

essay

The Poet of Beautiful Bengal: Jibanananda Das

by Fakrul Alam

1999 is the centenary year of two of the classics of our literature: Jibanananda Das and Kazi Nazrul Islam. Jibanananda was born on 17 February, 1899, in Barisal town, and Nazrul on May 24 of that year in Churulia, a village in West Bengal. Nazrul's poems created a great sensation almost as soon as he began publishing them. On the other hand, Jibanananda's poems were mostly ignored in his lifetime and a lot of what he wrote remained unpublished at the time of his death in 1954. Nazrul stopped writing in tragic circumstances in the 1940s, even though he died in 1976. In contrast, changes in literary tastes and the stream of unpublished poems and fiction by Jibanananda which have found their way into print throughout the second half of the century have made him a formidable presence in Bengali literature long after he passed away.

Nazrul's birth centenary has been marked by continuous official and unofficial celebrations throughout Bangladesh. Literary supplements, conferences, musical events, and seminars have been reminding us continuously of his genius. This is as it should be, because Nazrul's contribution to our literature and the role he played in the formation of our national consciousness cannot be overstressed. Unfortunately, Jibanananda's birth centenary has attracted very little attention in our country. Certainly, there have been a number of individual attempts to commemorate him, but he has been more or less ignored by our "official" cultural caretakers. And yet, if we looked objectively at Jibanananda's life and works carefully, we would find it impossible not to conclude that he is the most "Bangladeshi" of our major writers and that he too played a crucial role in the evolution of Bengali culture and the birth of Bangladesh.

The publication of Prabhatkumar Das's biography of the poet, *Jibanananda Das* (Calcutta: Proschim Bangla Academy) earlier this year allows us to take a fresh look at the poet's life and works and trace his connections to, and love for, Bangladesh. Prabhatkumar begins his biography by revealing that the poet's family originated, like so many of the leading cultural figures of Bengal in this century, in Bikrampur, but that the family moved in the middle of the nineteenth century to Barisal where his grandfather, Sarbananda, soon became Municipal Commissioner. The poet's father, Satyananda, became head teacher of a local school. The poet's mother, Kusumkumari, a poet in her own right, was born in Barisal. Both Satyananda and Kusumkumari took active part in Barisal's cultural life in general and in the activities of Barisal's Brahmo Samaj in particular.

Jibanananda studied initially at home and then in Barisal's Brajamohon Institution. But in addition to the formal education that he acquired in school, he seemed to have become exposed at a very early age to the myths, legends, and fairy tales of Bengal in his family environment. While still a boy, he got the opportunity to travel all over Barisal district with his uncle Priyannath Das, a Deputy Collector working for the British India Government. The poet passed his intermediate from B. M. College. His first published piece, a poem welcoming the monsoons, was also published in a Barisal periodical in 1919.

Between 1917 and 1928 Jibanananda was in Calcutta, first as a student of

Calcutta University, and then as a teacher of City College. His poems initially attracted attention when they came out in *Kallol*, the famous "little" magazine published from that city. However, he began to get sustained attention only when Buddhadev Basu took it on himself to feature Jibanananda prominently in the pages of *Pragati*, surely one of the most important literary magazines to have come out from Dhaka.

In advocating Jibanananda's poems, Bose pointed to his use of everyday speech and the language of his region. When he started to write fiction some years later, Jibanananda experimented with the dialect of his region in a number of his novels too. Interestingly enough, the attacks on him in *Shonibar Chitti* were motivated in part because he was perceived to be a "Bengali" poet who had failed to stick to the language considered to be appropriate for poetry by the literary establishment in Calcutta. Thus, an article in that satiric weekly saw Jibanananda's "Bodh" as an obnoxious example of a movement it termed "East Bengali literature" and the poet as the "Whitman" of the movement.

In 1928, Jibanananda lost his job in City College. For the next seven years he was mostly unemployed, although he did hold a couple of teaching positions for short periods. One of them was in Bagerhat's P. C. College. In all probability, he disliked teaching here, but it must have been in the three months that he stayed in Bagerhat in 1928 that he got the inspiration to write one of his most famous celebrations of the beauty of Bengal, the sonnet "Abar Ashibo Feere". In the sestet of the poem he conjures this beautiful image of the Rupsha riverscape:

Perhaps you'll look up and see the evening breeze blow gloriously.

Perhaps you'll hear an owl calling in shimal branches;

Perhaps a little boy will be scattering parched rice in some grassy yard.

