

46TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY OF JASIM UDDIN

# More than a pastoral poet



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Today—March 14—marks the 46th death anniversary of Jasim Uddin (1903-1976). Popularly called "palli kabi" (folk poet), Jasim Uddin is also considered a major Bangla poet. And by now he has been fully assimilated into the Bangla literary canon and the academy as well. Yet, his work remains marginalised—and sometimes even gets gruffly dismissed—in contemporary Bangla criticism. I think this has to do with a certain "aesthetic elitism"—to use the African writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o's term—predicted as it is on the contention that Jasim Uddin's characteristic preoccupations with everything rural or pastoral, accompanied by his inattention to the complexities of urban life, do not make him "modern" enough to merit attention.

But I will argue that consciously running against the grain of the literary modernism of the 1930s—represented by such poets as Sudhin Dutta (1901-1960), Amiya Chakravarty (1901-1986), Buddhadeva Bose (1908-1974), Bishnu Dey (1909-1982), and, to an extent, Jibanananda Das (1899-1954)—Jasim Uddin's work articulates a particular version of alternative, anticolonial modernity. And, thus, he comes close to Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), their different thematic concerns and stylistic dispositions notwithstanding. I'll return to the question of Jasim Uddin's anticolonial modernity later. Let me now make some quick observations about a few aspects of his life and work that I find significant for a partly introductory piece like this one.

Poet in the first place—but also lyricist, composer, dramatist, novelist, short story writer, memoirist, folklorist, teacher, researcher, music critic, and even travel writer—Jasim Uddin was born on January 1, 1903 in a village called Tambulkhana in the district of Faridpur in present-day Bangladesh. His rural upbringing had a lasting influence on the development of his work. By his own admission, his rural life brought him profoundly close to poor peasants, making him live and breathe their own songs and stories that remained in his blood. As a university student, Jasim Uddin worked with his mentor Dinesh Chandra Sen (1886-1939)—the famous educationist, folklorist, and literary historian—under whose guidance he collected folk songs and poems. He ended up collecting more than 10,000 folk songs, some of which are available in his famous compilations called *Jaari Gaan* (1968) and *Murshidi Gaan* (1977). And, of course, what has come to be famously known as the *Purbabanga Geetika*—a collection of folk ballads from Mymensingh, Netrokona, Chatogram, Noakhali, Faridpur, Sylhet, and Tripura—owes much to Jasim Uddin's compilation. Thus, early on in his life, his intimate and intense immersion in Bangladesh's folk traditions significantly contributed to the formation of his poetic sensibility.

Jasim Uddin's phenomenal productivity spanned more than six decades. He started writing poetry at school. While in Class 10, he wrote the proverbial poem "Kabar" (Grave). This poem immediately catapulted him into fame, and it was soon included in college textbooks. I think Jasim Uddin is most popularly associated with this singular poetic achievement—a doleful dramatic monologue in which an old man, pointing at his wife's grave, addresses his little grandson. I recall how my

own grandfather—who was a primary schoolteacher in a village—recited that poem to me when I was 12 or 13. I immediately felt the poem had a gripping voice, a sad tale to tell, and a musical cadence of its own. A story has it that Jasim Uddin's mentor Dinesh Chandra Sen cried while reading "Kabar." So did I. Jasim Uddin is also popularly

Jasim Uddin (1903-1976)

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associated with his two masterpieces—his two trailblazing ballads—named *Nakshi Kantha Math* (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt), published in 1929, and *Sojan Badiar Ghat* (The Place of Sojan, the Gypsy) that appeared in 1933. These two works distinctly diverged from the very lyrical tradition dominated by Rabindranath Tagore himself (1861-1941). And Jasim Uddin's ballads seemed to hark back to the mediaeval tradition of verse narratives represented by such figures as Chandidas (1370-1430), Krittibas Ojha (1381-1461), Maladhar Basu (c. 15th century), and even Kashiram Das (16th century), although he by no means returned to mediaeval theocentrism as such. In fact, poor peasants characteristically remain at the heart of his creative enterprises. And, of course, his ballads have their own lyricism and musicality; while Jasim Uddin did not abandon the lyrical tradition altogether, he later decisively returned to it.

