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(Interviewed by Sonia Sahoo)

When did you pass the B.A. and M.A. examinations? What were the institutions?

I completed B.A. in 1967 and M.A. in 1969 from Presidency College and the University of Calcutta respectively.

When did your first encounter with Shakespeare occur?

It was at school in class 8 (St. Teresa's Convent School). We had to read the entire text. At that point of time, the Senior Cambridge examination had just been phased out, and the ISC had just started in Delhi. The scripts were still sent to Cambridge then. We had two comedies, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, and subsequently *Julius Caesar*.

What were the college and university syllabi for Shakespeare like? Who taught you the texts in question? What kind of approach was used for teaching the texts?

In college we had *Macbeth* and *As You Like It* once more, but other than that, we had a lot of extensive background classes at Presidency. We were taught theatre conditions, about the actors. Professor Taraknath Sen was the Head of the Department. He taught *Macbeth* intensively – even though we used to begin it from the second year. *As You Like It* was taught by Professor Sailendra Kumar Sen. The two of them had wholly different approaches. Tarak-babu focussed primarily on aesthetics, dramatics, especially poetry, the text, and in great detail, the same text twice a week for two years – so you can very well understand what it was like. We had to prepare for the classes, he used to ask us to say something about the lines before he started to explain. That was quite an experience, it used to go on and on, it used to start at four in the evening and used to continue till eight at night ... so you can imagine. It was not at all theory-oriented, critical theory was not around at that time. So it was mainly a direct approach to Shakespeare.

Sailen-babu on the other hand used to stress various readings, folio and quarto interpretations, textual emendations, the eighteenth century editors and how they changed things, the recreations, which at that time seemed a bit boring to us as it was a romantic comedy and we were young, but now we can understand the importance of what he was trying to teach us. At that time I preferred what we had learnt in school about *As You Like It*. It was more enjoyable. There was a production at the National Library as well. There used to be a dramatic club in Calcutta at that point of time, and they had put



up the production under the big banyan tree in the lawns. That was in 1961. Those memories are quite vivid, and if it is dramatically produced, I feel that one learns much better in that manner.

Did you find any particular trait of a teacher to be impressive?

Tarak-babu used to supplement his teaching (not only Shakespeare but other areas also) with pictures. He used to show us quartos and folios during Shakespeare classes. The facsimiles were there in the Presidency College libraries, so he used to show us those, and it all felt very authentic. He generally didn't mention critics, we used to do that on our own, but at that time, we were fortunate (or unfortunate) enough that we didn't have to read too much of criticism. L.C. Knights, G. Wilson Knight and A.C. Bradley, and subsequently there was Terry Eagleton. We read a lot during M.A.

Professor Jyoti Bhattacharya's teaching was fantastic, and we had to study a lot of criticism for Lear. But that wasn't the case at Presidency, therefore examinations were a bit difficult to tackle as well. You know that teaching practices were different at Calcutta University and Presidency. Presidency prepared us for future days, thorough a firm grounding in the primary texts. At the university, Professor Jyoti Bhushan Bhattacharya was a great experience. His teaching was histrionic, his reading was marvellous. Maybe he can be placed in the tradition of the great P.C. Ghosh. Through his reading he would enact the roles, if he was teaching *Othello*, he would enact both Othello and Desdemona. The differences, the characterization, the poetry, all of it used to come through, the students could get everything. Of course the students were Presidency College students. I don't know if this would have worked with students of other colleges. They would want notes and expect to be taught in Bengali.

Our Head of the Department, Professor Amalendu Bose, used to teach us *Antony and Cleopatra*. He too used to teach very well, but Jyoti-babu had a rare charisma. There are a few things which are unforgettable about him, for example the scenes where Cordelia is brought in dead, there are five never-s, each one he used to pronounce differently, with a rising climax. And of course he had a Marxist angle, he belonged to that camp. He had his own political party, the Workers' Party. But he never brought politics into class, but in *Lear* for 'man is a poor, bare, forked animal', he used to bring in that angle without mentioning Marxism. I think that is quite okay, for he was not indoctrinating us. He used to mention how this was present in Russian productions as well.

