

The Mona Lisa of Bengali Poetry

Jibanananda’s “Banalata Sen” (Part I)

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The process of reading is consummated in rereading. It is sure to deepen and broaden our understanding of the work and its author, and quite possibly of ourselves as well.

It is forty years since my first entranced encounter with Jibanananda Das in Ranesh Dasgupta’s edition of his Collected Poems, and I have from time to time dipped into it to refresh my memory of one poem or the other. But it is only now, after the masses of

world of his poetry, I now realize, my early outpourings in verse (albeit in English) would not have displayed such an image: “leaf to leaf/ trips/ smudge of shadow;/ dew-drops fall,/ soft as a hint or flicked ash” (“Two Trees and Time”). Nor such dire imaginings as this “picture/ of a perfect/ suicide—/ a drugged/ body/ lain lengthwise/ in the new-/ born waters of a spring/ as the/ thickening/ blanket/ of ice/ lulls/ faint heartbeats/ to sleep” (“Hill Station:

remains enigmatic as ever. I think I can throw new light on the source of this enigma.

But first let me sum up the positive achievements of “Banalata” criticism to date. First, the poem’s intertextual connections with other poems have been pretty thoroughly uncovered. Most conspicuously, there is a series of correspondences between “Banalata Sen” and Edgar Allen Poe’s “To Helen”: “ami klanto pran ek”/“The weary, way-worn wanderer”; “samudra safen”/“desperate seas”; “chul tar kobekar andhakar bidishar nisha”/“thy hyacinth hair”; “mukh tar sravastir karukarja”/“thy classic face”; “daruchini dwip”/“perfumed sea”. Then again, the opening phrase of Keats’s sonnet “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer”-- “Much have I traveled”—seems to be behind Jibanananda’s “anek ghurechhi ami.” It has also been suggested that “daruchini dwip” may be derived from the “dur dwipbhashini” in Nazrul Islam’s “daruchini desh.”

But these are only surface similarities; and let me hasten to add, lest anybody suspect otherwise, they do not make Jibanananda any more of an imitator than Shakespeare or Eliot. He was clear-headed about the role of a writer’s reading in the strange business of writing. As he told Bhumendra Guha, one’s reading impacts on the mass of one’s experience, clarifies it, lends it a certain character, and if one is a writer or an artist one writes about this reshaped experience or represents it visually; it’s a matter of an action eliciting a reaction. In making creative use of his reading Jibanananda is what Harold Bloom would call a “strong poet” who “for startled moments” can make us believe that the flow of influence has been reversed, that he is being imitated by the ancestors.

On the surface both “To Helen” and “Banalata Sen” are celebrations of the fascination exerted by feminine beauty, but even a cursory examination reveals that the underlying differences are more significant than this similarity. The former is a rather transparent construct in which a woman Poe admired (she is the dedicatee mentioned on its first publication, Mrs. Jane Stannard,

mother of his friend Robert Stannard) is unambiguously conflated with Helen, who is of course recognized in the whole of western culture as the mythic embodiment of consummate feminine loveliness. But Banalata Sen is mysterious, because she cannot be simply equated to any personage, mythic or historical, or to any easily intelligible quality, abstract or affective.

This brings us to the second, more complex and more important aspect of the exegesis of “Banalata Sen.” There are a number of perceptive readings, whose salient points I shall sum up and comment on, adapt to my own agenda and add to. The very name seems to have exerted a strange fascination on the poet, for it features in a novel and four other poems of his; one of the latter exists in two versions. Needless to say, these poems are far inferior to their famous cousin, and the ladies who appear in them are far less engaging than their famous namesake. One of them, “shesh holo jibaner shab lenden” (“Life’s Transactions Come to an End”), is a fairly straightforward lament for the early demise of the lady. Another, “Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, Gujrati,” conflates a Bengali Banalata Sen, bearing a pitcher of water from the river on her hip, with a middle-eastern damsel offering a pitcher of intoxicant; the reader may be reminded of Coleridge’s Abyssinian maid in “Kubla Khan.” “Ekti Purono Kabita” (“An Old Poem”) is a fanciful eight-line poem spoken by one come back from the dead and ending with the reincarnation of Banalata Sen. The two versions of “hajar bochhor shudhu khela korey” (“After a Thousand Years Spent Only at Play”) dramatize a moment of recognition in an afterlife encounter between the speaker and Banalata Sen; but one version is set in this subcontinent and the other in ancient Egypt and Assyria.

