

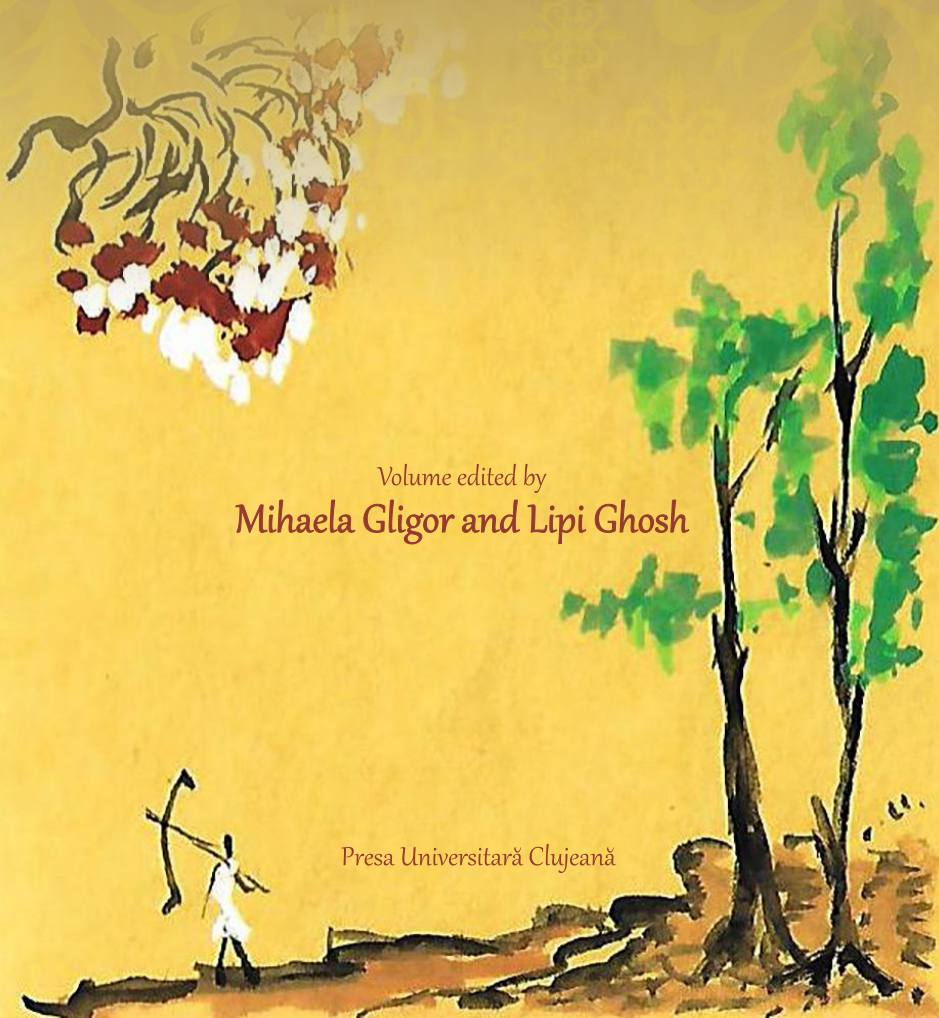
# Between Two Worlds: Romania and India

Essays on Expanding Borders through Culture

Volume edited by

Mihaela Gligor and Lipi Ghosh

Presa Universitară Clujeană



**Between Two Worlds: Romania and India**

*Essays on Expanding Borders through Culture*

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Volume edited by

**Mihaela Gligor and Lipi Ghosh**

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# Between Two Worlds: Romania and India

## *Essays on Expanding Borders through Culture*

*Volume edited by*  
**MIHAELA GLIGOR and LIPI GHOSH**

*with the generous support of*



**Ministry of Culture**  
Government of India



Embassy of India to Romania  
Ambasada Indiei în România

*Foreword by*  
**DANIELA SEZONOV ȚANE**  
Ambassador of Romania to India, Nepal and Bangladesh

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*To those who worked with passion  
for the cultural encounter between  
Romania and India.*



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## FOREWORD

***Daniela SEZONOV ȚANE***

The year 2022 marked several important milestones in the history of Indo-Romanian cultural connections. The clock of the calendar ticked with the celebrations and commemorations of the main Romanian Indologists, namely Mircea Eliade, Sergiu Al-Gorge, Arion Roșu, Theofil Simenschy, along with the only translator from Romanian into an Indian language, Bengali – Amita Bhose.

To mark those important dates in what was named *The Indo-Romanian Cultural Year*, the Embassy of Romania in New Delhi organized two seminars at the University of Calcutta and the University of Delhi with the generous support of the Romanian Cultural Institute. The events would not have been possible without the efforts of Dr Lipi Ghosh and Dr Minni Sawney. I was happy to be at the origin of those two events, which brought back to India two well-known

Romanian scholars, Dr Liviu Bordaş and Dr Mihaela Gligor. Along with them I invited Carmen Muşat-Coman, one of Amita Bhose's disciples, who, after her teacher's early demise, founded the "Cununi de stele" Publishing House, which has published some forty volumes written by Amita Bhose.

Exactly thirty years ago I was attending Amita Bhose's Sanskrit classes at the University of Bucharest along with a dozen passionate youngsters who studied letters, philosophy or history. In August 1992 I went to India on an Indian government scholarship to study Hindi at Kendryia Hindi Sansthan, Agra. Unfortunately, I could not see Amita Bhose again, as my teacher left for a better world several months later, in October 1992. I felt it was my duty to commemorate her and make her work known at the two universities in India, since she is better known in Romania, where she lived for more than thirty years, than in her home country. In the wake of the seminars, the two universities will create special corners dedicated to her books in their libraries and will make other Romanian writers known to Indian students through the bilingual editions created by Amita Bhose.

The seminar in Calcutta did not only bring Romanian Indology and its main exponent, Mircea Eliade, to the attention of the participants, but also his professor, the famous Indian philosophy historian and Sanskrit scholar, Surendranath Dasgupta. From the end of 1928 until September 1930, Eliade was the disciple of Professor Dasgupta, who, after a while, offered to host him in his house, where he met Maitreyi Devi, his charming and extremely brilliant teenage daughter. The love story between young Mircea and Maitreyi blossomed and grew in the magical and very intellectual atmosphere of the library in the house, full of irresistible attractions, though.

Only a few months after he returned to Romania, Mircea Eliade completed a novel entitled *Maitreyi* (known to English readers as *Bengal Nights*), in which he used extensive parts of his Indian diary along with many biographic elements, faintly disguised in the novel. Besides bringing him a national literary prize and building his fame as an extremely gifted novelist, writing *Maitreyi* may have helped him somewhat heal the wounds of a love lost forever. When he wrote this book he did not realize what this would entail besides fame. Published in 1933, the

novel met with unexpected success and was translated into Italian in 1945, German in 1948, French in 1950, and Spanish in 1952. An English version, however, was not commissioned until 1993, when Carcanet Press in England contracted a translation from the French.

The fictional part was unfortunately undermined by the author's personal story, which created a scandal in Calcutta after the publication of the novel and put Maitreyi, and especially Eliade, in a very bad light. Those negative echoes from India made young Eliade erroneously think that he was no longer welcome there; not even later in his life did he ever return to the country which had fascinated him and marked his entire career as it had never influenced anyone before. Maitreyi never forgot their story, which she also committed to paper from her perspective under the title *Na Hanyate* (*It Does Not Die*). *Na Hanyate*, the original title of the Bengali version of Devi's book, is a spiritual reference, alluding to the immortality of the soul, which does not die with the body. Unlike Eliade's novel, which must be seen first and foremost through the lens of fiction, Maitreyi's describes her passionate feelings, her critique of her father and family, and her strong sense of self.

Thoroughly discrediting his version of their relationship, Maitreyi chose to go and see Eliade in Chicago forty-three years later.

The workshop organized by the University of Calcutta was intended to “make peace” between Eliade and India somehow; between Maitreyi, Eliade, and his master, professor Dasgupta. Ninety years later, we look at their story with a lenient eye, both amused and enchanted by its candour and beauty.

Another unexpected outcome of the Kolkata workshop was the students’ interest in the Romanian language and culture. On 16 January 2023, the first Romanian course was initiated (online) by the Indian Association for Asian and Pacific Studies for some thirty students eager to discover a new world, a new country through the beauty of its language. The course is taught by none other than Carmen Muşat-Coman, which symbolically closes the circle. In a similar way, three decades ago in Bucharest, under the guidance of our Indian guru, Romanian students were discovering not only the mysteries of Sanskrit, but also the sweetness of the Bengali language raised to the rank of the most poetic Indian language by the immortal Rabindranath Tagore.



# INTRODUCTION

***Lipi GHOSH and  
Mihaela GLIGOR***

“Culture is the acquired knowledge, which people use to interpret experience and generate behavior.”<sup>1</sup>

Culture is usually seen as an umbrella term which encompasses the so-called social behavior, institutions, and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, capabilities, beliefs, arts, philosophies, laws, customs, and habits of the individuals belonging to these groups. Culture often originates from or is attributed to a specific geographical region. People acquire culture through the learning processes of acculturation and socialization, which is shown by the diversity of cultures across societies.

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<sup>1</sup> According to James Spradley, anthropologist.  
[https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/183212.James\\_P\\_Spradley](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/183212.James_P_Spradley). Last accessed on 17.01.2023.



Culture (from the Latin *cultura* stemming from *colere*, meaning “to cultivate”) generally refers to specific patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance. Cultures can be

“understood as systems of symbols and meanings that even their creators contest, that lack fixed boundaries, that are constantly in flux, and that interact and compete with one another.”<sup>2</sup>

Culture compresses the shared characteristics of a group of people, which encompass place of birth, religion, language, cuisine, social behaviors, art, literature, and music. Some cultures are wide-spread, and have a large number of people who associate themselves with those particular values, beliefs, languages, and origins. In addition to its intrinsic value, culture provides important social profit. With improved learning, increased tolerance, and opportunities to come together with others, culture enhances our quality of life and increases the overall well-being for both individuals and communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Carter Vaughn Findley & John Alexander Murray Rothney, *Twentieth-Century World*, Belmont, CA, Cengage Learning, Inc., imprint of Wadsworth Publishing Co. Inc., 2011, p. 14.

How does culture affect us? Our culture shapes the way we work and interact, and it makes a difference in how we view ourselves and the others. It affects our values, especially the differences between what we consider right and wrong. This is how the society we live in – our own culture – influences our choices. But the choices we make can also influence others and ultimately they help in shaping our community.

Culture is a phenomenon which goes beyond boundaries and in today's world of globalization it is very important to understand cultures of other countries and reciprocal interactions of their culture with our own culture.

Culture is a process which is transmitted as well as shared. This process of transmission was evident in the case of some prominent cultural personalities who contributed to Romanian-Indian cultural relations, especially.

The cultural relations between India and Romania are interesting to study and to understand. India is a country of immense diversity, of extraordinary customs, and a genuine feast of opinions, which attracts researchers from all over the world. Romanians are people with a profound sensibility. The two

cultures met on the common ground of spirituality and the results are remarkable, as it is shown in this special volume.

The year 2022 was excellent for Romanian-Indian relations in the field of education and culture. On 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2022, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the University of Calcutta and Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. The purpose of this Memorandum is to develop academic and educational cooperation on the basis of equality and reciprocity and to promote scientific relations and mutual understanding between both universities.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2022, with the generous support of the Embassy of Romania in India and the Romanian Cultural Institute in Bucharest, a special seminar took place at the Department of South and South East Asian Studies, University of Calcutta. It was dedicated to several important cultural personalities who contributed to Romanian-Indian relations and it brought together Romanian and Indian scholars interested in cultural closeness of the two cultures. This volume contains five of those lectures and it is interesting for people willing to

learn more about the cultural relations between the two countries.

Different aspects of Indian-Romanian cultural interactions are discussed in the present volume. The chapters give voice to different personalities, both Indian and Romanian, people that brought two countries closer to each other. Their names are Amita Bhose, Maitreyi Devi, Mircea Eliade and Surendranath Dasgupta. This collection is a significant effort to understand the links between the two cultures from a perspective hitherto not attempted. This volume is the first substantial endeavor to connect, at a cultural level, India and Romania. It contains essays that tell the stories of love and respect; sketches portraits of forerunners that constructed cultural bridges. In a way, the volume is a landmark for India and Romania cultural relations. People across the globe should be aware of the notions of cultural interactions between the two cultures.

India and Romania established diplomatic relations on 14<sup>th</sup> of December 1948. The first Office of the Embassy of Romania to India dates from 1955. In 1957, the two countries signed an important Cultural Agreement which provided

for cooperation in culture, science, literature, arts, and education. Following this Agreement, the Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP) was formulated and implemented. The first diplomatic representation of India in Romania was established in 1959.

Although official diplomatic relations between India and Romania began only after India's independence in 1947, there were many other stories that linked the two countries long before the commencement of official relations. A series of important Romanian poets and researchers were interested in Indian culture and tried to promote it in Romania. On the other side, a couple of important Indian writers came to Romania and helped in changing the perceptions regarding Indian culture.

Among the Romanian poets who succeeded in learning more about India and its culture were Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), one of the most famous and influential poets, who studied Sanskrit in Berlin and used some Indian myths in his poems; George Coşbuc (1866-1918), who translated *Śakuntalā* from a German version; and Lucian Blaga (1895-1961), who was interested in

*R̥gveda*, and even met Mahatma Gandhi in 1931 in Bern, and wrote about this encounter.

Constantin Brâncuși (1876-1957), a pioneer of modern art, and one of the most influential sculptors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, often called the patriarch of modern sculpture, was invited in India by the Maharaja of Indore to build for him a meditation temple. Though the building was never completed, Brâncuși made three sculptures for the Maharaja, three birds called “L’Oiseau dans l’Espace,” in bronze, black and white marble. These are now part of museum collections.

Sergiu Al-George (1922-1981) was a physician with high interest into Indian languages. He mastered Sanskrit, Pali, and Tibetan and was the author of several important books on Indian Philosophy, and translated *Bhagavad Gītā* into Romanian. He also taught Indian philosophy and culture at the University of Bucharest between 1971 and 1973. Before his sudden death, in 1981, he participated at the World Sanskrit Conference, giving a lecture on “Metaphor and Philosophy from an Indian Perspective.”

There is no need to introduce Arion Roșu (1924-2007), Sergiu Al-George's friend. An eminent scholar, he was drawn to the subject of traditional Indian medicine from the 1950s. His doctoral thesis, supervised by Jean Filliozat, was published under the title *Les conceptions psychologiques dans les textes médicaux indiens* (1978). His work includes nearly one hundred monographs, articles and bibliographies and more than sixty critical reviews, notes and bibliographic records.

Several stories are better known than others, but all of them are important. Widely known is the love story of Mircea Eliade and Maitreyi Devi. Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), the most famous of all Romanians who traveled to India, studied Indian philosophy under the guidance of Professor Surendranath Dasgupta, at the University of Calcutta, and wrote a beautiful novel, *Maitreyi (Bengal Nights)*. He met Maitreyi in her house in Bhowanipore in Calcutta, where he also lived for a while at the invitation of his professor, who was eager to show him the true India, and to offer him a direct contact with the authentic Bengali life. The professor's daughter did not draw his attention immediately, but

things changed soon and their love story came to the ears of the professor, who banished Eliade not only from his home, but also from Calcutta. *Maitreyi (Bengal Nights)* was published in 1933, immediately after his return to Romania, and brought him an unexpected literary fame. The story contains extensive autobiographical passages and, with only a few exceptions, the author maintains the actual names of the people and places described. Mircea Eliade became professor at the University of Chicago and one of the most important and influential historians of religions.

But Maitreyi was more than a character. Maitreyi Devi (1914-1989) was a poet, essayist, and prose writer, one of the most remarkable women of Bengal. Daughter of the famous Indian philosopher, Surendranath Dasgupta, Professor at the University of Calcutta, she had received a special education and had shown a very poetic sensitivity from a young age. In 1976 she received the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Na Hanyate (It Does Not Die)*. She has traveled the world lecturing on the life and works of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, as well as on Indian philosophy and culture. She also had a



special role in the emancipation of Indian women.

Among Indians who went to Romania and offered a new perspective on Indian culture and spirituality, thus linking the two cultures, we can mention three Bengalis: the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who visited Romania in 1926 in order to give a lecture and even met King Ferdinand; Maitreyi Devi, and Amita Bhose, the Indian professor who dreamt in Romanian and translated several Romanian writers into Bengali.

The story of Amita Bhose<sup>3</sup> (1933-1992) is a beautiful one. She was an Indian who chose to live in Romania. Born in Calcutta, into a family deeply involved in artistic and scientific activities, with significant contributions to Indian culture, she followed her husband in Romania in 1959, where he had come to specialize in oil geology. Her husband was one of the first Indians to benefit from the scientific agreement concluded between the two countries. Amita enrolled in a Romanian language and literature course, at the end of which, two years later, she

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<sup>3</sup> For the complete biography of Amita Bhose see <http://amitabhose.net>.

passed the exam and received a proficiency certificate in the Romanian language. In 1975, she defended her PhD thesis on *The Indian Influence on Eminescu's Thought*, at the University of Bucharest. She also began to teach Sanskrit and Bengali, as well as theoretical courses in Indian civilization and aesthetics. Many students of those times discovered India through her courses. Among her students was Carmen Muşat-Coman, who is now the coordinator of "Cununi de Stele" Publishing House in Bucharest, where she promotes Amita Bhose's work to a new generation of students.

In contemporary times, there are many stories of young people who decided to study in India and worked hard to bring a piece of India to Romania. One of them is Liviu Bordaş, a Romanian scholar who studied in India and then used his knowledge to build an international career in history of religions and cultural studies. Since 2014, the *Cluj Center for Indian Studies*, from the Babeş Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, founded by the former I.C.C.R. fellow Mihaela Gligor, offers a range of activities dedicated to Indian culture. The *Romanian Journal of Indian*

*Studies*,<sup>4</sup> affiliated to this center, brings together important specialists from all over the world. Mihaela Gligor also translated Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian*, and wrote extensively on Rabindranath Tagore. Maria-Daniela Pomohaci is pursuing her PhD in Indian Studies at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies from Georg-August Universität Göttingen, where Cătălina Pavel is also completing her M.A. Dr Hilda-Hedvig Varga studied Hindi at the University of Bucharest, wrote a Manual of Hindi language, and works as Cultural Assistant for the Embassy of India to Romania. Julieta Rotaru studied Sanskrit in India and now is research fellow in Sweden and France. Florina Dobre-Brat also studied Sanskrit, and worked on the manuscripts and Sanskrit collection of Sámuel Brassai (1797?-1897), who was known as the first Transylvanian Sanskritist. After his death, Brassai's library was left in the care of the Unitarian College, and then it was transferred to the library of the Romanian

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<sup>4</sup> The *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies* seeks and encourages interdisciplinary approaches in literature and literary studies, Indian philosophy, history of religions, political philosophy, performing arts, history of ideas, and history of India. Open access on CEEOL: <https://www.cceol.com/search/journal-detail?id=1944>

Academy in Cluj-Napoca, where it can be studied today.<sup>5</sup>

In India, scholars like Mrinmoy Pramanick, Abhishek Bose and Jayati Gupta of University of Calcutta have written extensively on Mircea Eliade, Surendranath Dasgupta and Maitreyi Devi.

Amita Bhose was a bridge maker of Bengali and Romanian culture. She settled in Romania and translated profound pieces to both Romanian and Bengali languages. She was a popular *Didi*, who still resides in the hearts of Romanians.

“I was accused because I loved Romania. I admit my ‘guilt.’ For the sake of Romanian culture, with the desire to found a serious school of Indian studies, I settled here.”<sup>6</sup>

Her words contain the love, emotion and passion for Romanian people and also her

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<sup>5</sup> “Sanskrit, the Sacred Language,” an exhibition containing Sámuel Brassai’s notebooks and volumes, was organized by the *Cluj Center for Indian Studies* from Babeş-Bolyai University, with the support of Ministry of Culture, Government of India and Embassy of India to Romania, at the Library of the Romanian Academy in Cluj-Napoca, between 15 February and 1 March 2023. <https://ubbccultural.ubbcluj.ro/event/expozitia-sanscrita-limba-sacra/>

<sup>6</sup> Amita Bhose, 1992. See <http://www.amitabhose.net/>. Last accessed on 17.01.2023.

dedication to transmit the Indian cultural essence to Romanian students.

