

Translating Esotericism: Bangla

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Translating the terminologies relevant to esotericism from English to Bengali sheds light on the history of cultural encounters between two disparate ethno-linguistic and social worlds. In this essay, I will first devote a few words to the Bengali language for non-initiated readers and briefly discuss the reception of esotericism in Bengal. Next, I will address the problem of translating esoteric words and concepts in Bengali from a historical perspective. In the context of this essay, scholarly work on reception history and global history is important as a theoretical background.¹ The present chapter will deal with a few sample words which could sufficiently exemplify the problem of translating esoteric terms from English to Bengali.

Bengali belongs to the Eastern Indo-European language family. While rooted in Sanskrit, modern Bengali evolved from Magadhi Prakrit, a language spoken in ancient eastern India.² The language has a predominance of words (Bangla: *shabda* / শব্দ) that either have Sanskrit equivalents (*tatsama shabda* / তৎসম শব্দ) or are derived from Sanskrit (*tadbhava shabda* / তদ্ভব শব্দ). Additionally, the medieval period witnessed a large influx of Perso-Arabic words in the language. All these words, along with other indigenous (*Desbi Shabda* / দেশী শব্দ) and foreign (*Bidesbi Shabda* / বিদেশী শব্দ) words, collectively shaped the Bengali vocabulary. Modern Bengali developed during the colonial period between the late eighteenth and early twentieth century. Here it is essential to note that British colonialism is the most

1. For a definition of “reception history” see Martindale & Hardwick, “Reception,” in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 75; for a discussion of global history see Conrad, “Introduction,” in *What is Global History*, 1–16.

2. Chatterji, *Origin and Development of Bengali Language*, 27.

important context that must be taken into consideration for understanding the birth of modern Bengali and the reception of esotericism in Bengal.

While the English word “Bengali” denotes both the language and its speakers, there are two different words for them in the Bengali language. Native speakers are identified as *Bangali* (বাঙালি), but the language is called *Bangla* (বাংলা). Here, I will use the word *Bangla* as it occurs in the source language. Currently, the language is mainly spoken in the regions of eastern South Asia, including Bangladesh and the Indian states of West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam. According to the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution, Bangla is one of the twenty-two official languages of the country.

Here it is essential to briefly discuss the presence of esotericism in Bengal. As is well-known to the readers of this journal, the academic study of esotericism is a European innovation, and the scholarly field of (Western) esotericism is mostly restricted to Euro-American academia. As an academic category, esotericism is, therefore, non-existent in South Asia. This academic absence is largely a result of the minuscule presence of Religious Studies in contemporary Indian academia – strange as it may be, the latter discipline never took off in the postcolonial Indian education system. However, various esoteric movements have indeed been present in South Asia over a long period of time. On the one hand, some of these had an *institutional* origin in Western societies but also developed in South Asia and other parts of the world in the context of globalization. These movements and currents included Freemasonry, Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and Theosophy, among others. On the other hand, some other religious and philosophical currents with historical roots in South Asia were appropriated in the modern Euro-American cultural space through various Indian and Western actors. These religious movements include yoga, Tantra, Vedanta, Tibetan mysticism, and Theravada Buddhism, among others.

These Indian and Western movements collectively shaped the understanding of esotericism and occultism as globally entangled concepts and contributed to

the global history of religions. I just mentioned esotericism and occultism in the same breath because the difference between the concepts of “esotericism” and “occultism” is unclear in Bangla. Both concepts are identified as referring to the realm of hidden, mysterious knowledge, and often similar terms are used to denote them. Therefore, Bangla words such as *guptabidyā* (গুপ্তবিদ্যা) and *gujhyabidyā* (গুহ্যবিদ্যা) can be used as translations for both esotericism and occultism. Here, *gupta* or *gujhya* can be translated as either “secret” or “hidden.” Moreover, both these Bangla translations contain the suffix *bidyā* (বিদ্যা),³ which could be variously translated in Bangla as “knowledge,” “education,” or “wisdom.” Therefore, one can assume that esotericism and occultism are considered forms of knowledge in the Bengali context. This suggests that an interest in gaining secret knowledge could be seen as a global tendency in the history of esotericism. Similarly, the suffix *bidyā* is also used for translating “Theosophy” into Bangla. As there are multiple translations of the latter concept in that language, I will explore its translation in some further detail.