In the muddy Rupsha river some boy will be rowing a boat with torn white sails

Perhaps the white stork will be breasting the barred clouds

As it heads home in the dark; look for me, and you'll find me in this throng.

If Jibanananda disliked his work in Bagerhat, he must have positively hated the four months he spent in a teaching position in Ramjas College, Delhi, which he took up in December, 1929. This must be the reason why he failed to rejoin the job after having taken leave from it to marry Labanya Gupta in Dhaka in 1930. This must also be the reason that he felt a tremendous sense of relief to be back in Barisal even though unemployed and with the sudden responsibility of looking after his wife. Surely, this is why he composed another sonnet at this time that begins with these unforgettable opening lines:

Go wherever you desire—I'll remain alongside Bengal's banks;

And see jackfruit tree leaves shedding in the morning breeze;

And view the brown-winged shaluk growing cold in the evening...

At least one more sonnet of this period is emblematic about his desire not to be uprooted from Bengal again:

Because I have seen Bengal's face, I seek no more,

The world has not anything more

beautiful to show me.

These three poems, of course, are part of the sixty poems he composed at this time and then stowed away in the manuscript published posthumously by his brother as *Ruposhi Bangla* (Beautiful Bengal).

In its celebration of picturesque Bengal and its lyrical blending of the history, myths, people, and landscapes of East Bengal, the *Ruposhi Bangla* poems are unique. Who can doubt that the book contains some of the most intensely poetic evocations of the beauty and sadness of Bangladesh to be found in print? Combining close observation of our flora and fauna with allusions to our folktales, lyrical ballads, and fairy tales, and suffusing them with his apprehension of death and sadness about the ephemerality of all things, these poems have become timeless meditations of a time-haunted lover of Bengal. Indeed, in some of the poems he reels off images of Bengal as if he has got high on the sights and sounds of the Barisal countryside!

The years between 1930 to 1935 were, on the surface, a period of inactivity for Jibanananda since he was mostly unemployed then. Actually, however, these were among his most productive years. Not only did he finish the *Ruposhi Bangla* poems then, but also he wrote at this time quite a few novels, a stream of short stories, and some of the poems that were later to be part of his *Bonolata Sen* collection. Clearly, his immersion in Barisal's landscape stimulated him into poetry and fiction of lasting importance.

In 1935 Jibanananda finally found permanent employment as a lecturer in Barisal's B. M. College. This year he also published one of his most famous poems, "Mrittyer Aage" (Before Death). This is a poem where the poet seemed to be spellbound by the wintry landscape of Bengal:

Clouds, high as minarets, call golden kite to their casement.

Beneath bet creepers sparrow eggs lie all in blue

The river bathes its banks with the soft smell of its waters

The straw roofs shadow falls on the yard in moonlight

Cricket smells everywhere—in summer's fields and the green air;

On the bluish custard apple's bosom thicken the juice of desire.

Not surprisingly, this poem pleased Rabindranath because of its "pictorial beauty". He observed that Jibanananda's verse revealed a poet who seemed to take pleasure in looking at his world.

1935 was also the year that Jibanananda published his most famous poem, "Bonolata Sen" who, as we all know, was from Nature, even though she seemed to have a lineage stretching back to ancient India!

"Bonolata Sen" became an instant success and became the title poem of his third collection of verse, published in Calcutta in 1936. The collection also included poems such as "Ghas" (Grass) and "Hay Chil" (Ah, Kite!) that reinforced the popular impression of the poet as one of the leading "nature" poets of Bengali literature.

Mahapritihibi (The Great World), the fourth volume of verse Jibanananda published in his lifetime, shows the poet broadening his focus to include the human world of Barisal as well as the nonhuman one. Thus "At Bachhar Ager Ek Din" (A Day Eight Years Ago) begins in the town's morgue. However, in "Srajan Rat", a memorable poem about a monsoon night, we once again see a

poet preternaturally sensitive to our world. The poem is also significant as one of his few poems about our rainy season (he was the poet of Bengal's late autumn and early winter, partly because he knew of Tagore's exhaustive treatment of our monsoon season and partly because of his own enigmatic temperament).

There can be little doubt that Barisal's riverside settings, the joint family situation, the job security he had, and the creative ferment of the years he spent in this East Bengal district made these among the happiest years of his life. Indeed, Prabhatkumar Das notes that in later years Barisal was synonymous with him for happiness. Nevertheless, from the early forties Jibanananda began to feel the need to move to Calcutta. For one thing, he knew that Calcutta was the literary center and that he would receive much wider appreciation in the city than in Barisal. Also, he and his family, like countless other Hindus of the time, were feeling increasingly insecure because of successive religious riots all over Bengal.

