

Bengali Studies in Poland

Past and Present

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Introduction

Bengali Studies in Poland have always been an important part of Indology in the University of Warsaw. Indological studies have been conducted in Warsaw in the Department which over the period of almost 80 years has borne various names. At present, for about 15 years now, it has been bearing the name of the Department of South Asian Studies and it combines research on languages and cultures of South Asia countries – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The history of the Department goes back to the thirties of the 20th century when Professor Stanisław Schayer, a great Polish scholar of Sanskrit and Buddhology, started regular lecturing in Indian studies. After the Second World War the teaching of Indology restarted in 1953.

At present the Department of South Asian Studies in the University of Warsaw is the largest academic institution of this type in Poland and it conducts research and studies in four main linguistic fields, i.e. Sanskrit studies, Hindi studies, Tamil studies and Bengali studies. The Department of South Asian Studies is part of the Faculty of Oriental Studies which in 2009 replaced nominally the former Oriental Institute.

Bengali studies in the University of Warsaw constitute a relatively new field of research. If by Bengali studies we mean not only teaching the Bengali language but also studying the language, literature and culture of historical Bengal, the region that now is divided between two countries – the Republic of India (the state of West Bengal) and Bangladesh – Bengali studies as an independent branch of research appeared in Poland only in the 70s of the 20th century, so they are only about 40 years old.

One should mention, too, that although apart from Warsaw there are also three other centres of Indological studies in Poland – the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Adam Mickiewicz University in

Poznań and the University of Wrocław – however the University of Warsaw is the only place in Poland where we teach the Bengali language and where Bengali studies are conducted. Thus, when we talk about the Bengali studies in the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the University of Warsaw, in practice we mean Bengali studies in Poland.

The Beginnings

To begin sketching the history of Bengali studies in Poland, we should start with the name of Hiranmoy Ghoshal (1908-1969)¹. He was a Bengali from Calcutta, who came to Poland for the first time in 1935 at the invitation of Professor Stanisław Schayer. Hiranmoy Ghoshal worked as a lecturer of modern Indian languages in the Oriental Institute at the University of Warsaw, and he also taught English and Hindi languages in the Eastern Institute. When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, he got trapped in Warsaw, but as a foreign citizen he managed to return to India in March 1940, taking with him his Polish fiancée, Halina Nowierska. After returning to India he became actively involved in the campaign against the Nazis and tried to reveal the truth about the Nazi occupation in Poland. He wrote articles for Indian newspapers, lectured and broadcasted on the radio.

He also used to read on Bengali radio his diaries, which later on – in 1942 – were published by the National Literature Company in Calcutta under the title: *Mahatara yuddher pratham adhyāy* [‘The First Chapter of the Big War’]. It was most likely one of the first publications on the Second World War and the Nazi occupation in Poland in the world.

In 1945, another book of Ghoshal was published in Calcutta by M.C. Sarkar and Sons under the title *Kulturkâmp*. The title comes from the German, it literally translates to ‘a struggle for culture; culture war’ and refers to the policy of Germanization pursued by the government of Bismarck in 1871-1878. This culture war consisted in intense Germanization of Polish territories under the Prussian rule. Ghoshal’s book again evoked his experiences at the beginning of the Second World War.

In 1957, Hiranmoy Ghoshal returned to Poland with his son Bogdan (Bengali version of his name is Devadan) and continued working at the University of Warsaw till his death in 1969. He taught Sanskrit, Bengali language and literature, history of India as well as

¹ For more information see: Barbara Grabowska, ‘Hiranmoy Ghoshal (1907-1969)’, *Przegląd Orientalistyczny*, 1970, No4, pp.108-109.

Indian geography and ethnography.

In 1971, both of Ghoshal's books describing his experiences in Poland at the time of the Second World War were translated into Polish and printed in one volume². The translation of the first book, Mahatara yuddher pratham adhyây (the Polish title is *Prolog do wielkiej wojny*), was done by Ghoshal's son – Devadan Bogdan Ghoshal³; the second book Kulturkâmph (the Polish title of it is *Karabin – rozpylacz kultury*) was translated by Hiranmoy Ghoshal's former student Barbara Grabowska⁴.

