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Shakespeare Comes to Bengal

Abstract: India has the longest engagement with Shakespeare of any non-Western country. In the eastern Indian region of Bengal, contact with Shakespeare began in the eighteenth century. His plays were read and acted in newly established English schools, and performed professionally in new English theatres. A paradigm shift came with the foundation of the Hindu College in Calcutta in 1817. Shakespeare featured largely in this new 'English education', taught first by Englishmen and, from the start of the twentieth century, by a distinguished line of Indian scholars. Simultaneously, the Shakespearean model melded with traditional Bengali popular drama to create a new professional urban Bengali theatre. The close interaction between page and stage also evinced a certain tension. The highly indigenized theatre assimilated Shakespeare in a varied synthesis, while academic interest focused increasingly on Shakespeare's own text.

Beyond the theatre and the classroom, Shakespeare reached out to a wider public, largely as a read rather than performed text. He was widely read in translation, most often in prose versions and loose adaptations. His readership extended to women, and to people outside the city who could not visit the theatre. Thus Shakespeare became part of the shared heritage of the entire educated middle class. Bengali literature since the late nineteenth century testifies strongly to this trend, often inducing a comparison with the Sanskrit dramatist Kalidasa. Most importantly, Shakespeare became part of the common currency of cultural and intellectual exchange.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Bengal, Calcutta, Bengali translations, Bengali theatre, Hindu College, Presidency College, Kalidasa, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Datta, Haraprasad Shastri, Hirendranath Datta, Rabindranath Tagore, Girishchandra Ghosh

India's encounter with Shakespeare originates in the colonial experience and continues as a colonial phenomenon through to India's independence in 1947 and long after. But the standard premises of colonial and postcolonial theory may be inadequate to chart, let alone explain, the process. We have come

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to recognize that the colonizing intellectual order generated an opposite development, sometimes virtually deconstructing itself, inseminating India's own languages and cultures, and contributing to the ideation of India's freedom movement. Far from being restrictive or imitative, this is a creative development that appropriates and reorders the material of the colonizing culture.

Shakespeare affords a telling case study. Even in their primary curricular role, his works accomplish much more than the colonial conditioning attributed to all English literary education in British India. No doubt the "humanistic functions" implicit in that literature were harnessed to the purpose of "sociopolitical control," as phrased by Gauri Viswanathan in her influential account (Viswanathan 3). But it is also possible to see those aesthetic and "humanistic" elements as inseminating a very different cultural process. This is especially (though by no means exclusively) apparent in the wider dissemination of Shakespeare through the Indian languages. The empire is already writing (and performing) back, in a counter-appropriation to the colonial appropriation of Indian cultural space. The origins of India's engagement with Shakespeare thus span a somewhat wide spectrum: linguistically, chronologically, formally and generically. In this paper, I will trace its development in the eastern Indian region of Bengal.

Shakespeare came to Bengal, and more specifically to its capital Calcutta, in the eighteenth century—alongside parallel developments in the two other major British settlements in India, Bombay and Madras.¹ A Playhouse of which little is known (David Garrick reportedly took an interest in it: Thakur 2) ran in Calcutta from 1753 to 1756.² But the first major establishment was the Calcutta Theatre, set up in 1775, followed by the Chowringhee Theatre (1813) and the Sans Souci (1839). The first Shakespeare performance of which records survive is an *Othello* in 1780 at the Calcutta Theatre to mark the retirement of the manager, who himself played the title role.

This so-called "garrison theatre" was patronized by the British community with a sprinkling of English-educated Indians. The wealthy among the latter extended patronage: Dwarkanath Tagore (Thakur), Rabindranath's grandfather, bailed out the Chowringhee Theatre from bankruptcy and helped rebuild the Sans Souci after its destruction by fire in 1839. Unsurprisingly, the garrison theatre was more open to Indian benefactors than Indian performers.

¹ All three cities now have new names (Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai). I am retaining the earlier forms as being current in the period under discussion.

² Throughout this article, basic details of Shakespeare performances and translations in Bengal are chiefly drawn from Ananda Lal and Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed., *Shakespeare on the Calcutta Stage: A Checklist*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 2001. As the entries are in chronological order, page numbers have not been cited.

