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From Leuven 1979 to Osaka 2022, or a Note on the History of ICEMLNI

Danuta Stasik 

The series of International Conferences on Early Modern Literatures in North India is known either by its acronym as ICEMLNI or by its common earlier name as Bhakti conferences. It has had an interesting history spanning more than forty years of functioning as a forum for exchange among scholars from around the world working on early modern sources concerning North India. In the context of this volume, which is the outcome of the 14th ICEMLNI, held in Osaka between 15 and 19 July 2022, it seems to be worth giving some thought to the academic tradition from which this collection grows. The 14th ICEMLNI, the last conference of the series to date, scheduled originally for 2021 in Beijing, took place in Osaka after a four-year break, instead of the usual three years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ The Organizing Committee, led by Prof. Hiroko Nagasaki, had to face the many pandemic-related challenges but despite all the difficulties resulting from them, or perhaps precisely because of them (!), with new insights and experiences gained over that time, the committee managed to bring together researchers working on early modern literatures of North India, both online and on-site in Osaka.² The four years that followed the 13th ICEMLNI, held in 2018 in Warsaw, were a momentous time in

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- 1 For organizational reasons, the conference planned for 2006 did not take place after the usual three years. For details of conferences held, see Table 1.1.
 - 2 Altogether, including students from Osaka, there were more than ninety on-site and online participants, of whom forty participants presented papers, keynotes, and addresses.

the full sense of the word. After an initial shock, experiencing isolation from the academic – but not only academic – world and a lack of direct interaction with it, over time all this appeared to increasingly reinforce the community's sense of the need to return to personal contacts and the direct exchange of ideas. At the same time, questions about the future have emerged – a fitting impetus to reflect on the journey that has taken the ICEMLNI community from the first meeting in 1979 in Leuven, Belgium, to the fourteenth meeting in 2022 in Osaka, Japan. The story of this journey, and in particular how it all began, also presented itself to both Imre Bangha and myself independently when we were working on the introduction to the 13th ICEMLNI volume (Bangha and Stasik 2024). At that time, it had been set aside for another occasion and was only partially recounted in the Osaka opening address. Such insights can work to enhance our collective awareness of the event we participate in by looking at what constitutes the history of our community and what marks milestones along the way. This may help us understand better the present research position and what the prospects for the future are, where we go from here. Such a reflection seems all the more relevant insofar as it can contribute more comprehensively to an understanding, within the ICEMLNI community and beyond, of the current state of early modern studies on North India, and where they are heading for and under what assumptions.

Before³ the first gathering took place in Leuven, the few scholars concerned with North Indian early modern literature, mainly based in Western Europe, such as Charlotte Vaudeville (1918–2006)⁴ and R. S. McGregor (or Stuart McGregor (1929–2013))⁵ as he was generally known), as well as Vladimir Miltner (1933–1997) from Prague in the then Czechoslovakia,⁶ worked in isolation, without the support of a kindred academic community that barely existed, and often against the expectations placed on them by their teachers and immediate academic setting. In the late 1970s, around 1978, Charlotte Vaudeville was approached by Monika Horstmann who wanted to switch from the oral traditions of Chotanagpur, which she had previously studied,⁷ to

3 This paragraph, in particular, owes much to Imre Bangha and our email exchange in May 2022, as well as to personal communication with Monika Horstmann (email of 19 June 2022).

4 By then, Vaudeville had published her path-breaking books: Vaudeville 1955, 1962, 1974, 1977.

5 By 1979, McGregor had published his PhD thesis (McGregor 1968).

6 See Miltner 1966.

7 See Jordan-Horstmann 1969 and Thiel-Horstmann 1978.

the Sant tradition, a new interest prompted by her encounters with Kabīrpanthīs in Bihar. Vaudeville, who was Winand Callewaert's PhD supervisor, put them in contact with each other and this became a source of mutual inspiration. On the one hand, they quickly agreed that Monika ji should continue focusing on Dādū, whose compositions she had barely started studying. On the other hand, Winand ji, who was working alone, without the support of his teacher or colleagues, decided to remedy this by inviting a group of Hindi scholars interested in manuscript studies. This materialized as the International Middle Hindi Bhakti Conference, organized in 1979,⁸ which brought to Leuven fourteen scholars, mainly from Europe, but also from the USA and Canada. Among them were the gurus of early modern Hindi, Charlotte Vaudeville and Stuart McGregor, as well as younger scholars who had just risen or were rising into prominence.