Was there anyone else who used to teach Shakespeare at the M.A. level?

It was mostly a British literature oriented syllabus, the first paper was wholly on Shakespeare. For the first half, there were a few texts for non-detailed study. I honestly don't remember who used to teach those texts, nobody as far as I can remember. There would have been at most two or three classes, or we used to study them on our own. But what was more important was the stress on the background



or the stage conditions. *Lear* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* were there for the second part of the examination. There used to be another history play that we never used to attempt. There were four in all, but we could pass the examination by studying just two. So I don't remember the other ones.

So, were the history plays taught?

It was there in the syllabus, but it wasn't taught. *Timon* was there as well, but for the first half, Jyoti-babu took a few classes on it, and he used to link it with *Lear*, but the whole paper was on Shakespeare. So, while one text was being taught, the others used to creep in by reference. *The Tempest* was there as well, for the first part of the examination.

Could you tell us why the history plays were never emphasized?

I don't know the background story in the staffroom. Maybe they just preferred to teach these. Both were tragedies, I suppose doing another text would have been just as well. It wasn't considered inferior to the tragedies but there may have been technical reasons.

Did the teachers enact the plays in the classroom?

Jyoti-babu used to do this. But no one at Presidency ever did it. Tarak-babu used to read out in a monotone, Sailen-babu did the same. In school we weren't asked to read it out, as the text implied a lot of work, so that didn't happen. But we were taken to see the production.

What was the student-teacher relationship like?

Our teachers were very grave, dressed in *dhoti* and *chadar*, not very accessible. We didn't enter the staffroom at all. It was also a very disturbed time. During our third year the college was closed. We arranged classes at another place, and then political trouble started.

Did the teachers' emphasise upon pronunciation and accent?

Tarak-babu was very precise about that, he used to teach rhetoric and prosody as well. He was very careful about the versification too. He had a famous essay on Shakespeare's short lines. Logically it might not be very tenable nowadays, but it was famous in its day. The essay was there in the *Literary Miscellany*. A ten syllable line was a blank verse line, so sometimes if it was short, say of six syllables, then that is where the drama would come in. It would be filled up by action may be by a character walking up or gesticulating. He used to visualize the drama in the text in that manner. He was very careful about accent and pronunciation especially the prosodic element. Jyoti-babu had a very good sense of elocution. Sailen babu didn't have that, he had a few mannerisms, and a problem with the 'sh' sound.



Were the sexual references and puns omitted?

They were euphemistically covered ... We used to follow the Arden Shakespeare, the notes there were quite detailed.

What about the socio-historical context of the plays?

It was not just about Shakespeare, we were handed a reading list at the beginning on British history as well as Trevelyan's *Social History of England*. We had to read those. We had an exam on that as well. We also had to read Boris Ford. But in class, we only followed up on the references. We had to read on our own, and we had tests where we had to answer questions on these books.

Were Shakespeare's contemporary dramatists given importance? Was Shakespeare considered to be overarching or at the centre of the canon?

At university, we read Beaumont and Fletcher. We had *Philaster*. It was a romance, and we had *The Tempest* for non-detailed study, which was also a romance. *The Winter's Tale* was for detailed study but nobody taught that. There were links, Ben Jonson was there, as was Marlowe. For the B.A. there was *Edward II*. I think it is still a part of the current syllabus. There was *Tamburlaine* during our M.A.. However, Shakespeare got prominence. The people who taught Shakespeare didn't teach these plays. Kajal-di (Professor Kajal Sengupta of Presidency College) taught us Hardy and Restoration Drama. We enjoyed that more.

Did the students share the same opinion? Was there any trend that the best students would go on to research Shakespeare?