In 1848, a “native gentleman,” Baishnav Charan Addy, played Othello at the Sans Souci. The response was equivocal, from the offensively racist (“real unpainted nigger Othello:” *Calcutta Star*, qtd. in Lal and Chaudhuri 22) to the patronizing (“his pronunciation of English was for a native remarkably good:” *Bengal Harkara*, qtd. *ibid.*). The number of English-educated Indians was growing incrementally. This led five years later, in 1853, to a happier outcome: another production of *Othello* by an all-Bengali cast at the Oriental Theatre, established the same year under Indian ownership. This was the first public performance in Calcutta of an entire Shakespeare play by an Indian cast. Next year, the same group acted *The Merchant of Venice* with an English actor, Mrs. Greig, as Portia (DasGupta 21).

The formal study of Shakespeare’s text began with English schools set up in the eighteenth century by missionaries, by lay English or Anglo-Indian proprietors, and surprisingly often by Indians. As surprisingly, their first Indian students were chiefly from the humbler castes and classes, seeking employment under the British. An unflattering account notes that their sparse curriculum included “a play of Shakespeare, [and] some Essays of Bacon” (Mukhopadhyay 106). Two schools held in higher regard were run by Anglo-Indians, a Mr. Sherbourne and David Drummond. The former numbered several of the aristocratic Tagore family among his pupils.

The classroom exercises extended to performance. In December 1822, the *India Gazette* reported a function comprising “recitations from English” by students of Drummond’s Dhurromtollah Academy, where “A boy of the name Derozio gave a good conception of Shylock” (qtd. in Lal and Chaudhuri 23). The following decades saw a series of student performances. The 1822 event is notable for another reason: the boy Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), from the Anglo-Indian community, went on to become a charismatic teacher at the Hindu College. He was a chief mentor of the radical “Young Bengal” movement with its enthusiasm for all things English, only gradually (but then most productively) brought to bear on Bengali culture.

Hindu College, the first higher institution of Western learning outside the West, opened in 1817 through Indian, not British, initiative. Its tradition of Shakespeare performances began in Derozio’s time. Derozio also wrote two sonnets inspired by *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*; but he is thought to have focused more on the Romantic poets than on Shakespeare and Milton (Mukhopadhyay 93, 99). Shakespeare teaching at the College was consolidated in the 1830s by the Englishman David Lester Richardson. Lord Macaulay, whose 1835 “Minute” on education ensured an “Anglicist” (as opposed to “Orientalist”) agenda for education in British India, reportedly told Richardson: “I can forget everything about India, but your teaching of Shakespeare, never” (Sen vii).

Richardson compiled a sizeable *Selections from the British Poets* (1840) that set the programme for English teaching in Bengal and perhaps India. It included the full text of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (in that order), plus an extract from *1 Henry IV*, sixteen Sonnets and other short excerpts. Few students could have read all these texts, but they indicate the range of Shakespeare to which students were exposed. The section on Shakespeare in Richardson's introduction basically repeats the standard critical positions of the age. More than once, he asserts that Shakespeare is "the greatest poet that the world has yet seen"—as the French have grudgingly started to grant, the Germans more generously (Richardson xi-xii). The Bard as a British cultural icon is being repackaged for colonial students. It is noteworthy, however, that Richardson presents the racial predicament of Shylock and Othello with an eloquent understanding rare in that age, in the essays on the two characters in his collection *Literary Leaves* (vol. 2, London: W. H. Allen, 1840).

In the Preface to his translation of *The Comedy of Errors* (1869), the scholar-reformer Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar comments wryly on the celebration of Shakespeare as the "greatest poet." "It would be impertinence for a person like myself to judge whether this is a correct and impartial view" (Vidyasagar 3:333). The colonial agenda was already provoking resistance. Thomas Carlyle had asserted in 1841: "if they asked us, Will you give up your Indian Empire or your Shakspeare, you English; ... should not we be forced to answer: Indian Empire, or no Indian Empire; we cannot do without Shakspeare!" (Carlyle 116). Fortunately for the colonists, it was not an either/or choice but a package deal: Shakespeare was co-opted as the chief intellectual icon of the Empire, the avatar of its cultural superiority. The Indian market for Shakespearean publications was surprisingly wide. The 1821 Malone-Boswell edition of the Works was reprinted in its entirety from Calcutta in 1879 (Ray 3).

Even the Christian missionaries could not but grant qualified approval to Shakespeare's overtly secular works. Around 1843-46, John Macdonald of the (Scottish) Free Church Mission in Calcutta confessed his folly in exchanging—to someone else's perdition—a copy of Shakespeare he had unhappily owned, instead of burning it (Day 195). But in 1852, the Anglican William Keane, missionary canon of St Paul's Cathedral in Calcutta, saw the plays as imbued with "sound Protestant Bible principles" (qtd. by Thakur 21).