In the preface to the first conference volume, in fact complaining, Callewaert (1980: vii) observed that:

the study of the devotional literature in North India between the 12th and the 17th C. A.D. is often the scientific 'hobby' of scholars who are academically engaged in the study of Sanskrit or modern Hindi. This partly explains the lack of communication in the field of research on the so-called *bhakti* literature in North India.

It should also be mentioned that, by the late 1970s, pursuing his 'hobby', Callewaert had travelled extensively across North India⁹ in search of manuscripts and, as Monika Horstmann noted, 'collected a myriad of manuscripts, and this is how he facilitated a wave of scholarship, especially on the Sants'.¹⁰ It is significant to note in this context that Prof. Monika Horstmann serves as one of the first examples of this generous sharing by Prof. Winand Callewaert, which has continued to this day, also in the form of his publications, especially his *Dictionary of Bhakti* (Callewaert 2009).¹¹

8 Personal communication with Monika Horstmann (email of 19 June 2022).

9 Then and later, Winand Callewaert visited various institutional and private library collections mainly in Rajasthan (e.g., in Bikaner, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Jaipur), Punjab (Amritsar, Patiala), Uttar Pradesh (Varanasi, Kanpur). By photographing the manuscripts kept in them, he managed to amass a collection of film reels with ninety-four manuscripts. I would like to thank Prof. Callewaert for sharing with me a list of locations from which his collection originates.

10 Personal communication with Monika Horstmann (email of 19 June 2022).

11 In this context, at Winand ji's request, I would like to quote the last lines of his Preface to the dictionary: 'Finally, whoever will ever have use of this

The purpose of the Leuven conference was the sharing of research or, in the words of the organizer himself, ‘to give a chance to scholars who are working on a section of the North Indian devotional literature to exchange information and queries regarding their research’ (Callewaert 1980: vii). Thus the conference proceedings, meant as ‘a forum on current research or primary sources relating to bhakti’ (Entwistle and Mallison 1994: xi),¹² also include reports sent by twenty-five persons from all over the world, making the volume a comprehensive survey of the work done at the end of the 1970s. The need and usefulness of such a gathering of *sahyodayas* (Monika Horstmann’s formulation) was best confirmed by the unanimous decision of the Leuven-conference participants to meet in three years in 1982, ‘for the same purpose’ (Callewaert 1980: vii); Monika Horstmann volunteered to convene the next meeting in Bonn and the proposal was accepted enthusiastically.¹³

As a result, the next conference – the Second International Conference on Early Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages – was held in 1982 in St. Augustin near Bonn in Germany. Let us note here a change in its name in comparison with the first conference. First, ‘Middle Hindi’ was replaced with ‘New Indo-Aryan Languages’ to represent the fact that from the beginning, it was not only the sources in Hindi in its many forms that were the focus of interest and discussion, but the New Indo-Aryan languages (with some occurrences of Old and Middle Indo-Aryan, as well as Dravidian sources at earlier conferences). Second, ‘Bhakti’ disappeared from its appellation as such, though it is present indirectly in the designation of ‘devotional literature’ and directly in the title of the conference volume as well as the volume itself (Thiel-Horstmann 1983). At the same time, one cannot fail to notice how quickly the conference became institutionalized. In the Editor’s Preface to the volume, Monika Horstmann noted: ‘In 1982 the participants of the conference decided to make this triennial meeting a permanent institution.’ As can be seen forty years later, this was undoubtedly made possible by the energy and enthusiasm of those behind the origins of the conference, and above all their genuine willingness to share the results of their research, as well as a keen interest in the work of others, both established and beginner researchers. As a result, a line of

dictionary owes a great debt to Mieke my wife. For many years she allowed me to indulge in my passion for this project and nursed my fatigue every evening till I finally completed the work at the age of sixty-six’ (Callewaert 2009: x).

