

## Introduction

Among the Bengali poets other than Rabindranath Tagore known outside the Bengali-speaking area, the most notable are Kazi Nazrul Islam and Jibanananda Das. Except that they were born within a year of each other, there is, however, hardly anything in common between them. In fact they represent two altogether different faces of Bengali poetry.

Nazrul Islam, an embodiment of Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis, lived a life full of exciting events. He had a brief stint in the army, experience of which enriched his poetic vision. He responded vigorously to the Indian national movement; he was a political activist who welcomed the October Revolution; and he went to jail for his inflammatory poems and journalistic writings. A romantic youth full of revolutionary zeal, extravagant in life and literature, warm and passionate, loud and prolific, Nazrul Islam, who was given the sobriquet *Bidrohi* (Rebel) by his admirers, had a brief literary career, though he lived much longer than Jibanananda. He achieved great popularity with the publication of his very first work *Agni-bina* (The Lyre of Fire) in 1922. His fame continued to increase with each subsequent publication, and by the end of the 1930s he had become the idol of the Bengali youth\*as much for his poetry as for his musical talent. He is probably the author of the largest number of songs in Bengali. His career, however, was tragically cut short in 1942 by an irremediable disease affecting his brain. He lost his voice and remained paralysed for thirty-four years till his death in 1976 in Bangladesh, which honoured him as its national poet. Like a meteor, indeed, he lived and died, and has now been transformed into a legend.

Jibanananda, on the other hand, was a quiet, withdrawn and intensely introverted person. He maintained a distance from the crowd, from literary gatherings and learned societies, as well

as from the political movements and ideological debates that kept his contemporaries occupied. Shy and soft-spoken, Jibanananda experienced hardly any exciting event in his life worthy of drawing public attention, except for his agonizing death at the age of fifty-five in a tram-car accident. This makes for a glaring contrast with the vivacious Nazrul Islam. Yet the justification for introducing Jibanananda with a reference to Nazrul Islam lies not only in that they represent two different streams of twentieth-century Bengali poetry—the private and the public—but more because one is the last celebrated figure of a romantic phase of poetry with its spirit of revolt and passion, while the other inducted the tortured sensibilities of modernity into Bengali poetry.

The modernity that created the real rift in the history of Bengali literary consciousness—whatever be its immediate causes, political, social or aesthetic—appeared in the work of a small group of *avant-garde* writers, thoroughly westernized in their training and thought. They differed from one another in their response to the earlier traditions of Bengali poetry, particularly the Tagorean, and in their regard for Western modernism. They also differed in the strategies for appropriating Western 'modern' poetry. Yet they were successful to a considerable degree in presenting an orchestrated voice of challenge to the established norms of literary culture. Jibanananda was the most conspicuous among these writers; and today, more than four decades after his death, he appears to be the most outstanding.

## II

Jibanananda\* was born on 18 February 1899 in Barisal, now in Bangladesh. The landscape of this riverine district, known for its serene natural beauty untampered by urbanization—the district does not have any railways even today—had a deep and pervasive influence on his life and literature. Not only did it

\* Jibanananda is not a common name in Bengal. It was deliberately confounded with the more popular 'Jibananda' by his detractors, and often by other well-meaning but tongue-tied Bengalis.

shape his sensibility towards nature, but it remained with his poetic subconscious throughout his life as the most significant space out of which emerged his metaphors and images. Later in life, he wrote lovingly of the open fields in the town of Barisal: 'its evenings lit by glow-worms, its mysterious nights broken by the shrieks of owls, its roadsides—all this could keep human souls absorbed for a long time.'\*

Jibanananda was born in a Brahmo family. The Brahmos were known for their progressive views in social matters, particularly for their laudable role in the emancipation of women. His father Satyananda, a dedicated school-teacher and an active member of several social and religious organizations, was also a writer on religious and moral themes. His mother Kusum Kumari was a poet of merit: she published a considerable number of poems in different journals and also a volume of verse. The simplicity and spontaneity of her writings did not go unnoticed by her contemporaries. Jibanananda must have had a thorough religious and moral training, but he never showed any particular inclination towards religion. He had a happy and normal childhood, and like most of his contemporary poets, he grew into a young man without any interest in religious dogma.