The Theosophical movement substantially shaped the globally entangled history of esotericism in the modern period. Thus the translation of the term “Theosophy,” a doctrine promoted by the Theosophical Society (established in 1875), will help us understand how South Asians historically conceptualized esotericism during the modern period. The Theosophical Society (TS) arrived in Bengal in the early 1880s. It established itself as a major esoteric organization of Bengal following the foundation of the first lodge in Calcutta on 6 April 1882.⁴ Known as the Bengal Theosophical Society or the BTS Lodge, it received a Bengali name, *Bangīya Tattwabidyā Samiti* (বঙ্গীয় তত্ত্ববিদ্যা সমিতি).⁵ While the Bangla words *Bangīya* and *Samiti* can be translated respectively as “Bengali” and “Society,” *Tattwabidyā* can be considered synonymous with “Theosophy.” However, there has been no unanimity regarding the Bengali translation of the word Theosophy, and it was given various other Bengali names by different writers and thinkers.

3. Alternatively spelled in English as *Vidyā*.

4. Mukhopadhyay, “A Short History of the Theosophical Movement in Bengal,” 23.

5. Mitra, *Theosophical Society-r Sangkshipta Itihāsh*, 108–10.

Thus, besides *Tattwabidyā*, some of the other Bengali translations of Theosophy are *Brahmabidyā*, *Ātmabidyā*, and *Parābidyā*. However, none of these translated terms were neologisms, for all of them had Sanskrit roots (*tatsama shabda*). Hence, they could be found in various Indian religious texts composed in Sanskrit, which existed well before the arrival of the TS. As the Bengali Theosophists translated Theosophy in various ways depending on their individual understanding of the concept, they imagined it as a modern representative of pre-modern Hindu religious traditions. This procedure is equivalent to the way in which first-generation Western Theosophists tried to present Theosophy as a nineteenth-century descendant of multiple early modern esoteric traditions.⁶

Multiple instances suggest that the Bengali Theosophists engaged with some esoteric concepts for years, which they then used as the translation of Theosophy after joining the TS. For example, Dwijendranath Tagore (1840–1926), Rabindranath Tagore’s eldest brother and Vice-President of the BTS Lodge, wrote a three-volume work titled *Tattwabidyā* in the 1860s.

However, these translations of English terms did not always go uncontested, and some of them received multiple translations. One example, as shown above, is the term “Theosophy.” Similarly, the term “Theosophical Society” also went through various translations. In Bangla-language writings, the organization received names such as *Brahmabidyā Samiti*, *Bangīya Tattwabidyā Samiti*, or *Guptabidyā-lochani Sabbā*. At times, these translations drew criticism as well. For instance, Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) objected to the translation of Theosophy as *Brahmabidyā*. He wrote, “*Vidya* may be represented, though not perfectly represented by *Sophia*, but *Brahman* is not *Theos* and cannot be *Theos*.”⁷ He continued, “We all know what *Brahmanidyā* is, – the knowledge of the One both in Itself and in its ultimate and fundamental relations to the world which appears in It whether as illusion or as manifestation, whether as *Maya* or as *Lila*.”⁸

