



Professor Swapan Chakravorty

Rabindranath Tagore Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Presidency University, Kolkata

(Interviewed by Sri Abhishek Sarkar in 2012)

AS: In which year did you pass your BA and MA and from which institutions? When did your first encounter with Shakespeare take place?

BA from 1972 to 1975, Presidency College, Calcutta. MA from 1975-77 at Jadavpur University.

And then I left JU in 1978 in February. In those days the exams used to get delayed. The situation was slightly better at Jadavpur. But at Calcutta the backlog could stretch up to two-three years. Then I joined the State Bank in February 1978. I returned to teaching in November '78 and have been teaching since. Of course, with breaks. I went as Commonwealth Academic Staff Scholar to Oxford in 1988, came back in '91, and I am on leave, on lien rather, as Director General of National Library. Once in a while, I have been a visiting fellow, once at the University of London and another time at the University of Malaya. I think these are not important, but wherever I have been, I mean except for the University of London, where I was doing book history, I have always taught a bit of Shakespeare, I have even taught at a community college in Virginia. Nowadays I don't travel because of my health. But whenever I have done so, a bit of Shakespeare was thrown in some way. About your question...

AS: Where were you first taught Shakespeare?

School. We were taught Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* for our Senior Cambridge. That means from class 9 to 11 we had to read *Julius Caesar* in our syllabus. But I started reading Shakespeare much earlier. My father had a *Complete Works* which was printed here in the press of *The Statesman* and published by, I think, Standard Literature Company or some other house like that. It was a huge tome of a book, very ornately bound, with a portrait on the flyleaf, a frontispiece and dramatis personae preceding the play-texts – obviously a very attractive book. I'd been reading it for a very long time, but the only trouble was that there was no glossary or notes. So I sort of... it's a good thing... it was a good thing for me, I learned to make sense of Shakespeare without much help from teachers, family or notes. I remember my sisters had to read Shakespeare as part of their compulsory English course for college, and the



poor girls had to buy Indian editions with notes at the foot of the page. Usually these were edited by someone called D.N. Ghosh, I...

SB: From Bangabasi.

I don't know where he was from. By that time I was almost making fun of the notes. I was in high school, but I had read Shakespeare 'properly' and I had already grown supercilious. The edition in which I read *Julius Caesar* was a fine edition, called the 'Oxford and Cambridge edition'. Although it was called Oxford and Cambridge, it had nothing to do with John Dover Wilson's New Shakespeare published by Cambridge or any Oxford scholarly edition. It was simply an edition for those who would take the high school certificate examinations conducted by Oxford and Cambridge, especially in the colonies. I forget the name of the editor. But as for the teaching of Shakespeare, well, we were asked to memorize Shakespeare in our school and, although it might sound mechanical now, it was no better with the teaching of Bangla in Bangla schools. You had to recite poems by heart. That's why you have people who are over 60 years now, and they can recite a number of poems even if they have done nothing in their lives other than sell soap or something, because in school they were made to memorize these verses.

I remember that I used to feel a deep guilt that I never memorized in that way. My memory was very strong, but I never memorized anything that way. I must...I remember someone who could recite a whole soliloquy by Shakespeare and was impressed. Our teacher at Jadavpur University, Kitty Scoular Dutta, she said... We used to refer to her as Mrs Dutta and not Professor Dutta, I don't know why...I was impressed by someone reciting Shakespeare from memory at some seminar, I was very young then. She asked me, "O Swapan, how many songs of Rabindranath do you know?" I asked, "By heart?" I said, "Maybe several hundreds. I wouldn't be able to put a figure." Then she asked me, "Have you read them and memorized them?" I answered, "No." "It is the same with this man. He has probably seen it, acted on stage or heard it on the radio or something." That's how people get to remember Shakespeare. But we had no such opportunity.

It was a good thing—to come back to your question—it was a good thing that we were made to get our ears attuned to the accents and the rhythms of blank verse of the prose. Though we knew back then that this was not how English was spoken either in England or the England of Shakespeare's time, and we'd never fool ourselves into imagining that the Romans spoke English in this vein or that the Greeks did or that the plebs in *Julius Caesar* would be using the same accent as Brutus or Cassius or Caesar himself. And we were sometimes asked to act out bits of the play, and that itself was fun.



