

THE BENGALI LANGUAGE, FROM INDIA TO ROMANIA¹

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Abstract

This article aims to bring to light a brief history of the study of the Bengali language in Romania, useful to those who focus on the presence of Indian languages in our country. At the same time, it presents the works translated from Bengali, mainly from Rabindranath Tagore, and the work of the teacher, translator, writer, exegete of Eminescu's work, Amita Bhose.

Keywords: Bengali language, Amita Bhose, Rabindranath Tagore.

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1. Introduction

Those who will cross the threshold of the National Museum of Romanian Literature located in the heart of Bucharest, on No. 8 Nicolae Creţulescu Street, will be surprised to discover, in the space dedicated to Eminescu, on the ground floor, an exhibition dedicated to a person with an Indian name. More precisely, Bengali. Along with personal objects, manuscripts, photographs, the curious visitors will also find a manuscript page in Bengali, the mother tongue of Amita Bhose - the one to whom the exhibition space is dedicated - and of Rabindranath Tagore, the national poet of India. The gaze will also stop on a book where garlands of letters intertwine in Eminescu's verses. *Eminescu kavita (Eminescu/ Poems)* is the first translation of our poet in Asia, more precisely in Bengali, by Amita Bhose who would also defend her doctorate in Eminescu in 1975, as the first doctoral student of Mrs. Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga. And if the visitors open the *General Dictionary of Romanian Writers*, located at the entrance to the museum, at the letter B they will find the name Amita Bhose.

2. About Amita Bhose and Bengali

The name Amita Bhose is associated with many things - a Bengali woman who fell in love with Mihai Eminescu's work in 1959, when she was studying the Romanian language at the University of Bucharest, where she would return as a teacher in 1972,

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and also as a doctoral student. In love with the Romanian culture and people, she remained here, in Romania, giving up her wealth, family, husband, and country. An exegete of Eminescu's work, a professor of Bengali, Sanskrit and Indian civilization at the University of Bucharest, a translator from Bengali, Sanskrit into Romanian, and from Romanian into Bengali, a writer, Amita Bhowe would single-handedly create a cultural bridge between India and Romania.

Many will know that Amita Bhowe was from Calcutta, a native speaker of Bengali language, a language belonging to the Indo-European language family, with Sanskrit as her mother tongue.

The vocabulary of the Bengali language is divided into four categories of words: 1. words preserved from Sanskrit; 2. words modified or derived from Sanskrit; 3. native words and 4. words borrowed from foreign languages (for example from Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Portuguese, Dutch, French and especially English). A number of category 1 words, e.g. taila, lauha, are used only in literary texts, especially classics; in the spoken language as well as in contemporary literature, they are replaced by their category 2 counterparts, e.g. tel and lohā respectively. The preserved words from Sanskrit, which have not undergone changes, e.g. lekhak, yauvan, gaurav, i.e. those that do not have a counterpart in category 2 are used both in literary texts and in the spoken language.

It is to be noted that these words preserved from Sanskrit are pronounced according to the phonetic rules of the Bengali language, e.g. taila is pronounced toilo and nodī is pronounced nodi.

A number of words from the language spoken by the native population before the arrival of the Indo-European people in the Bengali space are preserved in the Bengali vocabulary; they constitute the category of autochthonous words. (...) That language has been lost. (Bhowe, 2014: 34, transl. A. Marinescu)

Amita Bhowe is the author of the only Course in Bengali Language in Romania, based on her teaching experience and published first in 1974, with a 2nd edition in 1978, with the University of Bucharest. In 1983 she added more detailed explanations for the grammar elements in the course and she published The Bengali Language textbook with the University of Bucharest, republished in 2014 at *Cununi de stele*. Also, she published an 850-page Bengali-Romanian dictionary with the University of Bucharest in 1985.

In terms of number of speakers, Bengali ranks 7th in the world, with approximately 250 million speakers, of which 220 are native speakers. It is one of the 16 major languages of India and a state language in Bangladesh, it is spoken and is the language of instruction in education in West Bengal and Bangladesh. At the same time, Bengali is also the mother tongue of Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian laureate of the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1913. Thanks to his writings – mostly in Bengali – edited in their entirety in 30 volumes and of other writers such as Swami

Vivekananda, Chandidas (author of the love poem between Radha and Krishna), Bengali is the Indian language with the richest literature.

And yet, few Romanians know that Bengali was Tagore's mother tongue, although many love him and read his work. One explanation would be that all the translations, up to Amita Bhose's *Bengali Proverbs and Thoughts*, collected and translated from the Bengali language (including thoughts by Tagore - 1975), *The Tale of Prince Sobur* (Bengali fairy tales, 1975) and *Broken Letters* (1978, an anthology of Tagore's letters addressed to his granddaughter, Indira Devi) were made, even from the year of the Nobel Prize award, 1913, from European languages - French, English, German, as there was no expert in the Bengali language in Romania. The articles about Tagore dated from the year of his visit to Romania - 1926, too far away for the hurried reader of the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the next, and the years of the ban on the publication of the "Prophet of India" in Romania (1939-1956) had their say on memory, with younger generations only now learning to discover him.