In 1947, a few months before partition, Jibanananda moved with his family to Calcutta for good. He was never to come back to Barisal, but the work he did in the city revealed that he continued to treasure the sights and sounds of East Bengal while his prose fiction as well as prose indicate that he was always rueful at being uprooted. "1946-47", possibly the longest poem that he wrote, expresses his anguish at the destruction of communal harmony and the cataclysmic changes occurring in rural Bengal. As he puts it in the poem:

Thousands of Bengali villages, drowned in disillusionment and benighted, have become silenced.

How different the situation was, the poet implies, from the time when there was an organic community, a sense of harmony, and the simple delights of life in the Bengali countryside!

Living in Calcutta proved to be extremely difficult for the uprooted poet. Not only could he not get any job that gave him satisfaction as well as security till almost the last year of his life, he could not find a satisfactory place to live for himself and his family because of his financial situation. No wonder that in *Bashmotir Upokhan* (the story of Bashmoti), a novel that he wrote at this phase of his life, the protagonist resolves not to leave the district town where he was working as a college teacher for Calcutta despite his difficulties!

In this trying period, writing reviews and articles in Calcutta newspapers became a major source of his income. One of essays that he published then, titled, "The Bengali Language and the Future of its Literature" reveals that the fate of the Bengali people everywhere after partition was very much in his mind. Writing soon after the 21st February happenings, the poet wonders about the fate of the Bengali language in a world where the two Bengals had been split and where Bengali had to contend with other languages. Praising the vigor of East Bengal writing using the dialects of the region, he regrets the arrogance of West Bengali culture about such writing. While the introduction of English had vitalized Bengali, he feels that the future of Bengali literature was now becoming uncertain because of the imposition of Hindi on West and Urdu East on Bengal.

That the region he had left behind was always in his mind can also be seen



Sketch of the poet by Prakash Karmakar

in a letter he wrote to the poet Kaisul Huq in 1953: "East Pakistan is my birthplace; I have been eager to return to it for a long time now." After reprinting these lines, Prabhatkumar Das also reproduces other lines from the poet's correspondence where he expresses his desire to work in an environment where he could relive his Barisal days. In fact, towards the end of his life, he was getting restless in Calcutta and at times seemed to be overwhelmed with regret and nostalgia. In one of his last poems, "All Daylong Trams and Buses," he describes he articulates his anguish thus:

All daylong trams and buses—cry of street vendors—lepers on footpaths—

Carts driven by weary buffaloes—

busyness of bazaars—bustle of slums.

I turned away that shell-garlanded girlchild who had come to make her home in my heart;

I sent her back from the city to some remote country road.

When was it that I, prince-like, had been exiled from that remote country road?

Where is the fragrance of the bean plant? The song of the thrush? Has the youth in me died?

The afternoon thickens with moist clouds—the kite cries—do you know where—where is Hiranman?

That shell-garlanded girlchild had come to make her home in my heart!

And the poem ends with the poet's ultimate wish:

And make my bed on that level land That lush grass-green picturesque land

Close to the smell of the Dhanshiri river water

In this Bengal.

However, Jibanananda Das died in Calcutta on 22 October, crushed under the wheels of a tram while walking the city streets in a daze. But if he was unable to go back to his Bengal at the end of his life, hadn't he prophesized thus:

I'll come again to the banks of the Dhanshiri—to this Bengal.

Perhaps not as a human—maybe as a white-breasted shankachil or a yellow-bellied

Shaluk;

Or as a morning crow I'll return to this late autumnal rice-harvest laden land. Wafting on the fog's bosom I'll float one day into the jack-fruit shade; Perhaps I'll come as a girlchild's duck—her bells on my red-webbed feet. My days will pass floating in the fragrance of the aquatic kalmi plant; I'll come lovingly again to Bengal's rivers, fields, farmlands. To the green wistful shores of Bengal lapped by Jalingi's waves.

As Jibanananda Das's centenary year draws to its close, let us endeavor to catch hold of his spirit, for he has left himself abundantly behind for us in his unsurpassable verse and prose pieces; let us possess him fully and celebrate his unique achievement!