This volume consists of five chapters. The chapter of Mrinmoy Pramanick focuses on Amita Bhowse as “Translator, Comparativist, and Cultural Ambassador.” He shows how, since the commencement of colonial modernity in India, English, French and German literature and philosophy have influenced Indian literature. At the end of the Renaissance era, Indian authors were inspired by the literature of these three European nations and the rise of contemporary Indian literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They also studied new European literature particularly that of the former USSR republics and small European nations.

Additionally, Indian minds were attempting to comprehend various European perspectives on the two World Wars at the moment of the shattering of the nations. Amita Bhowse spent her entire life translating between Bengali and Romanian and created an emotional bond between Romania, her Bengali as well as Indian heritage, and herself. In his chapter, the author argues that Amita Bhowse and her works are so much emotionally attached that led a translator

to find a new home in the world, and thus a translator may be regarded best as a cultural ambassador. Amita Bhowe, through her works from and into Bengali, Sanskrit and Romanian, created a bridge between two nations and produced a generation of students who essentially become comparatists in various areas.

Mrinmoy Pramanick's chapter is completed by the one written by Carmen Muşat-Coman, "Amita Bhowe, From the Great Ganges to Bucharest," that beautifully depicts the cultural emotions across boundaries. Muşat-Coman presents the biographical details of her professor and asserts that Bhowe was the first Indian philologist who knew the Romanian language, which allowed her to translate and to introduce the two cultures. Researcher, writer, translator and professor, Amita Bhowe has a special place in the Romanian cultural landscape. Throughout her life, Bhowe published in both international and Romanian journals over 56 translations from Romanian literature, including studies on Eminescu, and/or Bengali literature.

In her chapter "Maitreyi Devi: Crossing Borders and Traveling in Cultures," Jayati Gupta touches upon Maitreyi Devi's (1914-1989) transgressive personality as a devotee of Rabindranath

Tagore, as well as an independent thinker and traveler. Maitreyi Devi traveled between geographical locales and concomitant cultural spaces, both the provincial and regional, also the national and international. Her travel discourse constitutes an understanding of ideas of geographical space and distance, rootedness and itinerancy, identity and belonging. Thus the complicity of the genre in 'politics' is inevitable. Maitreyi probably admired the cross-national liberalism of Rabindranath Tagore. In terms of historiography, she interacted with Russia and Eastern Europe from a post colonialist position based on imperative contemporary realities in a newly independent India. Jayati Gupta observes that the author deliberately crossed generic boundaries, commenting on how history and politics reshape public policy that in turn transforms society, people and culture. Yet the hard core of truth regarding transnational and transcultural human encounters and exchanges is a more enduring legacy shared by the author with her revered Gurudev.

Complementing Jayati Gupta's chapter, the one written by Mihaela Gligor analyses the story behind the writing of the renowned novel *Na Hanyate (It Does Not Die)*, by Maitreyi Devi. Gligor

recounts Maitreyi Devi as one of the most remarkable women of Bengal, insisting on her education and work for welfare of women and children. In her chapter, “Maitreyi Devi – *Na Hanyate* – the Story behind,” Gligor uses different sources to explain why Maitreyi Devi’s novel is important for understanding the truth about Eliade and Maitreyi love affair.

Finally, Abhishek Bose writes on Surendranath Dasgupta, the conservative father of Maitreyi, in his chapter “Surendranath Dasgupta: Towards a Philosophy of Literature?” Professor Dasgupta is best remembered as a philosopher and for his contributions to the Indian Philosophy. As a thinker, he defied all disciplinary boundaries and wrote and lectured on the sciences, literature, art history, and aesthetics and so on. Even a cursory look at his teaching career establishes the essentially interdisciplinary nature of his calling: among other things, Dasgupta served as a Professor of Sanskrit and Bengali. He was deeply influenced by poetry, especially of Rabindranath Tagore. Besides these scholarly pursuits, he has also authored poetry collections and novels in Bengali. Dasgupta liked to keep himself informed about the latest developments in World



Literature and at times, he even participated in the literary debates that were taking place in the public sphere in that period. Bose supplements his analysis with quotes from texts on aesthetics by Dasgupta. From this, we seek to understand his way of approaching literature, looking for patterns of relationships and connections across time, space, and cultures.

The intrinsic value of this volume lies in offering a new perspective on the Indian-Romanian cultural connection. Through discussions on how culture was shaped by the works of the great personalities of India and Romania, this volume will no doubt make a difference in how we view ourselves. It gives birth to a new notion of "Culture of Association." Perhaps following Eminescu we'll say:

"What we wish you, Sweet Indo-Romanian Culture, let's have bold aspirations, and a bright future for both our Lands."

The future will bring more encounters and other incredible stories, brought up to life by ignited minds of people who are willing to learn about the others.

\* \* \*

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the cultural ties between India and Romania.



# 1

## **AMITA BHOSE: TRANSLATOR, COMPARATIVIST, AND CULTURAL AMBASSADOR**

*Mrinmoy PRAMANICK*

“The Romanian creative demarche made me not only learn Romanian in its country of origin, study Romanian literature, write in Romanian, translate from the Romanian, but I have even come to dream in Romanian. Do you think I am exaggerating if I tell you that in my dreams my grandparents speak Romanian?”

(Amita Bhose)

### **Introduction**

Colonial modernity not only shaped the Indian mind but it was also a new renaissance for the European minds, as they had learned from their colonial subjects. The emergence of Oriental

Studies from various colonies in Asia appeared as new knowledge to Europe, and that was not only to govern their Empires but also for constructing the European self. Oriental Studies were gradually introduced as academic disciplines in various universities across Europe, and many European intellectuals started learning Oriental languages and about the knowledge systems.

Ancient Indian knowledge was also reestablished into the modern academic system not only with the printing press and early academic institutions in India, but also through scientific inquiry into Oriental Studies. Indian intellectuals, including *littérateur* and creative authors, were influenced by European poetic and intellectual writings and simultaneously European authors also were influenced by Indian knowledge. This is how the knowledge exchange between Indian and European minds was established. As a way to reshape European minds, Oriental Studies were established in the universities of Europe.

Besides British, French, and German Indologists, there was a significant number of Indologists of Czech, Dutch, Ukrainian, and Romanian origin. Amita Bhose (1933-1992)

could place her here, in the realm of intellectuals who were Indologists and well-versed in their own national literature and culture. Indologists from non-colonising nations, Pavlo Ritter (1872-1939), Jan Gonda (1905-1991), Dušan Zbavitel (1925-2012), Kamil Václav Zvelebil (1927-2009), besides British, German and French Indologists, were making an epistemological map of oriental knowledge in their respective languages and nations and that created further possibility of Indo-European literary and cultural exchanges by preparing a new generation of scholars interested in Indian Studies.

Amita Bhowe introduced herself as an expert in Indian literature and also Romanian literature. Not only to Romania, but such intellectual intervention was a curious case to European knowledge itself, as it was read from the other side of the civilization that was not so common practice. Such epistemological maps in the Eastern and Central blocks in Europe also brought a curiosity about the first Asian Nobel Laureate in Literature, Rabindranath Tagore, made them more curious about Indian traditional and contemporary literature. I would like to locate Amita Bhowe in this epistemological and cultural context and I believe the kind of

contribution she made to the history of international literary exchanges recognised her as an Indologist, as well as a Romanian expert; and in that sense she is quite unique.

## **Whither Romania!**

Here, my objective is to locate translation in a cultural system and conceptualize the ideas like the theory of translation, a paradigm to read the history, politics, reception, and formation of the literary. In this initiative of conceptualizing translation I understand it as decolonizing a community's linguistic and literary identity. In his recent book, *Decolonizing Theory: Thinking across Traditions*, Aditya Nigam begins with a statement by Walter D. Mignolo:

“Decoloniality ‘as decolonization,’ means epistemic reconstitution, while the horizon of decolonization during the Cold War meant to build native nation-states.”<sup>1</sup>

Nigam mentioned the difference between the concepts of ‘decolonization’ and ‘postcolonialism’ concerning Mignolo. Nigam also refuses

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<sup>1</sup> Aditya Nigam, *Decolonizing Theory: Thinking across Traditions*, New Delhi, Bloomsbury India, 2020, p. 1.

the words like ‘postcolonialism’ and ‘postcoloniality’ while talking about ‘decolonization.’ Still, he did not find ‘decoloniality’ as a suitable term to use in the Indian context as the word has a ‘discrete history’ in South America.<sup>2</sup>

His problematization of the concept of decolonization and the process of ‘epistemic reconstitution’ are also essential tasks to constitute the Indian theory of translation concerning the early thinkers of modern India, especially those who worked in *bhasha*. The history of Bengali literature uses the words ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’ and the words which often replace those are modern and post-independent. Mignolo’s inquiry about decoloniality in the Cold War context with the nation-state’s formation is quite interesting. However, we may go a little earlier to locate the emergence of decolonization by tracing the concepts like nationalism, *swaraj*, and *Swadesh*, in our political history. And this entire geopolitical reality shapes our notion of translation during and after the colonial era.

This complete decolonization of the intellectual mind constitutes the history of the Bengalis and positions the community as an

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 1-3.



independent infant against adult Europe. I argue that the modern concept in Indian literature is a phenomenon with the authoritative existence of Europe. The continuous process of translating and receiving Europe into the Indian literary space is an ongoing initiative to be departed from Europe. Amita Bhose located herself in the knowledge system primarily the result of oriental projects across Europe but also beyond the Orientalist project. She tried to break the hierarchy and bridges between national literatures of two nations. Her works are 'epistemic reconstitution' of the way Oriental knowledge and the way Europe commonly used to be perceived. Amita Bhose's works brought our vision beyond the binary and paradigmatic questions of colonialism and post-colonialism and offered a new way to decolonise the literary culture by locating the self of any nation into another.

In his chapter "Orientalism and the Institution of Indian Literature,"<sup>3</sup> Amir R. Mufti described the development of various phases of Orientalism in the British Empire in India and

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<sup>3</sup> Amir R. Mufti, "Orientalism and the Institution of Indian Literature" in A.R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 103.

associated translation as observed in history as a powerful tool of ascendancy of British rule. He commented:

“Empire was from the beginning a matter of translation and translation itself an anxious sense of fidelity and betrayal [...]”

Amita Bhowe’s model is reverse to the practice of imperial translation and orientalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century in India and Europe. She visited Europe, learned the language and found literary exchanges as a matter of love, passion and unity in humanity. Comparativist like her is not an example of what the Empire wanted to produce, she added value of humanity in translation and the knowledge system she engaged with other cultural affairs instead of the imperial agenda of ascendancy of political power.

Amita Bhowe worked on Eminescu for her PhD (1975) in the Faculty of Romanian language and Literature at the University of Bucharest and as Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga wrote, she judged Eminescu “not by its own yardstick, but by that of a millenary culture of the East.”<sup>4</sup> With her close reading of ancient and classical Indian literature and Eminescu, Bhowe located Eminescu in such a

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Carmen Muşat-Coman, on e-mail, received on 26 September 2022.

broader philosophical context of India, that opened a new reading about Eminescu and that gave her a way to enter into Romanian culture and establish Indo-Romanian dialogues as exchanges between equals. Cicerone Poghir, president of the Association for Oriental Studies from the University of Bucharest, commented about her work:

“The Indianism of Eminescu was not a Danubian echo of the European Romanticism. The present work demonstrates, with convincing proofs, exactly the opposite, the deep influence and the structural affinities between the Indian thoughts and those of Eminescu are fundamental factors for the Eminescian exegesis.”<sup>5</sup>

Bhose located the most celebrated poet of Romania in the “millenary culture of the East,” and found the “millenary culture of the East” in his poems. I assume this as a metaphor which is an alternative to the colonial and early Orientalists model of exchanges and establishing knowledge centres of the East across Europe.

The Eminescian way of literary reception, translation and cultural bridges made Amita Bhose uncritically acceptable by both Romania and India. By Eminescian way I do not mean in

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<sup>5</sup> *Idem.*

any way what is reflected in Eminescu's writings or his ideology, but the strategy that Amita Bhose adopted and the kind of 'literary spiritual' she found as a contact zone between India and Romania through Eminescu's writings. This is what I call the 'Eminescu metaphor' which breaks any kind of hierarchy between two cultures and establishes an equal ground for exchanges. This 'Eminescu metaphor' in literary reading, reception and translation may be extracted from Bhose's works as a model of comparison in comparative literary study. This kind of literary contact zones as comparative literature can be assumed as a decolonised model of literary studies.

### **Walking through Tagore's Universal Humanism**

In 1961, when the world was celebrating the birth centenary of Rabindranath Tagore, Amita Bhose (Ray), wrote a feature in a renowned Bengali magazine called *Desh* by quoting from *Adevărul*, the most renowned newspaper of Bucharest, on 20<sup>th</sup> November, 1926, that Tagore is the exceptional instance of ideal humanity, perhaps the only one. Tagore reached there via Bulgaria and Yugoslavia and, as Amita Bhose

reported, all the educational institutions in Bulgaria remained closed for two days in honour of Rabindranath Tagore. Romanian journalists also described Tagore as a saint as portrayed in the Bible. When Tagore entered Romania and took a train, a Romanian journalist sat beside Tagore and asked him about Pan Asianism, Tagore replied that he only hold the idea of the unity of greater humanity in his mind and again he was asked about Italy and Tagore replied that he loves Italy, "and you know that I do not support the violent act and way of Italy."<sup>6</sup> From 1954 to 1971 Amita Bhose used the name 'Ray,' the surname of her husband, and after they got divorced in 1968, she started using 'Bhose.' Therefore, some of her works are signed as Amita Ray and later her writings appear as Amita Bhose.

As a part of his academic trip, Tagore visited many countries in Central and Eastern Europe. He was the most popular Indian intellectual in the Czech Republic, and people there felt a great affinity with Tagore's works. Czech nationalists were very much influenced by Tagore's universal humanism and the Indian freedom struggle also made them realise that

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<sup>6</sup> Amita Ray, "Rumaniay Rabindranath," in *Desh*, no. Rabindra Janmashatabarsha Sankhya, 1368 (Bengali Calendar), 1961.

they were on the same page as the Indians to fight against any kind of imperial forces. Tagore also visited Hungary between 23<sup>rd</sup> October to 12<sup>th</sup> November, 1926, and his writings were already translated into Hungarian.

The cultural relations between India and Poland also remember Tagore's contribution as he established the Indo-Polish Friendship Society in 1941, and the first book on Poland was published by the society.<sup>7</sup>

Immediately after being awarded the Nobel Prize, Tagore's writings were translated into Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian languages in Yugoslavia. Regarding Tagore's reception in the cultural and political life of Central and Eastern Europe, Surendra Munshi commented:

"The great project of Tagore was the project of cooperation between cultures. He would time and again harp on the theme of cooperation between the West and the East."<sup>8</sup>

Amita Bhowse's work found its path in the ideological ground prepared by Tagore and the

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<sup>7</sup> Rajendra K. Jain (Ed.), *India and Central Europe: Perceptions, Perspectives, Prospects*. Springer, Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 79-234.

<sup>8</sup> Surendra Munshi, "Universalising Europe: In the Spirit of Rabindranath Tagore," in *Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2011, pp. 296-303, p. 299.

history of the reception of Tagore by the intellectuals of Eastern and Central European countries. Amita Bhowe was also accepted by the Romanians in the political context of India as a nation fighting against colonialism and imperialism. The political notion of India in Europe grounded her works and unfolded to a greater context of solidarity in Europe.

## **Cultural Equilibrium and Politics of Translation**

“Such a communication demonstrates the numerous spiritual affinities between the Romanian and Indian peoples. For otherwise, our literatures would not betray so many similarities in so many respects, a fact that holds good particularly in the case of Bengali literature. Our beautiful landscape has inspired ballads and folk songs of a matchless, extraordinary wealth. No folk musician from Bengal has experienced the joy of playing his flute in mountains like those of Eminescu and Sadoveanu’s Moldavia; however, the eternal green and wide expanses of the Ganges were able to inspire a poetry boasting an equal truthfulness and purity.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Amita Bhowe, “A Winter Night in Bucharest,” in *Romanian Review*, no. 1, 1976, p. 56.

Her ideology of translation is the ideology of breaking the hierarchy, and in quest of indefinite humanity which can plant a text anywhere and anytime in this world. Before translating any text, she always used to visualise Bengal, images of the land and the people passing through her vision. She used to take pen and paper to translate Romanian literature which represents the nation. Amita Bhowse's position as a translator was to find, locate and promote cultural equilibrium, unlike the translational relation that India had with English, French and German.

In 1959, when she visited Romania for the first time with her husband,

"In order to absorb and become familiarised with the mentality and spiritual life of the Romanian people, she enrolls in a Romanian language and literature course."<sup>10</sup>

In May 1961 she wrote an article on "Rabindranath in Romania" which was published in *Tara* literary gazette. From 1960s onwards, she started to be associated with regular writing on Romanian literature and culture and translated Romanian literature into Bengali. She

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<sup>10</sup> Carmen Muşat-Coman, "Chronology of life and works," Amitabhose.net, last accessed: 10 February 2023.



was also affiliated with various academic and culture centres from Calcutta and deeply engaged with Indian literature and culture. She also started to perform on the All India Radio.

A decade long engagement with Indian culture and continuous practice of Romanian literature with the knowledge she earned with the degree of Romanian language and being there in Romania, she prepared herself for what she would become in future. As a result of deep association with literature she joined a graduate programme in English literature at the University of Calcutta. She was invited by the Institutul Român pentru Relații Culturale cu Străinătatea and visited Romania in 1967 for the second time and she explored new cultural ties between India and Romania.

Meanwhile, she translated Mihail Sebastian's *Steaua fără nume* (*The Nameless Star*) into Bengali as *Nam-Na-Jana-Tara*, which was performed in Calcutta and also played for the Radio in 1967. Another play by Sebastian translated into Bengali was *Chutir Khela* and it was performed in All India Radio, twice, first on 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1969 and then on 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1970 and was well received by the audience, as *Jugantar*

reported on 30<sup>th</sup> June, 1969 and 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1970. First version of the play was published in *Bahurupi Patrika* and performed by them on 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1969 at Rabindra Sadan at Calcutta.

These rooted the texts and Romanian culture in the mind of the Bengalis. All the media accepted Amita Bhose's work and they circulated those very well among the readers and audience of Calcutta and West Bengal, which shows authenticity of Amita Bhose's works and authority she earned with great respect from the community. Bhose mentioned in her article, "A Winter Night in Bucharest,"<sup>11</sup> about the similarity in politics, state, taste and poetics between Romanians and Bengalis and the reasons behind her translation. Deep understanding about both the societies made her a true comparativist whose translation successfully created organic contact zones between the cultures, which is an objective of a comparativist. The kind of reception her works got from the Bengali audience showed the ideological necessity of the time. Socialist thoughts, movements, people's struggle against hunger, corruption, unemployment, and welfare

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<sup>11</sup> Amita Bhose, "A Winter Night in Bucharest," in *Romanian Review*, no. 1, 1976, pp. 56-58.

of the peasant class were supported by the kind of works translated by Bhose into Bengali from Romanian, especially the works of Sebastian.

Mihail Sadoveanu's (1880-1961) *The Mud Hut Dwellers* was selected for UNESCO programme and translated into Bengali and Hindi, with a special care by Sahitya Akademi. In Post World War II political context, antifascism writings and thoughts emerged as dominating characters of the time, not only the Marxist intellectuals but also the liberal thinkers in India subscribe to antifascism thoughts as one of the agenda of literature and several other writings. Sadoveanu was one of the prominent intellectuals to fight against fascism during World War II.

The post-Independent Indian novels were in quest of "Bharat," the indigenous, non-colonial India to reconstitute the history of the Indian nation. Sadoveanu's writings, especially the *Matir Kutire*, searched the rural life of Romania and indigeneity of culture. Perhaps this was one of the reasons the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters, was interested to publish it in 1969. Similar texts on the theme of poverty, people's struggle, hunger were also selected by the UNESCO programme in

collaboration with Sahitya Akademi Indian Literature Abroad series and translated into English and two of those were a Bengali novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* by Manik Bandopadhyay, and *Chemmen*, a Malayalam novel by Takashi Shivshankar Pillai, both about the lives of the fisherfolk communities. Interestingly, Sahitya Akademi published Amita Bhowe's translation of Marin Sorescu's *Iona* in 1988, which is also on the life of a fisher folk community. Such an interesting connection in the world of translation across the globe made Amita Bhowe's works a curious case of comparative literature and Bhowe herself engaged within the ground of comparativism.

When she was in Calcutta, she established her identity as a translator of Romanian literature, not only Sebastian, but she also translated contemporary Romanian poems as *Amrao Swapna Dekhi* (1969). She also wrote *Chenasonar Baire*,<sup>12</sup> which was her travelogue on Romania, for which she had been awarded with "the best book on a foreign country," by the All India Radio.