12 See also further in the article.

13 Personal communication with Monika Horstmann (email of 19 June 2022) and Winand Callewaert (Zoom meeting on 19 June 2022); cf. Callewaert 1980: vii.

tradition – *sahṛdaya paramparā* – could have been established. It may be noted here that the list of scholars ‘who contributed to the conference by presenting papers and participating in the discussions or by doing either’ comprises thirty-seven names (Thiel-Horstmann 1983: 443–5), which, compared to the meeting three years earlier, testifies to a significant increase in active participation and, above all, the scale of interest in the topic.

As agreed, after three years, the Third International Conference on Early Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages was held in 1985, in Noordwijkerhout near Leiden, in the Netherlands; its main organizer was G. H. Schokker (1929–2009) from the Kern Institute in Leiden. It is worth noting at this point that all the conferences, from the earliest to the most recent, have been followed by volumes containing the papers presented at them (see Table 1.2). In the case of the Leiden proceedings, however, for various reasons, it took a long fifteen years before they were published in 2000. This volume contains twenty-six papers (one of them co-authored), although some contributions had not been read out at the conference (Gautam and Schokker 2000: vi).

In 1988, it was R. S. McGregor who invited the conference participants to the Fourth Conference¹⁴ on Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages that took place in Cambridge. In his preface to the conference volume, including twenty-seven papers, McGregor observed that the study of ‘the earlier literature of the modern South Asian languages... has in recent years made... [this] material much more accessible to scholarly study than in the past, and this has opened the way towards improved knowledge of the history of Indian religions in the last millennium’ (McGregor 1992: xiii), evidencing thus the conference impact on boosting scholarship beyond language and literature.

In the proceedings of a subsequent conference, the Fifth Conference on Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, organized in 1991 in Paris at Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient by Françoise Mallison, its editors, Allan W. Entwistle (1949–1996) and Françoise Mallison, make an important statement about the conference evolution (1994: xi–xii):

When the series began in Leuven twelve years ago, the aim was basically to establish a forum for reports on current research or primary sources relating to *bhakti*. By the time the conference appeared in its Parisian incarnation, the scope had broadened

14 Note: the absence of the adjective ‘International’ in the name of this conference is not an oversight.

considerably, both in terms of the time-span and the types of source material considered. This confirms the impression gained at Cambridge that the study of devotional literature has expanded and diversified.

This also marks a decisive shift in the focus of the research field from bhakti devotional literature to the rich literary production of North India of various kinds – pertaining to different areas of knowledge, courtly, historical, Hindu, Jain, Sufi. It came about with the concept of ‘early modernity’, after Western historians of culture moved away from exclusively Eurocentric approaches and became more intensely concerned with early modernity in a broad comparative perspective (cf. Eisenstadt and Schluchter 1998: esp. 1–2). This new approach has been adopted by researchers involved with the conference and, in due course, it also became reflected in the renaming of the conference as the International Conference on Early Modern Literatures in North India (ICEMLNI). In this form, the name emerged in 2012 on the occasion of the only conference held in India so far, at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies in Shimla, thanks to the organizational efforts of the younger generation from Columbia University, especially in the person of Tyler Williams.

As we can see, this shift was neither sudden nor altogether unpredictable, and resulted from a transformation in the way South Asia began to be understood and studied, taking into account – as John F. Richards put it – ‘the notion of cumulative and accelerating change’ in India between the fifteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries (Richards 1997: 208). An early forerunner of the ‘early modern approach’ noticeable in connection with the conference appeared somewhat hesitantly (?) and essentially out of context in the main title of the proceedings of the 6th Conference on Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages that was organized in 1994 in Seattle at the University of Washington, thanks to the untiring efforts of Alan Entwistle. Its volume, published in 1999, was entitled *Studies in Early Modern Indo-Aryan Languages, Literature and Culture* (Entwistle et al. 1999).