An awed acceptance of Shakespeare sealed the colonial conditioning of Indian youth. Kishorichand Mitra (Kissory Chand Mittra), one of the "Young Bengal", speaks for them when he writes "It is impossible to study Shakespeare and Milton, Bacon and Newton, Johnson and Addison, without being inoculated with the purest moral precepts and the most elevated ideas pervading their pages" (Mukhopadhyay 150). This accords with the standard colonial paradigm. "How many seminars we spent on detecting this moral significance in every paragraph, in every word, even in Shakespeare's commas and fullstops?" writes Ngugi wa Thiong'o a century and a half later (Ngugi 90).

But the same prizing of English letters could activate a creative reordering of the colonial intellectual legacy. The fiercely independent-minded Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, doyen of Sanskrit scholars and an educational and social reformer, writes in his celebrated “Notes” on reforming Calcutta’s Sanskrit College of “the necessity of making Sanscrit scholars well versed in the English language and literature,” for (to cite another of his works) “imbuing our vernacular dialects with the science and civilization of the Western world” (Basu 381, 324). He does not mention Shakespeare (or any other author), but we can assume that Shakespeare featured prominently in his programme. When Chandramukhi Basu (Bose) qualified as the first female Master of Arts of Calcutta University, Vidyasagar, a crusader for women’s education, presented her with a copy of Shakespeare’s Works.

In 1840, students of Hindu College studied *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*. Another syllabus from c.1843-53 surprisingly includes *King John* and *Henry VIII* besides *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*. These texts were also taught at the other colleges set up in Bengal in the earlier nineteenth century. Surviving exam questions show how widely students were expected to know the subject. This one makes a daunting demand for both close and wide reading:

In what words of the Porter-Scene does Coleridge recognize the certain hand of Shakespeare? The same words occur in *Hamlet*, and the same idea in *All’s Well*, &c; quote the lines in both these dramas.

Or this, on textual matters:

What different readings have been proposed in the following passages; state which you prefer, with the reasons which influence your choice.

Or in broadly interpretative vein:

Shew by an accurate comparison the truth of Schlegel’s remark that, in the progress of action, *Macbeth* is altogether the reverse of *Hamlet*.³

Clearly, students were expected to delve deep into the text and background of the play from every angle and relate it to the rest of the canon, including plays not formally prescribed for study. What is lacking is any kind of theoretical perspective, or even formal and thematic issues of wider scope.

³ For many details in this paragraph and the next, see Banerji 103-5, 121-2. Her source, in many cases, is the autobiography of the scholar and social activist Rajnarayan Basu (1826-99). I am also indebted to Banerji’s work for some other leads.

Nor do the questions address the theatrical aspect of the plays: the academic cultivation of Shakespeare is starting to diverge from the performative. Yet performance remained very much a part of the total Shakespearean agenda. From 1827 onward, the students of Hindu College, as of the School Society, acted Shakespeare (usually in excerpts) in their institutions and elsewhere—most grandly, more than once, at the Government House before the Governor-General. The commercial English theatre was a notable background presence. Richardson of Hindu College coached its actors and attended their rehearsals. He would discuss ongoing productions with his students, and sometimes even hand out tickets. Another teacher of Hindu College, H.M. Parker, himself trod the boards, with a grand finale as Pistol in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Mukhopadhyay 91). One Mr. Clinger, an English teacher at the Calcutta Madrasa (school of Islamic learning), instructed Bengali amateurs in Shakespearean acting (DasGupta 21).

A European-style theatre visit, with scripturally “forbidden” food and drink, would be a quintessential act of rebellion for “Young Bengal” activists, exemplifying the early radicalizing impact of Western education. In a satirical play of 1866, *Sadhabar Ekadasi* (The Married Woman’s Widow-Rites) by the eminent dramatist Dinabandhu Mitra, one such youth, found drunk at night by a policeman, spouts a string of quotations including three from Shakespeare. But when Krishnadas Pal (Kristo Doss Paul) composes an oration (Mukhopadhyay 120-33) to vindicate the tribe of Young Bengal, his text is as liberally sprinkled with Shakespeare.

Still more telling evidence of the dissemination of Shakespeare are performances in affluent homes. The earliest on record is a School Society staging of scenes from *Julius Caesar* in 1830 at the house of Gopimohan Deb, a founder of Hindu College and scion of the Shovabazar Raj family, prominent among the new wealthy urban elite. These productions gradually led to public performances charging for entry. The first such endeavour was the Oriental Theatre, set up in a school, the Oriental Seminary. Here “Hindu Amateurs”, trained by English actors from the commercial stage, produced *Othello* in 1853, *The Merchant of Venice* in 1854 and *Henry IV* in 1855. The development reached its highest point at the start of the next century, when the Dawn Society, a historic fellowship of many of Bengal’s finest minds, regularly staged the plays of Shakespeare. The Society’s leading spirit, Satishchandra Mukhopadhyay, also set up a Shakespeare Society that performed in commercial theatres (Lal and Chaudhuri 31-2).