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<sup>12</sup> Amita Ray, *Chenasonar Baire*, General Printers & Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1968.

She also published *Eminescur: Kavita* in August, 1968 in Calcutta.<sup>13</sup> In her paper “Eminescu Read by Indians,” presented in a conference organized by the University of Bucharest, she wrote:

“My purpose was not necessarily to reach a perfect translation of the physical body of words, but to understand the poems’ spirit, to delve into their enigmatic and tempting depth, to live the anguish felt by their author. For me, translating Eminescu was not an artistic experiment or a language exercise; it was more of a deep spiritual experience I cannot begin to define.”<sup>14</sup>

Eminescu as a contact zone between India and Romania was taken by Amita Bhose very sincerely; she not only translated his works but performed research and found a strong ground for connecting two nations. The Bengali translation of Eminescu’s poems shows how much care, love and passion it took to translate. The kind of language she used is very close to the modern poems in Bengali, especially of Tagore.

In its 16<sup>th</sup> December 1965 issue, *Saptahik Basumati* reported about theatre festival

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<sup>13</sup> Amita Ray, *Eminescur: Kavita*, General Printers & Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1969.

<sup>14</sup> Carmen Muşat-Coman, “Chronology of life and works,” [Amitabhose.net](http://Amitabhose.net), last accessed: 10 February 2023.

organised by Natyakar Parishad, where Sadhan Bhattacharya inaugurated the festival and remarked in his speech that only those plays should be performed which show the lives of the common people, labour class and the ideology of socialist realism. The plays which do not talk about the people should not be performed. He also added that the problem of war, hunger, and poverty can only be removed by the socialist ideology and the playwright should adopt this ("Nataker Katha.") In the same section a brief review of *Naam Na Jana Tara* was published, and the reviewer appreciated the translation as it successfully brought through the rhythm of Bengali language.

The first translation of Eminescu into any Asian language was Japanese in 1936, and the second was by Amita Ray in 1969. Krishna Dhar, a renowned Bengali poet commented:

"The translator has succeeded in mastering the subtlety and beauty of the language in which the poems were written. The fluency of the translation and her choice of words enthralled us."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Krishna Dhar on the cover endorsement of Amita Ray, *Eminescur Kavita*, General Printers & Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1969.

Parimal Goswami, renowned author, critic and editor in Bengali, also commented:

“With this volume of poetry from a faraway land, the translator builds a bridge between two cultures, and for this our literature and culture will forever be grateful to her.”<sup>16</sup>

As I came to know by interviewing Carmen Muşat-Coman – who knew Amita Bhowse closely, published 43 books by Bhowse and called her *Didi*, a kinship address for elder sister in Bengali and many other Indian languages – Amita Bhowse was very much active from 1970s to 1990s, she was continuously serving literature in Bucharest and also in Calcutta mailing her writings for various magazines and journals. Muşat-Coman also said that:

“she was the first Indian philologist who knew Romanian, there were no dictionaries, she created Manuals of Bengali, Sanskrit, a Bengali-Romanian dictionary. She found the equivalents herself.”

Amita Bhowse, as being one of her kind, had to take a lot of labour to translate texts from Romanian into Bengali, and we know that mere knowledge of a language does not make a person a good translator, but translation comes with many

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<sup>16</sup> Parimal Goswami on the cover endorsement of Amita Ray, *Eminescu's Kavita*, *op. cit.*

other tools. Bhowse made all these tools for herself. Her translation of a single text is not a single affair but she made a system of translation and offered tools for the future generation of translators who will translate from Romanian into Bengali. She created all the knowledge based tools a translator needs to have for producing an adequate translated text. On 27<sup>th</sup> December 1970, the renowned Bengali newspaper *Jugantar* reported about Amita Bhowse's translation of Ion Luca Caragiale's play into Bengali as *Harano Chithi*, and appreciated it because of planting the text in the context of West Bengal but keeping the ideology, political contexts etcetera of the source text as it is.

## **Individual, International, and the World**

When Bhowse was asked by Vladimir Udrescu for the *Romanian Today*, June 1986 issue,

“Any bad feelings about having attached yourself to a culture different from your own, in whose language you write with much intuition and talent”?

she answered:

“I wanted to take my doctor's degree in Bengali and took it in Romanian. Why? I could have taken it in English too, a language I can speak very well.



But I chose the Romanian language because I discovered *a world*. And not only for me but for my fellow countrymen too. From this point of view, I am the first Indian who has popularized the values of Romanian spirituality in the area of Greater India. And I did it without resorting to an intermediary.”<sup>17</sup>

‘International’ is any kind of intellectual connection between any two nations or a group of nations identified together for some common cause. World is an endless process of making. World Literature is the continuous reception of texts by many languages and many nations. International is worldly in the limited sense of reception of literature and identity. International is one of the primary conditions or microcosmic rationale in the formation of the ground of world literature. International may be an affair of an individual, between two individuals or a community. With an International interaction with a set of international interactions, one inherits the idea of the world. Accepted definitions of world literature are mostly defined by the languages of the economy but International literature is more democratic in the sense

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<sup>17</sup> Amita Bhowe, *I Started Dreaming in Romanian*, Bucharest, Editura Cununi de stele, 2022, p. 142.

that a marginal or less powerful community may have their international claim. International literature is a set of such literature, literary collectives or texts that can be located as a critic or an alternative to world literature.

Contribution of Amita Bhowe in translation and building cultural communications between India and Romania was an act of a comparativist. The role of a cultural ambassador is a role of a comparativist too. Through her translations from Bengali and Sanskrit into Romanian and from Romanian to Bengali, Amita Bhowe was to recontextualise a few authors foregrounding the history of reception between the authors or authors and the ideas. Amita Bhowe reconstructed herself with both Indian and Romanian 'literary spirituality.' By this I mean a ground of an individual's mind that inherits the unity of national culture/s. National culture means the most common denominator/s of the cultural unity of a nation or the national symbols of culture. Bhowe found Sanskrit classical literature and Indian thoughts and Tagore as the most common denominators of national culture and traced its reception in Romanian literature besides the cultural similarity between the two

nations, India and Romania. She belonged to both nations and cultures through her practice. Her life and practice is an alternative organic model of comparative literature which is non-anglo-phone and not dominated by major European nations which colonised India.

She was as fascinated with Eminescu, as Eminescu himself was fascinated with Indian culture. Bhowse's research interest in Eminescu itself is a method of comparative literature, not because Eminescu received Indian thoughts in his writings but because of Bhowse's enquiry to find extended India in Romanian national culture. Eminescu is a poet of that stature who can define Romania and represent it to the world. Bhowse's doctoral dissertation on Eminescu found how the reception of literature of one nation by another national symbol of literature of that nation can make a literary family. Bhowse not only did research on Eminescu, but she translated him into Bengali which is the language Bhowse inherits with her birth. The Bengali translation of Eminescu's poems shows its affinity with the language Tagore used in his poems. Poetic style is defined by the time of the poet and also by individual talent. Tagore has his own language

that carries his identity, a Tagorean poetic utterance. To locate Eminescu in her Bengali translation, Bhowe found Tagorean poetic utterances as a mode of linguistic expression, as both Eminescu and Tagore were born in almost the same historical context but in different nations. The readers of the Bengali translation not only found Bhowe's work aesthetically beautiful, they but can locate Eminescu at a certain time.

Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga commented:

"Amita Bhowe loved our country perhaps more than many Romanians do, and served it with her intelligence and her pen."<sup>18</sup>

And Amita Bhowe wrote that "Mihai Eminescu is the only European poet who made India immortal in his country."<sup>19</sup> Such exchange and perception of love and respect made Bhowe's position somewhat different from any other kind of literary exchanges between nations and process of formation of international literature. Bhowe represented Romania to the Bengali readers with its cultural totality by representing

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<sup>18</sup> Amita Bhowe, *Eminescu and India*, Bucharest, Editura Cununi de stele, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Amita Bhowe, Cover Endorsement of *Eminescu and India*, *op. cit.*

the canonical authors of Romania, doing her PhD, making dictionaries, language learning courses, writing short features, translating plays for the stages in Calcutta, and so on.

With her interventions, the literature of Romania reached Bengal with a knowledge of the nation. The way she worked in different capacities, she crossed her limitation as an individual and appeared as a symbol of Romania to Calcutta and this is how an individual turned into an international symbol. It is because of her stages of Calcutta in the 1970s regularly performed Romanian plays, and group theatre like “Bahurupi” adapted her translation and most celebrated the newspaper of that time, *Jugantar*, used to report her works adapted for the stage. Individual turning into international symbol is a way of formation of a new world literature. The political and historical conjuncture when Amita Bhose’s works were adapted on the stages of Calcutta was not so special to receive Romania particularly; but the power of individuals as a dedicated international symbol could reconstitute the cultural canon of a geo-political space, and Amita Bhose stands as an example.

## **Conclusion**

Amita Bhowe's work found its ground as an Indo-Romanian contact zone in three ways: the first is the anti-fascists progressive ideology emerged globally to combat fascism and colonialism and to form a national culture across the nations. The second is the 'Eminescu metaphor,' where Bhowe locates India in Eminescu and Eminescu in India, which is like an intellectual organic integration of spiritual cultures of both the nations. This paradigm does not allow cultural or racial hierarchy but emotion of oneness as *Sādhana* is important here. The third is the universal humanism of Rabindranath Tagore, which was already celebrated in his name in the small European nations and the Soviet Block since the 1920s. Amita Bhowe worked as an individual, but individual as an institution, because she was located in her contemporary political and cultural contexts of Europe and India. Her translations are located in the greater global reality of her time, therefore, all the translated texts are connected with many other systems of thoughts and that opens the possibility of a new comparative literature.

Bhose always was conscious about her role as a cultural ambassador. Every single intellectual step she took, she took it because of her role as a cultural ambassador which was given to her by herself and later recognised and celebrated by others. Bhose's works opened new horizons of perspectives for the intellectuals about how to look at the nations beyond the power structures of the administrative institutions and the state. Amita Bhose, the kind of love and passion she put for each and every work she did can be metaphorically understood by the amount of love put by each Sufi poet in their lyrics. The international literature she created is made with the *Rasa* of love for the nations and people. She reconstituted the work of Orientalists by her nonhierarchical position of remapping Indology and knowledge of Europe. In her words:

"I have always tried to act as a factor of culture. I could not but try to disseminate Indian spiritual values in the country I consider my second homeland, Romania. This is how Tagore's poems, Bengali Proverbs and Thoughts, *The Prince's Tale* (a collection of Bengali folk tales), the above-mentioned dictionary and others were published."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Amita Bhose, *I Started Dreaming in Romanian*, Bucharest, Editura Cununi de stele, 2022, pp. 143-144.

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Acknowledgement: Mrs Carmen Mușat-Coman.

## 2

### **AMITA BHOSE, FROM THE GREAT GANGES TO BUCHAREST**

*Carmen MUŞAT-COMAN*

I'm going to tell you a story. A true story that begins in the City of Joy, Kolkata, 90 years ago, and the main character is a little girl with short hair and lively black squirrel eyes. This little girl, Amita, would single-handedly build the cultural bridge between India and Romania, a distant country of which she only knew it was in Europe. But until then, the little girl would learn to read and, returning home from school, she would translate poems from English into Bengali for her mother. Perhaps, in her heart, throughout her life, when she would translate for millions of people, connecting worlds, these translations were dedicated to her mother whom she lost at 13.

To appreciate the true value of her cultural endeavor, we must take into account the time when it took place, the 1960s, more than 60 years ago. Amita has created a cultural bridge between two worlds with a pencil, her mind and lots of love. In a time when there were no computers, high-performance phones, e-mails, Facebook or Whatsapp. In the 1960s there were only letters that took weeks between the two countries.

Amita lived her childhood in an intellectual climate that left its mark on her later career. Her family was deeply involved in artistic and scientific activities. Her father, Sudhir Kumar Bhose, was a lawyer at the Calcutta Supreme Court of Justice as well at the New Delhi Supreme Court. He was awarded the “A.N. Dev” Prize by the University of Calcutta for research in the field of law and he was elected member of the University of Calcutta Senate and of the Asian Society. Her grandfather, J.C. Bhose, was a renowned Orientalist and a member of the Asian Society, who was awarded the “Cobden” medal by the University of Cambridge for his research in the field of Indian Studies. Her maternal grandfather, T.N. Mitra, was the first to obtain his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of

Calcutta's Faculty of Humanities. Various members of her family had made significant contributions to Indian culture. For instance, N.C. Bhose set up the Indian Boy Scouts organization for young people, and her father's uncle on his maternal side, N.C. Chunder, was one of Gandhi's close associates. His son, P.C. Chunder, who was for a while minister of education and culture, was a scientist of considerable reputation even outside India.

In 1953, Amita graduates from the Faculty of Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics of the University of Calcutta and one year later she marries Dipak Kumar Ray, Ph.D., an engineering geologist. In 1959 she follows her husband to Romania, where he comes to specialize in oil geology; D.K. Ray being one of the first Indian to benefit from the scientific agreement concluded between the two countries.

In order to become familiarized with the mentality and spiritual life of the Romanian people, she enrolls in a Romanian language and literature course at the University of Bucharest at the end of which, two years later, she passes an exam and is issued a proficiency certificate in the Romanian language. In a Romanian textbook she

discovers the poem “Ce te legeni...” (“Why do you swing, oh, Forest?”) which, as she will confess, captivates her.

“My first contact with Eminescu’s poetry simply astonished me. I was discovering a whole world, in which the East meets the West, Europe meets Asia, the finite is *unbordered* and barriers are removed. Eminescu’s entire poetry [...] was thus revealed to me like an endless melody, blending all the borders of time and space.”

Truth is of course stranger than fiction.

“Otherwise how could a poem in a children’s book change the course of my life? It was just by chance that I came across that piece, and immediately it captured my imagination. A world of poetic phantasy revealed before my mind’s eye. It was a poplar forest of late autumn, a forest bereft of leaves and deserted by birds, a forest which stood at the pivot of bareness between the colorful summer and the snow winter, with its branches swinging vertically. It swung between summer and winter, autumn and spring, empty and full, life and death, creation and annihilation. The poem called to my mind the image of Siva Nataraja, the lord of cosmic dance, who creates the universe with one step and brings its end with another. Like the Indian god, whose image was so artistically revived by Tagore, Eminescu’s forest was apparently withered, but under the garb of emptiness it preserved a great potentiality, an inconceivable force of regeneration.”

In 1961 she returns to India with her husband and she makes her press debut with an article entitled “Rabindranath in Romania,” published in *Desh* literary magazine. She becomes a regular contributor to various Indian journals and newspapers, with articles in both Bengali and English, on India’s culture or on Romanian culture and literature, from which she also translates. She also begins to be invited by universities, schools, cultural associations or by the radio to give lectures on various aspects of convergence between Indian and Romanian cultures.

She was deputy editor-in-chief (1962-1971), literary editor at the Publicity Department of Damodar Valley Corporation; she worked, at the same time, as the literary editor of Damodar Valley Project Reports. She also contributed with articles at *Bharatakosa*, an Indian Encyclopedia in Bengali. She was the cofounder of the Bichitrita Association (a Literary, Music, Dance and Drama Society) in Calcutta, led by Prof. P.C. Gupta, an academically renowned historian and a close associate of Tagore. As secretary general (1964-1966) and, later on, literary secretary (1966-1971), Amita Bhose organized literature, folklore and theatre conferences, musical shows as well as a symposium on the history of Indian cinema.

From this moment on, due to her thorough involvement in the research of Indian culture, she attained a high level of specialization and was recruited into many famous cultural associations. Thus, she was a member of the Asiatic Society of India; “Rabindra Bharati” Society; Bangla Sahitya Parisad (the Association for the Study and Research of Bengali Literature) in Calcutta; or the Oriental Studies Association of Romania; she was also granted lifetime membership to Vishva Bangla Sammelan (Bengali Culture World Association) and to the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Calcutta; she also become a member of Presidency College Alumni Association, European Branch in London.

In 1965 she graduated from the Bengali-English Faculty of the University of Calcutta and two years later, on the invitation of Romanian Institute for Cultural Exchanges, she arrived in Romania for the second time, establishing new cultural ties. One year later she divorced D.K. Ray. In documents and publications between 1954 and 1971 she appeared as Amita Ray.

Amita Bhowse was a fine writer: *Cenasonar baire* (*Beyond the Familiar World*),<sup>1</sup> the journal of

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<sup>1</sup> Amita Bhowse, *Cenasonar baire*, Published by Surajit C. Das on behalf of General Printers & Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1968.

her travels to Romania, was considered by Indian radio channels “the best book on a foreign country.” For *Jugantar*, an Indian newspaper, she writes about local traditions and social aspects, her articles being published under the title *Alapinir alapani* (Woman-to-woman Talk).

A very important moment of her literary activity was in 1969, when she published in Calcutta *Eminescu: kavita* (*Eminescu: Poems*).<sup>2</sup> We discover the details of the intense labor of translating these poems in her paper “Eminescu read by Indians,” which she delivers at a conference held by University of Bucharest:

“My purpose was not necessarily to reach a perfect translation of the physical body of words, but to understand the poems’ spirit, to delve into their enigmatic and tempting depth, to live the anguish felt by their author. [...] For me, translating Eminescu was not an artistic experiment or a language exercise; it was a spiritual experience of living an inner existence, which I cannot define.”

The volume gathers 35 of Eminescu’s poems published both during his life and after his death, translated into Bengali and accompanied

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<sup>2</sup> Amita Bhose, *Eminescu: kavita*, Published by Surajit C. Das on behalf of General Printers & Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1969. Republished in bilingual edition, Romanian – Bengali, Editura Cununi de stele, București, 2018.



by a short introduction to the poet's life and work. This was the first translation of Eminescu's poems in Asia, published in a volume. With a modesty that only great spirits have, she said: "Thanks to Eminescu my name reached all the meridians of the world." At the same time, also thanks to Amita Bhowe, the first Indian language into which Romanian literature was translated was Bengali. Amita Bhowe penetrated into the enigmatic depths of Romanian literature due to her love for this country. And for Eminescu's work: the Indian world discovered, amazed, in a foreign poet, ideas and feelings so similar to Indian ones. And many recognized Rabindranath Tagore's poetic sensibility in Eminescu's poems. In the daily *Jugantar*, in 1970, the writer Parimal Goswami noted:

"The translation is cursive and it is done in such a nuanced language that it does not even look like a translation. Through this volume of poetry from a distant country, the translator built a bridge between the two cultures, a fact for which our literature and culture will be grateful."

Of her own initiative she continues to translate books, sometimes as a freelancer or renouncing her copyrights. She translated dramas of the most representative playwrights: Ion Luca Caragiale, Mihail Sebastian, Al. Mirodan,

and Marin Sorescu. The plays were broadcast and performed on stages in Calcutta. She also translated short stories of Romanian classics, a collection of modern Romanian poems. She was the first Indian philologist to learn Romanian.

### **And from now the story continues on another continent**

In August 1971 her father dies, and in December she enrolls in a doctoral programme of the Faculty of Romanian Language and Letters of the University of Bucharest, on a scholarship from the Romanian government. Her thesis is *The Indian Influence on Eminescu's Philosophy*, and her supervisor is Prof. Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga,<sup>3</sup> the greatest exegete of Eminescu's work. Amita identifies the sentimental reasons behind her decision to return to Romania.

“After my father passed away, I went back to Romania in search of a love haven among the Romanian people.”

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<sup>3</sup> Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga (1920-2006). Professor and Head of the Department of Universal and Comparative Literature, University of Bucharest, scientific advisor of Amita Bhose's doctoral thesis.

She also says:

“Man’s destiny cannot be foreseen. I am an Indian in love with my mother tongue and Indian culture. But if [...] I happened to get acquainted with your country and devote myself to some comparatist research into Romanian and Indian spirituality, that was one of the capital and revealing events of my life.”

She defends her PhD thesis at the University of Bucharest in 1975, “One of the happiest moments of my life,” she said. She received so many flowers that a few students had to carry them on to the campus where she lived. Published with the title *Eminescu și India* (*Eminescu and India*),<sup>4</sup> the thesis establishes a series of new points of contact between Indian and Romanian cultures as found in Eminescu’s works, and attempts to change the accepted opinion of Romanian literary critics on Eminescu’s Indian sources.

“I must say at the very beginning that I recognize this distinguished Indian intellectual as one of the most serious contemporary Eminescologs. She bent upon the texts with an attentive and unbiased eye and reconsidered the works of the

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<sup>4</sup> Amita Bhowse, *Eminescu și India*, Editura Junimea, Iași, 1978, 176 p. Republished in 2009, 2011, Editura Cununi de stele, București. English edition: Amita Bhowse, *Eminescu and India*, Editura Cununi de stele, București, 2021.

