

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 50 (1996)

Heft: 3

Artikel: Polish translations of Bhagavadgt

Autor: Wüthrich-Sarnowska, Maria Mariola

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147274>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 16.03.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

POLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ

Maria Mariola Wüthrich-Sarnowska

The first Polish translation of the Bhagavadgītā appeared in 1910. It was not however the first contact of Polish culture with this great work. The Bhagavadgītā had already been known due to its first translation done by Charles WILKINS in 1785. This version was even more widely known owing to its French rendering done by M. PARRAUD in 1787 and its German counterparts by Friedrich MAJER published in *Asiatisches Magazin* in 1802. An important source for the knowledge of the Bhagavadgītā in Poland was also the famous work by Friedrich SCHLEGEL *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (1808) containing ample fragments of the Bhagavadgītā translated from Sanskrit and the Latin translation from Sanskrit by August SCHLEGEL done in 1823.

The public in Poland became acquainted with the early renderings of the Bhagavadgītā and publications concerning India thanks to three centers active in the years 1800-1830 that were preparing the more extensive recognition of Indian philosophy. These centers were the Duke Adam Czartoryski's estate in Puławy, The Royal Scientific Society of Warsaw and the Vilnius University.

Polish interest in the Bhagavadgītā and India in general¹ appeared in the Pre-Romantic period and during the flourishing of Romanticism as an echo of European Orientalism and Indian studies, stimulated particularly in Germany and in Poland by philosophical and literary works of Johann Gottfried Herder. It was Herder who outlined the mythical image of India as the cradle of humanity (*Wiege der Menschheit*) in such works as for example *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774) or *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1785). He depicted India as an ideal country for the very beginning of culture and philosophy and considered the innocence of its inhabitants as an immediate reflection of divine nature. This myth had a particular significance for Poles because

1 This subject has been extensively treated in its literary historical aspect by Jan TUCZYŃSKI in his *Motywy indyjskie w literaturze polskiej*, Warszawa 1981. (*Indian Motifs in Polish Literature*.)

HERDER made it a basis of another myth of the similarity and relationship between an innocent Indian soul and a subtle soul of a Slav and thus envisaged the Slavs as the future activators of a humanistic regeneration of mankind. This indication led Polish Romantics to link the mythical image of India with the national and liberational dreams dominating the tenor of Romantic art in partitioned Poland.

Keeping up with HERDER's comparison of an Indian and Slavic soul, Adam MICKIEWICZ (1789-1855), a great Polish romantic poet, explained the parallels between Indian and Slavic mythology in lectures held in Paris in Collège de France during the years 1840-1844.

It might be interesting to mention here that the Indian trend in Polish culture was inspired not only by the European interest in India but also by the native Oriental tradition. This tradition was an outcome of Byzantine, Persian-Armenian, Tatar-Turkish and Karaim influences penetrating the eastern Polish border.

A number of Polish romantic works informed the reader about the Bhagavadgītā by taking over various aspects of the theme of India. Some of these works are *O Słowianach i ich pobratymcach* (1816) (*On Slavs and their Kindred Nations*) by Walenty Skorochód MAJEWSKI, *Badania historyczne jaki wpływ mieć mogły mniemanie i literatura ludów wschodnich na ludy zachodnich* (1819) (*Historical Researches on What Influence the Ideas and Literature of Eastern Peoples Might Have Had on Western Nations*) by Jan TARNOWSKI, *Dzieje starożytne Indii, ze szczególnym zastanowieniem się nad wpływem jaki mieć mogły na strony zachodnie* (1820) (*The History of Ancient India with Particular Consideration of Possible Influence It Had on Western Parts*) by Joachim LELEWEL and *O najdawniejszych zabytkach pisemnych* (1850) (*On the Most Ancient Relics of Literature*) by Leszek Dunin BORKOWSKI.

The most representative sign of the Bhagavadgītā's lively presence in Polish Romantic culture was the art of an outstanding poet of the period Juliusz SŁOWACKI (1809-1849). The Bhagavadgītā's echoes are the strongest in SŁOWACKI's heroic-mystical poem *Król Duch* (1847) (*King Spirit*) where the images of a transmigrating soul are constructed according to the pattern of śloka 22 from canto II. This motif is paraphrased in other SŁOWACKI's works which also comprise such Bhagavadgītā motifs as the metaphor of the cosmic tree aśvattha from canto XV or the personification of the destructive time from canto XI.

In spite of the marked presence of the Indian current in Polish literature since Romanticism the first translations from Sanskrit into Polish did not appear until the beginning of the XXth century. The principal cause for this is the fact that the advanced Indian studies which had been initiated in Western Europe during the Romantic period reached Poland only in the years 1871-1918. The first grammar of Sanskrit by Franciszek MALINOWSKI appeared in 1872. It anticipated outstanding works in linguistics by Andrzej GAWROŃSKI the author of a Sanskrit manuel which has been commonly used in Poland since then.

