

“SONOROUSLY FEMININE BEAUTY”: THE INTRINSIC CONNECTION BETWEEN VERNACULAR POET JIBANANANDA DAS AND THE CITY OF KOLKATA

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Received: 04 Aug 2023

Accepted: 06 Aug 2023

Published: 16 Aug 2023

ABSTRACT

In this study, it has been my objective to explore the unique nature of the relationship between Jibanananda Das and the city of Kolkata. The restlessness of the poet, favouring the life in the city and sometimes longing for the peaceful native Barisal with its birds, rivers and foliage is a recurring theme for his poetry and prose. Kolkata occupies a central and somewhat ambiguous position in Jibanananda's poetry. Poems such as 'Ratri', "Footpathe-e" present a lucid picture of Kolkata in the 1940s - 'the old negro', 'the motor car', and "song of the Jewish Woman" all capture the city at night in minute detail. In the poem "Bhikhiri", Jibanananda skilfully assumes the personae of a street-beggar who calculates how many 'pice' he can collect from various streets of Kolkata. This image of the city and its people are captured almost through a photo lens realistically but always with affection and admiration. In the novel Malyaban, and the short story aptly titled Gram O Saharer Galpo there is the urge to leave the city (and its people) and embrace the peaceful and serenelife of the countryside. It is worth noting that the village/ countryside is the theme of nearly all poems in the collection Rupashi Bangla/ Bengal the Beautiful. There is one other source that accurately records his unique attachment to the city. In this study, I would try to examine select entries from Jibanananda's literary Notes/ Dinlipi. (1930-35). These notes are phrases and sentences mostly in English and of a somewhat telegraphic nature. The entries are monologues and it can be safely assumed that Jibanananda never intended to publish them. The Literary notes are perhaps a trifle overlooked in any estimation of Jibanananda but contain innocuous entries which become themes for major themes in the future. A brief article on Calcutta, entitled "This City" (1952), captured my attention; it bears testimony to Jibanananda's unique attachment to the city – a subject of many important poems. From Kolkata the "Kallolini Tilottama" in the poem "Suchetana" to "Aadim sarpini sahodarar moto ei je tram-er line" in the poem "Footpath-e", Jibanananda's desire to see a better Kolkata is evident.

KEYWORDS: *Flanerie, Dinlipi, Kolkata.*

INTRODUCTION

1.Literary Notes of Jibanananda Das

In Bivab Jibanananda Janmosataborsho Issue (1998-99) Bhumendra Guha points out that it may be assumed that the Literary Notes or his diary cover a period between 1930-35. During this time the poet was facing penury, depression, and severe criticism from contemporary poets. He was critical of others and guilt-ridden. His family life was unhappy and a longing for one B.Y (Shovana Majumder?) is recorded in Dinlipi/Literary Notes. Jibanananda had lost his position as a lecturer in English at City College in 1928 and after a brief tour of Bagerhat College and Ramjas College in Delhi and was

again unemployed. The entries in Literary Notes reflect his disillusionment with life, family, friends, and colleagues. The entries in literary notes are almost entirely in somewhat cryptic phrases and sentences in English with very little Bengali. The use of cryptic language would imply that the notes were a record of the poet talking to himself and he had never intended to make it public. I have sparingly used the entries in Literary notes and sometimes tried to trace phrases that might contain hints for some later poems and stories. I have relied on Bhumendra Guha's interpretations as well. For example, repeated reference to "three pice" in Literary Notes might act as starting point for the poem "Bhikhiri". I have selected entries about Kolkata and provide my interpretations with the disclaimer that but this is speculation.

1. 28.7.31

No More Than 3 Pice & What Can 3 Pice Give You?

The "one-pice and three-pice" recur in the entries and emerge in the poem "Bhikhiri".

I've got a paisa in Ahiritola,

I've got a paisa in Badurbagan.

If another paisa can be formed –

I'll walk away, make no further trouble. (1-4, trans. Chakravarti)

2. 31.7. 31

Train - the excessive heat & sun, the dirt & dust, the shadowy patches, refreshing breezes, rural vistas, dreams - Bengal always ... She is mine as no other is in a thousand ways - Her sons - her soil - her atmosphere, field, sky, sun, shade, silence & reminiscences ... "

A direct reflection of Jibanananda's deep love for Bengal as is illustrated in the poems in the collection *Rupashi Bangla*. The rural theme is evident which is reflected in in poem "I Shall Return to This Bengal"-

I shall return to this Bengal, to the Dhansiri's bank:

Perhaps not as a man, but myna or fishing-kite;

Or dawn crow, floating on the mist's bosom to alight

In the shade of this jackfruit tree, in this autumn harvest-land

Or maybe a duck – a young girl's – bells on my red feet (1-5, trans. Chaudhuri)

3. Petty Stations With Kerosene Lights: Train Stopping Everywhere Like A Diabetic Patient Urinating Every Now & Then - "

The "diabetic" train could be linked to the coughing motorcar in the poem "Ratri".