6. Hanegraaff, “Western Esotericism and the Orient,” 31.

7. Ghose, “Science and Religion in Theosophy,” 72–74.

8. *Ibid.*

There is nothing to suggest that Aurobindo’s criticism got traction in intellectual circles or found any support among the Indian Theosophists. The latter not only continued using the word *Brahmabidyā* but also offered other alternative interpretations regarding the translation of the word “Theosophy.” For instance, Bhagavan Das (1869–1958), the secretary of the Indian Section, opined that Theosophy could be translated as *Ātmavidyā*. During the Theosophical Society’s Annual Convention in 1912, he made the following remark: “...I should say that theosophical writers in the vernacular should bear in mind the fact that ‘Theosophy’ is a translation of ‘Ātma-Vidyā’ and not ‘Ātma-Vidyā’ of ‘Theosophy.’”⁹ Das’s opinion is interesting because the aforementioned Sanskrit word means “knowledge of the self” [*Ātma* = self; *Vidyā* = knowledge] and not “knowledge of the divine” as Theosophy is generally interpreted. One may wonder if he meant to say that the self, as the soul of human or living organisms (Sanskrit: *Jivātman*), is nothing but a manifestation of the divine higher spirit (Sanskrit: *Paramātman*), thus indicating a relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm in accordance with the Upanishadic ideas. Such a detailed exploration of various options for translation shows how the understanding of esoteric currents, such as Theosophy, could change from one part of the world to another.

Following the TS’s arrival in Bengal, English terminologies relevant to the Western esoteric discourses were transmitted into Bangla. Therefore, when translation and transliteration for various English terms used in Western esoteric traditions appeared in Bangla, a new glossary was constructed. I have previously noted the various translations of Theosophy. Similarly, other esoteric terms found new translations as well, which continues even in contemporary times. For instance, Spiritualism and / or Spiritism are translated as *Pret-tattva* / প্রেত-তত্ত্ব [Spirit: pret / Tattva: theory / doctrine].

9. *Annual Report*, 20–21.

In some cases, a few Bengali translations of relevant English words existed before the arrival of the TS or other esoteric movements in Bengal, and these terms were later integrated into Bengali esoteric discourse. In this regard, the Bengali translations of “Religion” and “Spirituality” are worth mentioning. While “Religion” is translated as *Dharma* (ধর্ম), “Spirituality” means *Adhyātmikāṭā* (আধ্যাত্মিকতা). Similarly, the literal meaning of “Magic” is *Jādubidyā* (জাদুবিদ্যা). These were late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century translations. Additionally, British colonialism introduced the lens of “Enlightenment,” a word which literally means *Ālokaṅprāpti* (আলোকপ্রাপ্তি) in Bangla.

As noted earlier, the words listed above were derived from pre-modern textual sources and therefore were not neologisms. In some instances, however, new words were invented to translate English words that are relevant to the study of esotericism. For example, Adrish Bardhan (1932–2019), a well-known Bengali litterateur, invented the word *Kalpa-bigyān* (কল্প-বিজ্ঞান) as a translation of “science fiction.”¹⁰ Here, the word is derived from two *tatsama shabda*. While *kalpa* is a shortened version of *Kalpanā* (কল্পনা) and can be translated as “Imagination,” *bigyān* (বিজ্ঞান) can be translated as “Science.”

I would like to emphasize in conclusion that the translation of esoteric terms and concepts from English to Bangla is an extremely important subject for exploring the globally entangled history of esotericism. It must be noted that most of the terms discussed above are emic concepts and portray the historical understanding of esotericism by South Asian actors. The absence of an academic study of esotericism and Religious Studies in contemporary Indian academia leaves a huge void regarding the creation of methodological and theoretical tools for developing etic terminologies in this field. Finally, the heavy predominance of words with a Sanskrit origin (*tatsama shabda*) for translating esoteric terms (even though the rich Bengali vocabulary does contain alternatives with non-Sanskrit roots) suggests that translators had a strong preference for perceiving

10. Banerjee, *Indian Science Fiction*, 216.

esoteric concepts through Brahminical Hindu lenses. This indicates that the Hindu Brahmins had a social and cultural hegemony in colonial Bengal which manifested itself through the linguistic development of the Bengali language. As this short discussion should have made clear, the issue of translation of terminologies was a complex and multi-layered phenomenon.

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