class lectures in any way?

Have you noticed any changes in Shakespeare pedagogy and student reaction over the decade?

As a matter of fact, Shakespeare pedagogy down the decades has undergone a number of changes, largely effected by the ingenious application of the ever developing teaching / learning aids, mostly electronic in character, and consequently the present dot- com generation of students are interested more in learning Shakespeare through these devices rather than having a conventional approach to the Bard's works.

Did you teach Shakespeare at the university?

Occasionally, I taught Marlowe mostly, and some other sixteenth-century texts were also assigned to me.

Do you think that Shakespeare is an over-rated author?

No, I don't think so.



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

If one is to go by the latest trends, Shakespeare in the 21st century seems to be somewhat de-glamourized not withstanding his worldwide adaptability and acceptability down the ages, and this is perhaps, to some extent at least, due to the fact that the present-day syllabus committees tend to make room for new literatures in English. So Shakespeare, with some exceptions, is not that deified these days. In the West, however, Shakespeare continues to enjoy the same unabated reputation and fame, as evidenced by the statistics of the last World Shakespeare Congress (July 17-22,2011, Prague, Czech Republic) which I attended. So, I don't think Shakespeare is de-glamourized or de-canonized in Europe at least.

How would you react to the phenomenon of reading Shakespeare in paraphrase or simplified form, now popular among students in the West?

No doubt the flavour of the original Shakespeare will be considerably lost if the phenomenon of reading Shakespeare in a simplified language or in paraphrase is encouraged at UG or PG level. But it is not undesirable to introduce Shakespeare to the uninitiated and the beginners in a simplified language that will communicate the quintessential Shakespeare.