The early modern approach continued to mature for well over a decade. Thus, three subsequent conferences followed: the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth International Conferences on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, organized, respectively, in 1997 in Venice, 2000 in Leuven, and 2003 in Heidelberg (for details see Table 1.1), but with no direct reference to early modernity in either their names or the titles of their proceedings. The conference due in India in 2006

unfortunately could not take place and it was the next meeting, organized by Imre Bangha, in 2009 at the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, in Miercurea Ciuc in Romania, when this approach was articulated both in its name – the Tenth International Bhakti Conference: Early Modern Literatures in North India – and the title of its volume, *Bhakti beyond the Forest: Current Research on Early Modern Literatures in North India, 2003–2009* (Bangha 2013), yet with bhakti coming to the fore.

As mentioned, early modernity was fully and explicitly embraced in the name of the Eleventh ICEMLNI in 2012 in Shimla. Since then, the last three conferences have been held under this appellation, namely, the Twelfth ICEMLNI in 2015 in Lausanne, the Thirteenth ICEMLNI in 2018 in Warsaw, and the Fourteenth ICEMLNI in 2022 in Osaka (for more details see Table 1.1). The early modernity has also been captured in the titles of the resulting volumes, *Text and Tradition in Early Modern North India* (2018), *Early Modern India: Literatures and Images, Texts and Languages* (2019), and *Literary Cultures in Early Modern North India* (for more details see Table 1.2). All this, and especially the contents of the conference volumes, not only clearly underline the shift and broadening of the field of research but, at the same time, also the possibility, indeed the necessity, of considering sources from a transdisciplinary perspective. This new understanding would not have been possible in its present form without the groundbreaking primary research carried out by scholars of early vernacular literatures, who were also active participants in the previous conferences. It is their research presented in the conference proceedings that has contributed significantly to clarifying the notion of early modernity. Of course, research and publications on early modern cultures in India have come not only from the ICEMLNI circles. The exchange of ideas and research has also taken place outside this forum, contributing much to our understanding of early modernity not only in North India.¹⁵

One more point worth noting is that the ICEMLNI conferences, from the outset, in addition to their scholarly dimension, have also acted as an important means of integrating the community of scholars of North Indian early modernity, both established and newcomers. Over time, however, it became apparent that these triennial meetings were not

15 In addition to the works on the subject referred to in Bangha and Stasik (2024) and Cort (2024), cf. such volumes with first-rate contributions published at the time as: O'Hanlon and Washbrook 2012; de Bruijn and Busch 2014; Orsini and Sheikh 2014; Minkowski and O'Hanlon 2015; and Orsini and Schofield 2016.

enough for their participants, that there was a great need for (joint) guided reading of source texts, especially the lesser known and / or difficult to access. Thus, ICEMLNI-related events, in the form of annual or biennial workshops-cum-retreats, have emerged as a new feature of community interaction, and this was made possible through the initiative of Imre Bangha, who organized the Brajbhasha and Early Hindi Retreat cum Workshop in Miercurea Ciuc in 2011. Up to the present, it has taken on ten incarnations: in Warsaw in 2012, Bansko in 2014, Třešť in 2016, Bansko in 2017, Saint Petersburg / Gatchina in 2019, Brijuni in 2023, Pročida 2024, and due to the Covid-19 pandemic, three online workshops in 2020, 2021, and 2022.¹⁶ An event that grew out of early Hindi meetings was one Rajasthani workshop that took place in 2015 in Warsaw. Last but not least, there are also middle Bengali retreats, the first and second of which were held in Miercurea Ciuc in 2016 and 2017, with later meetings in Deer Park (Himachal Pradesh, India) in 2018, and Bab Zouina (Morocco) in 2019, while the retreat planned for 2020 had to be cancelled due to the pandemic.¹⁷ Workshops and retreats significantly increased the community outreach by including more research students and, after going online, especially many participants from India, for whom this format has become more accessible than in-person meetings.

