



Hana Preinhaelterová (12 September 1938 – 24 June 2018)

Hana Preinhaelterová (née Pletánková) was born in České Budějovice, the regional capital of South Bohemia. After completing a business secondary school in Plzeň in 1958, she moved to Prague to attend university. There she studied two subjects at the Faculty of Philology of Charles University: Bengali and English. Whereas she chose English for practical reasons, from the outset her most genuine interest lay in India and Indian culture. She was lucky to meet Dušan Zbavitel at the faculty, an excellent scholar and teacher of Bengali and several other Indological subjects. Although Zbavitel was employed at the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, he also taught courses at Charles University. Zbavitel's main research interest was Bengali literature, and young Hana, under the influence of her teacher, soon became interested in this subject as well (she remained faithful to it for the rest of her life). She graduated in 1962 with degrees in both English and Bengali. Her master's thesis was titled 'Humour in Bengali Folk Literature', which was a topic she would repeatedly return to during her later academic career.

After two brief jobs, first at the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and then at the Ministry of Education and Culture, in 1964 Hana Preinhaelterová accepted a position at the institution from which she had graduated two years previous, the Department of Asian and African Studies of Charles University's Faculty of Arts. First as a lecturer and later as a reader in Bengali, she spent almost twenty years there teaching Bengali and related subjects. An important break in her early career came in the academic year 1966/67, which she spent at Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan, West Bengal. This formative experience would influence not only her scholarly work but especially her teaching.

By the end of the 1970s Hana Preinhaelterová's position at the department had become uncertain for political reasons (she was not a member of the Communist Party, and at this time the process of communist 'normalization' was culminating). When Bengali was withdrawn as a degree-granting subject in 1982, she had to leave the university immediately the next year. Luckily, she got a job at the Prague Language School, a safe haven where many persecuted academics found refuge at that time. There she taught Bengali and English until the fall of the communist regime in 1989. The following year she returned to the Faculty of Arts, and in 1991, when Bengali was re-established as a degree subject, she again started to teach it. Only now, in 1992, was Hana Preinhaelterová allowed to submit her PhD thesis (titled 'Rozpad tradiční hinduistické rodiny v současné bengálské povídce' [The break-up of the traditional

Hindu family as reflected in the modern Bengali short story], published in a revised English form in 1995 under the title *Break-up of the Traditional Hindu Family as Reflected in Āśāpūrnā Debi's Short Stories*) and get a doctorate degree. Although she reached retirement age soon after returning to the faculty, she continued teaching full-time until 2006 and even afterwards taught Bengali reading courses part-time until 2009.

Besides having an academic career, Hana Preinhaelterová was also an extremely active popularizer of Indian culture in the Czech Republic. She wrote countless pieces for many newspapers and magazines, prepared a number of radio programmes, participated in several television shows, and gave dozens of public lectures. Particularly after 2006, when she was no longer burdened with regular teaching and other academic duties at the university, she began to give public talks about India also outside Prague, often in rather remote places. She immensely enjoyed such events, and she was loved by her audiences, who had the rare opportunity to listen to vivid first-hand accounts of Indian life and culture.

Hana Preinhaelterová was a prolific author who wrote in various scholarly genres and also penned non-academic works. From the days of her university studies, she was always very interested in modern and contemporary Bengali literature, and thus translations – particularly of short stories – naturally dominate her oeuvre. She translated approximately one hundred short stories, which appeared in several journals, were broadcast by various radio stations, and, most importantly, were published in book form. The first volume was a selection of love stories titled *Lásky nelaskavé: Bengálské milostné povídky* (Loveless loves: Bengali love stories, 1986). It was followed by *Ohromný svět* (A wonderful world, 2008), a selection of short stories by Sunil Gangopadhyay, and finally by *Kdyby zdi promluvily* (If the walls talked, 2009), a collection of short stories by her most beloved author, Ashapura Debi. In 2010 Hana Preinhaelterová began translating – together with her former student Kristýna Himmerová (née Válková) – Ashapura Debi's most famous and acclaimed work, the voluminous novel *Prothom Protishruti* (*The First Promise*). Due to illness, however, they were unable to complete this joint work; Himmerová later finished the translation by herself. It is currently awaiting publication.

During her one-year stay in Santiniketan, Hana Preinhaelterová encountered various aspects of Bengali folk culture, including – mostly oral – folk literature, with which she fell in love. Besides writing several short pieces about this subject, she also published two books about it: the 1977 children's book *Upovídáný Gopa* (Chatty Gopa), a translation of selected folk tales collected and retold by the Bengali poet Jasimuddin, and the 2007 volume *Ó Matko Lakšmí, dej mi dar! Magické obřady bengálských žen* (Oh, Mother Lakshmi, grant me a gift! Magic rituals of Bengali women), a translation of instructions, magic verses, and mythic legends accompanying a specific type of women's rituals (*brata*). The book was designed, illustrated, and typeset by her student Klára Šimečková (who also contributed a study on ritual paintings, *ālpanās*). As a whole it is one of the most beautiful works ever produced by Czech Indologists.

Apart from Bengali literature, Hana Preinhaelterová's second main field of interest was teaching Bengali. In 1966 she prepared the reader *Bengálská čítanka* (Bengali reader), which she later supplemented with a Bengali-English dictionary (*Bengali Reader: Appendix, Bengali-English Vocabulary*, 1971). Her magnum opus, however, is the four-volume textbook *Základní kurs bengálštiny* (A basic course in Bengali) published in 1983, paradoxically the same year she had to leave the faculty and Bengali ceased to be

taught. At almost nine hundred pages, this is probably the most comprehensive textbook of modern Bengali ever produced in any language. Regrettably, she did not have the opportunity to prepare an English version of this work. A second corrected edition was issued twenty years later in 2003.

Among Czech readers, Hana Preinhaelterová is best known for – besides her translations of Bengali short stories – two books. The first one, *Moje bengálské přítelkyně* (My Bengali girlfriends, 1978), draws from her stay in Santiniketan and describes her experiences with various aspects of everyday Bengali life. Thanks to its humorous and at the same time understanding style, the book was very popular (its large print run of seventeen thousand copies quickly sold out) and widely read by readers not primarily interested in India. This book has been translated into Russian (1984) and parts also into Bengali and Slovak. A new edition was published in 1998 with photographs taken by her former student Erika Piecková. Her second popular book was *Hinduista od zrození do zrození* (A Hindu from birth to rebirth, 1997), a vivid account of the cycle of Hindu rites of passage, based again mainly on her personal experiences and written in her typical humorous style.

Besides the above-mentioned books and translations, Hana Preinhaelterová also wrote a large number of other works: about twenty research papers (in Czech, English, and Bengali), countless popular articles, about thirty book reviews, translations from Czech to Bengali and from English to Czech, and so on. Her full bibliography has yet to be compiled and published. No entry in any bibliography could, however, reflect her main characteristic: her love for Bengal and for her students. She was a demanding teacher, sometimes very strict, but always loving. Her students never formally addressed her as ‘doctor’ or ‘professor’; instead, she preferred to be called – rather familiarly – by the Bengali form of her name, Hanadi.

Lubomír Ondračka

Photograph by Přemysl Fialka



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