4. - Mother Calcutta grand superb with her lights. Mother, take your weary son. Why I leave your breast mother like a stupid truant so often?

-A deep attachment to Kolkata, the "Kollolini Tillotama". Reflections in essays such as a small prose piece This City as poems such as "Footpathe".I quote;

It is late—so very late at night.

From one Calcutta sidewalk to another, from sidewalk to sidewalk,

As I walk along, my life's blood feels the vapid, venomous touch

Of tram tracks stretched out beneath my feet like a pair of primordial serpent sisters.

5. 5.8.31

Beautiful - sleepiness, refreshing breezes & doors open the fascinating longing for sleep & superb daydreams the Defence of Poetry, Art, etc man, in this world as it is, is bound to live in ... so there must be a dreamworld exile, anguish, ignominy & misery for him my daydreams today: countryside (Dhansiri) with cornfields, yellowing corns, autumn morning & noon ... girl who had known me for years (to know & understand one & appreciate it better than whole lots of passion & romance) such a girl I met this morning (Scotts Lane): Her eyes understand & appreciate.”

The eyes like a “bird’s nest” will be one of the most famous images of Jibanananda in the poem “Banalata Sen”;

Through the darkness I saw her. Said she, "Where have you been so long?"

And raised her bird's-nest-like eyes—Banalata Sen from Natore.

6. Charming Autumn Morning: Superb Sky, Earth, Water & Light, Reminding Of Old Days With Its Hopes & Dreams ... And I Regret Bengal To Leave?.Never

The deep attachment to Bengal, which is a central theme of the collection *Rupashi Bangla*.

7. 15.08.31

Ramkamal Sen Lane- 1 man -negotiations...College St.Roaming..

The obsession of roaming around the city as a silent observer would facilitate Jibanananda’s portrayal of the city.

8. 18.08.31 and 19.08.31

Ought to have stayed in Col and 1 effort undone...

Jibanananda, at this time, was exploring a number of avenues of income and had to travel away from Kolkata frequently.

9. 27.08.31

The wonderful knack of Col street traffic ...An old, decrepit black bull, two buses,one motor (car),one cycle and men on foot within an inch of one another magically shuffling : 1 great accommodation.

Have I ever paid a single a single pice to 1 Coll Street widow or various other beggars?

The Leper’s child and various other infants with duress appeal and reflections infinite on them?

-“Coll” refers to College Street. The theme of the beggars and the leper can be found in the poems “Bhikhiri” and “Ratri” respectively. Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “Happy” could have been an inspiration.

10. Mother Cal without trying to improve or exclude

A disillusionment with Kolkata?

11. 23.8.31

Pollock street Scouting – (Parsi Para) Upper Circular ...

Jibanananda was fond of walking around Kolkata, especially at night-this theme of walking would be a major theme for many later poems such as “Poth -Hanta.”

As if beckoned by a memory, alone I walked many a sidewalk
Of this city. I often watched bus and tram plying their designated ways,
And then at last leave their route and calmly enter into a world of sleep.

In this context, T.S Eliot was also fascinated by the streets of London which was an important theme in his poems.

12. Walk towards Lakhutia. face to face with clouds and clouds (their colours) Fertile

Fields are disappearing city is expanding (my translation from Bengali)

-The familiar ‘walk’, his minute attention to the colour of clouds, and the urban-rural conflict are all there, These themes will recur in his poems and stories-Footpath-e and the story Gram O Soharer Galpo.

