



interview

Encountering a Scholar

Rethinking English seminar organized by the Department of English, Dhaka University brought renowned scholar Sukanta Chaudhuri to Dhaka last February. Sukanta is famous for his translation of Sukumar Ray but he is basically a scholar of English Renaissance literature. He did his Ph.D from Oxford and is now Professor of English at Jadavpur University, Calcutta.

Sukanta spoke to the chairman and Professor of English, Dhaka University, Fakrul Alam and Ziaul Karim of *The Daily Star* on areas of his interest, problems of English teaching and his upcoming translation projects at Fakrul's flat in Dhaka. Excerpts:

Fakrul Alam: What have you translated?

Sukanta Chaudhuri: I began by translating a sort of fun book as it were. Some of Sukumar Ray's writings for children — *Abol-Tabol*, *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La*. Since then I have translated quite a lot of modern Bengali poetry.

Ziaul Karim: What really interested you in the nonsense rhymes of Sukumar Ray?

SC: I think the fun and challenge of translation really. This was about ten years ago. My son was small and I was reading *Abol-Tabol* to him, many years after I first came across *Abol-Tabol* and *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La*. I just felt inspired to translate a few and then I thought well if I have translated a few I might as well go on and try to complete the book.

After Sukumar Ray, I have translated a lot of modern Bengali poetry. I have translated a book of Nirendranath Chakravarty's poems, *Ulanga Raja*. Since then I have been involved in quite a lot of translating and editing of other people's translation of modern Bengali poetry. In fact, a book under my joint editorship appeared just a few days ago from Sahitya Academy in India — a collection of modern Bengali poems in English called *Voices from Bengal*. We are in the course of bringing out another such collection of the translations of Jibanananda Das's poetry. We are just in the very early stages of planning a collection of translations from Rabindranath Tagore which will be published jointly by Oxford University Press and Visva-Bharati Grantha Bibhag. But this is really at a very embryonic stage. We are just in the course of planning the content of each volume and working out who the translators could be. It is very much at the drawing board stage though. So, the time has not really come to talk about this on any scale.

ZK: What do you think is the reason behind the waning readership of Tagore in the West?

SC: I don't know if it is waning. I rather think that after the appearance of some recent translations — the most widely circulated one being William Radice's translation in the Penguin series, and others like those by Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Mary Lego and the book *Rabindranath: The Myriad-Minded Poet* by Andrew Robinson and Krishna Datta — Western interest in Tagore has increased to some slight extent after a

long time. I'm not saying he is the craze everywhere, but at least people in the West are once again aware of the existence of Tagore. At the same time there is no reason why we should rely entirely on Western scholars to present the work of Tagore to the world. This is where Bengali scholars should come in. At least as initially planned, the Oxford Tagore will be carried out chiefly by translators and scholars from Bengal.

FA: What is the copyright situation on the translation front?

SC: Well, as far as India is concerned copyright is still owned by Visva-Bharati. This is a joint project between Visva-Bharati and Oxford University Press; so it is absolutely official.

ZK: There are complaints about Radice's translations. What is your view about his rendition?

SC: Actually, given the fact that we are just planning another set of translations ourselves, I really would not like to comment on the merits or demerits of other translations of Tagore. I'm not saying this is bad; we will not comment on any translation of Tagore. Let's look at that way. Let's avoid the subject.

FA: Tagore was his own translator also; so, are you going to translate some of the poems that Tagore himself translated?

SC: These are the kind of things we are really thinking out now.

FA: What is your gut reaction to that?

SC: My gut reaction is yes; there is no reason why we should avoid those poems altogether. Because they could do with retranlations in idioms which will be more familiar and acceptable to modern readers. That way any author needs to be translated and retranslated. Because translations that work for one generation in one context may not work for another.

ZK: That reminds me of Eliot's remark 'every classic should be translated in each decade.'

SC (laughs): If I may say so, I think we have talked enough about the Oxford Tagore project. As I said it is at a very embryonic stage and if we go on discussing it then I will make remarks which will take the form of a kind of either a commitment or at least sort of prediction of something which in fact I am not in a position to make now.

FA: What about translating the other way around? Have you translated from English to Bengali?



Sukanta poses for a photograph at Fakrul's flat in Dhaka before the interview

Star Photo: Zahid I. Khan

SC: No. Not really. I do write in Bengali but that is prose chiefly on contemporary subjects — sometimes on literature, actually more often on education matters, social matters, matters concerning the city of Calcutta, things like that. More practical subjects, I should say.

ZK: Do you have any particular project in mind like translating other poets of the thirties except Jibanananda Das?