The originary phase of Shakespeare’s entry to Bengal ends up infusing the wider physical and mental space of the Bengal elite, with major effects for both Bengali theatre and Bengali intellectual life. The patronage of the new English-educated Bengali community brought into being a novel urban Bengali theatre, to which Shakespeare is integral in more ways than one. First, his plays

were regularly rendered in Bengali. By 1900 there were 39 translations, including seven of *Romeo and Juliet*, six of *Hamlet*, and five of *Macbeth* (a few of these are retellings in prose). More often than not, the stage versions were free adaptations in Indian settings with added songs and other embellishments. What the Bengali public wanted was a melding of Shakespearean drama with the not dissimilar traditional popular theatre or *jatra*, with its larger-than-life action, rhetorical verse dialogue, abundance of songs and music, and frequent supernaturalism.

In a signature development of colonial culture, a cherished indigenous form was thus reinvented in terms of a new occidental model. The Western trappings in sets and costume added a further exotic element. Very few of these plays were strictly Shakespearean in material. Many more were free but recognizable adaptations—using Shakespeare as Shakespeare used Plutarch, Cinthio or Holinshed, as a historian of drama perceptively puts it (Ahsan 77). Some combined Shakespeare with other ingredients, like *Antony and Cleopatra* with Rider Haggard in a *Cleopatra* (1914). The greatest number had no discernible Shakespearean element at all, but owed their composition to the Shakespearean model of form and affect. “Shakespeare has always been for us the ideal of drama,” writes Rabindranath Tagore in the preface to his play *Malini* (Tagore 1939, 5:137b). This hidden but ubiquitous presence might be Shakespeare’s most important contribution to Bengali theatre, as in comparable ways to the theatre of other regions and languages of India.

Yet despite this vibrant theatre, the seminal presence of Shakespeare in Bengal was textual: he was primarily imbibed through a flourishing reading culture. The early producers drew their knowledge of Shakespeare from his texts: that was the first medium of access. But this productive traffic between the study and the stage was countered by a division. Academic study became more and more intensive and even technical, focusing closely on the play-text. The theatre, on its part, became an independent self-driven entity, its Shakespearean features increasingly merged with other components, perhaps from very different sources.

This led to a divergence of outlook. The patrons of the new theatre comprised a small section of beneficiaries of the new education system. A different section formed an academic-minded community who took their Shakespeare seriously and ascribed an ethical dimension to learning generally. A Victorian scholarly ethos, rigid and sometimes puritanical, was pitted against the more open, urbanized and allegedly profligate culture of the theatre-going public. The opposition was largely artificial and never total. Most academics, and certainly their students, would visit the theatre, while leading theatre people from Girishchandra Ghosh (1844-1912) to Shishirkumar Bhaduri (1889-1959) were also very respectable Shakespeare scholars. Yet the symbiosis of academic study and stage performance carried an undoubted tension, sometimes within the same person.

Academic study naturally focused on the original texts while the theatre, with rare exceptions, opted for strongly Indianized versions. These were not so much translations as adaptations, sometimes freely reworking the originals. Plots were radically redrafted and characters renamed. The protagonist's new Bengali name might serve in place of Shakespeare's title. Girishchandra Ghosh, the greatest theatre personality of the age, made a reasonably close translation of *Macbeth* (1893), though with added music and dancing. Despite its exceptional literary merit, it failed at the box office. But to Girishchandra's chagrin, Nagendranath Chaudhuri's *Hariraj* (1896-97), a free and somewhat crude redaction of *Hamlet* set in Kashmir, proved a runaway success, with another leading actor, Amarendranath Datta (Dutt), in the title role. The play was revived at intervals until at least 1925, when it was staged by an all-women cast.