The Das family was dominated by a strong literary culture: a typical feature of the contemporary English-educated Bengali homes, where English literature was read with passion without neglecting either Bengali or Sanskrit, particularly the two Sanskrit epics in their Bengali transcreations. Jibanananda is not known for any special interest in Sanskrit, though his early education consisted of reading and listening to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, works that he valued all his life. It was English literature—to which he was introduced by his father and then the teachers at school quite early in life—which remained a

\* See *Jibanananda Daser kabyasangraha*, ed. Debiprasad Bandyopadhyay (Bharabi: Calcutta, 1993), p.(19).



permanent source of delight and inspiration for him. He studied English literature at Presidency College, Calcutta, and then took his Master's degree in the subject from Calcutta University in 1921. That very year he got a teaching assignment in the Department of English at City College, an institution founded by the Brahmos in Calcutta. The impact of English literature was quite deep and pervasive in his life. Almost all the 'modern' Bengali poets were formal students, and some were teachers, of English.

Jibanananda did not continue at City College for long. The College has been unjustly maligned by some admirers of Jibanananda for dismissing him on the charge of obscenity in one of his poems. Teaching, however, remained his life-long profession. He taught at a college in Khulna for a few months, then at a college in Delhi. It was from Delhi that he came to Dacca in 1930 to get married: the bride Labanya was then a student in one of the colleges in that enlightened town. He did not return to Delhi. Little is known about the period between his leaving Delhi and his appointment at Brajamohan College, Barisal in 1935. In the interim, he applied for jobs at various places without much success, finding only intermittent employment. For some time after marriage, life was not easy for him.

Brajamohan College had acquired great prestige in Bengal at that time for its high moral and intellectual standards. This college and the natural setting of Barisal gave Jibanananda stability, security and probably happiness. He continued at this college for a little over a decade. In 1946 he came to Calcutta to spend his holidays, a month before the infamous Calcutta riots. Jibanananda had to postpone his journey home. Then came Independence: the country was partitioned, and Jibanananda did not go back to Barisal again.

After months of unemployment, he found a job in a daily newspaper but was unable to continue with it. The next few years of his life were marked by dire financial distress and acute

unhappiness. Occasional payment for poems published in journals were his only earnings for a long time. His wife's income as a school teacher was very meagre. We are told by his biographers that during this period Jibanananda received one hundred rupees as royalty, the first ever in his literary career, for one of his books. Finally he found a teaching job in a college in Howrah. But his last days were haunted by financial anxiety and the trauma and humiliation caused by the partition of the country. His death on the night of 22 October 1954, eight days after he was hit by a tram-car, brought down the curtain on the life of a man already crushed under the weight of poverty and anguish.

His reputation as a poet was still confined to a very small group of enlightened readers, who admired him as the most remarkable literary figure of contemporary Bengal. He left behind a large number of unpublished manuscripts; some of them were, expectedly, of verse, but more of novels. The discovery of these novels, distinguished by their narratorial skill and thematic complexity, opened up a new area of exploration within the legend that Jibanananda had slowly become. The Sahitya Akademi's bestowal on Jibanananda of the first of its annual awards in Bengali was announced soon after his death.

### III

The conclusive emergence of Jibanananda as the greatest Bengali poet after Tagore and the most powerful influence on the next generation of poets and poetic movements, took place after his death. Although now a canonized figure in the Bengali literary pantheon, he did not attain smoothly to this eminence. Recognition came very slowly indeed. Most critics and fellow-poets, with the notable exception of his generous-minded friend Buddhadeva Bose—himself a versatile writer—maintained a studied silence about him. The tradition-minded reader, engrossed in Tagorean splendour, found him different, exotic and imitative of Western poets. His unconventional metaphors and uneven diction, the rawness of his language and his sensuous imagery, became the

target of untiring lampoons by several critics including a notorious weekly magazine, *Sanibarar chithi*, which consistently misspelt his name with gleeful malice. The Marxist critics did not lag behind, censuring him for his lack of social awareness and his dark pessimism. Buddhadeva Bose described him as 'the loneliest' poet.