There was nothing of that sort, at that time. The students were examination oriented as well, whatever was easier to write about or was better scoring ... they did not think beyond that. They were not that career focussed then, and it was also a matter of preference as well. Many of them used to be fond of Eliot. Then the novels, rather than Shakespeare, like those by E.M. Forster or D.H. Lawrence appealed more to them. Shakespeare was considered to be rather difficult by most of the students.

Were Eliot's essays on Shakespeare discussed?

No, Eliot was restricted to classes on Eliot. Those who taught Shakespeare spoke about Coleridge, Lamb and Hazlitt. Many would also claim that the tragedies of Shakespeare could not be acted. Keats and Coleridge were referred to. Eliot was very modern. I think he must have died in the 60's.

Which editions were recommended?

We were advised to look at the Variorum, but Arden was the main text. Not for school however, we used the Oxford and Cambridge edition there.

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What kind of critical interpretations were used?

They mainly concentrated on imagery or character. We were referred to Caroline Spurgeon. We had Shakespeare's sonnets for our M.A. They were also there for our B.A., although for our M.A. we had the entire corpus. Selected ones were taught, but we had the entire corpus.

Did you have to take the texts to class?

We had to take the texts to class. That was mandatory.

Could you tell us about the question pattern?

At Presidency College we had thought-provoking and unconventional questions, not the kind in which one could memorize answers. The emphasis lay on critical thinking. Not of the Calcutta University pattern where we had essay-type questions based on a select few topics. We also had 'reference to the context' questions.

Did the students challenge the teachers or refute them?

Not at all. There were a few teachers who could repeat their books in class. We used to laugh about that. But no one had the courage to contradict the teachers in the classroom.

Was independent thinking encouraged?

Yes. But more so at Presidency because the class was very small, having not more than 15 students. Sometimes even less than that. Tarak-babu would at times take just 10 students through an admission test since no one else was good enough. The seats would remain empty. But at university there were a lot of students. There were two sections. Tutorials did exist initially, so there was some individual attention, but that ceased after some time. At Presidency, there was one tutor for every student. It was a very intensive tutorial. We were asked to read things outside the syllabus as well. But at Calcutta University that was not possible due to the vastness of the class. There were no microphones, and the teacher was audible only from the first few benches.

Were stage and film productions discussed in the class?

There were no discussions, but Jyoti-babu had mentioned the Russian *Lear* during class. He used to encourage us to go and see it. We did go to see the productions arranged by the British Council.

Was the text related to the performance conventions?

No, not at all.



Were there any performances of Shakespeare in your student days?

That was much later, when I was a teacher, scenes from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* were performed at the reunion. It was very well done by our students. That would have been in the eighties. Sukanta would have been there. When we were doing our M.A. there was one person, Anil Acharya who is now the editor of the little magazine *Anushtup*, who had put up something for the Gorky Centenary. The students had Marxists leanings then. The performance was very successful.

Did any of your classmates become famous as Shakespeare scholars or performers?

Aparna Sen, though she didn't give her part II exams. Dhritiman Chatterjee, he was called *Sundor* Chatterjee. He was older and had studied Economics. At university there was Anjan Dutt, who was a junior. Amita Dutt who is a dancer would probably be senior to him. Then there was Lolita Chatterjee who was our senior at Presidency. She didn't do much. Aparna's present husband, Kalyan is an academic, but he is doing films now. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ketaki Kushari Dyson were our seniors. From our batch, I teach and there are a few others who do the same. There was Santanu Das who now teaches in London. Paromita [Chakravarti of Jadavpur University] was also a student. Utpal Dutt's daughter Bishnupriya was also our junior. I don't know what she studied but it wasn't English.

Have you noticed any change or transition in pedagogy and student reaction over the years?

