

Middle Bengali Retreat cum Workshop, August 2016

The Department of Humanities at Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania organized a Middle Bengali Retreat and Workshop in August, 2016 in which AIBS supported two students to attend. The purpose of the retreat was to bring together scholars and advanced students of Middle Bengali in an informal and relaxed setting, where reading and discussion of texts could be shared and analyzed. Our awardees wrote about their experiences after they completed the workshop. You can read about their developments in the pages that follow.



Final Report on the Middle Bengali Retreat cum Workshop, 2016
American Institute of Bangladesh Studies
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“We should be rigorous, but never rigid,” said Dr. Thibaut d’Hubert at one of the opening sessions of the inaugural Middle Bengali Retreat cum Workshop. d’Hubert, a Professor of premodern Bengali literature at the University of Chicago, was one of the organizers of the workshop. But although he was prescribing a particular approach to the reading of texts produced in eastern India during the early modern period, his words just as easily encapsulate the general atmosphere of the workshop. Hosted in a small city, nestled in the hills of Romania’s Transylvania region, the workshop was at once scholarly and relaxed — a perfect environment for a PhD student such as myself to become acquainted with challenging early modern texts and with some of the world’s top experts in early modern Bengali language and literature.

Three times a day throughout the course of the ten-day retreat, junior and senior scholars as well as advanced PhD students would guide our group through translation sessions that introduced us to a wide range of poetic forms, religious texts, and literary traditions. During these sessions (often held in surrounding fields, forests, and meadows) each participant was asked to read and translate several lines of text. With little exposure to pre-nineteenth century forms of the Bengali language (forms that I soon came to learn were almost never referred to as “Bengali”), I initially found such spot-translation exercises daunting. Yet the professors, session leaders, and native Bengali-speaking scholars in our group were quick to put those of us with a background only in modern Bengali at ease by remaining supportive, patient, and, responsive when our turn to translate came.

One of the biggest highlights of the workshop was learning to read the specific forms of Middle Bengali used by the seventeenth century poet Alaol. Alaol (fl. 1651-71 c.e.), who was of Afghan descent, was captured in Bengal by Arakanese and Portuguese mercenary marauders and brought to Mrauk-U, the capital of the Buddhist kingdom of Arakan (a kingdom that held coastal territory in today’s Bangladesh and Burma). Celebrated as one of the first early Bengali poets to compose poetry in the Bengali vernacular, Alaol’s life became the subsequent subject of East Pakistani playwright Sikander Abu Jafar’s 1966 play “The Epic Poet Alaol.” By the time the workshop commenced, I had translated (for the first time into English) just under two thirds of the play, yet I was unable to read and translate Alaol’s original verses that Abu Jafar had included in his script. But thanks to the several workshop sessions devoted to Alaol’s poetic corpus and, more specifically, to his Middle Bengali rendering of *Sayphulmuluk*, I am now equipped with the advanced grammatical and lexical knowledge needed to begin this task.

During the workshop I was also afforded the opportunity to study with two scholars from Bangladesh and India's state of West Bengal (Saymon Zakaria and Naba Gopal Roy). Each conducted sessions on *bāromāsī*, a lyrical "song of twelve months" that uses late Middle Bengali poetic forms to express its female narrator's amorous feelings and anxiety over imminent separation from her lover. Their insight into the genre of *bāromāsī* and other diverse forms of Bengali textual practices, modes of manuscript transmission, and folk oral recitation traditions strongly impacted my ability to understand the cultural contexts in which many of the texts we read were produced and transmitted.

Largely attended by students and scholars from disciplines outside of my own (history), the workshop introduced me to new methodologies and modes of critically engaging with literary texts. One example that stands out in my mind is the painstaking attention the religious studies scholars and philologists in the room paid to what one participant called the "grammar of metaphors" used in Middle Bengali religious texts. All of the texts we read followed (or melded or mixed) specific Indic and Perso-Islamic metaphorical paradigms with which a learned contemporary audience would have been intimately familiar. Thus, many participants drew on their knowledge and training in numerous other classical and early modern languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic, Awadhi, Braj, and Persian as they endeavored to unpack the layers of metaphors used in a given text. While I do not have training in these languages, I nevertheless was able to grasp the profound importance of looking to both prior and simultaneous literary, linguistic, and intellectual traditions to help explain not only the meaning of certain metaphors but also their intended aesthetic function and effect in Middle Bengali texts.