The wheel of fortune has now turned full circle. There is hardly any voice today complaining of obscurity or obscurity, two frequent charges levelled against him by his contemporaries. The new poetics today has privileged the opaqueness of his language, and has found in his rhythm and diction the fitting medium for the agony and anxiety of the fractured sensibility of the modern world. Marxists too have tempered their criticism; some are apologetic for their past folly.

Jibanananda started publishing poems from 1920. His early poems, some of which are now available, hardly show any special flash of genius: they disappeared unnoticed into the milling crowd of Bengali verse. His first collection of poems, *Jhara palak* (Fallen Feathers) appeared in 1927. Most of these verses show unmistakable traces of the influence of contemporary poets: notably of Nazrul Islam and Satyendranath Datta, a poet known as the wizard of metre, as well as a few whom the *avant-garde* treated with indifference if not contempt. This book hardly created any impact on the Bengali reading public; yet it contained a few poems which certainly heralded a change in his poetic language and the emergence of a new poetic voice, which acquired intensity and power in his next collection *Dhusar pandulipi* (The Grey Manuscript) published nine years later. It is a significant work in the history of Bengali poetry, ushering in a silent revolution. Not only did Jibanananda emerge here as a mature poet with a distinct idiom of his own, but also as someone utterly exotic to the main tradition of Bengali poetry. His admiring readers hailed his world as an isolated island, strange and unknown, compelling and magical. The first phase

of his poetic career, as evidenced in *Jhara palak*, is marked by a sustained and strenuous search for a new diction and rhythm. On the one hand he had to work clear of the formidable Tagore, with whom most of the *avant-garde* poets had an ambivalent relationship; on the other, he had to carve out a world of his own, different from those of his contemporaries, some of whom were highly gifted.

His success was reflected in the manipulation of diction and prosody, particularly the controlled use of assonance and alliteration and the employment of a slow and gentle rhythm. Unfortunately, this aspect of his poetry cannot be fully appreciated in translation. When viewed against other contemporary experiments with metre and rhythm, one realizes the contrast in Jibanananda's practice. His vocabulary is uneven, jarring, conspicuously defiant of the established rules of rhetoric, at times repellent to the canons of taste. Their provocative power comes partly from their role in the evolution and construction of Bengali poetic language, and partly from the tensions they create within levels of style determined by the aesthetics of different social classes. His syntax too is often sloppy and tortuous, slow-moving and at times rather unkempt and fragile. His rhythm advances in delicate languid ripples, hardly ever surging into vigorous waves. These are all parts of a conscious design, but also appear congenial and inevitable. This syntax and rhythm, that contribute to the distinctiveness of Jibanananda's poetic structure, are in perfect harmony with his poetic world, which first appears distinctively in *Dhusar pandulipi*.

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 its bright blue sky, green fields, young



paddy and swollen rivers, and *sit* (winter), a season of tender sunshine and ripe crops. *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 gaiety and vivacity of the rains and the colourful abundance of *sarat* and *vasanta* (spring), so familiar to Bengali readers. He creates an altogether different world with exotic geographical features. Like his syntax and rhythm, his imagery attempts a state of defamiliarization. He uses his ingenuity to construct an unfamiliar geography out of a familiar world. It is dominated by mists and mellow fruitfulness; its rivers are languid, its trees mysterious, its leaves grey and yellow. He also privileges the kite, the owl and the vulture, not the *koel*. His favourite trees are the *hijal*, *akanda* and *dhundhul*, which had never found an honourable place in poetry. The animals inhabiting his world are rats, jackals and frogs, all evoking a sense of the dark and the sinister. And yet this world is not totally fearsome or eerie: it has its charm, tenderness and sensuous beauty. I quote a few stanzas from the poem *Mrityur age* (Before Dying), published in 1935:

We who have seen the wild duck, escaping the hunter's shot  
Take wing into the horizon's mild blue moonlit glow,  
We who have rested our hands in love on the paddy-sheaf,  
And come home like evening crows, expectantly; have found  
Children's breath-scent, grass, sun, kingfishers, stars, sky—  
Traces of these, again and again, the whole year round;

We have seen the green leaf yellowing in the autumn dark;  
Light and bulbuls play in windows of *hijal*-branches;  
The mouse on winter nights coat its silk fur with bits of grains;  
Morning and evening, to the eyes of lonely fish, the ripples  
Fall fair in smoky rice-smell; at pond's edge the duck at dusk  
Smells sleep and is borne away by a soft female hand.

