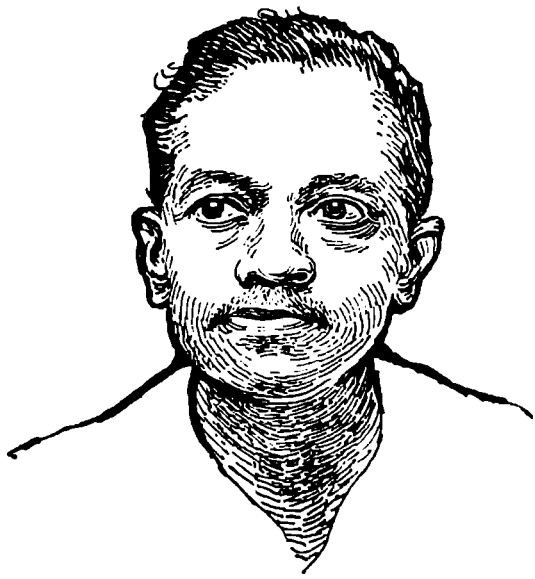
Makers of Indian Literature

TITLES IN THIS SERIES

K.M. George: *A.R. Rajaraja Varma* □ Maheshwar Neog: *Anandaram Dhekhiyal Phukan* □ G. Vanmikanathan : *Appar* □ Balwant Singh Anand : *Baba Farid* □ K. Krishnamoorthy: *Banabhatta* □ S.C. Sengupta: *Bankimchandra Chatterjee* □ H. Thipperudraswamy : *Basaveshwara* □ Harbans Singh: *Bhai Vir Singh* □ Madan Gopal : *Bharatendu Harishchandra* □ Prema Nandakumar: *Bharati* □ G.K. Bhatt: *Bhavabhuti* □ A.N. Moorthy Rao : *B. M. Srikantayya* □ Alokeranjan Dasgupta : *Buddhadeva Bose* □ Sukumar Sen : *Chandidas* □ T.C. Sankara Menon: *Chandu Menon* □ Jayadeva Misra : *Chanda Jha* □ D. Anjaneyulu: *Dr C.R. Reddy* □ Anuradha Potdar: *Dattakavi* □ B.J. Sandesara: *Dayaram* □ Mayadhar Mansinha: *Fakirmohan Senapati* □ M. Mujeeb: *Ghalib* □ Ramanlal Joshi : *Goverdhanram* □ V.R. Narla: *Gurazada* □ R.B. Joshi : *H.N. Apte* □ Malik Ram: *Hali* □ M. Varadarajan: *Ilango Adigal* □ Hiranmay Banerji: *Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar* □ Ramesh Chandra Shah: *Jaishankar Prasad* □ Suniti Kumar Chettarji: *Jayadeva* □ Chidananda Dasgupta : *Jibanananda Das* □ P.Y. Deshpande: *Jnanadeva* □ Prabhakar Machwe: *Kabir* □ Somnath Dhar : *Kalhana* □ S. Maharajan: *Kamban* □ Gopal Haldar: *Kazi Nazrul Islam* □ Prabhakar Machwe: *Keshavsut* □ B. Rajanikanta Rao: *Kshetrayya* □ K.M. George: *Kumaran Asan* □ Hem Barua: *Lakshminath Bezbaroa* □ Sukumar Azhicode: *Mahakavi Ulloor* □ Narayan Chaudhuri: *Maharshi Devendranath Tagore* □ Saroj Mohan Mitra: *Manik Bandyopadhyay* □ G. Vanmikanathan: *Manikkavachakar* □ Lotika Ghose: *Manmohan Ghose* □ V.J. Trivedi: *Meghani* □ Amalendu Bose: *Michael Madhusudan Dutt* □ Ish Kumar: *Mir Taqi Mir* □ Usha S. Nilsson: *Mira Bai* □ A. Srinivasa Raghavan: *Nammalvar* □ U.M. Maniar: *Nanalal* □ Gulabdas Broker: *Narmadashankar* □ Mohammad Hasan: *Nazir Akbarabadi* □ R.M. Gole: *N.C. Kelkar* □ V. Sitaramaiah: *Panje Mangesh Rau* □ D. Venkatavadhani: *Pothana* □ Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay: *Pramatha Chaudhuri* □ Prakash Chandra Gupta: *Prem Chand* □ Gopinath Mohanty: *Radhanath Ray* □ Prabhakar Machwe: *Rahul Sankrityayan* □ Soumyendranath Tagore: *Raja Rammohun Roy* □ G. Vanmikanathan: *Ramalingar* □ K.B. Advani: *Sacha Sarmast* □ Krishna Chandra Panigrahi : *Sarala Dasa* □ *Padmini* Sengupta: *Sarojini Naidu* □ K.B. Advani: *Shah Latif* □ Manoj Das: *Sri Aurobindo* □ Amiya Dev: *Sudhindranath Datta* □ [illegible] □ Vishnu Dutt Sharma: *Surya Mall Mishran* [illegible] *Brahmanand Tirth* □ Mahasveta Devi: *Tarasanka* [illegible] Maharajan: *Tiruvalluvar* □ Padmini Sengupta: *To* [illegible] Nemade: *Tukaram* □ B. Hradayakumari: *Vallati* [illegible] Vedam Venkataraya Sastry (Junior): *Vedam Venka* [illegible] Narla: *Veeresalingam* □ V. R. Narla: *Vemana* □ Ramanath Jha: *Vidyapati* □ Rajeev Saxena: *Vrindavanlal Verma* □ A. N. Raina: *Zinda Kaul.*