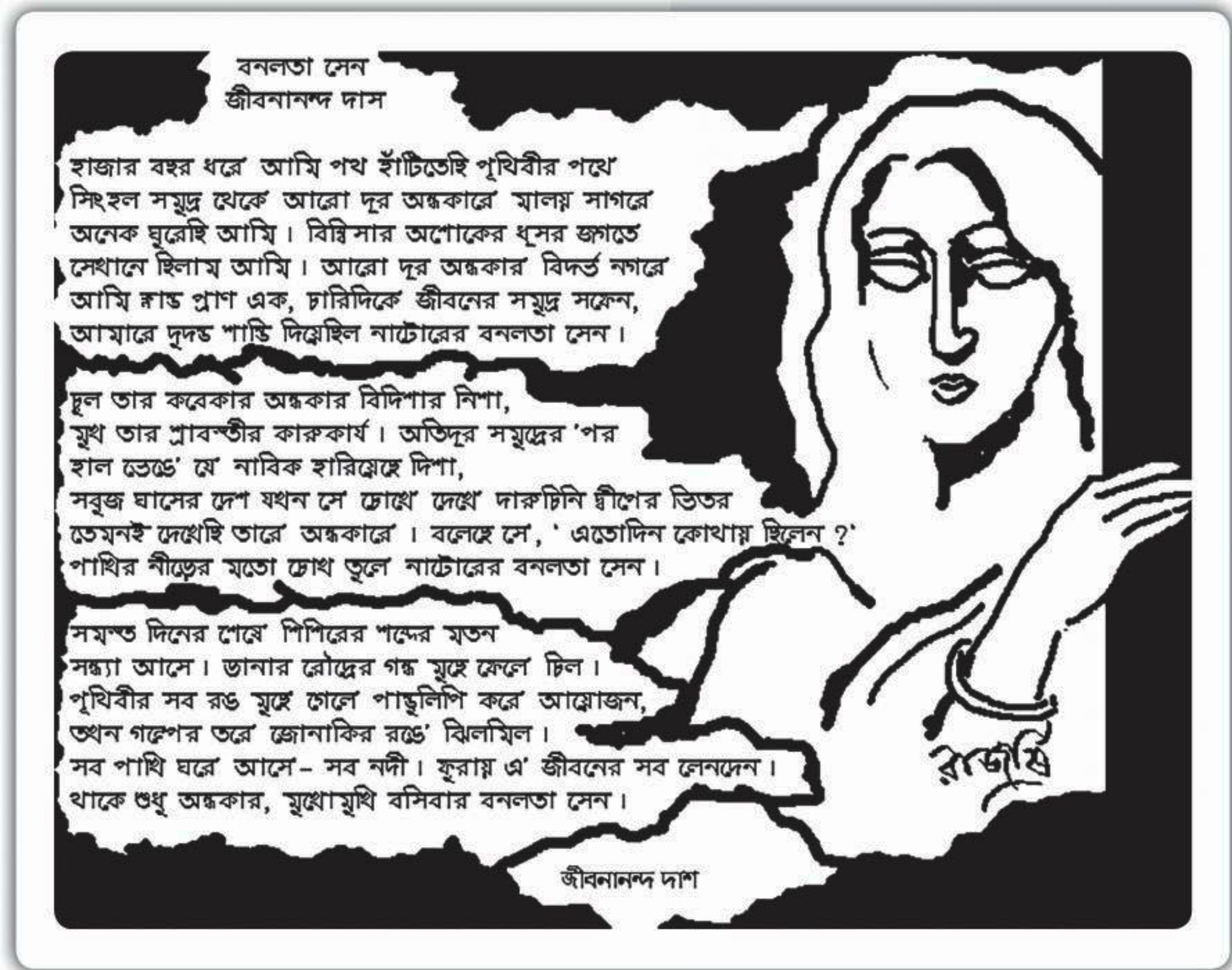
These middle-eastern associations of some of the Banalata poems may lie behind the view (Sumita Chakrabarty’s) that the Banalata Sen of “Banalata Sen” embodies the peculiar decadent romantic aura that is identified with the region (thanks to Orientalism of course). I will not quarrel with this as long as we remember that in its

geographical as well as historical setting “Banalata Sen” is 100% South Asian. It takes us to the seas skirting Malaysia and Sri Lanka, evokes a cinnamon-isle in a simile (South India was famous for its cinnamon, we may recall), then brings us back to rural and mofussil Bengal. In time it takes us back and forth between modern Bengal and ancient India, characterized by puissant emperors like Bimbisara and Asoka, and fabled cities like Sravasti and Bidisa.