Hariraj presented "a Hindu Hamlet" and cited the twelfth-century Kashmiri chronicle *Rajtarangini* as a source. Satishchandra Chattopadhyay (Chatterjee), who adapted *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the "opera" *Jahanara* (1904), extolled "the great poet Shakespeare, emperor of the occidental poetic world, universally worshipped"; yet asserted "I have been forced to make many changes in the characters to render the play intelligible to the ordinary men and women of our country." He warned the intending audience to "abandon [the] hope" of seeing "an undistorted image" of Shakespeare's play. So too *The Merchant of Venice* was reinvented by Bhupendranath Bandyopadhyay as *Saodagar* (The Merchant, 1915) with "Abundant Charming Songs and Graceful Dances". Some productions remained closer to the original, like a 1919 *Othello*; but as a rule, they neither cared nor dared to adopt textual or historical authenticity as a criterion.

Meanwhile, academic study focused more and more on Shakespeare's text, even to editorial and historical issues, and based its interpretation upon that close analysis. Such interpretation might result in a strongly affective and even theatrical rendering in the classroom, but it was always anchored in the text. It reflects the approach found in Victorian criticism as exemplified in the work of Edward Dowden and, classically, A. C. Bradley, even if H. M. Percival, the first celebrated Indian teacher of Shakespeare in Calcutta, only encountered Bradley's work long after retirement and treated it dismissively (Chaudhuri, Sukanta, 396).

A minor development featured distinctively Indian readings, chiefly by external application of premises from Indian philosophy or literature. Notable instances are Smarajit Datta's (Dutt) three volumes on *Macbeth* (1921), *Othello* (1923) and *Hamlet* (1928), each subtitled *An Oriental Study*. But with rare exceptions, such inquiries could only proceed by analogy or conjecture: it was not a promising field.

Down to the late twentieth century, the staple concerns of Shakespeare studies in Bengal and India were annotation, close reading and Bradleyan

character-analysis, within the usual liberal-humanist framework then current in the West. In Bengal, the high point of this approach was attained by Praphullachandra Ghosh (1883-1948). He had his teaching copies of Shakespeare specially bound, interleaved with blank pages. Every inch of those pages, and the margins of the printed book, were covered with notes in variously coloured inks, to indicate different categories of material that he would take up in the classroom. Yet his lectures also comprised a species of playreading: he would gesticulate, modulate his voice, or even burst out weeping, as in the scene where Othello chastises Desdemona, as reported by a student (Sujata Chaudhuri: personal communication, c.1980).

In another direction, this pedagogy of close reading led to editorial activity. Its earliest practitioners, as one might expect, were Englishmen. C. H. Tawney produced a notable edition of *Richard III* (London: Macmillan, 1888), and J. W. Holme edited the original Arden edition of *As You Like It* (London: Methuen, 1914), both while teaching at Calcutta's Presidency College (formerly Hindu College). But the initiative soon passed to Indian scholars, where it has remained. It was in their hands that Shakespeare scholarship in India came of age. The British had practised a more simplistic, patronizing pedagogy. Tawney, in the preface to his *Richard III*, agrees unquestioningly (and perhaps in that milieu not incorrectly) with another Englishman who taught in India, Kenneth Deighton (who brought out a series of editions from Macmillan for use in India), that "Indian students of Shakespeare require more help than is given in the school editions generally used in England and America" (Tawney vii). Indian scholars showed greater respect for their students' powers of understanding.

In Bengal, the first prominent Indian Shakespearean was Harrington Hugh Melville Percival (1855-1931)—despite his name, an Indian from Chattagram (Chittagong), now in Bangladesh. He initiated a line of celebrated Shakespeare teachers at Presidency College. The mantle descended from teacher to pupil across generations: through Praphullachandra Ghosh (1883-1948) and Taraknath Sen (1909-71) to Arun Kumar Das Gupta (1932-2023). I was fortunate to have the last two as my teachers, and the last subsequently as a colleague. Again we see the long-term fruition of the origins of Shakespeare studies in Bengal that I am tracing here.

Besides editions of Spenser and Milton, Percival left behind five Shakespeare editions, of *As You Like It* (Bombay: Longmans, Green, 1910), *The Merchant of Venice* (London: Henry Frowde, 1912), *The Tempest* (Calcutta: S. Chaudhuri, 1928), *Macbeth* (Calcutta: S. Chaudhuri, 1929) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1955). The last appeared long after his death. Even the earlier ones were reconstructed from notes taken by students during his lectures and worked up under his supervision. As their provenance indicates, these are very much teaching editions, sometimes almost conveying

the voice of the lecturer in the classroom. In a handwritten “Foreword” affixed in facsimile at the start of each volume, Percival expresses his pleasure at “lectur[ing] again on Shakespeare through the Press”. There is little or no textual or bibliographical apparatus. Percival was well versed in textual cruces, but preferred to resolve them by aesthetic rather than editorial criteria.