2. “THIS CITY”; FASCINATION WITH KOLKATA

In modern poetry, there is a legacy of the voyage (mainly internal) the city life, and the tour of the city. This can be directly attributed to French Symbolist poetry – Arthur Rimbaud's A Season in Hell (1873). The theme of a voyage is in some cases an escape from reality In Jibanananda's poems “Banalata Sen”, “Jiban” and “Monobij” we find such voyages. Repeated references to Babylon (as in Arthur Rimbaud) link the past with the futile journey which does not end in complete self-discovery. The element of dreams comes to this journey which leads to fatigue and depression. Bengali modern poets like Jibanananda had been influenced in their portrayal of the city by Eliot who in turn was influenced by Arthur Rimbaud and Baudelaire. The crowd, excitement, traffic noises, and loneliness become symbols in Jibanananda's poetry, as in “Path-Haanta”:

As though holding some gesture in my mind alone from the city's road to road

Much I have walked: much I have seen the trams and buses moving currently

That later leave the road to retire calmly to their world of restful sleep... (1-3)

The city of Calcutta held a unique fascination for Jibanananda. Of course, his dissociation from rural Barisal was not a happy one; yet, just as in poems like “Ratri” and “Bhikhiri”, his observation of night-time Calcutta in “Path Haanta” stands uniquely intimate:

The solitary walk brings deep peace

To my heart.

It is late night, when many stars

Surround the peak of the towering Monument
In the solitude; I wonder if ever
I have seen anything
More simple, more possible than this, the crowd of stars
And Calcutta, filled with the Monument? (13-20)

His fascination with the city and its people evokes emotion in terms of the intensity of poets beginning with William Wordsworth, finding resonance in Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot² and James Joyce. In “Upon Westminster Bridge”, Wordsworth would at first conjure an image of tranquil, undisturbed Nature at dawn only to contrast it with the demonic pace and activity of the city waking up to a mechanical day of business. In the poem “Shahar”, Jibanananda notes, “Heart, you have seen many a big city” (1) and concludes by mentioning that they have turned into ashes (4). The big city, London or Calcutta, has been a concern with both Wordsworth and Jibanananda respectively; both prefer rural life over city life (Bandyopadhyay 16). The geography of Calcutta from footpath to footpath – Belgachhia, Jadavpur, Bothtola, Muchipara, Taltala, Jorasankho, Pathureghata, Nimtala, Chitpur, Chinabajar, Bentinck Street, Feare Lane – is present in Jibanananda’s poems. There is a distinct difference between Eliot’s urban consciousness and Jibanananda’s: while Eliot articulates a society overreaching itself and staring at a crisis, Jibanananda’s concern is a wartime Calcutta where a society based on trade and commerce is emerging. Despite his consciousness of Eliot’s legacy, Jibanananda’s approach is different. In “Ei Sab Dinratri” he writes:

Bottola, Muchipara, Taltala, Jorasankho – in even more futile darkness
Those who walk the footpaths or tread the tram lines
Which way are their skies? (Seely 29-31)

In the welcome lecture of the seminar “Janmosatabarshe Jibanananda” K. Satchidanandan observes that the poet’s view of city life is similar to Goya’s painting where the individual is surrounded by animals dressed as humans. beings. Eliot’s London and Jibanananda’s Kolkata are all connected in the accurate depiction of city life. Critic Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay, in his essay entitled Reviewing Flanerie: Jibanananda Das and Urban Culture in the 1940’s uses the term Flanerie to grasp the modern concept of walking the city to establish a connection between Baudelaire-Walter Benjamin -Jibanananda Das in the sphere of Modernism. The activity of strolling and looking carried out by the flaneur, has gained considerable importance in the study of modernity. In himself, the flaneur is, in fact, a very obscure thing. Originally, the figure of the flaneur was tied to a specific time-space, Flanerie, after Baudelaire, can be understood as the observation of the fleeting, the transitory, and the contingent, which is the other half of modernity, obverse to the permanent and central image of the self. Baudelaire has been quite well known and popular among the literati in Bengal from the 1960s courtesy of the translations of Buddhadeva Bose with Jibanananda despite their different locations in history, we find points of similarities and contrasts. The theme of poverty and squalour associated with the city is enumerated in his essay “This City”:

Calcutta is not a very clean city, nor is it, compared with London, Paris, or New York, in any sense very much captivating... The city, however, is overlaid with a crust of poverty, folly, and coarseness that often proves too great an obstacle to many foreign observers to have a more correct and dispassionate understanding of it. (443-44)

And further on-

Destitutes of West Bengal and beyond, fortune-tellers and -seekers, swindlers, adventurers of thinkable sorts, folks with aptitude for any odd craft or none, traders, labourers, loafers, in fact all people who look for a decent livelihood turn to Calcutta believing that the city can feed and incidentally supply some fireworks and fun to them as it has in its own way been striving indeed to do for decades. It has not been able to take all to its bosom. Many – perhaps their number tends to increase – have starved and died in Calcutta who with their family – might conceivably have done much better outside. In the face of this tragedy, too, it is surprising how people blindly repose their trust in the healing power of Calcutta and pathetically cling to it. (444-45)