We should mention that Hiranmoy Ghoshal was also a diplomat. Between 1947 and 1950 he worked as a cultural attaché and the first secretary in the Embassy of India in Moscow. He was also a journalist and a writer – he is the author of nine books written in Bengali and two written in English, for example *Ūkâna* ('Very poor food') published in 1942 by Agradati Publishing Works in Calcutta, *Rây Baruyâr ôkâr kâhinî* ('Rai Barua's hunting stories') published in 1964 by Bharati Book Stall in Calcutta, and *Hâter kâj* ('Handmade').

A revised, English version of Ghoshal's doctoral thesis on the dramaturgy of Chekhov, which Ghoshal had completed in Warsaw just before the outbreak of the Second World War, was published in India in 1949 by Orient Longmans under title *Anton Chekhov. A Biographical Note*. In the library of South Asian Studies Department there is also a manuscript of his Bengali translation of Nikolai Gogol's famous drama *The Wedding*.

So much attention has been devoted in this presentation to Hiranmoy Ghoshal, because we believe that he undoubtedly was a very interesting and colourful personality, and as a great admirer of Poland he contributed a lot to bring the two countries – India and Poland – closer together. It was especially important in those times when such a bringing together was not so easy as today; if we take into account the distance, communication possibilities as well as the differences in political systems of both the countries of the time. I think we can risk saying that if he had not come to Poland and had not started teaching Bengali there would not have been at present any specialist in Bengali language and literature in Poland.

While speaking of the history of Bengali studies in Poland there

are three more names that should also be mentioned: Dr. Agnieszka Kowalska-Soni, Ms. Maria Gurbiel and Ajit Kumar Das.

Dr. Agnieszka Kowalska-Soni completed her studies in Indology in 1960. From 1964 to 1979 she worked at the Department of Indology, but in the meantime she spent many years in India. Between 1965 and 1968 and in the academic year of 1973-1974 she taught Bengali grammar and spoken Bengali. Although the main subject of her research was Hindi literature, she is the author of an article on the reception of Rabindranath Tagore in Poland⁵; she also translated into Polish Premendra Mitra's story *The Big City* (*Mahânagar*)⁶.

Ms. Maria Gurbiel, MA, worked as an assistant professor for two academic years between 1969 and 1971. She taught Bengali grammar. However she did not publish anything on Bengali studies.

There is also another Bengali who contributed to Bengali studies in Poland. Ajit Kumar Das (1928-2002) was a Bengali who permanently settled in Poland. In the 70s of the 20th century he worked for a few years as a free lancer at the Department of Indology as a

Bengali language lecturer. His background wasn't strictly academic, however, so as a native speaker he taught spoken Bengali.

Staff

At present there are four teachers in the Department of South Asian Studies who teach Bengali language and literature. They are: Prof. Barbara Grabowska, Dr. Elżbieta Walter, Dr. Bożena Ćwicyńska and Dr. Anna Trynkowska.

Professor Grabowska and Dr. Elżbieta Walter specialize almost solely in Bengali studies. Dr. Ćwicyńska and Dr. Trynkowska combine their research interests in Bengali studies with Sanskrit studies.

Professor Barbara Grabowska specializes in medieval literature of Bengal. She has written over 40 articles mostly about poets involved in the religious movement of Chaitanya, such as Vidyapati, Chandidas and Jnanadas. She has also done translations from Bengali into Polish. She is the author of three books (all in Polish language): *Powstanie, rozwój i zmierzch liryki wisnuickiej Bengalu* (1995) ['The Origin, Development and Decline of Vaishnava Lyric Poetry of Bengal'], *Świat węłowej bogini* (2002) ['The World of the Serpent Goddess'] and *Kryszna. Z dziejów literatury indyjskiej* ['Krishna.

² Hiranmoy Ghoshal, *Ksiąga Walhalli*, Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, Warszawa 1971.

³ Ibidem, pp. 13-262.

⁴ Ibidem, pp. 263-395.

⁵ Agnieszka Kowalska, 'Z dziejów recepcji Tagore'a w Polsce', *Przegląd Orientalistyczny*, 1961, No 3, pp. 275-281.