In conclusion, one cannot fail to mention that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought the conference and related events to a pivotal moment, initiating the diversification of our practice. Paradoxically, it has opened up new vistas barely imaginable before 2020, changing the rhythm and formats established over the years. The Osaka conference, in a hybrid format, held mainly online but with considerable on-site participation, was an important practical lesson in how ICEMLNI may operate in the future. Especially under the new conditions, it has become apparent that the conference series continues to exist not only because of those willing to share the results of their research. For this to be possible, the community needs those who are willing to volunteer their time and effort for the benefit of others, that is, the organizers, all those thanks to whom the past conferences have taken place, and those who are yet to organize them.

The *paramparā* will go on: in Osaka, the offer of Christopher Diamond from the Australian National University in Canberra to organize the 2025 ICEMLNI was most welcomed. Let us get ready for it in whatever format reality dictates!

16 For the history and details of past Early Hindi Workshops, please visit: <https://earlyhindibrajbhashaworkshop.wordpress.com>, accessed 9 February 2025.

17 For more details of Middle Bengali Workshops, please visit: <https://voices.uchicago.edu/middlebengali>, accessed 9 February 2025.

Table 1.1 Details of Conferences for 1979–2022

No.	Date	Organizer	Name of the conference
1	31 March – 1 April 1979	Winand M. Callewaert, KU Leuven (Belgium)	International Middle Hindi Bhakti Conference
2	19–21 March 1982	Monika Thiel-Horstmann, University of Bonn (Germany)	2 nd International Confer- ence on Early Devotional Literature in New Indo- Aryan Languages
3	12–15 Decem- ber 1985	G. H. Schokker, Leiden University (the Netherlands)	3 rd International Confer- ence on Devotional Litera- ture in the New Indo-Aryan Languages
4	1–4 April 1988	R. S. McGregor, Cambridge University (UK)	4 th Conference on Devo- tional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages
5	9–12 July 1991	Françoise Mallison, Ecole Française d'Ex- trême-Orient (Paris, France)	5 th Conference on Devo- tional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages
6	7–9 July 1994	Alan W. Entwistle, Uni- versity of Washington (Seattle, USA)	6 th Conference on Devo- tional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages
7	6–8 August 1997	Mariola Offredi, Univer- sity of Venice (Italy)	7 th International Con- ference on Early Litera- ture in New Indo-Aryan Languages
8	23–26 August 2000	Winand M. Callewaert and Dieter Taillieu, KU Leuven (Belgium)	8 th International Con- ference on Early Litera- ture in New Indo-Aryan Languages
9	23–26 August 2003	Monika Horstmann, University of Heidelberg (Germany)	9 th International Confer- ence on Early Devotional Literature in New Indo- Aryan Languages
10	22–24 July 2009	Imre Bangha, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Miercurea Ciuc, Romania)	10 th International Bhakti Conference: Early Modern Literatures in North India
11	3–6 August 2012	Tyler Williams, Columbia University / Indian Insti- tute of Advanced Study (India)	11 th International Con- ference on Early Modern Literatures in North India (ICEMLNI)

Table 1.1 (continued)

No.	Date	Organizer	Name of the conference
12	15–19 July 2015	Maya Burger and Nadia Cattoni, University of Lausanne (Switzerland)	12 th ICEMLNI
13	18–22 July 2018	Danuta Stasik and Aleksandra Turek, University of Warsaw (Poland)	13 th ICEMLNI
14	15–19 July 2022	Hiroko Nagasaki and Eijiro Doyama, University of Osaka (Japan)	14 th ICEMLNI