SC: No project really. It happens that in various contexts, like many of my colleagues in Calcutta, I do translations. But not as a major project. This Rabindranath is a big enough project to tackle. The Jibanananda project was actually proposed by Sahitya Academy. As you know, the birth centenary of Jibanananda is coming up in 1999. So in anticipation of that they have undertaken certain projects. In fact, ahead of the date at this latest Calcutta Book Fair they published a book of essays on Jibanananda — the result of a seminar on him.

ZK: What is your process of working on a particular project?

SC: We have a very interesting process of getting about this. Take, for example, the collection of modern Bengali poems *Voices from Bengal* I was talking about. We had a workshop first. Then

what we did was to select the poems and divide them among a number of translators. We make our first draft translations individually. And after the first drafts were completed we — literally sat around a large table each with his or her translations — and read them out to each other and consulted each other, took each other's comments and opinions and in the light of that carried out some revisions. Then in fact we had a poetry reading where the living poets were present. We began with the immediate post-Tagore generation and came down to the poets who are now in their thirties. Many of the living poets were in fact present at the poetry reading and they offered their comments afterwards. In this way the collection has been put together. The Jibanananda collection is also going to be the result of a workshop.

FA: Who would be the poets now that you would like to translate?

SC: My first answer would be a poet who is no longer living — Shakti Chattopadhyaya. But his poetry is a great challenge to translate and also very tempting to translate. Another poet who, although well known, I think is under-rated, Sharat Kumar Mukhopadhyaya, I would like to translate his works. He was one of the associates of

Sakti and Sunil in the early days of *Kirtibas*. Then I would like to translate Joy Goswami. Joy's poetry is very challenging. But I have no immediate project for translating these poets at any scale.

FA: You also have a literary column. More than one I think. Could you tell us about your literary column?

SC: Actually, I have only one literary column. The column which I write regularly — once a fortnight — for the Indian newspaper *Asian Age* called 'View from Calcutta'. But that is not a literary column. There I write, about immediate social problems; sometimes matters concerning my own city of Calcutta, sometimes about more general social problems in India as a whole. I also take part in a literary column that is, in fact, written by some six or seven of us which is published in the *New Strait Times* of Kuala Lumpur. That is because Jadavpur University have developed very cordial links with some universities in this region of South and Southeast Asia. One of them is Dhaka and another one is the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. Some time ago it struck us in Jadavpur that when we think of foreign contact we think of Britain or America and no doubt that is necessary. But there is so much work being carried out also in other countries in South and Southeast Asia. We should really have contact with those countries. As a first move towards that we invited Professor Alam of Dhaka and Prof Lim from the University of Malaya. Well, the column we are talking about is a kind of a spin-off from that really. It's a fortnightly column so each of us have to contribute once every three months.

FA: Do you write on Indian writing in English in your columns?

SC: Well, actually one of our briefs was that although obviously we should not totally avoid the subject they would prefer us to deal with more general subjects. But on the whole we have been asked to stay off it.

FA: You had some fairly provocative comments to make about Indian writing in English in the conference. Do you like to summarize them for us?

SC: I will try to summarize. Actually what I am afraid of is they will be taken in fact as more provocative than they were meant to be. There is, of course, continuing controversy about to what extent the new literature in English

should be included in the English curriculum and particularly, of course, as Indians and South Asians how far we should introduce this literature written in English in this part of the world. Now the stand I took was we should definitely do this.

FA: Who do you think should be included?

SC: Well, certainly fiction writers have had the biggest impact of Indian writing in English. In fact, not just Indians. Generally speaking the new literature in English has had the biggest impact in the field of fiction. I should say. So, definitely both the older writers like Anand, Narayan and Rao and also of course, from the more recent generation; Rushdie, to take the most obvious example. And next to Rushdie in my view Amitav Ghose is the finest of the present generation of Indian novelists in English.

FA: How do you view Rushdie?

SC: I think we must consider him as an Indian novelist. Because the basic material and substance of his inspiration is India although he may be dealing with it in ways which are unique. Definitely his orientation is Indian. If you remove India from his writing what have you left? That is the foundation of his literary genius and I think it is genius.

FA: Could we get back to your stance on introducing Indian writing in English at our Universities?

SC: It seems to me that in India the emphasis on Indian writing in English is really getting out of hand — English courses in many Indian universities not so much in Eastern India but above all South and Western India at least 25 per cent if not more of the course consists of Indian writing in English. Very large proportion of the research being carried out is on Indian writing; this I think is lopsided. If you have to study English then well the idea of that study has to be we are coming into contact with foreign culture and literature with which for historical reasons we have had close contact if we are to shut that out and concentrate exclusively on the little corner that actually, you know, belongs to our own territory then that will defeat the purpose of English studies — the purpose of studying English is to open windows to the world. So, if we shut those windows and only concentrate on what is within our own room that is I think self-defeating.

poems

by Zahid Haider

My Reality

Wretchedness sits in the sun and flashes a mirror
I am the pedestrian who gets this sudden burst of light.

