

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Jibanananda Das is probably one of the most read and yet the most neglected poets of Bengal. There is indeed a dearth of critical reading of his work, too. This issue is a tribute to Jibanananda on his 65th death anniversary in October, 2019.



## POETRY

FAKRUL ALAM'S TRANSLATION  
FROM JIBANANANDA DAS

## To a Pained One

("Kono ek Baethita ke")

Now late at night you have a bed  
A quiet and dark room  
Placidity and silence  
Think of nothing more  
Listen to no one speaking  
Just wipe your bloodied heart clean  
And tucked like the tuberose  
Go to sleep.



## ("Ghumaye Poribo Aami" from Ruposhi Bangla)

I'll fall asleep one day on one of your star-studded nights.  
Perhaps youth will still be sticking to my soul—perhaps  
I'll be in my prime then—that will be so nice! But sleep  
Overwhelms me now—Bengal's grassy green bed lies beneath.  
Eyelids shut. Tucked within mango tree leaves, *Kach* insects doze.  
I too will doze off like them in this grassy land I love—in silence!  
The stories stored in my soul will eventually fade. New ones—  
New festivals—will replace old ones— in life's honey-tinged slight  
In your forever busy minds—when finally you youthful ones  
Will be done tearing grassy stems and leaves—when Manikmala  
Will come here to pick up crimson-red *bat* and *kamranga* fruits  
On some mellow autumnal morning—when yellow *shefali* flowers  
Will fall on this grass as shaliks and wagtails fly far, far away—  
I'll feel the sun—the clouds—lying down in death-like stupor!

Fakrul Alam is UGC Professor at the University of Dhaka. In 1999 he published from UPL a translation of Jibanananda Das's selected poems with glossary and introduction, marking a bout of scholarly attention to the poet's work.

## JIBANANANDA DAS

### Poetics, Politics, Political Economy

AZFAR HUSSAIN

Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) is widely regarded as one of the greatest poets in the Bengali language. His poetry in particular has already made possible a staggering range of interpretive adventures and hermeneutic excavations, although he wrote 21 novels and 110 short stories that were discovered after his death. Yet much of mainstream Jibanananda criticism—from Buddhodeva Bose to Abdul Mannan Syed—tends to inflate Jibanananda's modernist aestheticism, and even celebrate in some instances his "purism," at the expense of many other perceptual registers and crucial conceptual constellations his work embodies and enunciates.

But could a poet like Jibanananda Das—in the very spaces of his own poems—be concerned with ostensibly "unpoetic" subjects like budgeting and banking, inflation and interest, even compound interest, income tax, royalty, commission, agency business, indenting business, the power of money, the exploitation of labor, and even what Marx calls *fiktives Kapital* (fictive capital) in the third volume of *Capital*?

Mark, then, this prosaic line from a 1938 poem by Jibanananda (all translations in this piece are mine): "Sitting in on their meetings they allocate those damn bones to the dogs, budgeting their wagons of meat...." He also writes: "High-reaching factory after factory—angry Progress, along with the bank, remains wide awake. Do you feel sleepy?" In another politically charged poem Jibanananda writes: "At the expense of the many, only an individual or two can buy./ Interest remains invested in the world, but not for everyone./ The ineffable bill of exchange stays in a hand or two/ And the demand of this world's upper-class folks/ Grabs every goddamn thing, including women ("1946-47")."

In fact, Jibanananda's poem "Bonafide" may easily serve as a *locus classicus* of the discourse of money. For example: "This is the kind of world/ Where people wax lyrical about money at every turn/ And they speak again of the stomach's system/ Everyone able to pay income taxes/ Is deemed damn important/ [...] Their children speak of the same money/ They speak of job, salary, increment, royalty, commission, interest./ And they speak of pure pleasure if they end up receiving an extra penny."

I have provided above just some quick instances; but I argue that it is possible to show how the intricate calculus of his images, the matrix of his mixed metaphors, and even his direct statements repeatedly broach a cluster of issues such as the *problematique* of commodity fetishism, the *ethos* of buying-and-selling that decisively characterizes the practice of everyday life, the curious arithmetic of interest and inflation, the illusion of economic progress, the ruthless exploitation of labor and accumulation of capital, and so on. In other words, Jibanananda Das, I argue, could even mobilize the texts and tropes and tenors and terms of political economy even in the spaces of poems themselves, unsettling the otherwise misleading characterization of this poet as a "purist," or as a total "aesthete," one who as if remains indifferent to the dull prose of daily living.