The critical reading and translation skills I learned at Middle Bengali retreat this summer will serve me well this year as I work toward finishing my translation of "The Epic Poet Alaol" and begin crafting my own dissertation proposal related to the role literary and technical translation played in the development of Indo-Soviet relations after 1954. In both of these areas of my research, I will make sure to connect the modern forms of literary production and print culture that I am studying to their early modern precedents; pay attention to the grammar(s) of metaphors that might be woven into fabric of my texts and primary sources; and remain rigorous in my reading, but never rigid.

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The first Middle Bangla Retreat-cum-Workshop took place in Miercurea-Ciuc, Romania from August 11th-21st, 2016. The Department of Humanities at the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania generously hosted us for ten days, as our lively group read a wide variety of texts written in various forms of the Bangla language that were current before British colonialism. This, roughly, is what we designated as “Middle Bangla” – an umbrella term for literature composed in Brajabuli, Maithili, Muslim *do-bhāṣī*, and an older form of what we now call Bangla.

Precisely defining and isolating these closely-related registers of writing as a *language* – or even as several languages – is, as one can see, a bit of a problem. No one writing these texts referred to their works as being written in something called Bangla, Maithili, or Brajabuli. These authors generally preferred to say they were writing in the *paṃyāra* verse-form, or writing in a *prākṛta* language, or writing in the language of the *deśa*. To complicate issues still further, the registers of language used in these texts never neatly or simply represented the vernacular spoken dialects. Yet, over the centuries, all of these texts have come to be seen as belonging to the Bangla literary tradition.

Concepts of language and definitions thereof have been important to the study of South Asia in the West from the beginning. Debates about the status of written languages other than Sanskrit in pre-Colonial South Asia have been particularly lively in the last decade. The discussions we had in Romania have much to contribute to these debates, and I am certain that we will have much to say in years to come. Though we came to no definitive conclusion concerning these issues (and perhaps doing so might be impossible anyway), we successfully navigated the problems and challenges that they raise for historiography and philology.

There were roughly three ninety-minute sessions a day and five session leaders. After a few sessions led by Thibaut d’Hubert on the concepts of language and the variety of grammatical forms found in Middle Bangla, Rebecca Manring shared some excerpts from Rūparāma’s *Dharmamaṅgala* – one of the *maṅgala-kāvya*s dedicated to the God Dharma, and an important text for historians concerned with the social history of pre-Colonial Bengal. I shared bits of Yadunandana Dāsa’s Bangla commentary on Bilvamaṅgala’s Sanskrit *Kṛṣṇakarṇāmṛta* as well as excerpts from Locana Dāsa’s Bangla translation of Rāmānanda Rāya’s Sanskrit *Jagannāthavallabhanāṭaka*; both texts were central to the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thibaut d’Hubert brought a variety of lyric poems (*padas*, mostly by Vidyāpati), excerpts from the oeuvre of the Arakanese court-poet Ālāola, some verses in *do-bhāṣī* (a Bangla register heavily laden with Perso-Arabic elements), and some samples of original manuscripts. Naba Gopal Roy introduced us to *bāromāśya* song-form (a woman’s lament about her lover’s absence structured around the twelve months of the year) through an excerpt from Bhāratcandra’s *Annadāmaṅgala*. Saymon Zakaria led us in reading a *bāromāśya* from the nineteenth century written by a woman named Rahima Khatun – this was quite an appropriate close to our workshop, as it showed us how people in more recent times continued to feel a connection with these older forms of expression.

The workshop was productive for participants and session leaders alike. Moreover it was an actual retreat as well: we often hiked through the Transylvanian forests and hills to find idyllic spots in which to read together. We are committed to making the workshop an annual affair and I am happy to report that myself and Thibaut d’Hubert have been tasked with organizing next summer’s sessions.