⁶ Premendra Mitra, *To wielkie miasto*, transl. by Agnieszka Kowalska-Soni, *Przegląd Orientalistyczny*, 1960, No 4, pp. 415-423.

From the History of Indian Literature’]. The second book [‘The World of the Serpent Goddess’] is dedicated to Manasa –the serpent goddess of Bengal, and contains also a Polish translation of the oldest extant text devoted to Manasa, written by Vijayagupta. The third book [‘Krishna. From the History of Grabowska is writing a book on goddess Chandi.

Dr. Elżbieta Walter mostly teaches Bengali grammar and language. Her interests mainly focus on the Bengali language itself, but she has also translated into Polish and published a few pieces of Bengali literature. The translated publications include: *Pieśń z drogi* [*Pather panchali*] (1994) –the classic novel by Bibhutibhusan Banyopadhyay, *Opowieści ludowe Bengal* [‘Folk Tales of Bengal’] (1986) by Lal Behari Day and *Mircea* [the original title in Bengali – *Na hanyate*, ‘It Does Not Die’] (1993). The last book is a novel by Maitreyi Devi that was her response to Mircea Eliade’s autobiographical novel *Maitreyi*, which is well known in Poland. Apart from these, Dr. Walter has translated two books for children written by the famous Bengali film director Satyajit Ray: *Podróż profesora Canku* [Sâbâs prophecar Canku; Prophecar Canku kaṇḍakâkhânâ] (1982) and a play by Rabindranath Tagore *Poczta* [‘Post Office’] (1999). The latter drama was staged and shown by the Polish public television in 1998 and 2008. Besides Dr. Walter is the author of the first book on Bengali grammar written in Poland: *Gramatyka języka bengalskiego* [‘The Grammar of Bengali Language’], which was published in 2008. She has written about 30 articles on different aspects of Bengali culture, literature and language. She also compiled the bibliography of the Polish translations of Rabindranath Tagore’s writings and wrote an article about it⁷.

Dr. Bożena Ćwicyńska specializes in both Bengali and Sanskrit studies. She focuses mainly on the unique Bengali traditional theatre form – *yatra*. The output of her interests is a publication in English, *The Gitagovinda of Jayadeva and the Kṛṣṇa-yâtrâ. An Interaction between Folk and Classical Culture in Bengal* (1994). For the last few years Dr. Ćwicyńska has been doing research on traditional theatre forms in Kerala – *kudittayam*. She also conducts classes in Bengali for student of our Department, if and when necessary.

Our youngest colleague – Dr. Anna Trynkowska specializes mostly in Sanskrit studies but she does also teach Bengali language.

Publications

Individual publications written by our teachers and lecturers have been already mentioned. But there are also three joint publications that are worth mentioning here.

As a result of the lectures on Bengali literature that had been delivered in our Department a book on Bengali literature was published in 1988 by Prof. Barbara Grabowska in collaboration with Dr. Elżbieta Walter. The title of the book is *Zarys historii literatury Bengal* [‘An Outline of the History of Bengali Literature’].

In 1999, another publication was released. This one had been undertaken by the three aforementioned teachers in Bengali studies in Warsaw: Barbara Grabowska, Bożena Ćwicyńska and Elżbieta Walter. The title of the book is *Z dziejów teatru i dramatu bengalskiego* [‘From the History of Bengali Theatre and Drama’]. It is an outline of the history of Bengali theatre and drama from the very beginning up to the 20th century. The emphasis was placed on Rabindranath Tagore’s playwriting. The study of Bengali theatre is broadly illustrated with Polish translations of the following plays: a *yatra* entitled *Svapna-vilâs* [‘The Delight of Dream’] by Krishna Kamala Goswami and three plays of Rabindranath Tagore: *Ākghar* [‘The Post Office’], *Râjâ* [‘The King of the Dark Chamber’] and *Raktakarabi* [‘The Red Oleanders’].

In 2011 some members of the staff of the Department of South Asian Studies published the first Polish anthology of Rabindranath Tagore’s works, entitled *Poeta świata* [‘A Poet of the World’] on the occasion of 150th anniversary of Tagore’s birthday. It was edited by Elżbieta Walter and published by the Warsaw University Press at the end of April 2011.