Romanian national poet in an unceasing comparison with the Philosophy and the Literature of India. She was struck with the profound analogy between the courses of thought of Eminescu and that of the poets of her country, from Kālidāsa to Rabindranath Tagore. Then she tried to return to the cause, which she researched and systematized with the European scientific rigor and minuteness,”

considers Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga.

“The work of Amita Bhose fills up thus a significant gap in the history of Romanian literature. Besides possessing a good knowledge and a personal meditation on the poems of Eminescu (being the translator of his works in her mother-tongue Bengali), the authoress is conversant with the Indian texts. As this advantage was lacking in all Romanian researchers till now, this aspect distinguishes her from her predecessors in this field. Besides the original texts of Eminescu, the authoress utilised an impressive bibliography of over 300 titles, for the purpose of documentation,”

writes Dr Cicerone Poghiric.<sup>5</sup>

Chapters 1 to 3 of the work assign the boundaries of Eminescu’s knowledge about India and the sources of this knowledge; the fourth chapter substantiates an exceptionally valuable

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<sup>5</sup> Cicerone Poghiric (1928-2009). Professor and Head of the Department of Classical Languages, University of Bucharest. President of the Association for Oriental Studies, University of Bucharest.

idea that the Indian influence on Eminescu was not an external element, imposed as a fashion or as a whim, but an internal necessity, a structural correspondence. The last three chapters present a concrete study of this influence in three essential moments: *Echoes of Kālidāsa*, *Encounters with Buddhism*, and *Onward to the Vedas*.

George Munteanu, the poet's well-known biographer, writes in his report on the thesis:

"This aspect of the poet (pandit-poet in the Indian world, *ed.*) was revealed to me when, after a longer meditation on his deep relations with the ancient Romanian philosophy, with traditional wisdom, I grasped that this should indeed be the basis for a new biography of Eminescu."

Reports were also given by Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga, Sergiu Al-George, Șerban Cioculescu, Constantin Ciopraga, and Alexandru Piru, all of them important specialists on Romanian culture.

For Amita Bhose, Mihai Eminescu was

"the quintessence of the Romanian spirit. It wasn't intellectual curiosity that made the poet get closer to India, but his need for self-rediscovery."

In her doctoral thesis, Amita Bhose writes:

"Eminescu was not a philosopher and was more than a poet; he was a *dārśanik* (a seer), a *kavi*

(poet and wise man) in the Indian sense of the terms."

Her comparative studies on the Eminescu-Tagore parallel drew attention of the existence of a common stock of sensitiveness, shared by the Romanian and Indian people, the idea supported by Sergiu Al-George too.

"In Romania, through Eminescu, the culture of my country reached the hearts of the Romanian people. His love and esteem for India have bound me inextricably to your country."

Eminescu's Indianism was not accidental or an echo of German romantic Orientalism, or a manifestation of Schopenhauer's influence. His knowledge of Indian texts only served him to crystallize his thoughts, in order to reach a certain level of artistic excellence. The Indian influence was a structural assimilation.

To understand the importance of her professional approach, in Romania, between 1900 and 1989, the year of the revolution, only 1600 doctorates were awarded, for all fields. 1600! And one of these was awarded to Amita Bhose. After her doctoral thesis, she is granted a two-year postdoctoral scholarship so that she can take part, together with other specialists, in

the scientific editing of Eminescu's work. Thus, she is asked to join the Eminescu Team formed under the aegis of the Museum of Romanian Literature. In this capacity, she writes a study on the influences Indian philosophy had on Eminescu's literary prose. And also gives the final version to the text of the *Small Sanskrit Grammar* by Fr. Bopp,<sup>6</sup> translated by the poet but never published, and adds the specific critical apparatus. Eminescu's manuscript is transcribed by transliterating Sanskrit words with Latin letters and diacritics. This three-year-long labor and the study were published in *Works* series, by the Romanian Academy Publishing House.<sup>7</sup> Amita Bhowe's books and subsequent studies and articles bring

"a more precise location of decisive crossroads and confluences the Romanian contribution represents in the world culture,"

as Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga considers.

Amita Bhowe was not only researcher, writer, translator, but also a very dedicated teacher. Between 1972 and 1991 – almost 20 years

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<sup>6</sup> Franz Bopp, *Kritische Grammatik der Sanskrita-Sprache*, Berlin, 1845.

<sup>7</sup> Mihai Eminescu, *Opere*, Vol. XIV, Editura Academiei Române, Bucureşti, pp. 509-896.

– she taught, using only the Romanian language, practical courses in Sanskrit and Bengali and theoretical courses on Indian civilization and aesthetics at the University of Bucharest. She wrote a Bengali Course, followed by a Bengali-Romanian Dictionary – 850 pages – and a Bengali Handbook, all three handwritten with the help of her students, as the printing house did not have Bengali characters. In time, following a serious study of the methodology of teaching Sanskrit to foreigners, she successfully wrote a 300-page-long Sanskrit textbook. This was unique to European languages. The three-volume Sanskrit textbook appeared posthumously. She had to do everything from scratch.

In my memory, Amita Bhose remains as a teacher. Many enrolled in her courses out of curiosity. Curiosity turned into passion and the students remembered the first exciting moments when they became children again, studying the letters of the Bengali or Sanskrit alphabet to enter the fascinating world of India. With a great ability of analysis and work, she translated, gave courses and conferences, developed manuals and dictionaries, wrote articles and comparative studies. She was an earnest and demanding person, with a fine and ironic humor. She was



very warm. She had a strong personality, despite her fragility. Without exaggeration, Didi was the University's most beloved professor. So we call her Didi. She happily attended our personal events and we were honored to have her as a guest at our homes.

The Bengali and Sanskrit classes were optional, two hours a week, but Didi worked a lot privately with us, her students, without any financial demands, only with love. The students did not even receive a graduation certificate. And yet, many synthesis works were written during that period; there were translations done from Bengali and Sanskrit, some of which were published by prestigious cultural magazines. In the literary-artistic shows organized by Amita Bhowe in Bengali and Sanskrit between 1974 and 1986, her students played and directed Rabindranath Tagore's *Sesh raksha*, translated by Amita Bhowe from Bengali into Romanian. This was the first performance of an Indian play in Romania. Fragments from this production were included in Romanian radio shows for foreigners and broadcasted by the local TV channel in Calcutta.

What motivated and spurred on these remarkable accomplishments? It was the loving

relationship between students and their teacher, their feeling of mutual respect in the true Indian tradition. And following her articles published in the Indian press, about the Bengali and Sanskrit courses held by her at the University of Bucharest, the Indian students, impressed, sent to the Romanian students the textbooks from which they themselves learned.

As a professor, aided by the renowned Sanskritologist Sergiu Al-George she sets up and runs an Indian Studies Circle within the Indian Civilization course delivered at the University of Bucharest. It is appropriate here to mention a few words about Sergiu Al-George, the greatest Romanian Indianist, the best Romanian translator from the Sanskrit language, whom we celebrated, in 2022, his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. "A scholar forgotten before he was known," as Didi sadly stated. He learned Sanskrit by himself; he also knew the Pali, Prakrit and Tibetan languages. Apart from contributing a number of papers on Indian Philosophy and Linguistics in Romanian and foreign journals, he translated the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Sāṃkhyakārikā* and *Tarka-samgraha* from Sanskrit, with explicative notes on Sanskrit terms and Indian philosophical concepts. At international level he was considered one of the

three non-Indian experts on Paṇini. He visited India at the invitations of the University Grants Commission in 1972. He participated in the Fifth International Sanskrit Congress at Benares in 1981 as a guest of the UNESCO. He died in 1981, within a week of his return from India. His last book, *Archaic and Universal*,<sup>8</sup> is a monumental work in the field of comparative and interdisciplinary studies.

As a translator in Romanian, *Didi* gave us one of the most representative Sanskrit plays, *Mṛcchakaṭikā* (*Căruța de lut*) by Sudraka – the first translation of a Sanskrit play into Romanian.<sup>9</sup> She also translates *Nāṭyaśāstra*<sup>10</sup> from Sanskrit, with her best student on Sanskrit, Constantin Făgețan. Romanians read the most beautiful Indian love story translated from Bengali, *Radha și Kṛiṣṇa* (*Radha and Krishna*) by Chandidas,<sup>11</sup> they also read poetry, theater, fairy tales, modern short stories, Bengali, Sanskrit proverbs and, especially, Rabindranath Tagore; Didi being the

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<sup>8</sup> Sergiu Al-George, *Arhaic și universal*, Editura Eminescu, București, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> Sudraka, *Căruța de lut*, Editura Cununi de stele, București, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Editura Științifică, București, 1997. Republished in 2016, Editura Cununi de stele, București.

<sup>11</sup> Chandidas, *Radha și Kṛiṣṇa*, Editura Cununi de stele, București, 2009.

first and only one to translate Tagore directly from Bengali. *Scrisori rupte* (*Torn letters*) was also the first translation of *Chinnapatra* into another language.<sup>12</sup> Other translations from Tagore's works written in Bengali were *Soarele din prima zi* (poetry), *Inspirația lui Valmiki* (drama), *Dragostea încurcă, dragostea descurcă* (*Sesh Raksha*), *Amintiri* (*Memories*), *Cântecele dimineții* (*Morning songs*). She translated directly, without dictionaries – they didn't even exist at that time – she wrote the Bengali-Romanian<sup>13</sup> dictionary herself. And every time she went to India, on holidays, she established new cultural ties.

During her lifetime, she published, in both foreign and Romanian magazines, over 56 literary translations from Romanian into Bengali and from Bengali literature into Romanian, and over 90 articles and studies about Eminescu, Romanian and Indian Culture. She delivered over 100 conferences and spoke on radio broadcast, and she gave over 20 interviews on cultural topics.

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<sup>12</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Scrisori rupte*, Editura Cununi de stele, București, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Amita Bhose, *Dicționar bengali-român*, Tipografia Universității București, 1985.

On all roads, Didi walked on untrodden paths. Of course, she could have achieved a lot more, but our destiny is decided beyond our power of will. When she was 59 years old, in October 1992, just one month after returning from holiday in India, Didi – Amita Bhowe – left us after an unsuccessful operation in a Bucharest hospital. At her family's request, the urn with Amita Bhowe's ashes remained in Romania, as a natural, yet premature fulfillment of the destiny of a woman who, for 30 years, served Romanian culture with utmost devotion. As a result, in Romania, in 1972 Amita Bhowe was awarded the Romanian Writers' Union Prize for her translation of Eminescu into Bengali. In India, in 1977, the Romanian Ambassador awarded her the medal commemorating Romania's Independence, for her activity in the field of Romanian culture. And she received the great prize of the Romanian people: love and gratitude. Her name is mentioned at letter B in the General Dictionary of Romanian Literature, edited by the Romanian Academy.<sup>14</sup> The National Museum of Romanian

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<sup>14</sup> *Dicționarul General al Literaturii Române*, second ed., Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, București, 2016, pp. 805-806.

Literature in Bucharest hosts a permanent exhibition dedicated to her, with manuscripts, photographs, and personal items.

This is, in short, Didi's life – Amita Bhose – the older sister of Eminescu, Romanians older sister. From 1971 to her death she lived in Romania,

“the country she loved perhaps more than many Romanians do, and served with her intelligence and her pen”,

as Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga, the scientific advisor of the thesis, writes. She used to call her “a noble friend” who taught Romanians to love and appreciate their own culture. For Didi – Amita Bhose – Romania did not mean a foreign country:

“Romanians are akin to Bengalis as regards affective structure, characterologic features, artistic options. This is why I never felt I was a foreigner in your country. Otherwise how could I have stayed among for you a quarter of a century, not as a mere neighbor? How would you account for my interest taken in Eminescu and your spirituality if it had not been for the extraordinary relations between two old and valuable cultures?”

She also said:

“The Romanian creative demarche made me not only learn Romanian in its country of origin, study Romanian literature, write in Romanian, translate from Romanian, but I have even come to dream in

Romanian. Do you think I am exaggerating if I tell you that in my dreams my grandparents speak Romanian?"

Her life was guided by the verse from the *Bhagavad Gītā*, so well rendered by Sergiu Al-George in Romanian:

"You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction."

Blessed be their memory. The story is told further, from the great Ganges to Bucharest.

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## **Appendix**

### **Homage to the author of *Language and thought in Indian culture*\***

***Amita BHOSE***

It is no wonder that a culture which expresses cosmodynamics in terms of dance and sculpture, in which musical modes are painted in human form, town planning is based on concepts of psychological structure of human body, alphabet represents energy levels and grammatical rules hold the key to moral and spiritual perfection, will be but little understood. The unifying principle of Indian culture seems to be the very factor responsible for its misinterpretation even in India. For, on the cultural place India is not merely a geographical territory; it is an idea, a conception.

The polyvalent structure of Indian culture was studied by Sergiu Al-George for more than thirty years. In the book under consideration he deals mainly with the coordination of logic, linguistics and semiotics with a view to solving certain problems which baffle European linguistics since the time of Aristotle. In the introductory chapter explaining the significance of Indian outlook, he draws attention to

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\* First published in *Analele Științifice ale Universității „Al.I.Cuza”, Iași*, 1987, pp. 141-142. Republished in Amita Bhose, *I started dreaming in Romanian*, Editura Cununi de stele, București, 2022, pp. 201-205.



the fact that “Indian thought on the whole is displayed in an organic continuity, without hiatuses, passing gradually from the categories of intelligibility of archaic world to the discipline of spirit which we find again in the modern man.” (p. 10)

Then he goes on illustrating the idea with the help of Pāṇini’s grammar of Sanskrit language, “the shortest and the fullest grammar in the world” in the words of A.A. Macdonell, in the subsequent chapters.

In Chapter II, *Predication and determination*, the author describes at first the Western premises, starting with the subject-predicate duality of Aristotle, and then he shows how the controversy can be explained away by adopting the Indian concept of the symbolic form, a discrete form, of speech, independent of the act of discursive knowledge, and its symbolic function expressed by *kāraka* (one who realizes, loosely translated as “case”), a term appertaining both to grammar and ritual (p. 40 sq.).

In the field of *Semiotics and Logic* (Chapter III), he narrates the arguments of the Stoics, based on signs, as expressed in Indian logic (p. 53), describes the development of the idea, and after an elaborate comparison of the Indian and European systems of treating logic vis-à-vis semiotics, opines for the better efficiency of the former, so far as the relations among name, sense and object are concerned. (p. 78)

While Chapters II and III present intricate problems to the specialists, Chapters IV, *Semiosis in Ritual and Grammatical Rule*, fascinates any student of Indian culture. Knowing Vedic Literature and

Sanskrit Linguistics in their most subtle nuances, Al-George correlates ritual and grammar, completely separate entities in European world of thought, giving numerous examples from both fields. It is a revelation even for an Indian reader to find how far a synthetic mind – mind of India – could go, and how the different parts of human life fit into the whole, the unified field which is India. To this end the author dwells on the semantics of technical terms concerning “rules,” structure of rules and function of negative markers.

Then he passes naturally to the *Semiosis of Syllables in Indian Phonetics* (Chapter V) and *Semiosis of Zero in Pāṇini* (Chapter VI), establishing the idea that the Sanskrit term *vyañjana* is more appropriate than its Latin correspondent *consona* (because the existence of a vowel can be concluded from the existence of a consonant, and not vice versa (p. 140), and with a surprising ingenuity links Pāṇini’s zero to the empty spaces in Mendeleev’s Periodic Table (p. 150).

While Chapter VI introduces the concept of *lakṣaṇa*, “index sign,” Chapter VII, *Semiosis of Syntactical Structures in Pāṇini*, analyses the function of the sign in qualifying syntactical relations, and concludes with the establishment of the advantages of Pāṇini’s system over the Stoic doctrine for the purpose of understanding the relations among semiosis, logic and speech (p. 173).

The last chapter, an epilogue, reflects on *The One of the Multiple as Form and Manifestation*. It takes the readers out of the boundaries of thought and speech to the gateway of the world beyond the

worlds, and points at the One who is not perceptible by speech or internal sense organ, who is all-knower but unknown to all (motto quoted on the jacket).

The author introduces a set of Sanskrit terms, new to his readers, and explains their philosophical and ritualistic implications to the fullest extent, quoting authority of extant texts. At the same time, he clears the confusion about the real sense of certain terms, for example *nirvāṇa*, already known to them. Dealing with the Indian concept of *kāraṇa*, generally translated as “case,” to which it approximately corresponds, he demonstrates how the two schemes differ completely in their relation to linguistic expression (p. 29 sq.).

The understanding of Indian culture in its true perspective does not depend on scholarship alone; it requires a particular bent of mind, perhaps a particular nervous structure. Like the ancient sages of India, Sergiu Al-George is at once synthetic and analytic, intensive and extensive, rational and intuitive. The strategy adopted in this book is essentially Indian: that of describing the opposite views in detail, to show their merits and demerits so as to establish the author’s point of view. In the Indian spirit, he blends warmth with rationality; far from being merely an exercise of brain, his hair-splitting arguments touch the heart. When he devalidates the theses of his predecessors, he does it with much respect.

Dr. Sergiu Al-George has an added advantage over many other linguists. Being a specialist in ear-

diseases, he is more abreast with the principles of acoustics and the reaction of sound waves on human system. This gave him a better possibility to understand the Indian phenomena, according to which sound stands as the basis of creation.

The purpose of this review is not to attempt an assessment of the value of a work that assesses the values of the foremost treatises on logic, linguistics and semiotics – both Indian and Western – in less than 200 pages. In the foregoing pages I tried to present its salient points to the readers. The success of the book is marked by the scientific curiosity it aroused among the younger generations for Sanskrit and Indology. Written in Romanian, this exceptional study remained limited to a comparatively small circle. It requires a larger public, so that the clues proposed by Al-George could be taken up and utilized by others.

It is known that Dr. Sergiu Al-George died in November 1981, within a week after his return from the Sanskrit Congress at Banaras. Yet I preferred to speak of him in present tense, because Al-George belongs for ever to the history of Sanskrit linguistics. I am sure Maharṣi Pāṇini's Romanian disciple would not consider it a grammatical error.



### 3

## **SURENDRANATH DASGUPTA: TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE?**

*Abhishek BOSE*

As a Professor at the University of Calcutta, Surendranath Dasgupta was the teacher and mentor of Mircea Eliade, and thus became a key contact point between the cultural worlds of India and Romania. However, usually Surendranath Dasgupta is remembered as the father of Maitreyi Devi and a character in the drama arising out of the subsequent affair. In *Maitreyi* (1933) by Mircea Eliade, and *Na Hanyate* (1974) by Maitreyi Devi, bordering on autobiographical writing, Dasgupta would appear as if straight from the pages of a New Comedy, as the authoritative and disapproving father figure.

The paucity of serious discussions on the scholarly works by Surendranath Dasgupta may have something to do with the overwhelming anecdotal depiction, at least in popular perception. Therefore, it is crucial to remember the colossal scholarship of Surendranath Dasgupta; the aspect which attracted the inquisitive and young Eliade to him in the first place and initiated a dialogue between cultures. This chapter is an attempt towards that; but the contributions of Professor Dasgupta to the study of philosophy, literature and a number of other disciplines are of such a magnitude that the present author is concerned whether this paper would be able to appreciate any of that intellectual acumen. Even tangentially discussing all of his publications and other academic pursuits would be beyond the scope of this paper. Witnessing this expanse and depth of Dasgupta's knowledge, M. Renou, who was a Professor of Sanskrit at Paris University, wrote:

“While you were amongst us, we felt as if a Śaṅkara or a Patañjali was born again and moved amongst us.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Renou, Letter to Surendranath Dasgupta, quoted by Surama Dasgupta, ‘Surendranath Dasgupta/A Memoir’, in Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. V, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2012, p. ix.

I start with a brief outline of the major achievements of Professor Dasgupta, without getting into the personal and familial aspects of his life. The sheer magnitude and brilliance of this intellectual giant is astounding; his works range from Philosophy to Iconography, History to Literature, Art and Aesthetics and what not. He did two masters in Sanskrit and Western Philosophy; earned two Doctorate degrees on Indian Philosophy and contemporary European Philosophy from University of Calcutta and Cambridge University respectively. He has taught Sanskrit, Bengali, Philosophy, Western Thought not in that order, at Rajshahi College, Chittagong College, Cambridge University, Presidency College, Sanskrit College, University of Calcutta, University of Edinburgh, Trinity College and so on. His scholarship was being recognised internationally from the very start. His biographical sketch mentions that:

“In 1935, 1936 and 1939 he was invited as visiting professor to Rome, Milan, Breslau, Königsberg, Berlin, Bonn, Cologne, Zürich, Paris, Warsaw and England.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Surama Dasgupta, ‘Surendranath Dasgupta/A Memoir’, p. viii.