Especially when Caesar strained to catch what someone said, claiming to be deaf in one ear. We had to act it out in class. So we were made to *see*. It was not just plain rote learning.

AS: What school was this?

Calcutta Boys' School. We were taught by Anglo Indian school teachers and also one Malayali teacher. You see, I think that there is a lot to be said in favour of their ways. The bright students would work for themselves. For all, including laggards, English language was compulsory. But you studied English Literature because you chose to study it. But at that stage someone who didn't care about poetry couldn't scan and hated reading Shakespeare. For that person, this method was a prophylactic against failure. If in the Senior Cambridge examination you failed in the English Language paper, you failed the entire examination. Fortunately this was in the English Literature paper. But still it was important to do well in both.

When we were in college we studied *Macbeth* and *As You Like It*. This was part of what was called in Calcutta University the Second Part, that is, Part 2 of the B.A. Honours course. We also had to read a certain number of sonnets. Unlike most colleges, Presidency had a tradition of having students study Shakespeare for all three of their undergraduate years. So we started reading both the plays quite early. Professor Sailendra Kumar Sen, who was a fine textual scholar, taught us *As You Like It*. And Professor Arun Kumar Das Gupta was the best teacher that I have ever met. Here or elsewhere. He taught us Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Apart from other things of course—Keats, the lyric, history of literature. I don't remember all. Professor Sukanta Chaudhuri taught us some poems from the Renaissance period towards the end. I most certainly remember him teaching us Wyatt and Sidney, and I think he did Shakespeare's sonnets with us. I remember doing the sonnets with Sukanta-da in the tutorial classes in my third year. And also *As You Like It*. He was very young then, had just returned from his first stint at Oxford. He must have been 24 or 25 years old, and we were the first batch of students he ever taught.

The complete experience of being taught Shakespeare came from Arun-babu's classes. Sailendra Kumar Sen taught us how to read a text, a printed text of Shakespeare which has been mediated at a number of stages—scribes, compositors, editors, especially in the eighteenth century. He was especially good on the eighteenth century onwards, and had written a book on Capell and Malone [*Capell Amd Malone: And Modern Critical Bibliography*, 1960], and modern critical bibliography. From the very beginning we were taught that the book or the text that we had in our hands has been mediated even by actors, people who decided on even the length of lines. Taraknath Sen, who we narrowly missed being taught by, wrote a very well-known essay in those times on Shakespeare's short lines,



although nowadays we believe that several of his conclusions are debateable. But the meticulousness and thoroughness of the way in which Shakespeare was understood and taught at Presidency was remarkable. When I edited the Diamond Jubilee number of Presidency College Magazine Phanibhushan Chakraborty, who had been Chief Justice of India, wrote a piece on his teachers—Prafulla Chandra Ghosh and others who taught Shakespeare. That was the old theatrical style, Phiroze Dastur also wrote a piece, which included his memories of being taught Shakespeare, recited and explained by great teachers—the kind of style that you found in Shishir Kumar Bhaduri, Perhaps you know that Shishir Kumar Bhaduri was for a while a teacher at Presidency College.

AS: Not at Presidency...what is now Vidyasagar.

No. For a while he taught at Presidency. He and Shrikumar-babu [Shrikumar Bandyopadhyay] used to share the adjacent desks in the Common Room, I was told. Many people taught Shakespeare in Calcutta. In those days, people had many options – Scottish Church College, Ripon College – they were good colleges. Presidency was not just the only college where you found good teachers.

But we also missed the teaching of Amal Bhattacharya. He had influenced many people at Jadavpur University. These were the people who tried to understand the Renaissance in terms of social factors, using the kind of historiography we find since Burckhardt. Round 1860 Burckhardt provided a text book definition of *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, a definition which we learnt to question. Many Marxist colleagues at Jadavpur were influenced by Amal-babu's teaching. Amal-babu nurtured more than camp followers. For example, when Arun-babu taught us Shakespeare he also taught us to read Arnold Hauser, the Marxist historian of art. He almost forced me to read Hauser's *Mannerism* while teaching *Macbeth*. It was a kind of encyclopaedic approach to studying Shakespeare that the Marxist Amal-babu too represented.