Clouds like minarets call golden kites to their windows;  
Under the cane creepers, the sparrows' eggs are hard;  
The river coats the bank with the soft water's smell;

In dense night the roof-thatch shadow falls on the moonlit yard,  
Smell of crickets in the air—green air of summer fields,  
In deep desire thick juice descends to the blue annona's core.\*

The magic of this world of Jibanananda has been heightened by his unusual fascination with the sense of smell and the transition of the senses one into another. The 'old owl-smell', 'children's breath-scent', 'smoky rice-smell', or the sleep scented by ducks abound in his poems. But more remarkable is the continuous traffic between the senses: smell into touch, touch into taste, sight into sound. One of the poems most finely characterized by this exercise in the dismantling of categories is *Ghas* (Grass). Written in simple prose-like language with sparing use of words, this poem makes complete the coalescence of the animate and inanimate worlds, and celebrates a primitive darkness where all pluralities are dissolved. It begins with the description of the morning light, that looks soft and green like tender lemon-leaves, and of the deer tearing the grass, fragrant and green like unripe grapefruit. The fixed world of categories with their structured functions then slowly crumbles down, and a wish 'to drink in the scent of this grass', 'to strain [its] body' and 'rub its eye' against the eyes of the beholder pervades the poem. The green grass changes into a bird, as does the beholder: 'My feathers on grassy wing'. The poet's response to the beauty of the morning, and of the green and fragrant grass, culminates in a desire to be born as grass, to descend to the 'delicious darkness/ Of the body of some intimate Grass-Mother', and thus finally to return to an elemental oneness with Nature.

## IV

Jibanananda reached the height of his power and virtuosity in *Banalata Sen*, published in 1942. The title poem, built up through a series of opulent images of sea and island, lashing storm and quiet resting-place, fragrant forests and shipwrecked sailors,

\* All extracts quoted in this introduction are from the translations in this volume.

captures the old fairy-land magic, that merges the geography of mythical and historical times only to culminate in the frustration and hope of the modern age. 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 heightening 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. The poetic 'I' no longer remains an indefinite universal, an outsider to man's anguished journey; it declares its location in time and space. The 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. Natore, a modern place-name, jars on the ear after Sravasti and Vidisa, embalmed in the serene beauty of the Buddhist world, as does Banalata Sen, a commoner without any mythical or historical halo, welcoming the 'hero' with a commonplace greeting. The contrast is further intensified by juxtaposing the embellished metaphors of classical association ('Her hair the dark night long ago in Vidisa/Her face a Sravasti carving') and the completely baffling image of eyes like bird's nests, rich and suggestive yet violating the norms of comparison. The tension caused by such contrasts continues in following up a flowing crescendo-like sentence with a short staccato question; and, one may add, with the unprecedented use of a common verb *chhilen* ('were') to rhyme with the surname *Sen* as well as the highly poetic Sanskrit word *saphen* (foaming). The last few lines, now completely denuded of the glorious chiaroscuro of the past, capture the modern anxiety in simple and direct language, playing with conventional grammaticality till it borders on a strangeness filled with frustration and hope :

At the end of all the days, dusk comes like the sound of dew;  
The kite wipes off the scent of sunlight from its wings.  
The earth's colours all quenched, the manuscript prepares  
To tell its stories, lit by firefly gleams.

All the birds came home, all the rivers—all life's trade ends.  
Only the dark abides; and, to sit face to face, Banalata Sen.