So, he visited eleven premiere academic institutions in the span of four years as an invited guest. He had delivered lectures at the International Congress of Philosophy in Paris, Naples, Harvard, and so on. Such triumphs were endless, even a cursory glance at his career proves that. Here is a little sample of his striking genius. The venue was the International Congress of Science held in Rome in 1936. Yes, he was regularly being invited to Science Congresses as he was also deeply interested in the disciplines like Mathematics, Anthropology, Physics, Biology, Economics etc. The night before Surndranath's lecture was scheduled; the President of the Science Congress invited him to a dinner. And there the conversations turned to the topic of development of science in ancient India. So the President urged Prof. Dasgupta to change the topic of his lecture scheduled next morning and talk about science in India instead. Surama Dasgupta writes:

"My husband came back to his hotel and thought over this. He had no books of reference with him. But this was no serious obstacle. All his life, notwithstanding the enormous amount of research he had been doing, he seldom made any notes. His memory was wonderful and unique. He carried all details and references, no matter

however varied the field, in his head. So he exercised his mind that night and decided that since space, time and matter were the fundamentals that science had to deal with, he would talk on these. He then went to sleep peacefully without a second thought about this science meeting.”<sup>3</sup>

The next morning, in front of the audience comprising of the greatest scientists of that period, Professor Dasgupta began to deliver his address. The usual limit of fifteen minutes passed into one hour; one hour into two and then three. When he stopped there were one or two questions which he duly answered. And then, Surama writes,

“The sitting came to an end amidst tremendous applause and loud acclamation ‘great man,’ ‘great man’ (*grando homo*).”

Here is a selected list of the works by Surendranath Dasgupta:

*The Study of Patanjali*, University of Calcutta, 1920.

*A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I-V. Cambridge University Press, Vol. I, 1922.

*General Introduction to Tantra Philosophy*, University of Calcutta, 1922.

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<sup>3</sup> Surama Dasgupta, ‘Preface’ to *Fundamentals of Indian Art* by S.N. Dasgupta, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1969, p. x.

- Yoga as Philosophy and Religions*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1924.
- Hindu Mysticism*, Chicago/London: The Open Court Publishing, 1927.
- Yoga Philosophy in Relation to Other Systems of Indian Thought*, University of Calcutta, 1930.
- Indian Idealism*, Cambridge University Press, 1933.
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- 'An Interpretation of the Yoga Theory of the Relation of Mind and Body,' in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, ed. Swami Avinashananda, Calcutta, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1937.
- Philosophical Essays*, University of Calcutta, 1941.
- History of Sanskrit Literature*, University of Calcutta, 1947.
- Rabindranath: The Poet and the Philosopher*, Mitra O. Ghosh, 1948.
- Religion and the Rational Outlook*, Allahabad: Law Journal Press, 1954.
- Fundamentals of Indian Art*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1954.
- Natural Science of the Ancient Hindus*, ed. by D.P. Chattopadhyay, New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1987.

The variety of subjects and the rigor at work here is self evident even in this selective bibliography; it shows a rare simultaneity of expanse and depth. Among these, the *History of*

*Indian Philosophy*, completed in five volumes, can be called the *magnum opus* of Dasgupta, spanning almost his entire academic life. The first volume was planned when he was in Chittagong and published from Cambridge in 1921. And the fifth (and the final volume) was published posthumously in 1954.

These volumes offer the first systematic study of various schools and systems of philosophy in India in the modern times. For Dasgupta, this project was a sacred mission and in order to complete this work, he could not devote much time to develop his own philosophical system, which is known as the theory of *Dependent Emergence*. But besides these volumes, he has written extensively on Yoga and Tantra, on Art and Aesthetics, History and Literature. As a philosopher his might has warranted some attention, and for the purpose of this essay I will try to focus on the *literary* aspects of his works.

Surendranath Dasgupta had a deep reverence for the ancient knowledge systems of India, but he was neither an orthodox obscurantist and nor an apologist. His interest in

contemporary times ranging from latest developments in world literature or political philosophy, served as a perspective to his exploration of the past. In the introduction to his *History of Sanskrit Literature*, co-authored with S.K. De, and published by the University of Calcutta as a continuation of Winternitz's work, he writes:

"It was also felt necessary the title of the book, as it appeared in Professor Winternitz's work, *History of Indian Literature*, should be changed to *History of Sanskrit Literature*, as 'Indian Literature' is too vast a subject to be taken up as a sort of appendage to the history of Sanskrit literature, as Prof. Winternitz has done."<sup>4</sup>

This shows that being a Sanskritist that he was, Surendranath Dasgupta is taking quite a different stand from the Indologists who would often regress to an Orientalist position. The first wave of the indologists had to fight hard to establish Sanskrit as a real language, and not some fake counterfeit. The second wave of Indologists, especially the British Indologists and their Indian counterparts often focused solely on Sanskrit as a literary language and a repository of other knowledge systems. Because, for them,

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<sup>4</sup> S.N. Dasgupta, S.K. De, *History of Sanskrit Literature*, Calcutta, University of Calcutta, 1947, pp. x-xi.

Sanskrit signified a golden past of India's great civilization which could not be equated with the perceived dismal state of the Indian Society at that point. It had to be dismal in the first place; otherwise the colonisers' invasion on the ground of *White Men's Burden* could not be justified.

So it comes to a circular logic: the past was great – the present is dark – white masters are trying to throw light in that darkness. Given that the colonisers can think of an era when there was still light in this land, but that is solely for the masters to discover. Therefore, majority of the indological pursuits never went beyond Sanskrit-Prakrit-Pali languages.

The Modern Indian Languages, the Bhashas remained largely outside their purview. Dasgupta categorically denies this gloss; he is saying that Sanskrit literature is important but it is only *one* part of Indian Literature and that the latter term refers to a body of literature which is too vast to be appended as a satellite of Sanskrit.

I feel that this expression acknowledges an informed view of Indian Literatures, or even Indian Literatures in the plural written in many languages. Sanskrit is one among those languages. This spirit is making way for the

heterogeneous tapestry of Indian literature. This is quite extraordinary given the fact that Dasgupta predates the current debates regarding the probable definition and characteristics of *Indian Literature*. If we remember that Calcutta University pioneered the study of modern Indian languages as early as 1919, the context of Dasgupta's comment may be comprehended. I believe it comes from his somewhat passionate engagement with literature. He wrote many pieces on art and aesthetics in English.

However, in my opinion, his most important books on literary criticism and aesthetics are written in Bangla – *Saundarya tattva*, *Kāvya vicāra* and *Sāhitya Paricaya*.<sup>5</sup> He has written one book on Rabindranath Tagore in English;<sup>6</sup> that is probably the first systematic study trying to present a comprehensive view of Tagore as a philosopher. In Bangla, Dasgupta's book *Ravidipita* is significantly more *literary*.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he was himself a poet and novelist.

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<sup>5</sup> Surendranath Dasgupta, *Saundarya Tattva*, Calcutta, Chirayata Prakashan, 1950; *Kāvya vicāra*, Calcutta, Mitra O. Ghosh, 1939; *Sāhitya Paricaya*, Calcutta, Mitra O. Ghosh, not dated.

<sup>6</sup> Surendranath Dasgupta, *Rabindranath: The Poet and the Philosopher*, Volume 1, Calcutta, Mitra O. Ghosh, 1948.

<sup>7</sup> Surendranath Dasgupta, *Ravidipitā*, Calcutta, Mitra O. Ghosh, 1960.

Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay, one of the most authoritative biographers of Tagore, informs the reader of this fact in his *Rabindrajiyani*.

“Although Surendranath is a philosopher, he is a poet and litterateur himself [...]”<sup>8</sup>

He further elaborates by means of a footnote that before he would become famous as a philosopher, Surendranath used to visit his nephew at Santiniketan, the alternative educational school established by Rabindranath Tagore; his nephew was a student there. And that then Surendranath was already testing his hand at writing poetry.<sup>9</sup>

His passion about poetry and poetic aesthetic can be observed in his short preface to *Sāhitya Paricaya*, where he is saying:

“From the early days of my youth, I have been thinking about poetic appreciation; some of these thoughts have crystallised and some have not. Both of these could have some use [...]. The sensitivity necessary to touch the soul of literature is rare in this world. Some people say literary criticism is all about the tasting of rasa; there is no place for philosophical analysis or logic here. And some experts say that literature creates

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<sup>8</sup> Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindrajiyani*, Vol. 3, Calcutta, Visvabharati, 1936, p. 392.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.



a special kind of mental state in our minds; rasa can be there at times, but rasa is not the ultimate goal of literature; the final result is an aesthetic attitude. My mind oscillates between these positions in the following essays.”<sup>10</sup>

Whereas ‘rasa’ is regarded as the epitome of poetic excellence by almost all the aesthetic schools in India, especially after Abhinavagupta – Surendranath Dasgupta takes a different position. And he has said that in more than one place. Basically, Dasgupta was trying to negotiate with his times and he did not shy away from rejecting a literary ideal if it was incompatible with the contemporary scenario or with his own understanding. He did not shy away from questioning those ideals that were generally accepted without any question, like the concept of rasa enjoying a high and mighty status in the order of things.

His engagement with contemporaneity was not always the customary distant intellectual relationship; it would often draw him to the eye of the storm. For instance, Dasgupta did participate in one of the fiercest literary debates in Bengal at that point; the debate between

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<sup>10</sup> Surendranath Dasgupta, *Sāhitya Paricaya*, ‘Bhūmikā’. My translation.

Realism vs. Idealism in literature. He wrote one article in *Sabujpatra*, edited by Pramatha Chaudhuri. *Sabujpatra* was one of the most important magazines of the day, and a significant part of that debate was happening on its pages. Dasgupta took to a unique form of writing; 'Abhinaber Diary' – an imaginary conversation among Dingnag, Bhattanayak, Rudrat.<sup>11</sup>

All of them were aesthetes from ancient times, but in this imaginary diary of Abhinavagupta, another great aesthetician, they are being referred to as Rudratbabu, Bhattanayakbabu and Dingnagbabu. 'Babu' has many connotations; though it is used as an honorific suffix in addressing or referring to someone by name, it acquired additional significance mostly in the colonial times. The British rulers used to refer to the clerks as 'Baboo.' The term is also closely associated with the zamindari system and the emergence of the socially, culturally and politically powerful 'Bhadralok' class in the colonial situation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Surendranath Dasgupta, 'Abhinaber Diary', *Sabujpatra*, ed. Pramatha Chaudhuri, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, Vol 7, Kartik 1322B.

<sup>12</sup> For a satirical take on the *Babus*, see Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Bābu', *Lokarahasya*, collected in *Bankim Racanāvalī*, vol. 2 (*Sāhitya Samagra*), Calcutta, Tuli Kalam, 1986, pp. 10-12.

Here, *Rudratbabu*, *Bhattanayakbabu* and *Dingnagbabu* are debating in chaste Bangla about *rasa*, the aim of literature, the relation of poetry with the everyday world and so on. This is a heated discussion; people are getting angry:

“Then Dingnagbabu was agitated, he pounded the table with his heavy fist and said [...]”<sup>13</sup>

This chapter does not have the scope to quote this dialogue at length, but the conversation is a unique example of how deep discussions can be camouflaged in the garb of a petty quarrel happening in a contemporary language register. Interestingly, Dasgupta does not draw any conclusion here; *Rudratbabu*’s indignant final question: ‘But then who would decide what poetry is and what is not? What would be the goal of poetry?’ remains unanswered.

“An ironic lightning smiled through the sky, a bunch of dry leaves fell on us carried by a sudden gust of wind – the conversation ended there for the day.”

A poetic ending for a discussion on poetry; and moreover, it remains open-ended. As Dasgupta has said, his mind oscillates. In another

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<sup>13</sup> Surendranath Dasgupta, ‘Abhinaber Diary’, *Sabujpatra*. My translation.

article, he traces the history of realism, pragmatism and idealism in Europe and then analyses their relevance in the Indian situation. He was looking for connections and relations everywhere, as Mathew Arnold has famously said. So in a single article dealing with the theme of monsoon and its correlation with human mind, he selects examples from *The Mahābhārata*, Bhavabhuti, Kalidas; Burns and Thomson; then Tulsidas and Vidyapati; Ishwar Gupta from nineteenth century Bengal; visits the *Mymensing Geetika* collected by Dineshchandra Sen; and finally comes back to his favourite – the poems of Rabindranath Tagore. This idea of literature without any prefix, without any boundaries of time and space and language runs through all his works. Even the works categorised as ‘philosophical’ abounds with quotations and citations from poetry.

In his *Hindu Mysticism*<sup>14</sup> he is placing side by side the high and low, the written and oral sources without any discrimination, starting from *Vedānta*, *The Upanishadas* and *Gītā*; he is talking about the Alvar poets writing in Tamil;

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<sup>14</sup> S.N. Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism* (Norman Wait Harris Foundation Lectures, 1926), Northwestern University, Chicago/London, The Open Court Publishing, 1927.

Namdev, Gyaneshwar, Tukaram and Khechar composing in Marathi; Tulsidas writing in Avadhi; Kabirdas, Ruidas composing in a mix of Avadhi, Khariboli and Brajbhasha; down to the mendicant Bauls with their Bangla padas. These essays were part of the Harris Lectures at Chicago; so he was essentially addressing an audience abroad. And I feel he was not only aware of this fact, he was purposefully using that occasion to criticize the coloniser's gaze. At the end of these lectures Dasgupta summarises:

"The thoughts and aspirations of the ages, our myths, our religions, our philosophies, our songs and poetry, have all interpenetrated and formed a whole which cannot be expressed through a portrayal of its elements. They represent a unique experience which I feel with my country-men, but which is incommunicable to anyone who is unable imaginatively to bring himself into tune with that spirit. The British in India have understood as much of the country as is necessary for policing it [...]." <sup>15</sup>

We have to remember that Dasgupta was in the payroll of the British Government in the education service, he would be awarded the CIE, Commander of the Indian Empire; he had concourses with the Lords and Viceroy of India,

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

and yet he is taking this stance of ridiculing the colonial masters. He goes on:

“[...] but no foreigner has ever adequately understood our land. Those of you who see India through newspapers and stories of tourists who “do” India in a month, can hardly hope to go right to the place where the heart of India lies.”

These lines strangely reverberate with an anticolonial critique of the colonial and orientalist gaze. Here and there, in his novel *Adhyapak*, his poems, we often find glimpses of such critical comments. And though praising the ‘West’ for their achievements in science and economy, he is emphasizing on the knowledge and experience that is not accessible to the *outsiders*, the colonisers. And for Dasgupta, that experience is not limited to pages of the ancient books. He gives an example of a singer on a steamer plying in rural Bengal. On the deck of this *modern* steamer the Baul sings, and his songs somehow or other carry the essence of all the high and mighty knowledge systems that India has envisioned. People gather around; they can be Hindus or Muslims, the singer can be a Baul or Fakir.

This moment narrated by Dasgupta is open to criticisms of essentialising and constructing a quintessential *Indian* spirit, but I think he was trying to envisage quite a unique position. His

colossal knowledge was complimented by a rootedness in the contemporary and everyday life of his times and of the people of his country. From his body of writings it appears that to him, India embodied a polyphony of languages, cultures, faiths and people. My submission is that embodiment is sculptured through the medium of literature – a plethora of poems and songs and tales – collected from books as well as from peoples' lives accessed through his travels across this subcontinent. I feel it is necessary for us to go beyond the anecdotal and remember and rediscover him for all these wonderful things – his contributions to philosophy, literature, art, aesthetics, science, and above all, his faith in the mutuality of relations and differences – things that have drawn people to him from within and without.

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## 4

# **MAITREYI DEVI: CROSSING BORDERS AND TRAVELING IN CULTURES**

*Jayati GUPTA*

Born into a socially conservative but intellectually liberal family, Maitreyi Devi (1914-1989) was the daughter of scholar-philosopher Surendranath Dasgupta and Himani Madhuri Rai (sister of Himanshu Rai, owner and founder of Bombay Talkies).

As a young teenager, in an era when women were not usually exposed to 'otherness,' she had this interesting encounter with Romania through a much discussed romantic liaison with a Romanian youth. Unknown to her, Mircea Eliade<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) came to Calcutta in 1928 to study Indian philosophy under the tutelage of Surendranath Dasgupta, a renowned scholar, teacher of philosophy, and

wrote his autobiographical fiction<sup>2</sup> in 1933. Maitreyi discovered this much later through a French translation of 1950<sup>3</sup> and wrote a rejoinder in *Na Hanyate*,<sup>4</sup> a novel which focuses on memory, recollection and forms of misrepresentation of cultural practices or ideas. In fact, Susan Ingram talks in her book *Zarathustra's Sisters* of

“the cultural implications of self-representation, specifically on the question of how the autobiographical or documentary genre has been mobilized to intervene with discernibly didactic

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alumnus of Cambridge. Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandy of Kasimbazar, a prominent patron of education had instituted a scholarship enabling European scholars to study in India. Eliade qualified to receive this grant which was later supplemented by another Romanian bursary.

<sup>2</sup> Eliade had been invited to live in the Dasgupta household and fell in love with Maitreyi, Surendranath's daughter. Once this was discovered, Maitreyi's father asked him to leave and to cut off all relations with her. Once Mircea returned to his home country, in 1933, he wrote a barely disguised autobiographical novel in Romanian, *Maitreyi*.

<sup>3</sup> *La Nuit Bengali* was the French translation of the novel in 1950 which first drew the attention of Maitreyi.

<sup>4</sup> Maitreyi was 20 when she was married to Manmohan Sen, a quinologist who worked in the cinchona plantation at Mongpu, Kalimpong. Her Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel *Na Hanyate* was published in 1974 after her visit to Chicago and meeting with the now established Romanian philosopher, Eliade. Maitreyi confronted him with his fantasies and wrote her novel that was a rejoinder to the Romanian's depiction of their forbidden romance.

intent in hostile, condescending, or indifferent cultural force fields.”<sup>5</sup>

Maitreyi was an ardent admirer of Rabindranath Tagore and his cosmopolitanism, an independent thinker in a social ethos that was repressive for women, as well as an inveterate traveler in geographical locales and concomitant cultural spaces, both the provincial and regional and the national and international.

Her early childhood corresponded with the trying years of the First World War while in her youth she was exposed to the political lessons of the Second World War – to fascist Italy, to Hitler’s regime in Germany, to Stalinist and post-Stalinist Russia, to Republican and communist China – when Maitreyi, was generally perceived as a left-wing sympathiser. This was also the era of the emergence of nation-states, of obsessive nationalism and revolts against hegemonic and capitalist forces. Maitreyi like her Gurudev was apprehensive about narrow nationalisms. Rabindranath was “against the general idea of all

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Ingram, *Zarathustra’s Sisters: Women’s Autobiography and the Shaping of Cultural History*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2003, p. 4.

nations.”<sup>6</sup> He visualized a Nation as a whole people being organized by a State into an efficient power. However he perceived this as an aberration because he believed that it “drains man’s energy from his higher nature where he is self-sacrificing and creative.” Years later, during her visit to Russia (1955), Maitreyi met a young Romanian girl, Veronica, who asked her “If you don’t hate the colonial Britishers, how and why did you get rid of them?”<sup>7</sup> Maitreyi explained how it was imperative to drive out the imperial British from India, but without passionate hatred. She spoke of the deeply inculcated indigenous cultural traditions of tolerance and sympathy that emerged from respect for the teachings of Buddha and Chaitanya, Nanak and Kabir,<sup>8</sup> Mahatma Gandhi and Gurudev Tagore,<sup>9</sup> and their concepts of non-violence and brotherhood. She

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<sup>6</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, “Nationalism in India” in *Nationalism*, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., London, 1917, p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Maha Soviet*, Bichitra, Kolkata, 1956, pp. 75-76.

<sup>8</sup> The Vaishnava saint Chaitanya, Kabir, a mystic saint of the Bhakti movement, Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, all part of the early and late 15 century were preachers of equality and tolerance.

<sup>9</sup> The names of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore were associated with inspiration for a non-violent struggle for independence from foreign yoke.

cited the example of Bina Das<sup>10</sup> who attempted to shoot at the Bengal Governor during the University of Calcutta convocation meeting. Bina Das depositing in the courtroom, after the attempt misfired, spoke of her sense of relief that none had died. Her attempt to murder was not a protest against Mr. Stanley Jackson or a sahib per se, but against a whole system of power.