The urban life symbolizes a materialistic thirst for money and comfort pitted against a simple, uncomplicated rural life immersed in Nature. This can be an echo of Jibanananda's travels between Kolkata and Barisal between 1929 and 1936. It is evident from the use of language that these stories are written by Jibanananda the poet. The details of village life, the names of wildflowers, and the flora and fauna of rural Bengal evoke the poet's nostalgia: though he spent the bulk of his life as a writer in the city of Calcutta, he was not an urbanite at heart. In the story "Gram O Shohorer Galpo", Prakash, his wife Shachi, and a friend of their youth Somen are transformed into an oblique analysis of amour: Somen loved Shachi, who later got married to his friend Prakash. After a long gap of eight to ten years, Prakash and Shachi unexpectedly meet Somen on a rainy night, where the story begins.

In Somen's eyes, Shachi is "so full of learning – yet soothing – and, to her husband, who knows how thrillingly fertile her body" (32). The story further reveals: Today he can put Shachi to any use of his – Shachi is ready for that, eager; but on this sofa? the same things that had happened one day on the banks of the Bokmohana River, in the shade of the forest and the trees under the constellations so close to the smell of water! (35)

The reference to Bokmohana river and the rural backdrop which Somen yearns for is in contrast to the life of Prakash and Shachi which is very urban, In the celebrated poem "Ratri" Jibanananda describes the city at night in detail:

Unscrewing the hydrant the leper licks up water;
 Or perhaps the hydrant itself had burst out.
 Now the thick of night descends on the city en masse.
 A car goes past, coughing like a lout
 And shedding restless petrol. (1-5, trans. Chakravorty)

The poem captures the essence of Kolkata night-life but it is more of a reportage than a great statement.

CONCLUSION

The poet walking across the city at night and minutely observing the surroundings will recur in the poems of Sakti Chattopadhyay, a great admirer of Jibanananda Das, in later years. In the poem "Senate 1960" Shakti Chattopadhyay expresses anguish at the contemporary modernization of Kolkata and disappearing face of "purono Kolkata". In "Se Bodo Sukher Somoy Noy, Se bodo Anander Somoy Noy"/"It was not a time of great bliss, it was not a time of great joy" Shakti records the experience of walking the streets of Kolkata though in an entirely different context.

Tottering from head to toe, from wall to wall, from parapet to parapet, swapping pavements at midnight

On the way home, a home in a home, feet in feet

Breast in breast

Nothing more - (a lot more?) - even earlier

Tottering from head to toe, from wall to wall, from parapet to parapet, swapping pavements at midnight

On the way home, a home in a home, feet in feet, breast in breast

Nothing more. (Se Bodo Sukher Somoy Noi, Se Bodo Dukher Somoy Noi trans Sinha)

In this study, limited in scope, I have tried to identify a small selection of poems of Jibanananda Das in which the city of Kolkata serves as a backdrop and the theme. In most poems, Jibanananda assumes the role of the spectator who presents startling images of the city but refrains from making any pronouncements or declarations. The admiration for Kolkata and his deep attachment is unmistakable. To end I quote a few famous lines of Jibanananda Das on Kolkata from the poem “Ratri-“

Three rickshaws trot off, fading into the last gaslight,

I turn off, leave Phears Lane, defiantly

Walk for miles, stop beside a wall

On Bentinck Street, at Tiretti Bazar,

There in the air dry as roasted peanuts

NOTES

1. Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) the author of *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du mal*, 1857), is the proponent of a new aesthetic based on city life. According to the Marxist cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), Baudelaire, by being the first poet of the city, was the first poet of modernity; he was the first writer to recognize the transformation of Paris during the Second Empire (1852–70) a radical transformation of society itself and to perceive the impact the new social reality would have on the creative artist. Baudelaire’s attention focused strongly on urban reality, and concomitantly his writing comes seems less concerned with creating beauty in any conventional sense. to play such a role.
2. In “The Waste Land” Eliot's speaker describes London as an 'Unreal City' and represents businessmen's morning commute into the city's financial district as a kind of death, through allusions to Dante's *Inferno*.

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“Why I Write”; Corresponding Elements in the Poetic Discourse of Jibanananda and Wordsworth,

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