'Banalata Sen' may or may not be the best poem Jibanananda has written, but it is undoubtedly the most popular one. The haunting rhythm, the rich imagery, the magic of proper names and the ethereal beauty of the concluding sestet have contributed to its immense popularity. The book *Banalata Sen*, too, has been identified as containing Jibanananda's most representative writings. The majority of the poems are about love, love that is fractured and wounded, and also about nature, sensuous and earthy. Despite the fever and the fret of modern existence and the hostilities of civilization, love survives all brute forces and exudes hope and contentment, just as nature remains glorious and compelling. Jibanananda is able to create a fairyland atmosphere with his frequent references to the evening, to the moon and glowworms, the fragrance of water and the sound of crickets. A sense of history, a vision of the rise and fall of civilizations pervades the whole work: the bones of peasant and king mingle in the dust, and still there is hope for the future of men: 'the world will evolve in freedom'. But there are strong strains of escape, surrender and death-wish. The poem *Andhakar* (Darkness), charged with a powerful rhetoric and loudness of tone rather rare in Jibanananda, brings out more than any other poem in the collection a cynical morbidity and Schopenhauerean wish of extinction :

I have been afraid  
I have felt an endless irrepressible pain;  
I have seen the sun wake in a blood-red sky  
And command me to dress as a soldier of humanity,  
confront the world;  
All my heart has filled with hate, pain, anger;  
Assailed by the sunlight, the world seems to start a festival  
With the shrieks of millions of pigs...  
Alas for festivities!



Drowning the sun in the unpierced darkness of the heart,  
I have wished to sleep again,  
I have wished to lie merged like eternal death  
in the bosom and the womb\* of darkness.

This rejection of the world, 'its rhythm, conflict, motion, effort, thought and action', and the desire to sleep beside the Dhansiri river, evoked strong protest from one section of readers, particularly the Marxists, who condemned Jibanananda as an escapist. His poetry with its narcotic effect, they declared, lulls the reader into inaction. I repeat, however, that this pessimism generated through metaphors of sleep, darkness and death is not a dominant mood in *Banalata Sen*. The book abounds with evidence of the poet's intense love for human existence and an unshaken faith in the ultimate triumph of the human spirit. 'The deeper gain of coming' finally compensates for all suffering and the pain of birth and living :

Now is the earth gravely, most gravely sick;  
Yet to this earth man is indebted still. ('Suchetana')

V

The two books of verse that followed *Banalata Sen*, *Mahaprithibi* (The Great Earth, 1944) and *Satti tarar timir* (The Darkness of Seven Stars, 1948), present a new landscape, almost radically different from the world of *Banalata Sen*. The new poetic setting emerged out of the agonizing experience of war and famine and riots and the partition of the country. The exotic and the mysterious, which had dominated the earlier phase of Jibanananda's career, yielded place to the rough and crude, the cruel and sick, the tortured and tormented. The urban world with all its loud harshness, its cold and callous inhumanity, now became the most conspicuous component of his poetry. No longer does the journey stretch from Ceylon waters to the

\* The corresponding Bengali word, *yoni*, actually means 'vagina'.

Malay Sea, or from the grey world of Asok to the dark nights of Vidisa. It is now a movement from 'pavement to pavement, pavement to pavement, through Calcutta' :

It's drizzling now—the wind seems rather cold ...  
In the face of the chilly wind, in the dead of night  
In this city of Calcutta  
You will never see a blue-veined nest shiver:  
No dove, waking from sleep among the olive leaves ...  
(*'On the Pavement'*)

The lament for the lost world slowly changes into an agonizing outcry condemning modern civilization :

A black man, grinning, lolls against a pillar;  
Cleaning out the briar pipe in his hand  
With the faith of an old gorilla.  
For him the vast night of the city  
Is like the Libyan forest.  
Even so, the beasts, all seriate—wage slaves,  
Out of shame, in fact, are dressed.