Maitreyi (herself born in Chittagong, East Bengal, now Bangladesh) came of age in an era that saw militant nationalism at its height – the martyrdom of Binoy, Badal and Dinesh,<sup>11</sup> the Chittagong armoury raid<sup>12</sup> (1930) on the one hand and the suffragette movement spearheaded

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<sup>10</sup> Bina Das (1911-1986), daughter of Brahmo educationist Beni Madhav Das, was a student of Bethune College. She was initially member of a semi-revolutionary organization in Calcutta. Her attempt to assassinate Mr. Stanley Jackson, the British Governor of Bengal in the Convocation Hall of the University of Calcutta in 1932, catapulted her to fame as a freedom fighter.

<sup>11</sup> The young revolutionary trio Binoy, Badal and Dinesh challenged British authority and repression by entering Writer's Building, the seat of British administration, and opening fire on Colonel N.S. Simpson. They were over-powered, Badal committed suicide, the other two shot themselves, Dinesh survived to be tried and executed.

<sup>12</sup> The British armoury in Chittagong was raided by a terrorist group led by Surya Sen. It is also called an uprising and was influenced by Russian Communists.

by Annie Besant,<sup>13</sup> Sarojini Naidu,<sup>14</sup> Herabai Tata<sup>15</sup> and the All India Women's Conference held in 1926, an organization that worked for emancipation of women. From the milieu in which she grew up, ideas of national resistance and political freedom were no less influential than a liberal, philosophical outlook imbibed from what she passively picked up from her father and his circle of friends, Brajendranath Seal<sup>16</sup> and Ramananda Chattopadhyay.<sup>17</sup> In the

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<sup>13</sup> Annie Besant (1847-1933) was a theosophist, writer, orator and a Women's rights activist working in India. Of Irish origin, Besant came and settled in Madras, became President of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, 1907. She was involved in India's struggle for independence and was the first woman President of the Indian National Congress at its session held in Calcutta in 1917.

<sup>14</sup> Sarojini Naidu, nee Chattopadhyay (1879-1949) was a poet, freedom fighter and activist. Gandhi called her the 'Nightingale of India' for her lyricism. She worked towards the emancipation of women and was elected the President of the Indian National Congress session held at Cawnpore (later Kanpur) in 1925.

<sup>15</sup> Herabai Tata (1879-1941) was a woman's rights activist and a suffragist influenced by Sophia Duleep Singh who was of Indian origin, living in Britain and trying to ensure women's voting rights in Britain.

<sup>16</sup> Brajendranath Seal (1864-1938) was a renowned humanist, social reformer, educationist and philosopher.

<sup>17</sup> Ramananda Chattopadhyay (1865-1943) was an educationist with strong nationalist leanings. He was a pioneer in Indian journalism and was founder editor of the Bengali monthly literary Journal *Prabasi* (1901) and the *Modern Review* (1907) in English.

Preface to a collection of her poems *Stabak* (*Bouquet*) Maitreyi writes:

“It is through one’s personal experience that every step of life can be touched by intense poetry and the deepest philosophy of living.”<sup>18</sup>

In *Na Hanyate*<sup>19</sup> Maitreyi alias Amrita’s first reaction to her father suggesting that a young foreigner was moving in to stay in their house was a negative one. She associated the West almost homogeneously with colonial hegemony, authoritarianism and violation of indigenous culture. One also learns that in their own family a certain element of acculturation was happening especially after the demise of her paternal grandmother. She learnt that cosmopolitanism and the idea of universal brotherhood shared the age-old wisdom inculcated by the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* that is upheld by the phrase *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Stabak*, Bichitra, Kolkata, 1963, page not numbered.

<sup>19</sup> *Na Hanyate* (*It Does Not Die*) was Maitreyi’s rejoinder to Eliade’s 1933 novel, written after her meeting with him in Chicago in 1973. The novel won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976.

<sup>20</sup> Literally this may be translated from the Sanskrit as the “the whole world is one family.” The saying goes back to the tradition of the Sama Veda found in mantra VI-72 in Maha Upanishad.



Later when she engages in assessing Russia in her 1956 book *Maha Soviet*<sup>21</sup> or China in *Achena Chin (Unknown China)* written in 1978, Maitreyi reads these cultures from the political standpoint of the postcolonial which intersects with the lens through which her much admired Gurudev Rabindranath, viewed Russia in 1930 and China in 1924. While travel discourse constitutes an understanding of ideas of geographical space and distance, rootedness and itinerancy, identity and belonging, the complicity of the genre in 'politics' is inevitable. Debbie Lisle calls it "a crucial site for political debate and resistance."<sup>22</sup>

In the Preface to *Maha Soviet* Maitreyi Devi categorically declares that she is not writing a travelogue *Bhraman brittanta* replete with personal experiences, but an objectively perceived account of organisations and institutions that

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<sup>21</sup> Maitreyi travelled to Europe in 1955 as part of a delegation of women from all over the world who participated in a Conference of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in Lausanne, Switzerland. Women delegates belonging to all strata of society across 70 countries congregated to collectively express their opposition to war. On this trip, the Indian delegates take a flight to Prague and then take a train to Moscow through Czechoslovakia and Ukraine.

<sup>22</sup> Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 276.

attempted to transform the lives of the people in general. She moves away from the traditional idea of the West to probe processes of social, cultural, political formations that controlled the dynamics of human living in Soviet Russia, the land behind the Iron Curtain and through it observes the East European Bloc of nations of which Romania formed a part. She is aware of 'otherness' and alterity and the problems of representation without essentializing the other. Language articulation is the single most important method of communication of subtle nuances of meaning and emotions. Inability to converse in another language can most often act as a barrier to understanding people and their customs and Maitreyi critically reflects on linguistic translation and meaningful cultural exchange.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote about his much desired, yet twice postponed, two-week sojourn to Moscow in 1930 in his *Russiar Chithi* (published in 1931). Russia had undergone transformation from a tsarist regime to what appeared to be a more populist Bolshevik dispensation under Vladimir Lenin in the aftermath of revolutionary uprisings, ushering in social, political and economic change. By the time

Tagore visited the country further reshaping of public and citizen life had already happened.

“In 1917, the Bolsheviks seized political power in Russia, but despite sporadic experiments under war communism, they did not radically transform Russia’s socioeconomic system in their first decade of rule. Beginning in 1928 and 1929, however, Stalin and the Communist Party carried out a second major revolution, one that completely changed the configuration of Soviet society [...]. Indeed, the goal of making the Soviet Union powerful enough to withstand any external threat strongly motivated Stalin and his comrades to force through rapid industrialization.”<sup>23</sup>

Rabindranath was eager to experience and understand the difference between a colonized capitalist society where “the majority of mankind is oppressed and dehumanized”<sup>24</sup> and a communist regime where the problem was addressed at the grassroots level when change and transformation in the condition of the common man was visible within a short time. When Tagore visited Russia he was travelling as an oppressed ‘native’ witnessing an alternative

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<sup>23</sup> John M. Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union An Historical Introduction from the Kievan State to the Present*, Westview Press, U.S.A., 2009, p. 244.

<sup>24</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Russiar Chithi (Letters from Russia)*, Viswa-Bharati Publications, Kolkata, 1961, pp. 1, 2.

political system. The accepted binary positioning of the imperial centre and the colonial periphery in Western Europe and the global south respectively was complicated by locating aspirational models of progress in Eastern Europe. Rabindranath wrote:

“It is not like any other country. The difference is in the very foundation. They have awakened all their people in an equal manner.”<sup>25</sup>

Social equity was for Rabindranath the first step in the direction of individual freedom. He commended the access that the common man seemed to have to resources, education and health care which even after a hundred years was not available to British subjects across the Indian subcontinent.

“If you think of it, England has been nurtured on the food that India had been deprived of. Many people in England seem to be of the view that India’s only purpose is to sustain England for ever. That country has gone on to accomplish major developments for humankind and this appears to justify its keeping another nation in slavery for eternity. If this race eats less and subsists on less – how does it matter at all? Some compassion may be shown and some improvement in their condition should be made,

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, 1, 1.

is only a passing thought. Yet a hundred years have gone by – we have not got education, nor healthcare, nor any wealth.”<sup>26</sup>

Tagore’s anti colonial stance peeved the British who banned the English version of the letters that Ramananda Chattopadhyay published in *The Modern Review* of 1934.

Historical circumstances of Maitreyi’s visit to Russia were different. She was travelling from a recently independent nation, a Republic that under the prime minister ship of Jawaharlal Nehru was exploring the structures and patterns of socialism. She was a member of the Women’s International Democratic Federation, a women’s delegation congregating in Lausanne to attend a conference of mothers, sisters, daughters from all strata of society who were protesting against the ravages of war.

At the end of the conference, several delegates from India toured Russia, a country out of bounds like the Forbidden City in China. The train transported the group from Lausanne to Zurich through the picturesque countryside. Then from Zurich to Prague they took a flight, then a memorable train journey to Moscow through

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 1, 2.

Czechoslovakia and Ukraine. She refers to divided perceptions about post-revolution Russia and asks a basic question:

“If the gigantic effort is towards human good, why are the people oppressed? From where did we gather proof about oppression on people? Was it merely rumors or the opposition’s propaganda? [...] There are innumerable hair-raising ‘real’ stories about Russia in addition to hundreds of books, working in tandem with the iron curtain, the trials of the renegades – all that add up to an impression of a vast prison house.”<sup>27</sup>

As an epigraph to her book recounting her visit to the Soviet Union, Maitreyi significantly enough uses words from Rabindranath’s *Letters from Russia*. The dichotomy and suspicion about the relationship of the individual and the State that she encountered during her visit is prophetically articulated by the poet:

“It is not easy to, on the one hand, exercise freedom of the mind, and on the other, give in to oppression. Fear is likely to work for sometime, but an educated mind will one day forcefully assert its personal independence and condemn one’s own lack of courage. They have oppressed these people physically though not mentally.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Maha Soviet*, Bichitra, Kolkata, 1956, pp. 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> Tagore, Rabindranath, *Russiar Chithi (Letters from Russia)*, op. cit., pp. 13, 89.

Historians assessing Russian socio-economic and socio-political conditions have focused on how

“the massive effort to industrialize the Soviet Union in the 1930s produced a substantial economic base for the society and paved the way for the nation to become the second-largest industrial power in the world (after the United States) after World War II. The more difficult questions are, how it was done, and what did it cost?”<sup>29</sup>

The transition from Czarist Russia to the Bolshevik Soviet Union involved a massive effort to mobilize human and material resources of the country that

“demanded prescriptive centralized economic planning and maximum control over every institution and individual [that] left no room for the operation of autonomous interest groups or the initiative and wishes of private individuals. Party and state set the goals, chose the methods, managed the effort, and ensured that each Soviet citizen made the contribution the plan required.”<sup>30</sup>

Totalitarianism, state control, paranoia and use of terror became the tools to achieve the goals set in Stalinist Russia. Maitreyi as an

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<sup>29</sup> John M. Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union An Historical Introduction from the Kievan State to the Present*, op. cit., p. 249.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 249-250.

outsider, views the loss of freedom as an impingement on the rights of the individual, on creativity and on personal growth. Yet she is impressed by the advances Soviet Russia had made in education, equalizing social disparity, advancing health care and large-scale industrialisation. There was something inexplicable and bewildering in the Russia that she saw and she tried to bring together the idea of proscribed progress and the concept of individual freedom.

In this context Maitreyi gives an account of an interaction with a Romanian professor, his wife and two children who had relocated to London, and another wealthy Chinese family, a couple with a child, who had found a new home in Kalimpong. These encounters allow her to rework ideas of transnationalism.

The Romanian exiles<sup>31</sup> are agitated about the Communist occupation of their homeland which had played havoc with citizen lives – the professor's sister and her husband were deported to Siberia and his own library of 8-10

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<sup>31</sup> In her book *Maha Soviet* (Bichitra, Kolkata, 1956) Maitreyi recounts this encounter during her visit to London during her sojourn in Western Europe a year before her journey to Eastern Europe. These accounts are part of the introductory chapter, pp. 2-5.



thousand books was burnt down. Maitreyi, a Communist sympathiser, is stunned by this face of modern day injustice and violence. The Romanian refugees are bitter about the loss of their homeland and the shift in status and identity.

“There are 22,000 Romanian refugees in Paris alone. No one abandons one’s own country without a reason. Yet, they are fortunate that they have been able to flee their homeland.”<sup>32</sup>

The couple urged Maitreyi to return to India and proclaims the dangers of communism in no uncertain terms. Among these pitfalls they cited the ruining of family ties, the punishment meted out to innocent people, imprisonment without recourse to justice, State treachery and death of deported individuals.

Maitreyi compares this situation to that of another wealthy Chinese migrant couple who had fled China fearing a backlash after the communists took over. The couple’s friends in China were shifting loyalties to an ‘ism’ that was taking the form of a coercive religion. In liberal terms religion is about ethics, morals, human relationships and connections. While the Chinese migrant speaks of the evolution and transformation of a country, he

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

wonders if he will recognize their defamiliarised homeland if they travel back.

“It is here we see the complicated interplay between the Mao generation’s conversion to Communist ideology and its continuous exposure to the influence of China’s age-old history and culture. At a glance, the two experiences are contradictory. As 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionaries, Mao and his comrades were highly critical of the Chinese past, declaring that their revolution would render a thorough transformation of China’s ‘old’ state, society, and culture. But when Mao and his comrades were posing challenges to the Chinese past, the ideology on which they depended as the lodestar and guiding philosophy for the transformation had to be articulated through the discourse, symbols, norms, and identities that had been a part of the Chinese past.”<sup>33</sup>

Maitreyi, comparing the situations of these two sets of exiles, who had abandoned their countries, realizes how cultural difference shapes perspectives. The Chinese exposed to the religion of Buddha, perhaps came to terms with sacrifice and loss with more equanimity. The emergence of small European nation states, with ethnic heritage, traditions and identity was

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<sup>33</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, University of North Carolina Press, U.S.A., 2001, p. 8.

marked by divisive civil conflicts between and within the East European bloc and the West European conglomerate. Maitreyi's explorations around political and cultural encounters move towards "genuinely dialogic, multidirectional and polyphonic perspectives."<sup>34</sup>

In her autobiographical novel *Na Hanyate* Amrita's father advises the Romanian youth roaming the streets of Calcutta in search of revolution or tanning himself in the sun to acquire 'Indianness,' that deep philosophical knowledge and cultural understanding are the only ways to transform the inner self. Every other form of difference is external and material.

Maitreyi's real-life friendship with Mircea Eliade in the 1930s helped her to rework ideas of transnationalism, its agendas and interests in the specific contexts of class, gender, and politics. In her adulthood when she visits Russia or China the transnational cognitive processes she was exposed to as a teenager opened up other kinds of spaces and perspectives to her. For example, in *Maha Soviet*, she recounts a conversation with a

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<sup>34</sup> Hallam, Elizabeth and Brian V. Street (Eds.), *Cultural Encounters: Representing 'otherness'*, Routledge, UK, 2005, p. 1.

young Romanian girl, barely 22 or 23 years old, a poet and writer who could communicate only in broken English. Maitreyi asks her if she knew a Romanian writer, Mircea Eliade who she used to know in the pre-war years:

“Oh, you know him!” “Where is he?” “He is dead.”  
“Aha, his was not the age to die – what happened?”  
Veronica went on to clarify herself. “Not dead exactly, but dead to us, he has gone over to the fascist.”<sup>35</sup>

This interaction pained Maitreyi who comments that she wanted to tell Veronika that such an attitude was anathema to tolerance and patience. Differences of opinion should never lead to extreme bitterness as that is the first step to war.

“Yet I did not have the language to communicate this to her. I couldn’t get a Romanian interpreter. So the conversation on this matter remained inconclusive.”<sup>36</sup>

The inadequacy of understanding an alien language and through it the nuances of cultural representation remained a traumatic memory for Maitreyi. When Mircea Eliade had come to

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<sup>35</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Maha Soviet*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 27-28.

stay in their Bhowanipore home after he had been suitably “acclimatized” after a few months stay in Calcutta, her father

“encouraged the two young people to exchange language lessons, Bengali for French, and to work together cataloguing his library.”<sup>37</sup>

Yet the natural romantic alliance shocked Surendranath Dasgupta, who blamed his pupil and shamed his daughter. Perhaps lack of linguistic proficiency with which cultural ethnicity is imbibed was at the root of the distancing.

In the introduction to *Achena Chin* Maitreyi recounts how ‘knowing’ and ‘understanding’ ancient civilizations that often sprawl over extended geographical spaces or terrain and swathes of time can be extremely complex. More challenging than the temporal span is the barrier of language “that is like seeing the other through a misted glass.”<sup>38</sup> Gradually, as the encounter deepens, the mist lifts, and the mind opens its doors to different emotions and thoughts that attempt to transcend alterity. As she looks into

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<sup>37</sup> Susan Ingram, *Zarathustra's Sisters: Women's Autobiography and the Shaping of Cultural History*, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>38</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Achena Chin*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2013, p. 1.

the unknown distance, what she sees before her consciously or unconsciously gets entangled with memories and experiences of the past that redefine the contours of new encounters.

After her 1955 tour of Russia, Maitreyi had spoken extensively about the positives that she witnessed – she had not seen instances of child labor, no pavement dwellers, no beggars, no stray dogs, and no disabled persons. She had visited communes and collective farms, old age homes and hospitals, schools and museums, the Bolshevik theatre, puppet shows, industrial units and agricultural exhibitions.

She tried to gauge the extent of happiness and contentment vis-à-vis levels of literacy, education and training achieved at all social levels. She noticed the spontaneity of response to outsiders, the self confidence in children and finds it difficult to believe that these interactions can be State directed and controlled. It is also important to mention here that unlike Tagore who stayed only in Moscow, Maitreyi visited Leningrad and other places. When she returned to visit Russia in 1962, she noticed transformation in public life and a change in attitudes and perceptions.

Referring to the transnational gaze, Maitreyi reiterates that in conjunction with the physical eyes confined to the here and now, there is a third eye that none can control that needs to be mentally open to absorb what one sees.

“There can be frequent changes in government, policies change, diplomatic relations between two countries undergo change, but that does not in any way dismiss previous connections. The truth of one encounter does not become an untruth in another time [...]. Moreover, government and policy changes have nothing to do with human consciousness in general which remains constant.”<sup>39</sup>

This lesson in liberal humanism and acceptance of other perspectives is something Maitreyi imbibed from her early experience with knowing a Romanian who taught her French and with whom she shared lessons in Bengali and Sanskrit. Acceptance of success achieved by other nations, learning languages belonging to others, exchanging cultural practices all lead to processes of transculturation that are intimate but extend to public spaces. For Maitreyi this ability to accommodate otherness as I conjecture came from two sources – firstly her interaction with Mircea Eliade and her first awareness of the

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

world outside “narrow domestic walls” that imprisoned a lot of Indian women even in the early twentieth century; and secondly her deep reverence for Rabindranath, his cosmopolitanism and internationalism. In *Achena Chin* she observes that political internationalism as evident in the political diplomacy of Jawaharlal Nehru<sup>40</sup> for example is dependent on outside events and circumstances; Rabindranath’s ability to traverse cultures is deeper and is inextricably linked to the fundamental truths of human life.<sup>41</sup> In one of the last lectures he delivered in China, a country he found rich in art and philosophy, during his visit in 1924, Tagore said:

“[...] I firmly believe that it is from the ideal that we get to know the best aspects of the real, and that the complete life is given by these two seen together. I must admit it is difficult for a stranger to discover this innermost trust, but I believe I have caught glimpses of it.”<sup>42</sup>

Maitreyi draws a scenario of ambivalence and skepticism regarding the international politics of communism as practiced in what is

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<sup>40</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) was a freedom fighter and statesman who became the first Prime Minister of independent India.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Talks in China*, Rupa and Co., New Delhi, 2002, p. 112.



termed the 'Cold War' period that spanned the post Second World War to the last decades of the twentieth century, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union. She visited China as a delegate of a nine member Indian team invited to visit the country for the opening of the Dr Kotnis<sup>43</sup> memorial museum in December 1974. This was when diplomatic relations between India and China were picking up again after the 1962 Sino-Indian War following the occupation of Tibet (1959) and India granting asylum to Tibetan refugees and the Dalai Lama.

"China is such a faraway country, not geographically, but distanced by impregnable inaccessibility,"<sup>44</sup> Maitreyi realizes, and seeks to renew ancient ties forged by Buddha and Ashoka, Hieun Tsang and Fa Hien followed by Rabindranath Tagore in later times.