Percival’s illustrious successors have left few publications commensurate with their scholarship and impact. They brought out no editions. On Shakespeare, the only notable book-length works are four volumes by Subodh Chandra Sengupta (1903-98)⁴ (including three covering the Comedies, Histories and Tragedies respectively) and some remarkable textual scholarship by Sailendrakumar Sen (1919-99),⁵ another of my distinguished teachers and, later, a colleague. Taraknath Sen published a long essay on Shakespeare’s short lines—that is, lines shorter than the pentametric norm—with a detailed analysis of every such line in the Folio text of *Macbeth*. But his criteria (unlike Sailendrakumar Sen’s) are theatrical and affective, not textual. The dominant critical strain of the past century continues to resonate.

I have moved beyond my chronological limits to indicate both continuity and departure. Curiously, the first major work on Shakespeare’s texts to appear from Calcutta was not by a literary scholar but a scientist—Prafullachandra Ray, a legendary professor of chemistry and pioneer of industry. Late in life, between 1939 and 1941, Ray published no fewer than seventeen articles on “my favourite subject—Shakespeare” in the *Calcutta Review* (the journal of the University of Calcutta). They have been reprinted in volume form with the title *The Shakespearean Puzzle*. What the “puzzle” might be is itself something of a puzzle. It seems to be the generally “elusive, evasive or baffling” nature of the plays: whenever the scholar “fancies he has discovered something material or relevant to the life or writings of the poet [, he] finds himself at last groping in the dark” (Ray 2). Ray addresses many general questions about Shakespeare’s artistic motives, the relation between his life, work and thought, and the evolution of his text. As one might expect, there is no independent research; but Ray has read deeply in the Shakespeare scholarship of his time, and conducts some major secondary inquiries based on their premises.

In English departments across Bengal and India, thousands of students were taking specialized courses in English at Bachelor’s and Master’s level at that date. Hundreds of thousands more took general English courses as part of

⁴ *Shakespearean Comedy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950); *The Whirligig of Time: The Problem of Duration in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1961); *Shakespeare’s Historical Plays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964); *Aspects of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1972).

⁵ Most notably in *Capell and Malone, and Modern Shakespeare Bibliography* (Calcutta: Firma KL Mukhopadhyay, 1960).

their Bachelor's programme. Shakespeare featured substantially at both levels. At Calcutta University down to the 1980s, the English Honours course included two Shakespeare plays and the general course required one. The Master's course had an entire paper on Shakespeare. Even high-school students would usually read some Shakespeare, in extract or even a full play. An army of college-educated youths across India thus encountered Shakespeare, however perfunctorily at times. At the other end of the spectrum, an enthusiastic minority had him hard-wired into their system.

In the third decade of the twentieth century, Shakespeare rather suddenly lost his proud place on the Calcutta stage, compounding the division between scholarship and performance. There were at least sixteen separate Bengali productions of Shakespearean drama between 1870 and 1920; between 1921 and 1951, none at all. Even an actor-director as well-read as Shishirkumar Bhaduri, who began life as a college teacher of literature, did not stage a single Shakespeare play. There is a comparable dearth in other Indian languages, even while students pored over Shakespeare's text in the country's schools, colleges and universities, and the educated elite read him extensively in print.

What accounts for this remarkable divergence between the theatre and the classroom? The history of the times suggests an obvious explanation. India won independence in 1947 after an intense freedom struggle in the preceding decades. It is an easy guess that the theatre of the colonizers, even in such a familiar and universalized form as Shakespeare's plays, would not have found favour with the public. Yet by the general paradox of colonial rule, the subject nation made its peace with the rulers' culture from the sheer need for survival: Shakespeare figured conspicuously in the academic curriculum of the colonial state. By a happier and not uncommon paradox, that cultural material, especially in so stimulating a guise as Shakespeare, triggered cultural innovations of its own, even to the point of challenging colonial rule.

Beyond the stage and the study, Shakespeare found his way to a third, more open-ended and hence more crucial sector. The college-going population of the late nineteenth century was a minute fraction of the total population of Bengal, almost entirely confined to males; but it expanded incrementally within those confines, driven by the urge to improve one's worldly lot or, in plain terms, to earn a living through an English education. That living, if it materialized at all, was usually modest and straitened; it could not support the more expansive lifestyle that might include theatre-going. Moreover, most beneficiaries of that education would leave Calcutta for their home towns and villages or other places of work. A few might organize amateur theatricals at those places, maybe even the occasional bit of Shakespeare. *Hamlet* was acted in 1857 at the residence of the reformer Keshabchandra Sen in Hooghly District, and *The Merchant of Venice* in 1870 in Krishnanagar in Nadia District. The same year saw the earliest recorded Shakespeare performance in Bengali, an

adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*—again by a group from Bantra in Howrah District, though staged in a private house in Calcutta. But on the whole, there was little reverse traffic from the districts to the city.