Jibanananda Das

Chidananda Das Gupta



JIBANANANDA DAS (1899-1954) is widely recognised as the most important poet in Bengal since Rabindranath Tagore.

His strength lies in the way in which he carried the Tagore tradition forward into the spirit and idiom of a new era. The striking originality of his images and the enraptured quality of his poetry have left a deep impress on the younger generation of Bengali poets. Jibanananda is wholly contemporary and yet has a deep sense of tradition. Living so intensely in the rural surroundings in East Bengal, Jibanananda got an opportunity of knowledge of Bengali life and landscape in such a wealth of intimate detail that people of Bangla Desh have rightly found some of the most poignant and deeply personal poetry in praise of their motherland in his work. The twenty-nine poems translated in this volume represent some of his finest work.

Chidananda Das Gupta, whose translations from Rabindranath Tagore, Manik Bandyopadhyay and Samar Sen are also well-known, has spent years studying Jibanananda. His translations are among the very few from any Indian language which are enjoyable as poetry in English. His close association with the poet in his life time gives him a particular insight into many aspects of his poetry and his personality. In his introduction and in the translations, Chidananda Das Gupta reveals a rare combination of analytical ability and intense love of poetry—particularly the poetry of Jibanananda Das.

It may be recalled that in 1955, when the Akademi instituted Awards to mark out the most outstanding books of literary merit published in any of the Indian languages recognised by the Akademi, the first book in Bengali to be selected for the Award was an anthology of the poetry of Jibanananda Das, *Srestha Kavita.*

SAHITYA AKADEMI
REVISED PRICE Rs. 15·00

Cover layout and portrait : Satyajit Ray

JIBANANANDA DAS

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

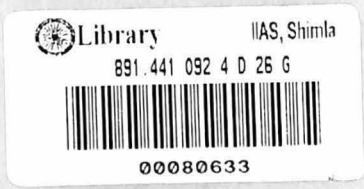
JIBANANANDA DAS

Chidananda Das Gupta

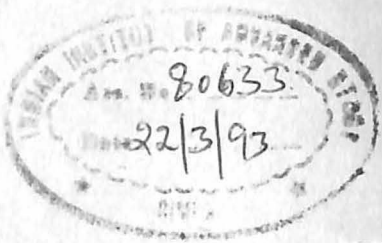
The rates of the Sahitya Akademi publications have been increased w.e.f. 1 May 1992 vide Govt. of India' letter No. JS(K)/91-545 dated 11 February 1992.

Sahitya Akademi

Sahitya Akademi
Rabindra Bhavan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110001
Block V-B, Rabindra Sarobar Stadium, Calcutta-700029
29, Eldams Road, Teynampet, Madras-600018
172, Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg,
Dadar, Bombay-400014



First Published : *1972*
Second Printing : *1983*



SAHITYA AKADEMI
REVISED PRICE Rs. 15·00

Published by the Sahitya Akademi
and printed by S. P. Jain at J. Samanta Machinery Co. Pvt. Ltd.,
14-A, Kamla Nagar, Delhi-110007

Dedicated to the memory of

HUMAYUN KABIR

who encouraged me to translate poetry

Contents

1. THE AGE

VIRTUALLY all of Jibanananda Das' life (1899-1954) was spent in the period dominated by Rabindranath Tagore.

