

Winter Landscapes : Remembering Tibanananda

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REFLECTIONS

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A strange darkness has come to the earth today.
Those who are blind see most with their eyes;
Those whose hearts are stirred by no love, fondness, compassion—
The world cannot move without their advice.

Those who still harbour a deep faith in man,
Those for whom it is still natural to avow
Some noble truth or precept, art or ceaseless striving—
Jackals and vultures feed on their hearts now.

Jibanananda Das (*Adbhut Andhar Ek*, 1954)
Tr. Sudeshna Chakravarti

We are celebrating the birth centenaries of two great Bengali poets this year: Jibanananda Das and Nazrul Islam who represent two different strains of Indian poetry: one, subtle, innovative, tension-fraught, low-toned, introspective, solitary, private; the other, loud, committed, rebellious, extrovert, collective, public. While the former represents modernisation at the level of aesthetic perception and poetic idiom, the latter represents modernisation at the level of thematic concerns and democratisation at the level of form. These trends that have co-existed all along the history of Indian poetry are not mutually exclusive; they complement each other and at the critical periods of our social evolution influence and interact with each other making poetry socially dynamic and aesthetically innovative at the same time as was the case with Sangam poetry, Bhakti poetry, the poetry of the Freedom Movement and is the case with several avant-gardist trends in contemporary Indian poetry.

Jibanananda too was considered avant-grade in his time. He was the most talented of a post-Tagore group of Bengali poets who had fine-tuned their sensibility to the frequencies of modern Western poetry and at the same time were eager to mix it with native cultural elements.

Jibanananda's poetry is archetypal in its typical synthesis of the indigenous and the alien elements. One of the first poets to try the new style, he had to pass through a period of indifference and hostility like most of the modernists of the first generation in India and elsewhere before he was canonised as the greatest poetic voice in Bengali after Tagore. It was not easy for him to counter the influence of Tagore whose readers found his imagery unconventional, his diction uneven, his language unrefined and his whole expression exotic. Lampooned by orthodox critics for obscenity and obscurity and censured by Marxists for his despair and indifference to social issues Jibanananda had created a new readership for himself through a patient education of taste and sensibility.

Sisirkumar Das in his careful introduction to *A Certain Sense*, a selection of Jibanananda Das's poems in English translation recently brought out by the Sahitya Akademi, points to this difference of Jibanananda's poetic world: "The poetic world of Jibanananda is colourful and sensuous, dark and melancholy and totally different from the geography celebrated in Bengali poetry both by his predecessors and his contemporaries. Spring and the rains, the two favourite seasons of Bengali poets (especially Tagore) are conspicuously absent in Jibanananda. He chooses *Hemanta*, the short-lived interval between *Sarat* known for bright blue sky, green fields, young paddy and swollen rivers, and *Sit*(winter), a season of tender sunshine and ripe corps. *Hemanta* is a season of mist and fog, of melancholy light and fields with ripe crops almost ready to be garnered. Jibanananda represents it so. He abandons the vivacity of the rains and the colourful abundance of *Sarat* and *Vasanta* (spring), so familiar to Bengali readers." He creates a dark geography dominated by mists and mellow fruitfulness, with languid rivers and mysterious trees. One may recall here the paintings of Rousseau. If cuckoo and the nightingale are the birds of romantic poetry, Jibanananda prefers the kite, the owl and the vulture: there is too the privileging of sinister beasts like jackals and rats and frogs over the hare and the deer. Sense experiences run into one another here; the animate and the inanimate coalesce. Diversities dissolve in a primal darkness; categories collapse into one another.

What happens to history in Jibanananda's poems is important. Commenting on 'Banalata Sen' the poet's most popular piece, Sisirkumar Das observes. "Asok and Vimbisara, Sravasti and Vidisa, the Malay Sea and the Sinhala Sea cease to be the luxuriant backdrop of a romantic escape. Apart from highlighting the contrast between the

past and the present and intensifying the pain and agony of modern man, the poem connects the narratorial voice with the ever-moving forces of history.... This private voice of the narrator becomes part of a historical experience of the continuous journey of man and the predicaments of the here and now." He points out how the poet juxtaposes modern places, times, names and metaphors with ancient and classical ones and how this along with the baffling images he uses creates a tension that captures the anxiety of our times. This sense of history pervades several of the later poems of Jibanananda Das where hope alternates with despair and life rises out of the debris of ancient civilizations. It is not all morbid; there are glimpses of hope and faith in the final victory of the human spirit.

True, Jibanananda was a critic of modern urban civilization much like Rilke and several other modern poets. He saw himself surrounded by well-dressed beasts in the city, as in a picture by Goya, lamented the absence of doves who never woke from sleep among the olive leaves. Personal and universal suffering fuse into one silent cry in his later poems written in the background of war, famine, Partition and genocide. The charge that he was indifferent to the turmoil of his times is easily disproved by these later poems, provided one does not expect poets to react loudly to and take a 'politically correct' stand on every social issue. Jibanananda's responses as in the case with the majority of poets, were oblique and affective, expressed more in the form of a universalised trauma rather than direct and topical reactions. The short piece of 1954 quoted at the beginning of this note is an example and so are poems like "The Chariot of History" (*Itihasan*, 1946), "After the Death of Men" (*Manusher Mrityu Hale*, 1950), "1946-47" (1948) or "Standing before Time" (*Samayer Kache*). Add to this the strong regional consciousness of the poems of *Rupasi Bangla* and you have a poet as much of his space and time as of transcendence.

Poetry is basically polyphonic and inevitably contains contradictions : it is unwise to reduce any poet's works to a single voice or give it a totalizing label like 'progressive', 'modern', 'post-modern' or 'reactionary': Jibanananda himself was conscious of this. In his preface of *Shreshtha Kabita* he says that his poetry has been called the poetry of loneliness, poetry of nature, poetry of historical and social consciousness, poetry of indifference and poetry of unconsciousness. While all these are partly right, he says that each one may apply only to a particular poem or a phase of his poetry, not to the totality of his work. Sisirkumar Das is right when he says that without being a public

poet, Jibanananda permitted his poetic personality to be influenced by the trauma and anxiety of the political situation. "He wrote with a strong sense of individuality but did not fail to locate the individual in the larger space of history. His engagements with existential problems are not confined to any narrow subjectivity but involve a cosmic view of life, which is partially shared by his contemporary novelist Bibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay, author of *Pather Panchali*. 'After the death of men, man still abides' "(After the Death of Men)."

Let me end this note with a few lines that affirm Jibanananda's hope in man:

"Yes I say:
I'll move in the sun for the few days I'm still alive:
Let's see how the world's grass brings forth,
From the drop of creation's poison
And the vessel of trampled humanity,
The great blue sky.
Let's think—let's think—
If you delve into history, you hear
Penetrating the mines of sadness like a comfort,
The sounds of a hundred, a hundred hundred springs."

(*He Hriday*, 1954)

Tr. by Swapan Majumdar



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