The visits to Beijing, Nanking, Shijiazhuang, Kowloon and other cities and far flung provinces, communes, collectives, cooperative agricultural farms, educational institutions, acupuncture institutes, and interaction with interpreters, political

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<sup>43</sup> Dwarakanath S. Kotnis (1910-1942) was one of the doctors sent to China during the Sino-Japanese war in 1938. He treated wounded front-line Chinese soldiers selflessly, married a Chinese nurse and lived on there till his untimely death.

<sup>44</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Achena Chin*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

leaders, ordinary citizens of the 'People's Republic,' poets, intellectuals, artists, even diplomats, gave Maitreyi insights into different phases of China's Communist ideology, the Cultural Revolution and radicalism that was seeking to legitimize itself as Communism in action, dominated by towering personalities like Chairman Mao Tse Tung who played a role in shaping modern-day Chinese culture and society. In her observation, Communism in China is largely open and broad-minded, perhaps more democratic.

The cross-cultural conversations that Maitreyi was able to strike up through her travels and interactions with different peoples led her to suspect that:

"it will not be possible to equate Russia and China. In reality, though one can follow the same ideology, every country has its distinctive character. No leader can ignore that and expect to proceed on the path of success. The massive industriousness in several fields that I am describing evokes a thought – is this enterprise self-motivated or done under coercion? [...] It leads me to wonder about how much and how long can a person be pushed into doing a job? Can oppression ever motivate anyone? If one is not inspired, can this enormous endeavor become successful?"<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 114.

Her first-hand experience of the outcome of the proletarian revolution in China<sup>46</sup> was to notice how this was intimately and dramatically linked to the discourses of anti-imperialism and decolonization.

“in a cross-cultural environment, the creation, transmission, and representation of an ideological belief must be subjected to the definition and interpretation of the discourse, symbols, norms, and values that formed a particular actor’s historically/culturally bound conceptual lens. The outcome of the process could lead either to convergence of or to divergence between actors with the same ideological belief. Consequently, ideology, like religious faith, could either bring people together or split them apart, and, in certain circumstances, even cause them to engage in deadly confrontations with one another.”<sup>47</sup>

Maitreyi’s transnationalism can be traced to her eclectic friendships, varied reading and liberal outlook that exposed her to diverse cultures and experiences. “A country is its people,”<sup>48</sup> she reiterates. So despite the passage of time and distance, Eliade and Romania were etched together in her memory, inextricably and

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<sup>46</sup> As achievements of the revolution Maitreyi talks of how among millions of people there was no unemployment, starvation, inflation, financial loans from other countries.

<sup>47</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Achena Chin*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

indelibly. Similarly, the Soviet people equated India with peace and non-violence and their overwhelming response to Indians was that they had “come from a fairy land”<sup>49</sup> that was far away from war and aggression, hate and violence. The ancient civilization of China and the Chinese people remained inscrutable and complex and therefore undeciphered, “Achina.” Postcolonial historiography, in the second half of the twentieth century was caught up in the dilemma of reclaiming a past, a tradition of civilization even while it attempted to disrupt the colonial paradigm with new structures of progressive modernity. When travelling in cultures, Maitreyi’s focus was on learning from experiments and transformations in social living initiated especially in Eastern Europe and East Asia.

Maitreyi used lines from Rabindranath Tagore in *Achina Chin* to refer to how she explored distant lands and peoples, crossed borders of nations, barriers of language, and differences of culture to be at ‘home in the world.’<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Maha Soviet*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>50</sup> In 1916 Rabindranath Tagore wrote *Ghare Baire*, a novel that was translated as *The Home and the World*. In 2021, Nobel Laureate, Professor Amartya Sen published a Memoir which uses echoes from the title of Tagore’s novel: *Home in the World*.

I quote the Bengali lines she uses followed by a free translation:

সব ঠাই মনের ঘর আছে, আমি  
সহে ঘর মরি খুঁজিয়া।  
দশে দশে মনের দশে আছে, আমি  
সহে দশে লব বুঝিয়া।  
পরবাসী আমি যে দুয়ারে চাই--  
তারি মাঝে মনের আছে যনে ঠাই,  
কোথা দিয়া সখা প্রবশেতি পাই  
সন্ধান লব বুঝিয়া।  
ঘরে ঘরে আছে পরমাত্মীয়,  
তারে আমি ফরি খুঁজিয়া।<sup>51</sup>

My room is everywhere, yet I  
keep looking for that home.  
My country is in every country, yet I  
Fight to be in that country.  
Though an immigrant, whichever door I go to  
I have space there for me,  
How can I enter into that place?  
I shall find out a passage there.  
There is a soul mate in every house,  
Yet I keep searching for her...

**Note:** Maitreyi Devi's volumes and Rabindranath Tagore's *Russiar Chithi* are originally written in Bengali. All translations from these books into English are mine.

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<sup>51</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Achena Chin*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

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## MAITREYI DEVI – NA HANYATE – THE STORY BEHIND

*Mihaela GLIGOR*

“This is destiny. I am thankful to Mircea that he is the inspiration and cause of the book which has changed my life in a big way.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1994, the University of Chicago Press published a very special conjoined edition. Mircea Eliade’s *Bengal Nights* and Maitreyi Devi’s *It Does Not Die* were released as companion volumes depicting two sides of a romance. When presenting the novels, the publisher described them in this way:

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<sup>1</sup> Maitreyi Devi to Mac Linscott Ricketts, an undated letter from 1982, in Maitreyi Devi - Mac Linscott Ricketts, *Correspondență. 1976-1988* [*Correspondence. 1976-1988*], Preface by Mihaela Gligor, Introduction by Mac Linscott Ricketts, Translated by Mihaela Gligor and Maria-Daniela Pomohaci, Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2012, p. 77. The original letters are in Mihaela Gligor’s archive.



"Set in 1930s Calcutta, this is a *roman à clef* of remarkable intimacy. [...] A vibrantly poetic love story, *Bengal Nights* is also a cruel account of the wreckage left in the wake of a young man's self discovery. At once horrifying and deeply moving, Eliade's story repeats the patterns of European engagement with India even as it exposes and condemns them. Invaluable for the insight it offers into Eliade's life and thought, it is a work of great intellectual and emotional power."<sup>2</sup>

"Maitreyi Devi was sixteen years old in 1930 when Mircea Eliade came to Calcutta to study with her father. More than forty years passed before Devi read *Bengal Nights*, the novel Eliade had fashioned out of their encounter, only to find small details and phrases, even her given name, bringing back episodes and feelings she had spent decades trying to forget. *It Does Not Die* is Devi's response. In part a counter to Eliade's fantasies, the book is also a moving account of a first love fraught with cultural tensions, of false starts and lasting regrets."<sup>3</sup>

Shortly, several reviews appeared, and their titles were disclosing more about the two novels' stories: "Two Tales of Love,"<sup>4</sup> "They've

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<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Bengal Nights. A Novel*, trans. by Catherine Spencer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *It Does Not Die. A Romance*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Eder, "Two Tales of Love," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 1994.

looked at Love from Both Sides Now,”<sup>5</sup> “Love in Calcutta His and Hers,”<sup>6</sup> or “Remembering Forbidden Love in the Time of the Raj.”<sup>7</sup>

“One is called a ‘novel,’ the other a ‘romance.’ *Bengal Nights* was originally written in 1933 in Romanian, subsequently published in French in 1950, and made into the film, *Les Nuits Bengali*, in 1987. *It Does Not Die* first appeared in Bengali in 1974. The young author of *Bengal Nights*, Mircea Eliade, went on to become an internationally renowned and much-published scholar; the writer of *It Does Not Die*, Maitreyi Devi, was 60, a famous poet and public figure in India when her book was published. The divergent histories of the two books have now converged with the simultaneous publication of their English translations. [...]

*It Does Not Die*, with a title which could be a reference to the eternity of first love, instead exposes how ephemeral it is. The relationship between the two authors becomes marginal to their future lives. But memory, like writing, churns up the present as it questions the past. And, as these two very dissimilar books testify, from the intertwining of the past and the present, something endures, however tenuously.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nina Mehta, “They’ve looked at Love from Both Sides Now,” *The Chicago Tribune*, May 8, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Isabel Colegate, “Love in Calcutta, His and Hers,” *The New York Times Book Review*, May 15, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Tilottama Minu Tharoor, “Remembering Forbidden Love in the Time of the Raj,” *The Washington Post*, May 22, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, last accessed 08.01.2023.

If most of the readers were expecting this special edition, and were very pleased to read it, some were scandalized by the University of Chicago Press's initiative. In August 1994, *The New Republic* published an article signed by Anita Desai, the famous Indian writer. Titled "O Calcutta!" the article was extremely critical to Mircea Eliade's novel and contained many inexactitudes, from the very beginning:

"In 1950 Mircea Eliade [...] published a thinly disguised account of a romantic episode in his youth in Calcutta, where he lived with a Bengali family and fell in love with their daughter, Maitreyi. Eliade's novel is a disturbing mixture of the racial and colonial attitudes of the day.<sup>9</sup> [...] Eliade is obsessed by racial differences, and takes pains to record the subtlest shades of skin color."<sup>10</sup>

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1994/05/22/remembering-forbidden-love-in-the-time-of-the-raj/60de8a2f-051b-4ca1-a141-cde026b2be4b/>

<sup>9</sup> However, a different opinion was expressed, 10 years before, by a Bengali Professor who had the luck to find Eliade's novel in a Library in Canada. Haragauri Narayan Gupta was Alfred Tarski's only doctoral student in foundations of geometry. See Haragauri Narayan Gupta's letter to Mac Linscott Ricketts in Mihaela Gligor, "Maitreyi. The Bengali Connection," in *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies*, no. 2, 2018, pp. 149-150. <http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/bd/ebooks/pdf/2293.pdf> The original letter is in Mihaela Gligor's archive.

<sup>10</sup> Anita Desai, "O Calcutta," *The New Republic*, 15 August 1994, pp. 43-45, p. 43.

Anita Desai's angriness comes from the fact that

"University of Chicago Press has taken the imaginative step of bringing out both these books simultaneously, providing readers with a fascinating access to the two perspectives of a single affair. [...] All we have, alas, is an unlovely affair in which the 'hero' farcically needs to mythologize the dark and initially unattractive Maitreyi into a primitive goddess so that he can find her fascinating."<sup>11</sup>

On 16 August 1994, Mac Linscott Ricketts<sup>12</sup> sent a letter to *The New Republic*. He presented the inexactitudes written by Desai and concluded:

"Having known Professor Eliade personally and having corresponded extensively with Maitreyi Devi, it grieves me to see the views of both, but especially the former, distorted in a prominent magazine. Ms. Desai's venomous and uninformed review dishonors *The New Republic*."<sup>13</sup>

Who was Maitreyi Devi? Why was she so important and how come her novel generated

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> Mac Linscott Ricketts (1930-2022) was the American biographer of Mircea Eliade. He was the author of a monumental work dedicated to Eliade. See Mac Linscott Ricketts, *Mircea Eliade. The Romanian Roots. 1907-1945*, 2 volumes, East European Monographs, Boulder, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Letter of Mac Linscott Ricketts to the editors of *The New Republic*, 16 August 1994. A copy of this letter is in Mihaela Gligor's archive.

such a storm? What drove her in writing such a novel in the first place?

For me, first, she was the main character of Mircea Eliade's *Maitreyi*. The story contains extensive autobiographical passages and, with only a few exceptions, the author keeps the actual names of the people and places described. Young Mircea Eliade met Maitreyi Devi in Surendranath Dasgupta's<sup>14</sup> house in Bhowanipore, in Calcutta, where he lived for a while at the invitation of his professor, who was eager to show him the true India, and to facilitate his student a direct contact with the authentic Bengali life. The professor's daughter did not draw his attention immediately, but things changed soon.

"It is also true that the whole of my existence at Bhowanipore, not just Maitreyi, was miraculous and unreal to me. My coming to the house had been so quick, so effortless, and my life there was still so mysterious and disquieting."<sup>15</sup>

The love story between the two youngsters came to the ears of the professor, who banished

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<sup>14</sup> Surendranath Dasgupta (1887-1952) was an Indian philosopher; and professor at the University of Calcutta. He was also a professor of philosophy, at Presidency College, Calcutta; professor of Sanskrit, Chittagong College and lecturer in the University of Cambridge.

<sup>15</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Bengal Nights. A Novel*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

Eliade not only from his home, but also from Calcutta. When returning in Romania, Eliade wrote this novel, which brought him unspeakable fame. I read *Maitreyi (Bengal Nights)* while I was in high school, and it changed my life. Years after my first encounter with the character, when I first arrived in India, in 2007, I had the opportunity to learn, from her family and people who have met her, that Maitreyi was more than a character.

Maitreyi Devi was a poet, essayist, and prose writer, one of the most remarkable women of Bengal. She had received a special education and had shown a very poetic sensitivity even since her young years. Her first volume of lyrics appeared when she was only 16 years old, carrying Rabindranath Tagore's Preface. She published poetry, essays, and volumes on the life and works of Rabindranath Tagore, but also philosophy and travel books.

In 1972, Maitreyi was 58 years old and had relocated to Kolkata a few years earlier. One day, an acquaintance took her to the Ramakrishna Mission, in Gol Park, to meet a foreign guest,

Sergiu Al-George,<sup>16</sup> a close friend of Mircea Eliade. She was amazed to learn that Eliade had written a novel called *Maitreyi*, wherein he had given elaborate details on their passionate affair.

"I tried to forget Mircea, I tried hard and I thought I succeeded. [...] Then you came Sergiu. [...] For full one month I rocked in fear. [...] What does it matter if my reputation is hurt? Love is greater than reputation. Oh! I am grateful to him for all that he has written because that is the only recognition he has given to the supreme truth of our lives. [...]

I would now go to the end of the world to see him again. [...] Nobody is blaming me. My husband and my daughter urge me to go to him, to see him if that would give me peace."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sergiu Al-George (1922-1981) was a Romanian Indologist. In 1972, while visiting Calcutta, he meets Maitreyi Devi by chance. He tells her about Eliade's novel. After their unexpected meeting in Calcutta, they had an intense correspondence. Their exchange was published along with other letters in Sergiu Al-George, *Corespondență*, Biblioteca Pedagogică Națională I.C. Petrescu, București, 1999, Cap. 11, pp. 51-62. She always thought Sergiu was sent to her by destiny. In one of her letters to him, she wrote: "Sergiu [...] you rock the bottom of peaceful rational attitude of my stable life and have put it up side down so that reason has gone below and bubbles of emotions are coming up. This must somehow be put right or I will be able to bear it no longer." Letter from 12.11.72, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Maitreyi Devi's letter to Sergiu Al-George, 2.12.72, in Sergiu Al-George, *Corespondență*, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

And she went to see him. In April 1973, Maitreyi arrived in Chicago along with a group of Jesuits. One day, she just knocked on Mircea Eliade's door.

Mircea Eliade was, at that time, a famous historian of religions and a professor at the University of Chicago. He was very surprised by her visit. This unexpected meeting took him back in time, to his youth when India was a major part of his life. In his *Journal*, Eliade only noted: "Meeting with M. After almost 43 years. Everything seems surreal."<sup>18</sup>

Prof. Pabitra Sarkar<sup>19</sup> was a witness to their encounter and he remembers that

"When I met her the next day, she was joyful. She told us that she had fulfilled her mission for which she had come to Chicago, namely to meet Eliade. She was happy and told us about her love for Mircea. Until then we didn't know anything for

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<sup>18</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Jurnal [Journal]*, vol. II, Humanitas, București, 1993, entry from 13 April 1973.

<sup>19</sup> Pabitra Sarkar (born in 1937) is an Indian academician, professor, and writer. From 1969 to 1975, he was in the United States as a Fulbright scholar, at the University of Chicago, where he did his Ph.D. in Linguistics. He taught at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis from 1973 to 1975. Between 1990 and 1997, Prof. Sarkar was Vice Chancellor of Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. I had the honor of meeting him in February 2008.



sure. [...] We witnessed such a romantic event. I realized we were part of a great human drama.”<sup>20</sup>

But Maitreyi Devi also gave an important lecture at the South East Asia Section of the University of Chicago. The invitation came from Edward C. Dimock Jr.<sup>21</sup>

“My friends at home chose my subject of talk for me, ‘Rabindranath – The Man behind his Poetry.’ Persons who can talk on this subject are getting rarer. Poetry will remain, but the poet is destined to go.”<sup>22</sup>

And that was not her only one, as Eliade himself mentioned in his *Journal*:

“M. has gone away to give lectures at several universities. Therefore, a week or two of peace.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, both on personal and academic levels, her visit to Chicago was successful.

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<sup>20</sup> See Traian Penciu's interview with Pabitra Sarkar in Maitreyi Devi - Mac Linscott Ricketts, *Correspondență. 1976-1988, op. cit.*, pp. 99-104.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Cameron Dimock Jr. (1929-2001) was, at that time, a professor of Bengali literature at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, and a close friend and colleague of Mircea Eliade.

<sup>22</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Rabindranath – The Man behind his Poetry*, a booklet published by Sudhir Das, Nabajatak Printers, Calcutta, 1973.

<sup>23</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Jurnal, op. cit.*, entry from 29 April 1973.

In the same year, it was followed by another important visit: to Romania.

“I did meet his mother in Romania in Dec. 1973. After coming back from Chicago I was invited by Writers Union to visit that country.”<sup>24</sup>

She considered their encounter “pathetic,” but Eliade’s nephew, Sorin Alexandrescu, described it differently.<sup>25</sup> In his opinion, she was trying to make sense of his gesture of writing about her. She wanted to learn about his family and culture. She even asked Eliade’s mother to bless her. While in Bucharest, she also met Sergiu Al-George and spent 1974 New Year’s Eve in his house, along with his wife,<sup>26</sup> Amita Bhoose,<sup>27</sup> and

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<sup>24</sup> As mentioned in Maitreyi Devi’s letter to Mac Linscott Ricketts, dated 27.5.76.

<sup>25</sup> See, in Romanian, Sorin Alexandrescu, “Un fotoliu insuportabil de singur” [“An unbearably lonely armchair,”] in Mihaela Gligor (Ed.), *Maitreyi Devi. Povestea adevărată* [*Maitreyi Devi. The True Story*], Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2019, pp. 13-31.

<sup>26</sup> See Dorina Al-George, *Șocul amintirilor*, Editura Paralela 45, Pitești, 2006, pp. 124-139 (containing a chapter on Maitreyi Devi and Amita Bhoose). Dorina Al-George’s description is moving: “I met Maitreyi, an imposing lady, with a certain type of mature beauty, full of strength and personality, and she told us chilling things: after meeting Sergiu in Calcutta, she entered into a state of anxiety from which she could not get out; she lost her sleep and interest in anything other than the obsessive thought that she must see Mircea Eliade again, the creator of her ideal image.” (p. 131)

<sup>27</sup> Amita Bhoose (1933-1992) was an Indian scholar who decided to live in Romania. She specialized in the life and works of Mihai

Constantin Noica.<sup>28</sup> Her presence in the city was mentioned in the newspapers, and a couple of her poems were translated into Romanian.<sup>29</sup>

When she returned to Calcutta, she decided to write her side of their story. And that was a brilliant idea! *Na Hanyate*<sup>30</sup> appeared in 1974 and was well-received by its readers. The phrase *Na Hanyate* suggests aspiration to a quality of existence beyond the earthly and material. *Na Hanyate* is taken from the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

“ajo nityaḥ śāśvato'yaṁ purāṇo na hanyate  
hanyamāṇe śarire” [Unborn, eternal, everlasting,  
primeval, it does not die when the body dies].<sup>31</sup>

In a short time, Maitreyi herself translated *Na Hanyate* into English. I have received from

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Eminescu, Romania's national poet, and translated extensively from Bengali to Romanian, and also from Romanian to Bengali. For 20 years, she was a professor of Sanskrit and Bengali at the University of Bucharest. Her works are published in Romania by Cununi de stele publishing house founded by her former student, Carmen Muşat-Coman. More details about Amita Bhose and her legacy: <http://www.amitabhose.net>.

<sup>28</sup> Constantin Noica (1909-1987) was a Romanian philosopher, and essayist, a close friend of Mircea Eliade.

<sup>29</sup> Translated by Amita Bhose and Veronica Porumbacu, these were published in *Secolul XX*, July, 1973, pp. 132-137. Maitreyi's poems were selected from her volume, *Aditya Marichi*, translated from Bengali by Shyamasree Devi, printed by Sudhir Das at the Nabajatak Printers, Calcutta, 1972.

<sup>30</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Na Hanyate*, Manisha Granthalaya, Calcutta, 1974.