Banalata Sen belongs to mofussil Nature but the timelessness of her fascination is suggested by her metaphoric association with Sravasti and Bidisa. “Nature” to my mind possesses a crisp musicality, and ideationally, as Sumita Chakrabarty points out, it has Vaishnavite associations on the one hand, and, thanks to Rani Bhabani, with the feudal-colonial order on the other. Her face is the art-work of Sravasti (“sravastir karukarja”): we have a metaphor here, not a simile, so the impression is rather that the beauty of this Bengali woman has been transmogrified into a purely aesthetic entity, such as Yeats longs for in “Sailing for Byzantium.” This dehumanized aestheticization is counterbalanced by the other historical metaphor for Banalata Sen: her hair is dark as the hoary nights of Bidisa. If the Sravasti metaphor is classical and Apollonian (and it is), this one is thoroughly romantic and Dionysian.

The image is one of hair let down, of a lady, *en dishabille*, in an unlighted nocturnal setting, clearly suggesting an illicit sexual liaison. The timelessness indicated by the reference to ancient history underscores the primordial and universal role of sexuality in human life, biological as well as cultural. Sanjay Bhattacharya, rightly to my mind, uses the Bengali word for an adulterous relationship, “parakiya,” to describe the tableau; and at once the relevance of Nature’s Vaishnavite connection becomes palpable.

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his posthumously published works in different genres—poetry of course, but also novels, short stories, essays and journal entries—have startlingly revealed what an iceberg of an author he was, that I have begun my second, comprehensive, engagement with his oeuvre.

Almost at once I have been struck by the unsuspected depth of his impact on my youthful sensibility. Were it not for my immersion in the crepuscular

Murree”; both poems are from my first collection, *Starting Lines, Poems* 1968-75).

As for my comprehensive critical take on Jibanananda, it will be a while before I can think of formulating it, but for starters I would like to share my (re) reading of his most famous poem. Much has been written on its eighteen lines—Saikat Habib, a Bangladeshi journalist, has even put together a 230-page anthology devoted entirely to it—but it

Jibanananda and Barishal

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What is Barishal known by? One hundred years back, the unfailing answer was “rice and river.” Half a century ago, the answer might have been a political name- Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Huq. But now the answer is unfailingly a name from the poetical world and he is our poet Jibanananda Das. Several times I have experienced this as a pleasurable reality. In 2008 I attended a seminar at Tripura university in India. Every time I met a stranger there and said that I was from Barishal, the first response from him or her was a word of sheer wonder- ‘Wow! You are from the land of Jibanananda Das!’ This happened not in India only. In Australia, Malaysia, Nepal, Saudi Arabia- wherever I met a Bangla speaking unknown person, most often it was a common pleasurable greeting for me- ‘Wow! You hail from the land of Jibanananda Das!’ These experiences solidify my belief that Jibanananda Das is now simply the identity mark of Barishal.

The status of Jibanananda as the identity mark of Barishal is obviously a making of his works, especially of poetical works. Some of his poems have poetised certain topographical names of Barishal with so astonishing success that reading those poems always gives the reader a sensation of journeying through the landscape and the lush greenery of Barishal. The reader must feel that the poem is a picture of no other place than Barishal as the topographical name has pinned it down to Barishal. Among those names the most prominent one is *Dhansiri*, a name of a river.

Before Jibanananda mentioned the name in his poem, nobody in the world knew a river called Dhansiri, because, if truth be told, there existed no river by this name in this Earth. The actual name of the river was Dhansiddha. It is only a 7-kilometre long narrow river in the present district of Jhalokathi, connecting a canal called Gabkhan to a narrow river called *Jangalia* of Rajapur. At its southernmost end there stands the Upazila town of Rajapur on

its bank. It is widely believed that the river was named Dhansiddha because the water-flow from the paddy-boiling vessels of the nearby villages, Hailakathi and Saichlapur, actually gave birth to this river. In all survey maps of the government, the name of the river is still *Dhansiddha*, not *Dhansiri*. It was Jibanananda who poetised the name and transformed it into Dhansiri. Now it is the most melodious and lyricised of all the river-names in Bengal. And it is no longer a mere name of a river, it is a poetical identity of Barishal.