I have described how stage versions of Shakespeare reworked the originals very freely indeed. From 1890, however, we find a number of poetic renderings closer to the originals, some of them by established poets and writers: Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay's *Romeo and Juliet* (1894), Nabinchandra Sen's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1894), Jyotirindranath Tagore's *Julius Caesar* (1907), besides a freer adaptation of *The Tempest* by Hemchandra.

Other redactions are cast as prose narratives, like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's retelling of *The Comedy of Errors* (1869). The first Bengali collected works start to appear from the 1890s: from the Hitabadi Press in 1895, then in a series of volumes by Haranchandra Rakshit (1896-1903). These too are in prose narrative form, though much of the dialogue is printed like a play-text. Earlier, there were Bengali renderings based on Lamb's *Tales of Shakespeare*. One of them, a *Romeo and Juliet* by Gurudas Hazra (1848), is the earliest surviving Bengali version of Shakespeare in any form.⁶

The shift of purpose from performance texts to reading texts is a matter of some moment. It made Shakespeare accessible to those who could not read him in English, and who, for whatever reason (and there were many), could not visit the theatre. In particular, it brought Shakespeare home to middle-class women, of whom a good number, by this time, were not only literate but voracious readers. Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897-1999), who says he "imbibed" the names of Shakespeare and Milton "unconsciously", first heard the story of *King Lear* from his mother, and was introduced to *Julius Caesar* in full by his father when he was ten—that is, in 1907. Neither parent was an academic (Chaudhuri, Nirad C., 98-99, 189). Such dissemination may have started with the new academic programme, but it became an independent focal point of Bengal's interest in Shakespeare. Located at the cusp of academic study and a wider non-theatrical reception, it worked Shakespeare more deeply into the fabric of Bengal's cultural and intellectual life.

The impact of the academic programme must be correctly gauged. Even the high school curriculum commonly included some Shakespeare, at least in excerpt; and as we have seen, the college curriculum could embrace a great deal. But the "English education" of which it formed a part seldom implied any radical Westernization, except in a few untypical groups like the early "Young Bengal". As this education reached farther into society, it melded with traditional Indian culture and the Indian way of life to produce an English-

⁶ There was reportedly an 1805 translation of *The Tempest* by Claude Monkton of Fort William College, the training institute for British civilians, but it has not survived.

educated but essentially homegrown middle class, of varying modified views and practices but firmly rooted in home soil.

Among its usual intellectual acquisitions was a greater or lesser familiarity with Shakespeare. “Everybody has a Shakespeare at home, everybody can open it and look at the text,” writes Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in 1875 (656). Applied to the English-educated middle class that Bankimchandra is addressing, this is only a modest overstatement. Around 1877-78, a visiting Indian student was introduced to a London audience with the remark that there were almost as many students of Shakespeare and Milton on the banks of the Ganga as of the Thames (Ray 3). In the same year, Rameshchandra Datta, in his historical novel *Maharashtra Jiban Prabhat* (Maharashtra’s Dawn of Life, ch.19), charges his Bengali reader with knowing more of Shakespeare (among other European and even Persian writers) than of India’s own epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (202). That may be why from this novel onward, Rameshchandra’s epigraphs are all from Bengali sources, though in three earlier ones exclusively from English, including nine from Shakespeare.

By the end of the century, there were thousands of people across India who had a reasonable knowledge of the Bard—in some cases, a very deep understanding. Quotations and allusions circulated freely, almost casually, as the shared legacy of the educated elite. Michael Madhusudan Datta or Dutt (1824-73), the first major poet of the nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance, was a product of Hindu College. His extensive correspondence contains relatively few references to “the splendid Shakespearean Drama” (as he phrases it in a rare mention: 571), but several eulogies of blank verse (which Michael himself practised, in both plays and non-dramatic poems) as the best medium for a “national drama”. He also cites Dr Johnson on Shakespeare and, during a stay in London, offers to help his friend Manomohan Ghosh in his “Shakespearean studies” by sending him “papers of questions”—whatever that might mean—“on his most famous plays” (letter of 8 January 1863: Michael 578).