Arun-babu combined in him the genius of all these scholars. He taught us how to read a text meticulously, even if it was to question Shakespeare's own understanding of certain things, for example, did Shakespeare understand how the crossbow functioned then when the idea of screwing courage to "the sticking-place" was referred to in *Macbeth*? For that he spent two classes, showing us pictures of the crossbow. And the way he used to read the lines. For example, after the night spent by Macbeth discussing the murder with his wife, when he used to read the lines "which is which" he used to pronounce the words in the way he had read "foul is fair" one year earlier. The echoes ring still in my head. We learnt to love the poetry. He taught us poetry: more than drama, he taught us poetry and the depth of it. And he would refer to all kinds of things. He taught us Shakespeare's Sonnets in passing. He would sometimes mention a sonnet and explain it to us. For example "Th'expense of



spirit in a waste of shame,” Sonnet 129, he used to refer to this while explaining the waste of Macbeth’s love. It has sexual connotations, talking about orgasm, but he would explain the double-ness of lust and love in terms of the Neo-Platonic philosophy of time, of the *spiritus* (the expense of ‘spirit’) which mediates between heaven and earth, between mind and matter between soul and body. The spirit is nimble, as we get to learn from some of the other sonnets: a sense reserved in the French *esprit*. And the ambivalence of that is made meaningful simply by the presence of word: not just disembodied word, but embodied word. The notion is there in the Christian religion, “word was made flesh,” says St John’s Gospel, which is said to be influenced by Neo-Platonic thought. So what we got in sum was a way of entry. ‘A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body’ by Andrew Marvell was taught in class by Arun-babu, with no apparent connection with *Macbeth*. As soon as he came across “the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire” he used to talk about Marvell.

There are many things I have forgotten. But what I do remember clearly are his tutorials. In the first class I had him as my tutor, he asked me “What have you read?” Which is a difficult question to answer: what have I read? I had read all kinds of stuff. “No, no, what kind of poetry have you read?” So I said, “Auden.” I was reading a book of Auden at that time. So he said, “Okay,” and gave me two poems—two ballads, really ballad pastiche, to write on. And then when the writing was over I was loafing around near the corridor, near the portico, near the stairs, the majestic stairs. He said, “You have to swear to me that you have written it yourself.” I said, “With help from this book and that.” He looked a little disappointed. “You are in college, you are supposed to read books. You can’t manufacture things.” The next day when I went back to his tutorial, he handed back the tutorial essay and said, “Read all the plays by Aeschylus, by Sophocles, and plays by Euripides and come back to class.” He didn’t say it in my way; he had a very soft voice and a soft manner of speaking. But what kind of torture was this? And when I went back he did not ask me any question, nothing, he didn’t set any question. Instead he brought out two poems by Hopkins, and said, “You write on ‘Golden Echo’ and ‘Leaden Echo.’” And so I sat there in the Professors’ Common Room and wrote on those poems. But why was he making me read all the rest? After two or three such episodes, when I began to think he was slightly kinky, he asked me, “Are you enjoying Auden better now?” And then the pieces started to fall into place. I saw that he was training me to read poetry in English, especially the poetry of Europe and England, that unless I had this background, I would never be able to read. I said I was reading ‘New Year’s Letter’, a long poem by Auden. He never made me feel small. Like some of us we tell our students, “You haven’t read this? You must be ignorant.” Even today when he says something, he starts with, “Of course, as you know...” Of course, we don’t know; he knows everything. I at least don’t know. But he would start his sentence like this: “Of course, you know that in Jaeger...” How many of us have read Werner Jaeger? But he’s read *Paideia* and he would start his sentence like that. There was great humility and great grace in the way he conducted himself, and many



of us have become teachers because of such teachers. I can't say that we have done justice to his reputation. We have been third-rate teachers, but in Arun Babu and Sankha Ghosh (who were friends in college), we had role models of how a teacher ought to conduct himself.