(*'Night'*)

The private sorrows and agonies have become part of a larger suffering. The rough and violent cacophony of the urban world now finds its rightful place in Jibanananda's poetry, and irony and sarcasm surface as two powerful modes of articulation to negotiate with 'a strange darkness (that) has come to the earth today' (*'A Strange Darkness'*). But it is not only the articulation of anger and frustration that makes this poetry different from Jibanananda's earlier work. It is also the consummation of his power to address different existential questions. The poem *At bachhar ager ekdin* (One Day Eight Years Ago), written in this period and included in *Mahaprithibi*, shows his intense engagement with questions of suffering and death and of what he calls *bipanna bismay* ('terrified awe', a wonder fraught with a sense of danger), a perception that 'plays

in our blood / And tires us out'. It is a poem of severe beauty, constructed through a series of complex and even uncanny images, as well as a tense narrative of contrasts between the instinct of self-preservation and the choice of self-extinction.

Jibanananda employed the practices of the Symbolists as well as the Surrealists within his own poetic world. He appropriated as much from the Symbolists as from his Indian predecessors: it is not difficult to detect traces of several European poets in his poetry, or to link him with various tropes of the modernisms of his time. He wrote in the preface to his *Sreshtha kabita* (Best Poems, 1954) that 'my poetry, or rather its author, has been described as lonely or loneliest. Some say it is nature poetry or poetry of historical and social consciousness; according to others it is the poetry of indifference. Some think it belongs to the symbolic tradition of total unconsciousness. All are correct, but only partly, correct for a particular poem or a particular phase but not of my total work.'

Jibanananda rejected the mode of public poetry and political poetry, but the trauma and anxiety of the political situation contributed to the growth of his poetic personality. 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 Bhushan Bandyopadhyay, author of *Pather Panchali*.

'After the death of men, man still abides.'

('After the Death of Men')

## VI

The posthumous publications of Jibanananda are quite numerous, in fact much greater in volume and variety than those published in his lifetime. They contain, as I have already mentioned, not only several volumes of poems but also half a dozen novels and

short stories, most of which are quite remarkable in their themes and structural sophistication. Among them are *Malyaban*, published in 1973, nearly two decades after his death: an introspective narrative about a painful marital relationship, told with subtle and grim irony. Among the poetical works are *Rupasi Bangla* (Beautiful Bengal, 1957) and *Bela abela kalbela* (Time, Wrong Time, Inauspicious Time, 1961). The poet himself prepared the press copy of the second work, which contains several poems written in the last phase of his life. When published, it was received with expected warmth and interest by the reading public. A competent collection with the unmistakable stamp of Jibanananda's style and vision, this slender volume presented some memorable poems; but it did not cause any excitement or surprise.

*Rupasi Bangla*, on the other hand, assailed the reader with surprise and excitement, virtually revealing a new Jibanananda. It won spectacular popularity and commercial success. Among the 61 poems collected in this volume, 58 are sonnets, most of them conforming to the Petrarchan structure. Two others (except no. 60) also aspire to the condition of the sonnet. These poems were written in the mid-1930s, when *Dhusar pandulipi* was still under preparation. (They have therefore been placed first in this volume.) The manuscript remained uncorrected, without any hint of the poet's intention to make the poems public, at least in that state. Even the title of the book was not devised by the poet: it is the gift of the editor, who happened to be his brother. The response to these poems, all celebrating rural Bengal, was overwhelming. Some years later, during the struggle for the liberation of East Pakistan, some of the poems acquired an unexpected political meaning. In particular, the line 'I have seen the face of Bengal' became charged with a feverish patriotism.

It is intriguing that Jibanananda did not feel any urgency to publish these poems when they were composed. He wrote them with care and love, opting for the rigidity of the sonnet form



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to regulate the soft and delicate emotion of a subdued patriotism. It indicates that Jibanananda responded to the contemporary political movements in his own personal mode, glorifying the country yet avoiding the rhetoric of patriotism. He wrote with utter innocence: "You can all go where you wish; I by Bengal's expanse/Will stay". But his Bengal was not apostrophized as a mother; nor was it identified with any mother goddess. His Bengal, in harmony with the entire geography of his poetic world, is earthy, concrete, pulsating and sensuous, redolent with myths, history and poetry, and lively and vivid with its trees and plants and birds and beasts. Deeply rooted in the regional ethos, these poems, all intensely Bengali in temper and tone, are linked with the mainstream of Jibanananda's poetry in their rhythmic structure and patterns of imagery. Regional yet sophisticated, sentimental but not lacking in depth, flowing with passionate love for his native soil yet free from the arrogance of patriotism, these poems have a unique place in the history of modern poetry. I conclude with one of them, which links Jibanananda with the broader traditions of Indian poetry, celebrating the desire to live and to be remembered through several births:

