

#PERSPECTIVE

JIBANANANDA

The poet who knew me best

I was introduced to Jibanananda in 1999. In December of the penultimate year of the last millennium, I became 18; Jibanananda Das had just turned 100 in February. At a crossroad of life, my first bitter-sweet taste of adulthood was marked by the feeling of losing oneself completely at the altar of love, only to be followed by the empty feeling of love lost.

I cannot recollect the ‘tingles’ of first love, not even the moments most people seem to cherish; burdened with the suffering of dejection for something that I knew was pure in my heart, I cannot seem to relive the moments — neither blissful, nor utter disdain.

I still carry Porna with me or the image of her in my heart, not through the moments shared, or the sleepless nights of displeasure, but through the words of Das.

I am not a critic; I shy to even call myself a lover of poetry. But Jibanananda struck a chord in me, who seemed all alone in a battle that cannot be won. It was something I could relate to.

Almost two decades have passed since the introduction of a naive 18-year-old with the literary giant, but life still throws its tempestuous blows, and moments of glee, and till this day, the conversations between Jibanananda Das and I, continue.

Jibanananda Das is a name unparalleled in Bangla literature; unfortunately, as has been the case of most Bengali poets, his works still remain to be translated for a wider, global audience. The scanty translations available often fail to convey the flavour of his wordplay, and the vivid imageries that he draws in his lines. Perhaps, that is true for all poets, but being ‘lost in translation’ has been the fate of most of his works.

Bangla literature is rich, and its first step toward reaching a global audience was through Tagore. Yet, even after being one of most iconic of Nobel laureates, Tagore himself is not as widely read as one would assume.

Although immortalised through his poetry, Das’s entire gamut of literature is beyond belief. The prolific author penned poetry and prose, much of which was published posthumously. The shy Jibanananda never published in his lifetime any of the proses he had written, and unfortunate as it seems, his short stories and novels still remain overshadowed by the majesty of his poetic prowess. That, however, does not mean that his literary works in other forms are any inferior.

My introduction to Das was through poetry, and I perceive him as a poet still. While critics compare him to the likes of Tagore, Nazrul and a few others — to me, he is truly the ‘purest poet’.

All his life, Das disdained such generalisations. But even I, as a Jibanananda aficionado, cannot help but

label him as such!

In the preface to ‘Shreshtha Kavita’ published in 1854, he wrote — My poems or the poet of these verses have been called the lonely poet of the loneliest of poets by some; some have said that these poems are primarily of nature or full of historical or social consciousness, others have labelled them as poems of resignation; still others consider them to be exclusively symbolic; completely derived from the unconscious; surrealist and so on. I have noticed many other labels. All of them are partially correct — they do apply to some poems or some phases, but no one of them explain all of my poetry.

JIBANANANDA, & I

It was taken that I would first seek to discover Jibanananda’s poetry through the most celebrated love poems. For me, that was a disappointing start; my limitation!

As someone passing a watershed moment that marked my introduction to adulthood, I found his romantic poetry simple; his heroines lacking the panache.

The image of Porna overpowered Bonolota when it came to seeking solace in my heart. The images of her engrossed in a hearty conversation with her male friend, overwhelmed the jealousy Jibanananda felt for Suranjana’s male acquaintances.

True, I was solitary in my discovery of Das; my only companion ‘Jibanananda Dasher Shreshtha Kavita’ [Edited by Abdul Mannan Syed]. But I knew there was something more to the words, it was clear that the embarrassing language barrier made it impossible for me to fully grasp what he was saying.

I knew poetry is something that should be read and re-read until the imageries become clear and the conceit reveal themselves. And re-read a few times more. And I never gave up.

I am neither a poet nor a connoisseur. I struggle with meter or rhyme, or what separates Shakespearean sonnets from Bangla ones.

Two decades since those December nights, I still read the same poetry and find new meaning every single time. But I still cannot let him be, and not

conceptualise his works in any one of the ‘labels’ he despised.

It is possible that his disdain of being restricted under an umbrella was primarily because of the poor response he received from fellow poets, readers, and critics. In his lifetime, Jibanananda could never imagine what his works will mean to the generations that followed.

While commenting on the influence of Das in our modern lives, renowned academician Abdul Mannan Syed wrote —

“Why do people read poetry? And why do poets pen their poems? There are no plausible answers to these questions... His life — both the inner identity or the outward self, is shrouded in mystery. Yet, to this current generation of Bangalis, there is widespread interest surrounding this very poet. In the turbulent sixties,

when we were immersed in an effort to re-discover and re-define our identity, he was our companion.”

Syed spoke my mind. In my quest of self-discovery, and in an attempt to pin an identity for myself, I too found him an honest companion.

NO DREAM — NO CALM — SOME OVERWHELMING SENSATION

It is difficult to describe what I found while unearthing the treasures of Jibanananda’s poetry; a rattled mind, a stirred soul, and a voice that created an overwhelming sensation through his wordplay —

I move towards a twilight world — in my head

No dream — some overwhelming sensation is at work!

No dream — no calm — no love...

I cannot evade it,

It takes me by its hand. Everything becomes irrelevant —

All my thoughts become futile.

All prayers meaningless,

So meaningless!

Das has a cult following, mostly by the youth, who, without exception, carry on for the rest of their lives. As a first-time reader, I could not evade from the reality that he clairvoyantly termed — ‘Bodh’ (sensation/or consciousness).