Why am I saying all this to a question on Shakespeare? Because you must understand that Shakespeare fell within a kind of barely disguised hierarchy in Presidency College that I often hated. The “best” teacher, and preferably the least scandalous male teacher, would get to teach Shakespeare. And the best among them would get to teach Shakespeare's major Tragedy. I was not taught by Subodh Chandra Sengupta, nor Taraknath Sen. Later, the mantle would fall on someone else, as it did on Amal-babu, and Sailen Sen. There was a sort of apostolic succession. Like you I was young once, and I was not comfortable with that. Arun-babu never made us feel that he had this invisible mantle on him although he was loyal to the pantheon. Those who didn't were unhappy. The eminent poet Bishnu De taught at Presidency College, but he never fitted in, He felt positively relieved when he left. Buddhadeb Basu taught at Ripon College, but he never fitted into the kind of ambience there. So there was a great tradition – almost a Brahmanical hierarchy in Shakespeare studies in Kolkata, which did not take into account the live genius of many poets and scholars of English who could not fit in. If you read Buddhadeb Basu's autobiography – not *Amar Joubon* but *Amader Kabita Bhavan* – you'll find him talking of his resignation from Ripon College. There was only one word used to describe his feeling at the parting: *swasti* or relief –the relief that these people felt at not having to teach anymore. So it is not as if that only Presidency had created a pantheon. Even Calcutta University had one of its own. The University perhaps was perhaps a little more open: it had more room for all kinds of teaching.

In our time, Jyoti Bhattacharya was a well-known teacher there. I didn't get to be taught by him, but I knew him well when I started teaching at Calcutta University as Guest Lecturer from 1980 to 1985. I heard him lecture a number of times; he used to teach in a different way. For example, when he taught *King Lear* he used to recall Brecht when reading the lines “so young yet so untender,” Jyoti-babu talked about Brecht's poems, you have to be cruel in order to be kind, or lines to that effect from *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. He would also cite the prayer in the *Aiterya Upanishad* (the same prayer is there in many texts, Debendranath Tagore included it in *Bramho dharma* and it became an important mantra for the Bramho sect), all the way from *vañ me manasi pratishtā to pratishtimāveeravarma edhi*). Jyoti-babu used to stress the lines *vañ me manasi pratishtā mano me vaci pratishtam* – whatever is in my mind, let it be expressed through my tongue, let my tongue express that which is in my mind. This gap between tongue and heart is what *King Lear* is also about. So that is another way of approaching the teaching of *Lear*, and he would also refer to the possibility and impossibility of teaching *King Lear*, referring to Lamb's essay. What does the actor do? Because after all, the actor does not speak his or

PEDAGOGY

Interview

SHAKESPEARE IN BENGAL

Centre of Advanced Study, Phase III

UGC-SAP

Department of English

Jadavpur University



her own lines, it is as if they speak someone else's line. It is almost metatheatrical. Consider the first scene of *Lear*, where you are supposed to speak the truth. What is truth in any case? It is not external to language. He would start talking about Leo Spitzer, and other philosophers of language. I haven't been taught by him, but I have attended some of these lectures, and this was not the kind of textual focus that we found in other classes.

So there were many kinds of teaching; if you are interested in teaching Shakespeare in the classroom, all kinds of approaches were possible. In Sailendra Kumar Sen's class, we were taught how the text would be 'constructed' through mediations tracked using certain Enlightenment criteria. What is authenticity? What did people such as Edmund Malone believe in? They were the children of the Enlightenment. What is an authentic text? How do you tell a fake? Samuel Ireland had published some Shakespeare documents which were clearly forgeries. Theobald had claimed that his *Double Falsehood* was adapted from a Shakespeare-Fletcher play named *Cardenio*, which in its turn was based on a text by Cervantes. So how do we establish a text through the Enlightenment? I'd always thought that Sailen-babu was a bit out of place, in a world which always suspected Enlightenment methods. The meticulousness with which he would even talk about...for example when you are reading *Twelfth Night*, the laugh lines described as lines in the new atlas, perhaps a reference to the rhumb lines in Linschoten's map that replaced the Ortelius's. This may be inaccurate, there are other candidates for the new map, one was printed under the supervision of Hakluyt. But it is a way, though arguable, of dating *Twelfth Night*. I forget the accepted date... 1600-1601. He would actually take the trouble of looking at the map and seeing what the differences are and if they can be taken as evidence, although he did not teach us *Twelfth Night*. He taught us many ways of dating, he taught us how to date and how to tell authorship. The front matter in the Arden editions which would give us the date and authorship...he would teach us those things.