I shall return to this Bengal, to the Dhansiri's bank :  
Perhaps not as a man, but myna or fishing-kite;  
Or dawn crow, floating on the mist's bosom to alight  
In the shade of the jackfruit tree, in this autumn harvest land.  
Or maybe a duck—a young girl's—bells on my red feet,  
Drifting on kalmi-scented waters all the day :  
For love of Bengal's rivers, fields, crops, I'll come this way.  
To this sad green shore of Bengal, drenched by the Jalangi's waves.

Perhaps you'll see a glass-fly ride the evening breeze,  
On her a barn owl call from the silk-cotton tree;  
A little child toss rice-grains on the courtyard grass,  
Or a boy on the Rupsa's turgid stream steer a dinghy  
With torn white soil—white egrets swimming through red clouds  
To their home in the dark. You will find me among their crowd.

Sisir Kumar Das

## Translation Editor's Preface

This anthology has been put together in the manner of certain other volumes brought out by the Sahitya Akademi—among them *Voices from Bengal: Modern Bengali Poetry in English Translation* (1996), some of whose translators have contributed to the present volume. The first drafts of the translations were prepared at a workshop. These were then revised and edited, and an introduction and notes added to assist the reader.

However, the principles of translation had to be defined afresh to suit the nature of Jibanananda's poetry. An initial attempt was made to preserve something of the verse-form, including the rhyme-scheme, of the original poems. It soon became obvious that most of the rhymes had to go. A major reason was the abundance of place-names, other proper names and 'technical' terms like the names of plants, flowers, fruits or birds. These were, so to speak, non-negotiable items: no paraphrase was possible, and little alteration of word-order or sentence-structure. Even where there were few such words, the distinctive flow or orientation of the original verse would have been badly impaired by Procrustean attempts to preserve even a part of the rhyme-scheme.

It seemed most important to retain as much as possible of the general movement and impact of the originals, even at the cost of the rhyme-scheme. All rhymes and part-rhymes in the translations correspond to rhymes in the original; but their absence in translation does not necessarily indicate an absence in the Bengali. This is obviously no more than a compromise: particularly where (as with the poems from *Rupasi Bangla*, which are all sonnets) the original follows an established verse-form. But close adherence to original forms is hardly an invariable condition of poetic translation. We hope we have preserved enough to suggest the frame and texture of Jibanananda's subtle

and diverse, if sometimes loose or ambiguous compositions.

The citing of plants, birds etc. presented a special problem. Some of these items had English names in general use; others unfamiliar or esoteric ones (often derived from the Latin scientific term), yet others none at all. There were more sources of confusion: the Bengali *aswatthwa* tree is the English (and Hindi) *peepul*, and has been rendered as such; the Bengali *pipul* is a different tree. So also the English and Hindi *myna* is a different bird (*salikh* in Bengali) from the Bengali *maina*. As consistency was impossible, we have rendered each term on its own merits and the needs of the context. We have also followed this policy with respect to the names of Bengali months and seasons: retaining the Bengali names where they seemed specially significant, elsewhere reducing them to 'monsoon', 'winter' etc. It is possible to differ from our decision in each case. We submit that we have tried to steer a middle course between flat Anglicization and obtrusive exoticism.

Jibanananda's poems are never merely exotic, though they can easily appear so in translation, steeped as they are in the scenes, traditions and mindsets of the Bengal he knew. They are robust in phrase and in programme, working remarkable compounds of quintessentially Bengali elements with the substance of international modernism. They pose a special challenge to the translator. We are glad of the opportunity to take up the challenge.

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