<sup>31</sup> *Bhagavad Gītā*, Canto Two, Sloka 20.

professor Mac Linscott Ricketts his signed copy of the first English edition of *Na Hanyate: It Does Not Die*.<sup>32</sup> It's a wonderful volume bound in *saree* material. Her novel is a meditation on memory and time, an investigation of youth motivation, and a profound philosophical statement on love, immortality, and truth.

"Time is not anchored anywhere. It has no front, back or sides. Time does not rise and set. Only to express me the Infinite becomes finite,"

writes Maitreyi in her first pages.<sup>33</sup> Her story is extremely personal and it follows exactly the events as they happened. Everything begins "on the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> September 1972," when she meets Sergiu Al-George at Ramakrishna Mission in Gol Park. While answering his questions, she remembers the events that took place in 1930, when young Mircea lived in their house: "I was transported to the verandah of our Bhowanipur house."<sup>34</sup> The Mircea she describes is the same we know: "That was Mircea – always searching for inner meaning."<sup>35</sup> The atmosphere of her

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<sup>32</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *It Does Not Die. A Romance*, P. Lal Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1976.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

house is as we imagined while reading his story, full of personalities, and an engaging cultural and scientific environment:

“Of the constant visitors, I remember most Stella Kramrisch and Professor Tucci. [...] Because of these visitors our ways were also changing; gradually we were getting westernized.”<sup>36</sup>

In many ways, *Na Hanyate* is the story of another story, the description of how she learned about Eliade’s novel in the first place:

“As far as I can remember that was in 1938. Father told me in Calcutta, ‘Mircea has dedicated a book to you and he has sought your forgiveness in the dedication’.”<sup>37</sup>

Beyond this, in *Na Hanyate* Maitreyi describes her own life, offering many details about the Bengali culture, her family, her husband, their children, their life together in their “forest resort,” her work as an activist for the cause of the poorest, or as a writer. “People know me, respect me. My work and life are steadily expanding.”<sup>38</sup> She traveled a lot and sometimes she met people that

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 187.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 214.

reminded her about Eliade. She describes one such event:

“In 1956 I went to Europe again. [...] In a large auditorium, when I was coming down from the rostrum, a sprightly young girl [...] approached me: ‘Are you Amrita?’”<sup>39</sup>

The young girl was a Romanian, Veronica Porumbacu,<sup>40</sup> and their meeting took place in Switzerland, in 1956, where the two of them were participating “at a world congress of mothers.” In 1973, when Maitreyi visited Romania, Veronica Porumbacu remembered their encounter:

“A middle-aged Indian lady, still beautiful, slightly stout, dressed in the classic sari, her forehead starred between the eyebrows with a deep-red dot, approached the Romanian group and introduced herself: Maitreyi Devi. [...] In the following days she asked me several times about the book [i.e. Eliade’s novel], about the author [Mircea Eliade] whom I had never met and about whom I knew very little at that time. She spoke to me about India, of Tagore.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>40</sup> Veronica Porumbacu (1921-1977) was a Romanian poet, prose writer and translator.

<sup>41</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, “Maitreyi regăsită” [“Maitreyi rediscovered”] in *Secolul XX*, 7, 150, 1973, pp. 138-139.

Various encounters with people who read Eliade's novel made Maitreyi think more about the time they shared, in her father's house. She understood that he fictionalized their story so that his book could be successful, but still she felt embarrassed by the thought that some people might think that what Eliade wrote was the truth. For her, the truth was different:

"The body perishes, the souls is immortal. It cannot be killed by killing the body. Where is that body of mine? The bower of my youth? [...] None has succeeded in destroying it, neither my father, nor Mircea; neither time, my own pride, nor the rich experiences of my life. A feeling of immortality is entering into me – I am touching this infinite. [...]

Love is deathless. My soul, held by him in that Bhowanipur house, still remains so fixed. The infinite is flowing through the finite."<sup>42</sup>

Her entire novel focused on this aspect: "It does not die." "It" can be the soul, her soul. But "it" can be also their story. Whatever "it" is, "it" is immortal. And "it" was the main reason for which Maitreyi decided to see Mircea again, and to confront him. "There is a conspiracy of the destiny of which for so many decades I knew

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<sup>42</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *It Does Not Die*, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

nothing.”<sup>43</sup> In 1973 she is determined to go to the USA and see Eliade again.

“Can he be the reason for it all, or is it some other power [...] who is moving me towards an unknown destiny?”<sup>44</sup>

When she arrives in Chicago and one young student asks her: “When did you last meet him?” her reply is stunning: “Forty-two years ago.”<sup>45</sup> Their encounter was terrible:

“I entered the room. At once the old man made a sound, ‘Ohh!’, and sprang to his feet. Then he sat down and got up again and then he turned his back towards me. [...]

‘Mircea, why are you standing with your back towards me?’

‘I will not see you. I am waiting for someone else.’ [...]

‘Do you know who I am?’ [...]

‘Certainly, certainly,’ he tilted his head.

Oh, this is the same Mircea – the same indeed – that twenty-three year old boy is visible in this sixty-six year old man. He used to tell me, you use the word ‘beeshan’ (‘terribly’) too often. Everything is ‘terrible’ for you. So many people have told me that. Maybe I also used that word

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 239.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 240.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 261.



now, for he shakes his head saying ‘certainly, certainly’.”<sup>46</sup>

As in real life, the end of her novel offers closure to an undying story:

“He spoke in Sanskrit: ‘na hanyate hanymane sharire’ – it does not die when the body dies.”<sup>47</sup>

For her novel *Na Hanyate (It Does Not Die)*, Maitreyi Devi received, in 1976, the Sahitya Akademi Award, the most important distinction from the Academy of Indian Letters. She was invited to give lectures on the life and works of her dear friend and mentor, the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, or on Indian philosophy and culture, all over the world.

She also had a special role in the emancipation of Indian women. She founded, in 1964, the Council for the Promotion of Communal Harmony and was vice-president of the All-India Women’s Coordinating Council. Marked by the drama of children left on the roads as a result of territorial divisions and political struggles, Maitreyi Devi set up an orphanage<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 262-263.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 268.

<sup>48</sup> In 1971, in Khelaghar, a few kilometers away from Calcutta, Maitreyi started a school, following Rabindranath Tagore’s

and attracted significant funds for educating and empowering young people in disadvantaged environments.

“It was while working so closely with these children of war that Maitreyi Devi was convinced that there was a growing number of marginalized children in our state that were more and more in need of a safe, caring, and empathetic environment to foster their growth and development. Children from impoverished minority and tribal communities are denied opportunities for health, education, and social mobility with each passing day. The direct experience of working with such children enabled Maitreyi Devi to envisage an alternative environment that could create a positive difference in the lives of such children and provide an opportunity for their all-round development. This is how Khelaghar came to be what it is today.”<sup>49</sup>

Her work with the children was extremely important to her and she mentioned it to her friend, Mac Linscott Ricketts, who also financially contributed to this educational center. In many of

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principles. The school still functions even today. Khelaghar is a secular, charitable trust and welfare home and education resource center. For more details see: <https://www.khelaghar.org.in>. Last accessed: 10.01.2023.

<sup>49</sup> See <https://www.khelaghar.org.in/how-it-started/>. Last accessed: 10.01.2023. Maitreyi loved to spend time there. In her letter from 19 March 1983, to Mac L. Ricketts, she mentions that she is there: “I am at Khelaghar now, arranging the Spring Festival.”

their letters she described the activities of these children and offered small details about some.

From time to time, some random meetings with various Romanians bring back to her long forgotten memories.

In March 1986, in Venice, another miraculous encounter took place:

“The lady tells me her name: ‘Maitreyi Devi.’ A shiver ran through me, I ask her with caution if she knows Mircea Eliade. [...] ‘Yes, I am Maitreyi’.”<sup>50</sup>

Basarab Nicolescu’s sincere admiration towards Maitreyi Devi is obvious:

“The real Maitreyi surpassed the character of the novel. It is probably what confused Eliade, explaining the panic and his coldness at the time of their reunion in 1973, when Maitreyi visited the United States of America, holding lectures on her mentor, Rabindranath Tagore, at five American universities.”<sup>51</sup>

Maitreyi also wrote to Ricketts about their encounter. In a letter from June 20, 1988, she mentioned “the UNESCO seminar in Venice,” where she met Nicolescu. Eliade was invited too,

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<sup>50</sup> See Basarab Nicolescu, “Mirabila mea întâlnire cu Maitreyi la Veneția” [“My wonderful meeting with Maitreyi in Venice”], in Mihaela Gligor, *Maitreyi Devi. Povestea adevărată*, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38.

but he was unable to participate. Only a month after that seminar,<sup>52</sup> Eliade died.<sup>53</sup> His last promise to Maitreyi was that his novel would not be published in English during her lifetime.

Maitreyi died in 1990, not seeing the English translation of Eliade's *Bengal Nights*. Writing to Mac Linscott Ricketts about her meeting with Mircea in Chicago, she emphasized that he "*gave me his word of honour* that he will never publish it in English."<sup>54</sup> It was published, but only after she (they) passed away. The 1994 conjoined edition from the University of Chicago Press can be summarized using her own words, as expressed in a letter from 1976:

"The books will float in the stream of time together, and as the stream takes a new bend the difference of forty-three years will vanish like

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<sup>52</sup> The UNESCO Seminar, held between 3-7 March 1986, was dedicated to *Science at the Boundaries of Knowledge: The Prologue of our Cultural Past*.

<sup>53</sup> He died on 22 April 1983. The Obituary signed by Edwin McDowell in *The New York Times*, Section B, Page 6, in 23 April 1986, mentioned that: "Prof. Mircea Eliade, a prolific writer and a leading scholar of religion, died at Bernard Mitchell Hospital at the University of Chicago. He was 79 years old and lived in Chicago." Last accessed 13.01.2023.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/23/obituaries/professor-mircea-eliade-79-writer-and-religious-scholar.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Maitreyi Devi's letter to Mac Linscott Ricketts, 6 May 1979.

bubbles in its ripples, and they will move side by side completing an union that life refused.”<sup>55</sup>

It’s like she had a vision of their future life together, their common life in the eternity.

Since the special edition was published by the University of Chicago Press, the story had multiple interpretations. Among them, the essay written by Ginu Kamani,<sup>56</sup> in which the author also paid attention to the film made after Eliade’s novel:

“Though Devi did not live to see Eliade’s book published in English, she was very much around when the film was being shot in Calcutta. In 1986, a young French film director named Nicholas Klotz contacted Eliade in connection with making his novel into a film. Eliade died that year, and Klotz completed his negotiation for the film rights for *Les Nuits Bengali* with Christinale [*sic!* Christinel] Eliade, his widow.”

This episode hurt Maitreyi deeply, as she wrote to Mac Linscott Ricketts:

“Christinale [*sic!* Christinel] has hurt me very badly. She permitted a French Co. to film *La Nuit Bengali*. They came to Calcutta for shooting and

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<sup>55</sup> Maitreyi Devi’s letter to Mac Linscott Ricketts, 26 July 1976.

<sup>56</sup> Ginu Kamani, “A Terrible Hurt: The Untold Story behind the Publishing of Maitreyi Devi,” in *The Toronto Review*, summer 1996, pp. 29-40. Also available online, on <https://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/143651.html>, last accessed 08.01.2023.

gave huge publicity pointing at me as the heroine.”<sup>57</sup>

This was her last letter to the American professor. “My friends will let you know when I am gone,” she concluded.

“She died two years later, in 1990, but no friend wrote to tell me. I celebrate her life which was devoted to service, I cherish her memory, and I am forever thankful that we shared those years of correspondence,”<sup>58</sup>

wrote Prof. Ricketts.

She was a remarkable woman, as her son also remembers:

“Sudden glimpses into the depth of her knowledge leave me amazed. She gradually developed a multifaceted personality with knowledge and interest in various fields which was unusual in that era in Bengal. [...]

Maitraye was a very erudite person. [...] In 1972 she opened a Home for Children in need and in distress near Calcutta in the suburbs. She worked for this Home till she died. This Home was formed on the basis of Rabindranath Tagore’s philosophy and ideals. She was a writer, a poet, a social

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<sup>57</sup> Maitreyi Devi’s letter to Mac Linscott Ricketts, 20 June 1988.

<sup>58</sup> Mac Linscott Ricketts, “My Correspondence with Maitreyi Devi,” in *The International Journal on Humanistic Ideology*, Edited by Mihaela Gligor, Vol. 4, No. 2, Autumn – Winter 2011, p. 96.

worker, a humanist. [...] Being her child was a great experience.”<sup>59</sup>

She changed the lives of people who had the opportunity to meet her or read her books, and she continues to do so even now, as her work still inspires people all over the world.<sup>60</sup>

Not long ago, Maitreyi Devi and her incredible story was, again, a novel’s character: in *All the*

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<sup>59</sup> Priyadarshi Sen, “Maitraye – My Mother,” in Mihaela Gligor and Mac Linscott Ricketts (Eds.), *Professor Mircea Eliade: Reminiscences*, Foreword by Mihaela Gligor, Preface by Mac Linscott Ricketts, Codex Publishing House, Kolkata, 2008, pp. 210-211. See the full text written by Priyadarshi Sen at the end of this Chapter, in Appendix.

<sup>60</sup> During the last years, several researchers succeeded in presenting the facts in a new manner, insisting on Maitreyi’s personality as well as on her novel. Among them: Fevronia Novac, “Maitreyi from Authenticity to Colonial Fantasy,” in *Theory in Action*, Vol. 9, No. 3, July 2016, pp. 13-37; Arina Cirstea, “Re-writing the Colonial Story in Mircea Eliade’s *Maitreyi* and Maitreyi Devi’s *Na Hanyate*,” in *Theory in Action*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October 2013, pp. 37-59; Sriparna Basu, “Passionate Fictions: Horizons of the Exotic and Colonial Self-Fashioning in Mircea Eliade’s *Bengal Nights* and Maitreyi Devi’s *Na Hanyate*,” in *Genders* 34, 2001, on line, last accessed: 13.01.2023. <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/2001/08/01/passionate-fictions-horizons-exotic-and-colonial-self-fashioning-mircea-eliades-bengal>.

See also Mihaela Gligor, “Searching for *Homo Religiosus* with Mircea Eliade in India,” in *The West and Asia/Asia and the West: Essays on Transnational Interactions*, Elisabetta Marino and Tanfer Emin Tunc (Eds.), McFarland Publishers, 2015, pp. 235-243, and Mihaela Gligor, “Maitreyi. The Bengali Connection,” in *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies*, no. 2, 2018, pp. 134-155.

*Lives We Never Lived*,<sup>61</sup> a beautiful story about family, identity, and love, Anuradha Roy's focus is also on the tale of Maitreyi Devi, who was Anuradha's aunt. In a moving interview, Anuradha Roy recalled that

"Maitreyi Devi was my aunt, as her husband was my father's first cousin, which [...] is considered a close relationship here. Her book came out in the 1970s when I was a child and immediately became more or less contraband in our large, conservative joint family in Calcutta. This is why I came to it so late, reading it only when I was casting around in my research for memoirs and fiction from the 1930s. And once I read it, her Amrita and my Gayatri seemed to be deeply connected. The heroine of *Na Hanyate* is an extraordinarily courageous woman who questions everything around her and lives unconventionally even after she is married. Knowing the kind of background Maitreyi Devi came from – conservative Bengali elite – I am sure even writing about such a fictional character was difficult – especially as most people knew it was an autobiographical novel. Most of her contemporaries, for example my other aunts her age, would not have dreamed of writing such a book or living such a life."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Anuradha Roy, *All the Lives We Never Lived*, Hachette India, 2018.

<sup>62</sup> "Anuradha Roy in conversation with Mihaela Gligor," in *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies*, no. 5, 2021, 125-126. <http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/bd/ebooks/pdf/2979.pdf>



Anuradha Roy's 2018 novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* recently won the Sahitya Akademi Award for 2022 in the English language category.<sup>63</sup> This is an incredible achievement and it proves that the literature of Bengali writers has something special:

"My own writing [...] is influenced both by the Bengali literature I read and by writers from all over the world whom I read in English or in translation. I had read Mircea Eliade's *La Nuit Bengali* in English long before I read *Na Hanyate*, for example,"<sup>64</sup>

concluded Anuradha Roy.

In 2022 a musical after Maitreyi Devi's novel was directed and staged in Australia,<sup>65</sup> and this is also extraordinary and it speaks about the

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<sup>63</sup> See [https://sahitya-akademi.gov.in/awards/akademi%20saman\\_suchi.jsp#ENGLISH](https://sahitya-akademi.gov.in/awards/akademi%20saman_suchi.jsp#ENGLISH), and <https://anuradharoy.blogspot.com/2022/12/all-lives-we-never-lived-wins-sahitya.html>, last accessed 14.01.2023.

<sup>64</sup> "Anuradha Roy in conversation with Mihaela Gligor," *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>65</sup> "The musical is based on novel of same name written by Maitreyi Devi, an Indian poetess and a novelist who was the protégée of the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. In 1976, the writer received India's top literary award, the Sahitya Akademi Award, for her novel. This is a story of two youngsters falling in love from a different cultural background in 1930. The narrative is beautifully woven with rich heritage and folk/regional music of West Bengal. Set in old Calcutta in the Colonial era, the musical is not to be missed." Last accessed 14.01.2023. <https://drum.greaterdandenong.vic.gov.au/drum/events/na-hanyate-it-doesnt-die-english-musical>.

power that Maitreyi's story still has. Some stories change the lives of people who get in touch with them. *Na Hanyate* is such a story.

Maitreyi Devi's legacy goes on. Her son and daughter-in-law continue her humanitarian work and Bengali culture shows the same respect for Maitreyi – the writer – as always. As for *Na Hanyate*, the 1976 Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel, this writing does not quite fit into any particular genre, but it arouses the sympathy and inspiration of readers worldwide, even today. And perhaps this is what immortality means.

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## **Appendix**

### **Maitraye – My Mother**

***Priyadarshi SEN***

Maitraye Devi, my mother passed away seventeen years back. When I look back her memories came crowding and I am pleasantly surprised to find that her presence is still fresh and fragrant in my mind.

My first impression of her is that of her sitting relaxed in her armchair – either reading or writing. At my age then I never stopped wondering why an adult having the rare prerogative of taking her own decision should spend so much time reading books.

In the lonely hills of Mungpu where my mother went to live after her marriage – there was little or no society. Ma therefore went on studying one subject after another from Egyptology to Botany, from Science to Literature and she studied them so well that she was almost a master in each of them. In later years sudden glimpses into the depth of her knowledge would leave me amazed. She gradually developed a multifaceted personality with knowledge and interest in various fields which was unusual in that era in Bengal. This was also partly an outcome of her deep devoted association with her mentor world famous poet Rabindranath Tagore. His writings influenced Maitraye greatly and her personality evolved... Maitrayi blossomed into a flower. Maitraye was a very erudite person. At the same time she was

feminine too... maintaining a beautiful household, trying out new recipes, designing furniture or landscaping gardens. At one point of time I even saw her directing dance dramas.

She was a very down to earth socially aware person and took to addressing serious issues. She worked for social harmony and formed a Council for Promotion of Communal Harmony. Whenever she has seen injustice she raised her voice. During the Bangladesh war my mother devoted herself to relief work and started a school at the relief camp in the border area for the uprooted orphaned children in the camps. She also opened a temporary home for such children who went back to Bangladesh after war.

In 1972 she opened a Home for “Children in need and in distress” near Calcutta in the suburbs. She worked for this Home till she died. This Home was formed on the basis of Rabindranath Tagore’s philosophy and ideals. She was a writer, a poet, a social worker, a humanist. Whenever I try to think about Maitraye – my mother I find her journey from her girlhood to her final days was a unique one. A simple ordinary girl turned herself into an extraordinary dynamic human being. She made life around her interesting and special – though turbulent at times. Being her children was a great experience.\*

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\* *Maitraye – My Mother*, by Priyadarshi Sen, was written in 2008, and it was first published in *Professor Mircea Eliade: Reminiscences*. Volume edited by Mihaela Gligor and Mac Linscott Ricketts, Foreword by Mihaela Gligor, Preface by Mac Linscott Ricketts, Codex Publishing House, Kolkata, India, 2008, pp. 210-211. The original of this memoir is in Mihaela Gligor’s Archive.

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The cultural relations between India and Romania are interesting to study and to understand. India is a country of immense diversity, of extraordinary customs, and a genuine feast of opinions, which attracts researchers from all over the world. Romanians are people with a profound sensibility. The two cultures met on the common ground of spirituality and the results are remarkable, as it is shown in this special volume.

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