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impression

A Museum of Civilisations and First Arts for The Year 2001

by Ines Somarriba

EVEN before its opening, scheduled for 2001, the Museum of Civilisations and First Arts already has a history and numerous episodes to its credit. It is, above all, the result of the friendship between two people who are keen on the artistic productions of distant civilisations: Jacques Chirac, the President of the French Republic, and Jacques Kerchache, an acknowledged expert. Since their meeting in Mauritius in 1990, the two men have been united by their desire to share their passion with the general public. The organisation of an exhibition on the art of the Tainos Indians at the Petit Palais in Paris, in 1994, was the first step in the rehabilitation plans for the First Arts. The arts which used to be known as "primitive", Jacques Chirac explains, "were called primordial by Malraux. For my part, I prefer 'first arts' in so far as they are the arts of the first nations."

With time, the plan took shape with, in its

wake, the creation of a First Arts Commission. Headed by Jacques Friedmann, the chairman of the UAP insurance group, the commission groups together curators and art historians such as Françoise Cachin, the director of France's museums, but also scientists including the prehistorian Henry de Lumley who is the director of the Natural History Museum, and the famous ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In accordance with the President's wishes, the commission recommends the creation of a Primitive Arts section inside the Louvre. This has been received with some reticence. It would be a symbolic acknowledgment of civilisations which have, until now, been neglected by the Louvre. Hence, the Sessions Gallery will act as a veritable embassy for the future museum and, as early as the end of 1998, will present the two hundred most significant works of these civilisations in an area of 1,400 m.

As the Louvre is unable to house all of the works, the Museum of Civilisations and

First Arts will be created on the site of the Museum of Mankind and the Maritime Museum at Trocadero in Paris. The commission rejected the project for a Museum of Life Sciences proposed by Henry de Lumley as a renovation for the present Museum of Mankind and opted for a presentation of the ethnological collections of the Museum of Mankind together with the ones from the Museum of African and Oceanian Arts. Objects gathered together in the Museum of Mankind as a result of on-site excavations by numerous researchers such as Paul-Émile Victor, Jacques Soustelle and Jean Rouch, and utensils from everyday life are displayed together with objects linked to magic or religious rituals such as a sacred statuette from the Chimu culture (Peru) which was reproduced in the comic book of Tintin, "The Broken Ear", or a mask from Gabon from the Adoma ethnic group. The collections will be displayed in the 31,000 m² of exhibition space. The construction of 8,000 m² of un-

derground reserves will preserve the objects from the ravages of time. This huge megalographic project also includes the creation of an auditorium, access to multimedia technologies and the organisation of huge exhibitions in an area of 9,000 m² in which the laboratories of prehistory and biological anthropology will be able to take part.

However, with this project, the Museum of Mankind is experiencing a turning point concerning its original vocation which was research and the propagation of various domains of the sciences of Man. The Museum of Mankind, which was founded, in its present form, in 1937, by the anthropologist Paul Rivet and was attached to the Museum of Natural History and came under the control of the Ministries of Education and Research, was arranged in three departments: prehistory, biological anthropology (Epidemiology, the study of fossils and the genetics of the populations) and ethnology which work together with 26 laboratories.

There is a pluralistic approach to a single philosophy; the apprehension of mankind in its complexity. If art cannot be separated from its cultural environment, man, similarly, cannot be separated from nature. Henry de Lumley maintains. Hence, Pierre Robb, an ethnologist at the Museum of Mankind and a specialist of the Greenland Inuits, studies this people in the light of its adaptation to a harsh environment. In this respect, exchanges with researchers in other specialised fields are essential.

Thus, in order to preserve this fruitful collaboration between researchers, the conditions of which will be drawn up in a convention, these three branches will remain located in the Palais de Chaillot where the present museum is housed. But the ethnology department will come under the new public establishment while the prehistory and biological anthropology departments will remain attached to the Natural History Museum. It is a great undertaking as, in addition

to the teaching given to French and foreign students preparing a doctorate, the reputation of the Museum of Mankind, through its researchers and its collections (11 million objects), extends all over the world.

The joint responsibility of the Ministries of Education and of Culture should give a pedagogical dimension to the Museum of Civilisations and First Arts. This dimension had ensured the success of the Museum of Mankind which proclaimed a message of tolerance and humanism. The vocation of the new museum could be to explain the components which go together to create a culture, by showing the influence of the First works of Art. Moreover, this project is an answer to the incitements of 20th century artists and intellectuals, Cubists, Fauvists, and promoters of Negro Art like Picasso and including Apollinaire and, above all, Malraux.

L'ACTUALITE EN FRANCE