"Our popular language is a chord from the symphony of infinity" (Neacșu, 1999: 26), said Tagore in the conference held at the National Theater in November 1926. However, Romanians could not learn the musicality of this language until half a century later, through optional courses of two hours a week held by one of Calcutta's daughters – Amita Bhose. Between 1972 and 1991, Amita Bhose taught the Bengali language at the University of Bucharest. As for the other courses – Indian civilization (for the Hindi secondary subject) and Sanskrit (taught between 1978 and 1991, as an optional course), Amita Bhose used Romanian as the language of instruction; Bengali and Sanskrit were part of the Section of Indian Languages within the Department of Oriental Languages of the University of Bucharest established in 1967, through bilateral collaborations.

Despite the great interest of the students, the results - articles, translations from Bengali by the students, published in the cultural press of the time, annual performances dedicated to Tagore's work (for example, the theatre play *Sesh raksha*, translated from Bengali by Amita Bhose, was acted and directed by her students at the Casa Universitarilor in Bucharest in 1981) – and the fact that universities in European capitals had a Bengali department, this language remained as an optional one, with two hours a week, a two-year course. Amita Bhose, the first Indian philologist who knew Romanian, the only Indian teacher who taught in Romanian, author of textbooks (she also created a Manual of the Sanskrit language), did not get to see her dream come true: a Bengali language chair. Its graduates did not even receive a graduation diploma from the University. And the lack of a university chair in Romania resulted in the impossibility of training specialists to translate Bengali literary works. "After graduation, my students - philologists, engineers, architects - all assigned to jobs outside Bucharest, strove to perfect their knowledge by

correspondence with me. Some succeeded, others gave up, and others went abroad.” (Bhose, 2012: 83, transl. A. Marinescu)

The teaching of the Bengali language at the University was to be permanently discontinued after the definitive closing of the Center for Indian Studies attached to the Department of Oriental Languages at the Faculty of Foreign Languages with the University of Bucharest, a center initiated by Amita Bhose and approved after many delays (in the academic year 1990-1991). The center operated for a year, with Amita Bhose teaching Bengali, Sanskrit and notions of Indian civilization. After the dissolution of the Center for Indian Studies, Amita Bhose would teach the above subjects at the Open University “Ioan I. Dalles” (in the academic year 1991-1992). For 1993, she planned “the awarding of diplomas, within this institution, for Bengali and Sanskrit” (Bhose, 2021: 238). On the 24th of October 1992, following an unsuccessful surgery at the Colentina Hospital, Amita Bhose died at the age of 59. Following the physical disappearance of Amita Bhose, studying the Bengali language in Romania became a memory and “the future was lost in the past” (Bhose, 2021: 77).

In 1961, Amita Bhose made her literary debut in *Desh (Homeland)* magazine, in Bengali, with the article “Rabindranath Tagore in Romania”, and towards the end of her public life, in 1989, a 60-page manuscript article was also published in *Desh*, this time as a cover story – “Rays of the Sun in Romania” (play on words, Rabi, the poet's first name, meaning “sun” in Bengali), an article dedicated to Tagore and the study of the Bengali language in Romania. In these 30 years, 20 of which were actually lived in Romania, Amita Bhose carried out an extensive activity as an exegete of Eminescu's work, as a teacher, writer, translator. She is the only translator who translated directly into Romanian from the Bengali language. The publishing house *Cununi de stele*, which owns the copyright of her work, has published, starting with 2009, till date, the following translations left in manuscript by the author: Chandidas's *Radha and Krishna*, *Sesh raksha* (a theatre play), *Morning Songs* (a philosophical poem), *The Inspiration of Valmiki* (a sung drama), *The Sun of the First Day* (poetry), *Memories* (an autobiography) by Rabindranath Tagore, also republishing *Bengali Proverbs and Thoughts*, *The Tale of Prince Sobur*, and *Broken Letters* (the entire print run of 11,000 copies sold out in a single day in 1978). At the same time, the publishing house published, in bilingual version, Bengali-Romanian editions, the translations made by Amita Bhose of Romanian writers and originally published in India during her lifetime: Mihai Eminescu - *Poetry*, Ion Luca Caragiale – *A lost letter*, Mihail Sebastian – *The Holiday Game*, *The Star with No Name*, Al. Mirodan – *Head of the Soul Department*. Other works await their turn.

3. Conclusion

The reader will, of course, wonder why knowledge of Bengali would be important, if only for the translation of Tagore into Romanian, since there are translations of his work into European languages, Tagore himself translating his work into English, thus being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, for *Gitanjali*. The answer is simple: “When he published his works in English, he himself used to abridge and modify parts of the works, realizing how difficult it is sometimes to find Bengali equivalents. An Indian critic said that “the most difficult thing in translating Tagore is Tagore himself” (Bhose, 2021: 17, transl. A. Marinescu). And then, the most important steps were taken through the work of Amita Bhose. It would be a shame if it remained at the level of history and if the teacher’s experience would not be fruitful - if only by using her textbook as a course support. And the future students will be able to deepen, through the knowledge of the Bengali language and thus implicitly the works of Tagore, so similar to Eminescu, the common background of the sensitivity of the two peoples, Romanian and Indian, as demonstrated in the studies of the 1980’s by the greatest Romanian Indianist, Sergiu Al-George, on one side and on the other, by Amita Bhose.

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