Of course, the Jibanananda Das of political economy is relatively unfamiliar to us—or whose relevance

is tellingly deflated in contemporary criticism. But I argue that Jibanananda is politico-economically engaged in both his poetry and prose—more in his prose than in his poetry—particularly in his short stories, relatively unexplored as they are. By offering brief, symptomatic readings of two of his short stories, I would submit that Jibanananda Das is one of the few creative writers in the history of Bengali literature who powerfully and productively enact a dialectic between the aesthetic and the political-economic, and that his poetic understanding of political economy variously informs and inflects much of his *oeuvre* that indeed looks forward to a world better than the one we live in.

Although Jibanananda wrote a number of remarkable novels, I am not concerned with them here. In fact, some, if not much, work on them has been done, and I think more work needs to be done. But what remain most unexplored are his short stories. In my reckoning, Jibanananda Das is a first-rate short-story-writer by even international standards. There is something Chekhovian-Pushkinian and even occasionally Lawrentian about Jibanananda's stories, many of which directly mobilize—among other things—the themes and tropes of political economy, fashioning what might be called the poetics of finance. I will call attention to two of his short stories. Their titles themselves are not only striking but seem unparalleled in the history of Bengali short stories: "Hisheb-Nikesh" [Transactions] and "Katha Shudhu—Katha Katha Katha Katha" [Words Only—Words Words Words Words Words]. Both stories were written in the aftermath of the Great Depression of 1929 when capitalism's crisis adversely affected not only the US but also the global economy by and large.

Indeed, both stories superbly stage humorous yet devastating critiques of the ways in which business folks enact the cycle of their becoming and being in the world. Jibanananda advances even a critique of Buddhodevaian Babu-type Bangla, although his critique is not loudly pronounced. Rather we find in his stories a well-orchestrated triangulation of tangential remarks, sarcastic retorts, and even aphorisms, as we also find humor, satirical mode of signification, innuendo, ironic indirection accompanied by the rhetoric of commendation in the guise of condemnation—elements that seem to be anticipating the guerrilla linguistics of the Moroccan writer Mohammed Khair-Eddine. My reading of these stories prompts me to submit that Jibanananda Das himself is, in his short stories, a guerrilla linguist in his own right.

Let us see, then, how Jibanananda Das introduces the main character Abaneesh in his story "Hisheb-Nikesh:" "He has just crossed 50. Bald-headed, he has yet a baby face, as if he's a baby of swollen cheeks—as if he's fucking innocent. Yet who the hell does understand the damn puzzles and perplexities of business better than he does? His entire body is a classic instance of corpulence and opulence both—overly plump, his flesh is like a cotton cushion, his cheeks resemble a cotton cushion, his lips themselves are cotton cushions, his nose is like a bowl made of wood or metal, his eyes themselves are two cotton cushions." As Antonio Gramsci once put it in a

letter: "Repetition creates the illusion of reality." And by deploying repeatedly the cinematic technique of close-ups, Jibanananda zooms in on the very body of Abaneesh, its obesity, its weirdly dangling fat, not only underlining the very "ugliness" that Jibanananda finds utterly disgusting but also underlining "surpluses" that the politico-economically conscious Jibanananda later directly and dexterously relates to the accumulation of capital—not only capital but, amazingly enough, "fictive capital"—the kind of capital that cashes in on fiction rather than commodity production, as theorized by Marx himself.

As Jibanananda shows in his story, Abaneesh is not involved in any commodity-production-oriented business as such; rather, abandoning the business of leather and pharmacy, he immerses himself in what's called "agency business," where money directly brings and begets money. In *Capital*, Volume 1, in its Chapter 4, Marx presents the general formula of capital via a circuit of  $M-C-M'$ , where  $M$  stands for money,  $C$  stands for the buying-and-selling of commodities, and  $M'$  stands for more money or profit. But Marx presents another circuit of capital which is simply this:  $M-M'$ , meaning that money directly brings more money, bypassing the phase of commodity production but decisively contributing to the accumulation of capital. Abaneesh is involved in the  $M-M'$  circuit, where the play of fictive capital is of paramount importance. Abaneesh's own story gathers momentum, revolving around  $M-M'$ , so to speak, as Abaneesh—widening his baggy eyes and letting out a bad belch—talks to his friend Rakkhal about a Yankee's coconut-oil business which ended in a flagrant fiasco as well as his own net profit of 2 lakh rupees. Jibanananda shows—partly realistically, partly even cubically—how the entire mindscape of Abaneesh—including even its "inscape" and "instress," to borrow the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins's terms from another context—and also his body are all inextricably entangled in the  $M-M'$  circuit such that even love and affection are all adversely affected, as relationships between people morph into relationships between mere things—something that the Marxist theorist György Lukács called "reification." Of course, Jibanananda did not read Lukács. But with a creative writer's uncanny sense of the world, Jibanananda convincingly fictionalizes the effects of both alienation and reification in his short story—something that even Manik Bandhopadhyay, his creative and critical competence notwithstanding, could not do.