Jasim Uddin's first collection of poems called *Rakhali* appeared in 1927 (which included the poem "Kabar"). Some of his poetic works include *Baluchor* (1930), *Dhankhet* (1933), *Hashu* (1938), *Matir Kanna* (1951), *Beder Meye* (1951), *Sakina* (1959), *Ma je Jononi Kande* (1963), *Holud Barani* (1966), and *Padma Nadir Deshe* (1969). And some of his dramatic works include *Padmapar* (1960), *Beder Meye* (1951), *Modhumala* (1951), and *Gramer Maya* (1952). He also wrote a novel called *Boba Kahini* (1964)—a work in which he remarkably depicted the struggles of two generations of poor peasants against the colonial-feudal order of things represented and reinforced by the Permanent Settlement of Bengal. Jasim Uddin wrote several memoirs, among which particularly significant is *Jibankatha* (1964). He also wrote a number of travelogues, among which his *Je Deshe Manush Boro* (1968) at least implicitly reveals his otherwise lifelong predilection for socialism.

And Jasim Uddin—who remained organically connected to the tradition of what is called "kabi gaan" since his childhood—composed numerous songs,

embracing such genres as *aul*, *baul*, *sari*, *jari*, *marfati*, *mursidi*, among others. He exemplarily energised and intensified the *bhatiyali* tradition, in particular. Indeed, Jasim Uddin's own musical works—extraordinarily rich and revealing as they are—call for an extended discussion. But, for now, suffice it to say that the musical and the poetic remain

it was Jasim Uddin who both excelled and revelled in reinventing and reusing the *payar* cadences and couplets that even remained a universal constant in his poetic work.

Dinesh Chandra Sen ardently asserted that no modern poet in his time could simply match up to such an intimate knowledge of rural life as Jasim Uddin had. And his English translators

Barbara Painter and Yann Love rightly pointed out, "The heroes of his poems are farmers, fishermen, boatmen, weavers, cowherds, even roadside barbers, wandering gypsies, palmists, and astrologers." But one should also underline Jasim Uddin's passionate concerns with poor, rural women. Many of his titles themselves clearly ascribe centrality to women, as a number of his works—his major ballads included—significantly foreground their suffering and marginalisation, and struggles at more levels than one, although one also notices his limitations in terms of questioning and unsettling male domination in the final instance.

In closing, let me say a few words on his two masterpieces, his two groundbreaking ballads, mentioned earlier—*Nakshi Kantha Math* and *Sojan Badiar Ghat*. Both—unforgettable stories of love as they are—are also remarkable for capturing conflicts, tensions, struggles, rhythms of living, human and even vegetal subjectivities, and life worlds that characterise the totality of rural life. This is more than radical pastoralism for Jasim Uddin. His choices of sites, subjects, scenes, and even signs in his richly structured and textured ballads—and his sensuous rootedness in rural Bengal—are all significantly political and anticolonial, marking his brand of modernity in oppositional terms, at a time when many of his contemporaries remained high on Western aesthetics and poetics.

As for *Sojan Badiar Ghat* in particular—a poem that fiercely dramatises the "dangerous," "suicide-inviting romantic relationship between a Muslim man named Sojan and a Namasudra woman named Dulali—Jasim Uddin's own modern sensibility offers an explosive tale of love on the one hand, and on the other, a tempestuous site of the interplays between communalism, colonialism, and casteism, all of which Jasim Uddin contests as an artist. Owing to space constraints, I cannot go into further details here, but I think rereading Jasim Uddin's work at this conjuncture will not only enable us to re-examine the relationship between the politics of art and the choice of our subjects and sites, but will also make us see why he continues to remain relevant as a truly great poet.

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profoundly indivisible in Jasim Uddin's work, while this almost Nazrul-like quality constitutes one of the forces of Jasim Uddin's own "modern" sensibility that remains opposed to the derivative modernist aesthetics of the 1930s and colonialism's divisive literary and cultural logic.