Table 1.2 Bibliographical Details of Conference Volumes for 1979–2022

Place and year of conference	Bibliographical details of volume
Leuven 1979	Winand M. Callewaert (ed.). 1980. <i>Early Hindi Devotional Literature in Current Research: Proceedings of the International Middle Hindi Bhakti Conference (April 1979) Organized by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven</i> (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 8). Leuven: Departement Oriëntalistiek KUL.
Bonn 1982	Monika Thiel-Horstmann (ed.). 1983. <i>Bhakti in Current Research, 1979–1982. Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Early Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, St. Augustin, 19–21 March 1982</i> (Collectanea Instituti Anthropos 30). Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.
Leiden 1985	M. K. Gautam and G. H. Schokker (eds). 2000. <i>Bhakti in Current Research, 1982–85: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Devotional Literature in the New Indo-Aryan Languages, Noordwijkerhout, 1985</i> (Kern Institute Miscellanea 10). Lucknow, Ghaziabad, Delhi: Indo-European Publishers.
Cambridge 1988	R. S. McGregor (ed.). 1992. <i>Devotional Literature in South Asia. Current Research, 1985–1988: Papers of the Fourth Conference on Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, Held at Wolfson College, Cambridge, 1–4 September 1988</i> (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 46). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Table 1.2 (continued)

Place and year of conference	Bibliographical details of volume
Paris 1991	Alan W. Entwistle and Françoise Mallison (eds). 1994. <i>Studies in South Asian Devotional Literature: Research Papers, 1988–1991, presented at the Fifth Conference on Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, held at Paris – Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient, 9–12 July 1991</i> . New Delhi: Manohar & Paris: EFEO.
Seattle 1994	Alan W. Entwistle and Carol Salomon, with Heidi Pauwels and Michael Shapiro (eds). 1999. <i>Studies in Early Modern Indo-Aryan Languages, Literature and Culture: Research Papers, 1992–1994, Presented at the Sixth Conference on Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, Held at Seattle, University of Washington, 7–9 July 1994</i> . New Delhi: Manohar.
Venice 1997	Mariola Offredi (ed.). 2000. <i>The Banyan Tree: Essays on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages (Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, Venice, 1997)</i> . 2 vols. New Delhi: Manohar & Venezia: Università degli Studi di Venezia. Dipartimento di Studi Eurasiatici.
Leuven 2000	Winand M. Callewaert and Dieter Taillieu (eds). 2000. <i>Devotional Literature in South Asia: Current Research, 1997–2000. Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, Leuven, 23–26 August, 2000</i> . New Delhi: Manohar.
Heidelberg 2003	Monika Horstmann (ed.). 2003. <i>Bhakti in Current Research, 2001–2003: Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Early Devotional Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, Heidelberg, 23–26 July 2003</i> . New Delhi: Manohar.
Miercurea Ciuc 2009	Imre Bangha (ed.). 2013. <i>Bhakti beyond the Forest: Current Research on Early Modern Literatures in North India, 2003–2009: Papers Presented at the Tenth International Bhakti Conference: Early Modern Literatures in North India held at Sapientia, Hungarian University of Transylvania, Miercurea Ciuc, Romania between 22–24 July 2009</i> . New Delhi: Manohar.
Shimla 2012	Tyler Williams, Anshu Malhotra, and John Stratton Hawley (eds). 2018. <i>Text and Tradition in Early Modern North India</i> . New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Lausanne 2015	Maya Burger and Nadia Cattoni (eds). 2019. <i>Early Modern India: Literatures and Images, Texts and Languages</i> . Heidelberg, Berlin: CrossAsia-eBooks.


Table 1.2 (continued)

Place and year of conference	Bibliographical details of volume
Warsaw 2018	Imre Bangha and Danuta Stasik (eds). 2024. <i>Literary Cultures in Early Modern North India: Current Research</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Osaka 2022	Hiroko Nagasaki, Monika Horstmann, Kiyokazu Okita (eds). 2025. <i>Early Modern Literatures in North India – Current Research, 2022–2024</i> . Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Winand Callewaert and Professor Monika Horstmann, the organizers of the first two meetings in the series, for generously sharing with me their knowledge and memories of the early days of the conference. I also thank Imre Bangha for an inspiring exchange of thoughts, as well Hiroko Nagasaki and Thomas de Bruijn for the information they provided me while I was writing this history.

ORCID®

Danuta Stasik  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6885-9714>

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