The aim of the book is to present diverse literary genres and artistic media in which Tagore worked and excelled. Therefore, anthology contains examples of Tagore’s memoirs, a play, short stories, fragment from a novel, poems, songs, epigrams and paintings, as well as letters written to his family and to famous people, essays, statements and conversations. Each genre represented in the anthology is provided with a short introduction by the Authors of the anthology. All texts were translated into Polish from original Bengali or English, depending on which language the great Nobelism himself had used.

The anthology consists of the thirteen following parts: Introduction, Foreword, Memoirs, Poetry, Songs, Drama, Novels, Short Stories, Philosophical Tales, Epigrams, Writings for children, Letters, Essays, Drawings and Paintings.

⁷ Elżbieta Walter, *On Polish Translations of Rabindranath Tagore’s Writings*, in: *India in Warsaw. Indie w Warszawie*, Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, Warszawa 2006, pp. 100-110.

As the Introduction to the whole volume the editors of anthology were kindly permitted by Professor Amartya Sen to use a Polish translation of his essay, *Tagore and His India*, published recently in his book *The Argumentative Indian. Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*. Professor Amartya Sen has also provided a Forward to the Polish anthology. The book has been illustrated with black and white drawings by Tagore from his book for children, *Se*, and with some colour facsimiles of his paintings.

Curriculum

In the beginning, in the University of Warsaw Bengali language was placed in our syllabus only as a minor Indian language (the main one was Sanskrit) and was taught only four hours a week. In the early seventies the curriculum at the then called Indology Department changed and – not neglecting Sanskrit studies – the emphasis was in addition put on the teaching of modern Indian languages. Consequently, the syllabus of Bengali studies has since expanded and become more intensive. Thanks to this change the students can now learn not only Bengali grammar, but also spoken Bengali, the history of Bengali literature, and have classes in Bengali text reading. The curriculum structure of the Bengali studies is the same as of Sanskrit, Hindi and Tamil studies. The only difference is that the Bengali studies curriculum covers 10 hours of Bengali language a week; apart from this student have classes in Bengali literature.

Until recently in Poland (and also in the Department of South Asian Studies) we had only a 5-year MA course that students completed with MA exams and written theses. A couple of years ago in relation to the access of Poland to the European Union in 2004, we had to adjust our curricula to the EU standards. In consequence Bengali studies are now divided in two stages: 3-year BA course and 2-year MA course.

Students

Up to now 47 students have obtained their MA in Bengali studies with the Bengali literature and language as their major subject. The first such MA thesis was written in 1961. There is a rule that each MA thesis has to be based on some original text in Bengali.

As far as the topics are concerned, pieces of research mainly focus on various themes from Bengali literature. Another popular area of research is the comparisons of parallel motives present both in Bengali and Sanskrit literature. This type of research is possible since all the students of modern Indian languages undergo a compulsory

two-year course in Sanskrit, too. Some research deals with the film adaptations of Bengali novels. For example, one of the students compared the novel *The Home and the World* written by Rabindranath Tagore with the film *The Home and the World* directed by Satyajit Ray. Since 1996, ten MA theses have also presented different problems of Bengali grammar, such as the repetition of words, passive voice, category of number, classification of affixes, language style in Bengali, tense usage, compound verbs and syntax.

As for BA studies, students have had the opportunity of doing their BA degree only since 2006. Before – as we already mentioned – there had been only 5-year MA course system. In the interim period (from 2006 to 2008) submission of BA theses was not obligatory – yet since 2006 twelve BA theses have been written. BA theses do not have to be based on Bengali language sources; however we do try to focus BA research on issues concerning Bengal or Bangladesh. Topics of these works vary, for example:

‘The daily life of Bengali village – based on Lal Behari Day’s *Bengal Peasant Life*’;

‘The image of Calcutta in foreigner’s eyes’;

‘Position of Bengali women – based on Taslima Nasrin’s essays’ collection *Nirbacito kalam*’;

‘The Situation in East Pakistan before the rise of Bangladesh – based on the film *Matir Maina* by Tareque Masud’;

‘The child’s picture in selected writings of Rabindranath Tagore’.