Now, overall, Jasim Uddin's work—in which the narrative, the dramatic, and the lyrical variously intersect and interpenetrate—abundantly reveals his concerns with the common, the ordinary, the insignificant, the neglected, the marginalised, and even the invisible. His avowedly anti-canonical—and anti-colonial—position prompted him to say that he learnt mostly from his "first teachers," who are his country's "uneducated and half-educated poets"—Jadab, Parikshit, Ismail, Hari Patani, and Hari Acharya. Respectful as he was of Madhusudan Dutta, Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul Islam, he made it a point that he would never imitate any one of them. And in the era of the free verse movement,

## Government of the people's Republic of Bangladesh

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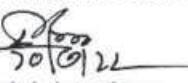
### e-Tender Notice (OTM)

E-Tender is invited in the National e-GP Portal (<https://www.eprocure.gov.bd/>) for the procurement of the following works:

Name Of Work	Construction of 9-Storied office Building with 2 Basement and 10-Storied Residential Building of the Department of Public Library,Dhaka including Civil, Internal Sanitary and Internal Electrification Works during the year 2021-2022.
Procuring Entity Name & Address	Md. Mahabubur Rahman, Executive Engineer, Dhaka PWD Division-4, Dhaka.
Tender Id	672689
Tender Package No	157/Dpp/D-IV/V of 2021-22
Last Selling Date & Time	17 April 2022, 15:00 Pm
Last Closing & Opening Date	18 April 2022, 15:00 Pm
Tender Proposal Security Amount	65000000
Security last Submission date & Time	18 April 2022, 14:00 Pm
Eligibility of Tenderer	<p>1. The minimum number of years of General Experience of the tenderer in the construction works as Prime Contractor or Sub-contractor or Management Contractor Shall be 10 (Ten) years.</p> <p>2. Having experience as a prime Contractor or Subcontractor or Management Contractor in Successful completion of 01(one) number of 8 storied RCC Building with 2 basement including civil, sanitary, and internal electrification works in a single contract amounting to Tk.170.00 (One Hundred Seventy) Crore in Govt. Semi-Govt. and Autonomous Organization of Bangladesh during last 5 (five) Years.</p> <p>3. The tenderers shall have a minimum average annual construction turnover during last 5 (five) financial years of Tk. 150.00 (One Hundred Fifty) crore. Payment certificates for contracts in progress or completed under public sector must be submitted along with tender in support of average annual construction turnover.</p> <p>4. The minimum amount of liquid asset or working capital or credit facilities as PW3-7 format of the tenderer shall be Tk.50.00 (Fifty) crore. Document submitted along with the tender must be issued in between tender publication and submission date</p> <p>5. The minimum tender capacity shall be Tk. 225.00 (Two hundred Twenty five) crore. In case of JV, tender capacity required for leading and other partner shall be as described in Tender Data Sheet (TDS). To calculate minimum tender capacity the tenderer must be submitted list of contract agreement, up to date payment certificate for on-going and completed contract under any public sector for the year in which maximum value of works performed within 5 years. In case of JV, Agreement between leading and other partner shall be required.</p> <p>6. The Tenderer must possess up-to-date trade license, ABC License, VAT Registration, Tax certificate&amp; 3(three) sets of steel shutter.</p>

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## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	29 Outback	5 Lewd looks
1 City on the Tiber	runner	6 Prepares for
5 Hightails it	30 Smith or	war
9 Like argon	Jones, e.g.	7 Spanish thanks
11 Blow one's top	32 Most frilly	8 Oration
13 Caesar's land	34 Recipe unit	10 Least spirited
14 Game host	35 Skimpy	12 Snappish
15 List shortening abbr.	swimwear	17 Pub offering
16 Swamps	36 Stage	19 Schnitzel meat
18 Turns	comment	22 Shortly, in
20 Drama	38 Gravy's kin	poems
division	39 Play setting	24 Big arteries
21 Past plump	40 Rigging	25 Scots and Irish
22 Pale	support	26 Sioux people
23 Enjoy some turkey	41 Calls on	27 Tour carrier
24 Director Lee	DOWN	28 Printer's goof
25 Mined fuel	1 Ceremonies	30 Rocker Bob
27 Churlish fellows	2 Boxing combo	31 Foils' cousins
	3 French thanks	33 Cuzco native
	4 Go astray	37 "Fifth Beatle"
		41 Sutcliffe



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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P	I	L	L	A	R	A	C	E
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E	R	A	P	I	L	O	W	
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