Now onto the story "Katha Shudhu—Katha Katha Katha Katha." Owing to space constraints, I would have to skip quite a cluster of close textual analyses and make even some conceptual leaps. I will in fact make some quick points. The French Freud-Marxist theorist Jean-Joseph Goux—in his seminal work called *Symbolic Economies*—theorizes the isomorphism between money and language by drawing on Marx and Saussure. Jibanananda is neither a Marxist nor a Saussurean, nor is he critical theorist. But well before Jean-Joseph Goux, Jibanananda himself points up the parallel between money and language in the space of a story, as his "Katha Shudhu—Katha Katha Katha

Katha Katha" reads as "Money Only—Money Money Money Money Money" or as  $M-M'$ .

Indeed, it is the movement of money or, more appropriately, capital that preoccupies the totality of the becoming-and-being of the major character Bhabashankar in the story "Katha Shudhu." But who is this Bhabashankar? Jibanananda introduces him thus: "Bhabashankar is chairman of a pretty huge life insurance company but at every meeting his own personal secretary gives him a hard time." Jibanananda actually uses the Bengali word "pa(n)day"—something that is likely to hurt the sense of linguistic hygiene represented by the likes of Buddhodeva Basu. Parenthetically, I should point out that Jibanananda mobilizes a number of onomatopoeias or near-onomatopoeias in his short stories. But what is onomatopoeia? It is a word that looks like the sound it makes, and we can almost hear those sounds as we read. Here are some words that are used as examples of onomatopoeia: slam, splash, bam, babble, warble, gurgle, mumble, and belch. And there are hundreds of such words!

But let us return to Bhabashankar. Like Abaneesh, Bhabashankar is also not involved in any production-oriented business. He is instead intoxicated with the idea of money-begetting-money. Bhabashankar wets his lips in his hot morning tea, but when he sips it he makes the kinds of weird sounds that only Jibanananda can describe. Bhabashankar loves to have his special jelly in his toast while sinking his yellow teeth into the heart of a boiled egg. He then bites into the innocence of his banana while thinking about cash cash cash only. As Jibanananda puts these words in Bhabashankar's mouth: "If I stick to my business, there will be money, more money, more money, more money, and more money." Bhabashankar seems to be echoing Marx's  $M-M'$ ! And, of course, for the sake of  $M-M'$ , Bhabashankar can go to any extent, even bordering on the schizophrenic. Indeed, it was Marx who—by using Shakespeare, particularly the Shakespeare of *Timon of Athens*—demonstrates in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1848* what magic and miracles money can do. Marx uses—among an array of theoretical formulations and metaphors and images and symbols—one particular image to point to the power of money, one which I'd put this way: The power of money is such that it can make your mouth kiss your own ass. I think Jibanananda Das brilliantly and even unprecedentedly captures this ass-kissing moment in his short story called "Katha Shudhu," bringing money, market, magic, miracle, mind, and Marx together, so to speak.

I have hitherto presented a different Jibanananda, I hope—one who is by no means compatible with those run-of-the-mill characterizations of the "purist" poet that still keep recurring. But I think more work on his short fiction (and on his poetry) needs to be done to explore the rich variety of his creative preoccupations.

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Born in Hiroshima in 1972, Sunairi now lives in NYC. Since the last decade, he has been making films and documentaries, expanding and experimenting with different contents and forms. Currently, he is researching to shoot *Das*, a hybrid experimental biography/fiction/documentary film on Jibanananda Das, the "most alone of poets" which will be released in 2021. The following are some of his renditions of the poetry of Jibanananda Das.