The social and cultural atmosphere of Polish modernism and its ideology affected by the Romantic models of perfection had also an influence on the vivid interest in Sanskrit literature and enhanced the need for the translations. The first decade of the XXth century was the time when the artistic and intellectual elite became exhausted with the disquieting threat of developing civilization and industry. So it eventually followed the Romantics in their quest for salvation in India. The modernists drew faith from the moral values of such works as Upaniṣads, Bhagavadgītā, Śakuntalā. They hoped for an optimistic reconstruction of the painfully disintegrated vision of the world. This faith of Polish artists was strengthened by the philosophy of Arthur SCHOPENHAUER who pessimistically assumed the absolute power of immoral Will and pointed out the teachings of the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavadgītā as the only chance of improving mankind.

The growing interest in Indian philosophy smoothed the way for the appearance of the first Polish translation of the Bhagavadgītā in 1910 by Stanisław Franciszek MICHALSKI-IWIEŃSKI (1880-1961). Stanisław MICHALSKI, a professional Sanskritist, pupil of Leopold von SCHROEDER, is the author of many translations from Sanskrit and Pāli into Polish. He translated among other things: *Czterdzieści pieśni Rigwedy* (1912) (*40 Hymns of the R̥gveda*), *Upaniszady* (1913) (*Upaniṣads*), fragments of *Rāmāyaṇa Tęsknota Ramy* (1920) (*Rāma's Longing*), *Atmabodha* (1923), *Dhammapadam* (1925). MICHALSKI's version of the Bhagavadgītā was reprinted twice in 1921 and 1927. Let us mention here that MICHALSKI published also the text of the Bhagavadgītā in transcription: *Bhagavadgītā. Texte sanscrit* (Paris, 1922).

MICHALSKI's philological rendering of the Bhagavadgītā stresses mainly the artistic value of the text. Being sensitive to poetry the author of the translation took care of the high artistic level of the reader's experience.

The archaic and biblical style used by the translator renders adequately the high poetry of this sacred text. MICHALSKI's translation of the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna perfectly reproduces its dramatic tension which suits the situational context of the enemy armies ready to clash. The poetical prose of MICHALSKI's rendering is modelled on the works of French and Polish modernists and particularly on the mystical output of Juliusz SŁOWACKI. The most perfect works of Polish literature echo in this version, making it sound familiar. The text does not invoke the sense of alien, exotic culture inhibiting the reader's contact with the work. Conversely, the choice of the Polish aesthetic convention automatically removes the psychological barrier in the reception of the Bhagavadgītā's message. This translation formed the public's ideas about the Bhagavadgītā and its copies are even now circulating among readers interested in India.

Another translation of the Bhagavadgītā appeared in Poland also in 1910. It is a secondary translation done from the French version of Emile BURNOUF *La Bhagavadgītā ou le Chant du Bienheureux* (Nancy 1861) by Bronisław OLSZEWSKI. OLSZEWSKI included in his translation the summary of the Bhagavadgītā done by Hermann JACOBI in *Mahābhārata. Inhaltsangabe, Index und Concordanz der Calcuttaer und Bombayer Ausgabe*. (Bonn 1903).

A year later in 1911, Antoni LANGE, a modernist poet and translator of Sanskrit literature incorporated OLSZEWSKI's translation into the work *Maha-Bharata* comprising summaries and renderings of ample fragments of the Mahābhārata. LANGE preceded this work with an introduction about the Bhagavadgītā explaining the elements of sāmkhya, yoga and vedānta in its philosophy. He also presents the researches on the Bhagavadgītā of such European scholars as Paul DEUSSEN and Richard GARBE. LANGE wasn't interested in the Bhagavadgītā only as a literary historian, but also as an artist. His own poetry is infused with India's spirit. It may be worthwhile to mention that LANGE's translation of such episodes from the Mahābhārata as *Nal i Damajanti* (1909) (*Nala and Damayanti*) and *Sawitri czyli opowieść o wiernej żonie* (1910) (*Sāvitrī or the Story of a Faithful Wife*) became enormously and permanently popular with the public in Poland.

Also in 1910 the metric translation of canto XII rendered by the poet and translator Józef JANKOWSKI appeared in Poland. It was incorporated into the collection of his poems *Poezje. Seria liryczna*. (Warszawa 1910)

(*Poems. A lyrical series.*) and was probably done from one of the French versions of the Bhagavadgītā.

The metric translation of canto XI of the Bhagavadgītā by a remarkable indologist, Stefan STASIAK, appeared in 1924. It was published in the magazine *Astrea* edited by A. LANGE.

The literary society of the period was influenced by the translations of the Bhagavadgītā. The works of the most brilliant authors of the period like Jan KASPROWICZ, Tadeusz MICIŃSKI, Waclaw BERENT reveal the knowledge of the Bhagavadgītā either in its Polish or European translations. Polish writers not only showed interest in pure Indian thought but were also fascinated with Indian philosophy through the medium of its theosophical interpretations and translations. The influence of the theosophical versions of the Bhagavadgītā initiated by Annie BESANT's translation from 1895, are most clearly visible in the works of T. MICIŃSKI and A. LANGE.