Till now only four people have received their PhD degrees in Bengali studies: Barbara Grabowska was granted a PhD degree on the basis of her thesis entitled *Vidyapati and Chandidas as pada poets in literature of North-Eastern India* (1973).

The title of Elżbieta Walter’s PhD thesis was *The Historical Novels of Bankimchandra Chatterji as an Expression of the Attitude of the XIX Century Bengali Intelligentsia in Regard to History* (1983).

Bożena Chwyczyńska was granted a PhD degree on the basis of her thesis entitled *The Gitagovinda of Jayadeva and the Kṛṣṇa-yâtrâ* (1993).

Walentyna Karmelitow was granted a PhD degree on the basis of her thesis *Breaking Down*

Traditional Stereotypes of Women in the Writing of Nabanita Deb Sen (2007).

At present, in the academic year of 2011-2012 we have got twenty students in the first year and seven students in the third year of BA course in Bengali studies.

We have also got three PhD students doing their research in

Bengali studies. All of them are supervised by Professor Barbara Grabowska.

Our present PhD students have been working on the following subjects: Micha³ Panasiuk – *Songs of dehatattva in minor religious traditions (sampraday) in Bengal (Bauls and Sahebhdhani)*. Aleksandra D¹browska – *The image of post-colonial Kolkata in Bengali literature. Framing the urban identity in post-colonial Kolkata*.

Weronika Rokicka – *The Naxalite Movement: historical and literary perspectives*.

The Library

For a long time the collection of Bengali books in the library of South Asian Studies had been very tiny, especially in the comparison with the collections of books in Sanskrit, Hindi and Tamil. About seven years ago, however, we received a very generous gift of Bengali books from the son of the above-mentioned Bengali, Ajit Kumar Das, who passed away in 2000. This collection, consisting of around 800 titles, most of which are classical pieces of Bengali writings, enriched our collection enormously.

Among the books there was also a crucial source for contemporary Bengali studies – a collection of the complete writings of Rabindranath Tagore.

Additional Teaching Materials

As for additional teaching materials, we receive Indian newspapers from the Embassy of India in Warsaw. We have been receiving regularly Bengali daily newspaper *Anandabazar Patrika* and weekly magazine *Desh*. We are very grateful to the Embassy of India in Poland for this constant support and assistance. We do not have any audio-visual teaching aids, such as cassettes, CDs VHS cassettes or DVDs. All such materials come from private collections of teachers or students of our Department.

Popularization activities

Being a specialist in Bengali studies in Poland, where the knowledge of India among the average Polish people is very limited, it requires from us not only scholarly work *sensu stricto*, but also popularization activities. We try to spread the knowledge about Bengal onto a broader forum – we write articles for Polish popular newspapers and magazines on various topics related to the culture of

Bengal – for example about Kolkata, Santiniketan, Bengal *yatra* or religious festivals.

In 1996, with the help of the Embassy of India in Warsaw we organized a special ceremony on the occasion of the 135th anniversary of the birth of Rabindranath Tagore. Students of Bengali recited poems of Rabindranath Tagore translated by themselves into Polish for this very occasion. In 1996, Dr. Walter took part in a conference on translating from Oriental languages, organized by the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, where she presented a paper on the problems of translation from the Bengali language into Polish.

In 2007, for the first time a contemporary Indian play was staged in Poland – it was the one-act play by contemporary Bengali writer Nabanita Deb Sen entitled *Medea* (staged with the author's permission).

In 2008, Dr. Walter participated in the international conference on art and visual culture of India, where she presented a paper on folk paintings from Bengal – *jorano pat*. Her presentation was received with great interest of the audience, mainly art historians, many of whom saw this form of Bengali folk art for the first time. The session on Oriental art was accompanied by film presentation: we showed to the Polish public two Bengali films – Aparna Sen's 'Mr. and Mrs Iyyar' and Rituparno Ghosh's 'Antarmahal'.

Then, in February 2010 Dr. Elżbieta Walter participated in the First International Congress of Bengali Studies in Delhi, where she presented a paper on Bengali studies in Poland, and in May 2011 she took part in an International Seminar *Revisiting Rabindranath* organized by The Tagore centre UK, in collaboration with the ICCR, where she presented a paper on Tagore's *Post Office* in Poland.