When I came to Jadavpur, I was taught by Professor Dinesh Chandra Biswas. His method was that of the old school of recitation. He did not stop at that. While reading *Twelfth Night*, he tried to sing some of the songs, an attempt which was, I must say, rather disastrous. He was not at all tuneful. But he was extremely caring of the students. He used to teach three or four plays and Marlowe and finish the syllabus at the right time, and take four classes a week and he was never late. The person to whom I owe the most was Professor Kitty Datta, and that was not because of anything she taught in class. She taught us Spenser, the Metaphysical poets, Browne, Walter Scott, and more. I registered under her as a PhD student, and she taught me how to conduct research. What to read, how to go about it, what to change and what not to change.



I will end this conversation with just one story, While I was doing this research, sometimes I would waste time on distractions. For example, once I wanted to find out Guillaume du Vair's work and its influence on French Neo-Stoicism, and I asked Arun-babu a question. Next day a postcard comes, খুদে খুদে মুক্তোর মতন লেখায় (written in small pearl-like letters), on how in *The Meaning of Stoicism* (1968), the classical scholar Ludwig Edelstein speaks about why Socrates was like a man playing ball. Socrates was a proto-stoic martyr to many from Epictetus to Lipsius. There are certain things you can control and there are certain things outside your control, belonging to the world of *apatheia*. Indifference. Some things, on the contrary, you can control, like Socrates could control the manner of his own death. The stoics made this difference and hence they considered him a proto-stoic martyr. Arun-babu cited Epictetus and showed why he was talking about Socrates at that point. All within 50-60 words. That was the kind of teacher I had. If you ask me a question I will never be able to write like that. So I am embarrassed when someone calls me a good teacher. Arun-babu would write 20 such postcards a day. And that kind of dedication made all the difference.

The rules of pedagogy were at times secondary. When I was ill with a tubercular abscess in the chest, I needed a certain kind of injection. I needed Streptomycin shots. One manufacturer's Streptomycin was reliable, but it was not available in the market, I think the company was Parke Davis. Hence I was taking shots made by Hindustan something. And he did not like it. So the next day Bhaswati, my wife, goes to Lady Brabourne College where she was then teaching, and finds on her desk an entire case which Arun Babu had ordered from the manufacturer's headquarters in Bombay. I had to take 65 shots. There were almost 48 in the case. So when you want me to speak on pedagogy, I'd much rather have this episode recorded. These people made us teachers. When Bhaswati and I were first trying to go abroad for the first time, we found that the agent had tricked us. Our name was on the waiting list in the train to Delhi where we were to appear for an interview. I reached Howrah station with Bhaswati nearly in tears for we needed travel in an unreserved compartment to get to the interview on time. Before the train was shuffling out of the platform, I caught a glimpse of Arun-babu through the waving crowd, making his way toward the compartment. He just wanted to see us before we left. Our memories of being taught Shakespeare are intertwined with such things, characteristic of Arun-babu used to call "a daily beauty." That too is a quotation from Shakespeare. *Othello*.

AS: What texts were taught at Jadavpur?

Professor Biswas taught us *Twelfth Night*. *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear* were taught by Professor Jagannath Chakraborty. He used to ask one of us play *Lear* and someone else to read Cordelia's lines and then go to sleep. My roll number was 747, and he asked me to sound like a Boeing. That's all I remember of him. He was not interested in teaching, and he once said to someone that at his age

PEDAGOGY

Interview

SHAKESPEARE IN BENGAL

Centre of Advanced Study, Phase III

UGC-SAP

Department of English

Jadavpur University



he preferred itching to teaching. He was a fine poet in Bengali, a good writer and a knowledgeable analyst of poetry. But he was not a good teacher. You can write it, you can quote me.

AS: Did they prescribe any secondary texts in class?

Hmm, Arun-babu did that as well. *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (1943) by Theodore Spencer for instance. The title of Sukanta-da's first book, I guess, was partly derived from it.

AS: Who had asked you to read Theodore Spencer?

We were handed a list at the beginning of the year. We also were advised to read the two volumes of E. K. Chambers's *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (1930) and the two volumes of Sir Alexander Walter Raleigh's *Shakespeare's England* (1916).

AS: Were expletives and sexual references discussed?

Always, at Presidency, that is. Professor Biswas didn't, He used to say, "Vulgar, my friend," and move on. Supriya-di once recalled that when reading a Touchstone-and-Audrey scene Sailen-babu had said, "Young love is a beautiful thing." That was as sentimental as Sailendra Kumar Sen could possibly be in class.