Another pioneer of modern Bengali literature, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94), has epigraphs to every chapter of his early novel *Kapalkundala* (1866). There are six passages from Shakespeare—as many as from the classical Sanskrit dramatist Kalidasa. Bankimchandra also composed the first well-known Bengali critical essay on Shakespeare (1875), comparing Kalidasa’s heroine Shakuntala with Miranda and Desdemona and arguing for Shakespeare’s superior insight. Less known but no less significant is an essay of 1878 by the historian Haraprasad Shastri (1853-1931) comparing Kalidasa and Shakespeare. But an informed interest in Shakespeare extended beyond humanists and men of letters to the entire educated community. The Bethune Society, a distinguished gathering of Bengal’s intelligentsia, featured “On the Tragedy of Macbeth” alongside “On the Sanitary Improvement of Calcutta” in its lecture list for 1852 (Banerji 110).

Gradually, the reading of Shakespeare progressed beyond knowledge and appreciation to critical analysis and assessment, and to general integration into learned culture. Interestingly, Michael and Haraprasad contextualize the Indian reception of Shakespeare in the same way. Michael writes: “In the great European Drama you have the stern realities of life, lofty passion, and heroism of sentiment. With us it is all softness, all romance” (Michael 571). Haraprasad adjudges Kalidasa superior in rendering matters naturally pleasing and aesthetic, and in external description of all kinds; but Shakespeare alone can probe inward to draw beauty out of the naturally unbeautiful, compellingly depicting pain, violence and evil. In 1892, the philosopher Hirendranath Datta (1868-1942) made an extended comparison of Kalidasa and Shakespeare over eight numbers of the journal *Sahitya* (Literature). He too argues that Kalidasa is the poet of beauty, and Shakespeare of humanity even where it inheres in the ugly or evil. This interior or intellectual realm is Shakespeare’s particular province (Hirendranath 574-76).

Bankimchandra tends in the same direction when he judges Desdemona a more powerful piece of characterization than either Shakuntala or Miranda. Both the latter are untested in the world’s ways, though their innocence differs in degree; Desdemona has encountered evil and suffering. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) wrote a rejoinder to Bankimchandra in 1902, strongly arguing for Kalidasa’s superiority by reversing the argument. He expands Goethe’s remark that Kalidasa’s play presents a comprehensive view of life, progressing from innocence through suffering and experience to attain a serene closure.

Rabindranath, scion of an affluent family, was largely educated at home. His tutor set him an assignment to translate *Macbeth* into Bengali. Only the Witch scenes survive (Rabindranath, *Rachanabali* 30:53-56). But his extensive acquaintance with Shakespeare appears all through his works. He did not write a full essay solely on Shakespeare, but there are some insightful passages. The most extensive is the previously mentioned comparison of Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* with *The Tempest*. The basic contrast, in Rabindranath’s view, is between the enriching accord with nature in the forest hermitage where Shakuntala lives, and Prospero’s engagement with nature in terms of power and subjugation. The idea is repeated in “The Religion of the Forest” (1919) with reference to several other plays by Shakespeare (*English Writings* 2:516-17).

Another basic idea about Shakespeare runs through many of Rabindranath’s writings. He puts it artlessly in an early essay: Shakespeare could depict other people’s hearts admirably in the dramatic mode, but not his own heart in the lyric mode (“Bhubanmohinipratibha” etc.: Rabindranath, *Rachanabali* 29:81). But Rabindranath soon fine-tunes this view to argue that Shakespeare’s apparently objective projection of characters is possible only because he has first internalized them, imbued them with his own being. That, in turn, is made possible by the depth of his human insight. In a novel fusion of the

opposed Keatsian principles of negative capability and the egotistical sublime, Rabindranath argues that Shakespeare's creations appear to be endlessly varied and distinct; but they all emanate from the "basic principle of life that he generates from within himself", which is also "humanity's eternal wellspring of laughter and tears" ("Patralap," Exchange of Letters [on literature, with Lokendranath Palit]: Rabindranath, *Rachanabali* 8:469, 477-78). Rabindranath wrote a sonnet in 1916 to mark the third centenary of Shakespeare's death. The "world-poet," he says, was once confined to his native land, in an island setting evoking *The Tempest*; but he has climbed the sky like the midday sun, and now lights up the world. It is an eloquent but formal eulogy. The real tribute of the Indian poet (himself customarily called the "world-poet" by his countrymen) lies in his scattered readings and observations.

The promise implicit in the origins of Shakespeare's reception in Bengal can be grasped only by tracing its progress to this point: an integrated line of development, difficult to separate into phases. Significant refashioning starts only in the second half of the twentieth century. My ending thus marks a natural, though not quite a chronological, point of conclusion.

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