The second full Polish rendering of the Bhagavadgītā from Sanskrit was done by Wanda DYNOWSKA (1888-1971). It appeared in 1947 and was reprinted in 1956, 1957 and 1972. This translation was done in India where the translator lived from 1935 to her death. DYNOWSKA was a chairwoman of the Polish Theosophical Society since 1920 and was involved in theosophical activity until the end of her life. Most of her time in India she lived in Adyar on the estate of the International Theosophical Society but she also often stayed in Gandhi's and Ramana Maharshi's ashrams. The years of her stay in India were filled with intensive work on translations. The effect of it were 40 titles which appeared in the Polish-Indian Library series started with DYNOWSKA. The library comprises the most famous works of Sanskrit literature like Vedic Hymns, Upaniṣads, Yogavāsiṣṭha; works of contemporary Indian mystics as Arundale, Aurobindo, Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, Krishnamurti; the works of Tamil, Bengali, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi literature; theosophical works of Helena Petrovna Blawatska; the works of Buddhist literature.

As far as the translation of the Bhagavadgītā is concerned DYNOWSKA proposes a completely different approach to the original text than MICHALSKI. She deals with the Bhagavadgītā as a mainly religious poem and a practical teaching on the laws of spiritual growth. Her translation clearly implies that it is intended for the readers who seek spiritual inspiration. DYNOWSKA's work is not philological, it employs many poetical paraphrases and her style is emotional and fervent. Her commentary relating to personal

religious experience makes us understand why the Bhagavadgītā, a relic of the past for many, could have become a living guide for millions of Hindus. DYNOWSKA's translation brings the Polish reader close to the contemporary religious atmosphere of Hinduism. Her translations constitute at the same time a link between the lost works of Polish indological studies before the II World War and the output of the post-war generation of Sanskritists and indologists.

In 1971 the translation of fragments from the Bhagavadgītā appeared by an eminent Polish expert on Indian philosophy and priest Franciszek TOKARZ (1879-1973). The renderings of ślokaś from canto II, VII, XI, XVI are accompanied by the commentary explaining the philosophy of the Bhagavadgītā and the problems connected with its text's history. The translation and the commentary appeared in the posthumous collection of TOKARZ's works *Z filozofii indyjskiej. Część I.* (Lublin 1974) ("From the Indian Philosophy" Part 1).

In 1981 appeared the secondary translation done by Krystyna BOCEK from an English rendering of Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness. This edition is clearly directed to the Polish members of Prabhupada's sect.

The most recent translation of the Bhagavadgītā was done by the professional Sanskritist Joanna SACHSE in 1988. Her translation appeared simultaneously with the work devoted to detailed studies on the Bhagavadgītā *Ze studiów nad Bhagawadgitą.* (Wrocław 1988) ("From the Studies on the Bhagavadgītā."). This version is invaluable for Polish readers due to the translator's scientific and philological method, the commentaries prepared on the basis of the classical Indian commentaries and Hanna WAŁKÓWSKA's introduction presenting the history of philosophical and religious tradition of India. The translator explains systematically and consistently the context in which the Bhagavadgītā's philosophy interacts with the Indian philosophical tradition. She also reliably presents the Bhagavadgītā as a canonical text of the system of vedānta.

This translation appeared just at the suitable moment when the modernist translation of MICHALSKI done in the Parnassus mode is no longer effective with the wider circle of readers. SACHSE's style meets the demands of the contemporary Polish owing to its discursive and descriptive style, the use of hypotaxis and the informative and communicative character. These features ascertain a new circle of readers for the Bhagavadgītā.

Polish translations of the Bhagavadgītā

I. Translations from Sanskrit:

a. full:

MICHALSKI-IWIEŃSKI S.F., *Bhagawadgita czyli Pieśń o Bogu*. Warszawa 1910, 1921, 1927.

DYNOWSKA W., *Bhagawadgita. Pieśń Pana*. Madras 1947, 1956, 1957; Delhi 1972.

SACHSE J., *Bhagawadgita czyli Pieśń Pana*. Wrocław 1988.

b. fragments:

STASIAK S., "Bhagawadgita canto XI," *Astrea*, Warszawa 1924.

TOKARZ F., "Bhagawadgita canto II, VII, XI, XVI," *Z filozofii indyjskiej*. Część 1, Lublin 1974.

II Secondary translations:

a. full:

OLSZEWSKI B., *Bhagawadgita*. Brody 1911.

BOCEK K., *Bhagawadgita taka jaką jest*. Vaduz 1981.

b. fragments:

JANKOWSKI J., *Bhagawadgita canto XII*. Poezje. Seria liryczna, Warszawa 1910.