Conclusion

To conclude this sketch, in which an attempt has been made to show achievements in Bengali studies in Poland, the question can be asked: What else can be done more in this field? We think about more translations from Bengali into Polish, more research on different subjects of Bengali language, literature and culture. Very important issue is to prepare a new revised edition of *History of Bengali Literature*. We think, we do not have to worry about the future of Bengali studies in Poland, as research opportunities are endless and we have PhD students who certainly will want to sustain Bengali studies in our country.

Bibliography of Polish books in Bengali studies :

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Ćwoczyńska B., *The Gitagovinda of Jayadeva and the Kṛṣṇa-yātrā. An Interaction between Folk and Classical Culture in Bengal*, Orientalia Varsoviensia, Warszawa 1994, No 6.

Walter E., *Gramatyka języka bengalskiego* [Grammar of the Bengali Language], Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, Warszawa 2008.

Anthology

Rabindranath Tagore, *Poeta świata* [A Poet of the World], ed. by Elżbieta Walter, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2011.

Translations from Bengali (books)

Banerji Bibhutibhusan, *Pieśń z drogi* [Pather pācālī] transl. by Elżbieta Walter, Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, Warszawa 1994.

Day Lal Behari, *Opowieści ludowe Bengalů* [Folk Tales of Bengal], transl. by Elżbieta Walter, Nasza Księgarnia, Warszawa 1986.

Ghoshal Hiranmoy, *Księga Walhalli*; p. 1 *Prolog do wielkiej wojny* [Mahatara yuddher pratham adhyā , pp. 13-262, transl. by. Devadan Bogdan Ghoshal, p. 2 [Kulturkāmph], pp.263-400, transl. by. B. Grabowska, Wydawnictwo MON, Warszawa 1971.

Grabowska B., Ćwoczyńska B., Walter E., *Z dziejów teatru i dramatu bengalskiego* [From the History of Bengali Theatre and Drama], Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, Warszawa 1999. The book contains translations of four Bengali dramas: Kryszna Kamal

Goswami, *Rozkosz snu* [Svapna vilās], transl. by Bożena Ćwoczyńska, pp. 117-172; Rabindranath Tagore, *Król ciemnej komnaty* [Rājā], fragments, transl. by E. Walter, pp. 173-219; *Pocztą* [Dākghar], transl. by Elżbieta Walter, pp. 221-253; *Czerwone oleandry* [Rakta karabī], transl. by Barbara Grabowska, pp. 255-307.

Maitreyi Devi, *Mircea* [Na hanyate], transl. by Elżbieta Walter, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1993.

Ray Satyajit, *Podróże profesora Ćanku* [Sābās prophecar Ćanku; prophecar Ćankur kaṇḍakārkhânā], transl. by Elżbieta Walter, Nasza Księgarnia, Warszawa 1982.

Taniec siedmiu zasłon, opowiadania indyjskie [The Dance of the Seven Veils]⁸, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1977.

⁸ [The book contains translations of 14 Bengali short stories : Parashuram, *Anandibai* [Anandibāi], *Żartobliwa korespondencja* [Cīṭhi bāji], *Taniec siedmiu zasłon* [Nirmok nrtya]; Bonophul, *Tilottoma* [Tilottomā]; Bighutibhusan Mukhopadhyay, *Nowoczesna dziewczyna* [Āltrā], Sudhindranath Tagore, *Przêkleta* [Poṛārmukhī], Manindralal Basu, *Ira* [Irā]; Bimal Kar, *Moskitiera* [Maśāri]; Prantosh Ghatak, *Wiosna pełna placzu* [Rodan bharā e vasanta]— transl. by Barbara Grabowska; Rabindranath Tagore, *Zeszyt* [Khātā], *Szubha* [Subhā], *Glupota Ramkanaja* [Rāmkānāiṇer nirbuddhitā], *Posag* [Denāpāonā]; Parashuram, *Starosc Jajatiego* [Yayātir jarā]—transl. by Elżbieta Walter.