Dhansiri is not the one and only example of poetic transformation of topographical names of Barishal in the hands of Jibanananda. The poem, known as “Abar ashibo firey” I shall return again), which has uplifted the status of Dhansiri almost to the mythical level, itself records at least two other examples of poetic transformation of names by Jibanananda and directly attaches the topography of Barishal to the beauty of Bengali beauty. One of the two examples involves the river *Jangalia*. The relevant lines of text read “I’ll come lovingly again to Bengal’s rivers, fields, farmlands,/ To the green wistful shores of Bengal lapped by *Jalangi*’s waves” [Translation by Fakrul Alam]. The translation by Clinton B. Seely reads- “Once again I’ll come, smitten by Bengal’s rivers, fields, to this/ Green and kindly land of Bengal, moistened by the waves of the *Jalangi*.” It is noticeable that *Jalangi* has been treated and translated as the name of a river in both the translations. But is there any river called *Jalangi* in Bengal? There is none and there was none even in our historical past. Actually, the name of the river is *Jangalia* and it is still a living river at Rajapur upazila of Jhalokathi district. *Jangalia* and *Dhansiri* have met at Baghri bazar of Rajapur. When Jibanananda used to travel to Kolkata, his steamer on the river Dhansiri took a right turn to the west at the point of Baghri and then he had every time a glimpse of the rippling water of the river *Jangalia* flowing



PHOTO: AUTHOR

to the east. It is in every way valid to imagine that the bewildering beauty of that river, whose gentle waves created by the propeller of the steamer lapped against the calm banks on both sides, had an everlasting impression in the poetic self of Jibanananda. He duly planned to immortalise the river in the lines of his poem. But the name of the river obviously sounded a bit unpoetical. So he moderately lyricised it and we got the immortal poetic name *Jalangi*, in place of *Jangalia*. This is how again a river of Barishal made its permanent place in an immortal poem of Bangla literature to represent Barishal, as well as the beauty of Bengal.

The third example of the name of a river of Barishal poetically transformed by Jibanananda is that of the little river *Ruposhia*. The Ruposhia

is a small tributary of the Dhansiri at its northern end. It is presumable that from the deck of the steamer to Kolkata, Jibanananda enjoyed the panorama of Ruposhia with his mesmerised poetic eyes. Jibanananda could not afford to leave the name of this little captivating river unmentioned in his immortal poem which celebrates and elevates two other adjacent rivers *Dhansiddha* and *Jangalia* to a sublime status. But, as usual, here also we see that the poet has made a slight change in the name of the river. He has mentioned it as *Rupsha*, not as *Ruposhia*. The text in Bengali reads- “Rupshar ghola jolay hoito kishor ek shada chera pale/ dinga baye:” in Fakrul Alam’s translation- “In the muddy *Rupsha* river some boy will be rowing a boat with

torn white sails.” This time the change in the name, however, does not seem to be due to any unpoetical harshness of the sound, rather, the change might be simply for the sake of metre. The name *Ruposhia* does not agree with the metre of the line and therefore the poet found it worthwhile to ensure a perfect metrical agreement by dropping one or more syllables off the name. Thus *Ruposhia* became *Rupsha* simply for the sake of prosodic correctness. Nevertheless, there are people who like to identify the river with the *Rupsha* of Khulna district. But that is unlikely because the deep and wide river *Rupsha* of Khulna is not supposed to be “muddy” and as the *Rupsha* is a river of mighty current, “a boy” is not expected to have the courage to row a boat in that river “with torn sails.”

Now, we see, all the three rivers in the poem titled “Beautiful Bengal” in Fakrul Alam’s translation are from Barishal to represent the beauty of Bengal. They are now celebrated river-names in Bangla poetry upholding the loveliness and comeliness of Bengal through the landscape of Barishal. Barishal vibrates in the texture of Jibanananda’s poetry not only with its rivers and landscape but also with its flora and fauna that include even a big number of names of insects familiar in Barishal only. Jibanananda’s poetry thus features Barishal and superimposes Barishal on the whole canvas of Bengal. The effect is that the Bengalis all over the world have started to know Barishal by Jibanananda Das. But is this love shown by Jibanananda for Barishal reciprocated by the people of Barishal? There are incidents which give a bleakly negative answer but there are also episodes that say “yes” to this question. Let me hope to come up with a conclusive analysis of those events in a write-up in future.

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