Then it was primarily text-based, nowadays it is primarily about alternate Shakespeares. The trend is now towards different critical theories, thus there has been a departure from the text, as it is not possible to do so much of the text in the class. There is no point in teaching the text line by line in an M.A. class. So we don't even attempt it. But I try to do the important parts of the text in detail, and the students benefit from that. I read at least the first act, and then I move on to the theory, like post-colonial theory that is a must for *The Tempest*. I also bring in the Renaissance background. I show all possibilities and I do a survey of criticism, and from there I ask them to think for themselves. This is a modern trend, more theory-based, and also more theatre-based. These days students are more interested in gender and post-colonial studies, and they are very passionate about it. But on the whole, students are not interested in Shakespeare to the extent they used to be, maybe because they feel it is difficult. They don't get that kind of grounding in school anymore. The hurdle of the text is too great. Nowadays they are just taught some scenes from the play.

So are there lacunae in the way they are taught in school?

They aren't taught the text properly at school, and the role of Shakespeare has diminished. I had taught Shakespeare for many years. Since 1988 I have been teaching *The Tempest*, *Hamlet* along with Stoppard's *Rosencrantz*.



Do you think that Shakespeare is an overrated author?

Certainly not. All the great actors and directors have studied Shakespeare. Even when they differ... there aren't any more conventional productions of Shakespeare, but the groundwork for performance happens through Shakespeare. There were quite a few productions in Bengali this year. I liked Kaushik Sen's *Macbeth*.

What is your take on the perception that Shakespeare has been exhausted as a topic for scholarship and research?

Even if it is so, people are thinking afresh. Even if there is an overlap, I think that it is possible to say new things.

So where do you think lies the space for this new Shakespeare criticism or today's Shakespeare criticism?

Shakespeare can be applied to contemporary events, for theorizing terrorism or violence or relating it thematically to present day situations. That is why Shakespeare never gets old.

What is your take on the current trend of de-glamourizing and de-canonizing Shakespeare? Do you think that it is a step in the right direction?

I think that it is a passing phase, it is not a healthy tendency. If we take out Shakespeare from the canon, something else would be canonized in his place, but there is no guarantee that it would be enduringly valuable. Shakespeare has withstood the test of time. And after Shakespeare I think that Ibsen and then Chekov are the 'greats' in terms of both drama and performance. There have been great productions of Shakespeare. If the dramatist wasn't strong enough, it wouldn't happen, right? And Shakespeare hasn't repeated himself despite having written so much. A lot of authors have turned out like Wordsworth, who would have been better off had they written nothing in old age. Shakespeare is not like that.

Students in the West are reading Shakespeare in paraphrase or in simplified language. What is your take on this trend?

Of course, there are different kinds of students. Not everyone is going to be a teacher or an actor. They cannot read it in paraphrase. For someone who is going to go into advertising, they can at least be introduced to Shakespeare through paraphrase. But of course the paraphrase has to be very good; otherwise the flavour of the work would be lost. So, of course, it depends on their aim. I think that reading the original is the right method for school. As in drawing, first come the rules, then the perspective, then anatomy, then you go to the modern and finally to abstract art forms. One who is a great abstract artist, would know the basics. Picasso was also very conventional at the beginning. He

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followed a very formal organization before he started to break the rules. Shortcuts don't have lasting effects. Can Shakespeare's poetry be represented through paraphrase? Or even in translation?

A lot of people say that they can relate to Indian writing in English since the parameters are known. But I don't always like the known, I want to experience other cultures. This is a function of literature. So Shakespeare should be read in the original. This doesn't happen in some countries. They don't know English as in Japan for example. It is taught in translation there. That is not an ideal situation. Many would claim that this is so because we were colonized, it is a colonial imposition. But even if it is theirs and if it is good, why not? Girish Ghosh was influenced, as were all the great 19th-century dramatists ... we didn't have the genre of tragedy in Sanskrit drama. If something has come to us, why not learn it well? Suppose there was no Shakespeare, wouldn't it have been a great loss? Shakespeare is now a part of World Literature, just like Tagore.