You think my days in the sun have come back.
Wretchedness only winks at me, in the gloomy attic.

You think I don't walk the road now without my shoes.
My feet are only protected by a borrowed pair,
There are no shoes to fit my size any more;
The feet somehow adjust to the shoes.

I cover my wounds with the colourful ads
From multinational companies, and move on.
You think there goes a happy man.
Wretchedness sits in the gloomy attic and smiles.

Translated by S Manzoorul Islam

Superfluous Man

I am a bloody superfluous man.
Wherever I go
I become an extra.
Men gaze around with silent sullen eyes.
Then my two eyes
Then my two feet
Then my two hands
And even my heart goes unbecomings
In that conference.

As if it is a poor street dog
Which has shed all its flea-ridden hair,
Foodless for days is,
Suddenly gate-crashing a super banquet
A dazzling ball room
The plush office down town.

I am a bloody superfluous.
Hospitals run out of beds as I arrive.
The pavement is no more kind,
Jostling me down with pedestrians.
Shoulders to the ground
And latest model cars scream to the sky
With latest jazzy horns.

News floats around
I am an extra man
A superfluous man,
Its only you
Who is pushing us
To the camps of the Third World
In the assemble of the World Itself.
Just for you
We have to listen
To some extra superfluous words.

I am a superfluous man
I am an extra man.
O mother land,
Superfluous and extra to you, too?

Translated by Afsan Chowdhury



profile

P.G. Wodehouse: Past Master of Light Humour

by ASM Nurunabi

PG WODEHOUSE WAS born to write, and he wrote for 80 years. His talents spread over many fields. As comic novelist, short-story writer, lyricist, and playwright. He was best known as the creator of Jeeves, the supreme 'gentleman's gentleman' He wrote more than 90 books and 20 film scripts and collaborated on more than 30 plays and musical comedies.

Breaking out as a humorous columnist on the *London Globe* (1902), he wrote freelance for many other publications. After 1909 he lived and worked for long periods in the United States and in France. He was captured in France by the Germans in 1940 and spent much of the war interned in Berlin.

Fame, fortune or old age made no difference to his existence. He was enamoured of "the pleasure of turning out the stuff". He insisted that he had no message for humanity. As he put it, "it was not his business to brood over the cosmos, but he had the good sense and observation of a comedian, and his kindly satire ex-

posed the pretensions and the unreal.

He first started as a writer of stories for school children. These stories conveyed a revolt against the mawkishness of the books for the children of his time. He told the truth about school life as he knew it without sentimentality. The characteristics of his stories were their naturalness, good sense and humour which made such stories classics of their kind. There were some unique characters in his stories. He created Psmith, his first great comic character, with his stylised diction, his quick eye for the affected and ridiculous. His next memorable character was Ukridge who had no conscience at all. The salient aspects of his character were that he was he was concerned only with himself and devised lunatic plans to make a vast fortune. Though portrayed as a rogue there was a kind of childlike innocence about him. He was the long-term favourite character of the author for his stories.

His success as established and popular author contin-

ued with his stories for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Though the majority of his readers comprised women and girls, his stories show up the falseness to life of hollow romanticism. His young men and women are of the world who are made to find happiness and fulfillment by understanding themselves and their world. In their philosophy of life, they find their guide in nature whose dictates are followed in all possible circumstances in their life.

Wodehouse subsequently embarked on a long and successful career in the theatre. His theatrical experience influenced his books. In his many short stories about Hollywood, he saw every episode as a "scene" and the characters as actors. He gradually evolved a style which gave his stories and novels a sort of naturalness and intimacy. In no time, his stories and novels gave indications that he had reached full maturity. He now became the master of his craft. Though his affection for the Edwardian period, as flected in his stories was obvious, he also wrote

stories of modern life with its characteristics of manners and outlook. The plots, situations and characters were familiar, so much so that when we are in Wodehouse territory, we know its ways.

For many readers, the peaks of his achievement are the series of novels and short stories about Bertie Wooster and his valet Jeeves, and those about Lord Emsworth and Blandings. Bertie, if he is a nitwit, appeared as an endearing nitwit who constantly plunged into situations of a kind devised to make humanity shudder, but he kept up a steady loyalty to his friend, Jeeves, who gets him out of the difficult situations by an ingenuity of inventions of elaborate designs by which this was brought about. His stories show his profound understanding of human nature. The Blandings stories were woven with a richness of absurdity.

His achievement is unique in our time. English-born, PG Wodehouse died in 1975 at the ripe old age of 94.