The extent to which Tagore enveloped the entire consciousness of Bengal for more than half-a-century can be understood only by those who have experienced it. Almost every literate Bengali copied his handwriting besides his prose style, knew at least five hundred of his two thousand songs, had played a role in one of his dramas at school or college, could recite a fair number of his poems from memory, had read all his novels and most of his essays, had visited his idyll at Santiniketan and, what is more, imbibed the attitudes of Rabindranath and applied them to virtually everything he came across. Attitudes of synthesis of East and West, new and old, science and religion, a broad liberal-humanist, social-reformist outlook with a leavening of Brahmo puritanism penetrated varying layers of the minds of successive generations. It was impossible for the educated Bengali to think without, beyond, or outside Rabindranath Tagore. In his life and his work he had created a monumental umbrella for the Bengali mind.

I use the past tense with trepidation, for the force of the Tagore tradition is by no means spent. But many among those born after his death in 1941 are touching thirty now, and the nature of the environment in Bengal has changed sufficiently for the Bengali today to look backward a little in thinking of him. The second world war, the unemployment, the ever-harsher political strife and the general feeling of the breakdown of cherished pre-Independence values have modified that total identification with him which marked the Tagore era.

If it was difficult for the literate Bengali to stray outside the pale of Rabindranath, it was doubly so for the Bengali poets who came in his wake. He went on surprising them with new phases of his ever-evolving thought. Beginning with *Prantik* (From The Outer Edge) a collection of poems published in 1937 soon after a severe illness which all but killed him, he spoke of a new awakening to contemporary reality, launched

on a scathing condemnation of the forces of war and of the new crop of evils around him :

Hissing serpents poison the very air ;
Fine words of peace ring hollow.
My time is up ; but before I go
I call out to men
Who, to fight the demon,
In every home prepare.

Prantik, Poem no. 18

One can imagine the agony which it must have cost the ageing poet, always the apostle of peace, to write that second line.

During the thirties, the search for liberation from Tagore became a conscious effort with a whole generation of poets among whom Buddhadev Bose was perhaps the most articulate. For some fifteen years before Tagore's death, the 'Kallol' group, centering around the magazine of that name and consisting of individuals strongly influenced either by English poetry of post-war frustration, or the Marxist philosophy or both, sought paths towards the expression of a post-Tagore mental stated. And 'Kallol' was by no means the only force which ranged itself in the struggle for freedom from Tagore. As Bishnu De says in a poem written on Rabindranath's birthday,

No merchandising of Tagore, anymore.
For us, no tying up of the primal river
In hairy knots of permanence; we keep
Open the Ganga of our souls,
Reach out to the sea in songs,
In new line and colour, picture and poem
We open up joyous new streams.

Bishnu De: *'25th Baisakh'*

Yet not only did Jibanananda Das not begin by 'revolting against Tagore' but the development of his content paralleled the evolution of Tagore more than any other post-Tagore poet. Of this he must have been intensely aware himself, for he writes :

'Poets are not born as a result of a conspiracy to overthrow the great poets preceding them... With the exception of a few poems by one or two poets, the ephemeral stamp on the rest of modern Bengali poetry is so marked, that a

moment's encounter with a song or a poem of 'Tagore's makes us grateful for his vast difference from them...*it is with the help of pointers from Tagore that modern Bengali poetry has made a tiny start* (emphasis mine), and its development will not culminate in the demolition of the fundamentals of Bengali literature or of Tagore...'

Jibanananda's strength lies in the way he carried the Tagore tradition forward into the spirit and the idiom of a new era, rather than stand in opposition to it. He provides an excellent example of the relationship between *Tradition and The Individual Talent* so precisely defined by T. S. Eliot in his essay of that name.

It was a period of Bengali literature strongly assailed by winds from the west—blowing across the waste land between the two wars where the moral certainties of Victorian times had collapsed, science on the threshold of the nuclear age had bred new uncertainties of its own, and Marxism had raised its flag in many corners of the devasted landscape.

Significantly, most of the creators of Bengali literature in the late Tagore and post-Tagore period were professors of English—Buddhadev Bose, Bishnu De, Amiya Chakravarty, Samar Sen, Jibanananda Das. If they were not actually teachers of English, they were close enough to it as journalists in the English press. Their poems abounded with allusions to the whole gamut of the classical and modern mythology of Western art and literature. Through the cross currents of T. S. Eliot and the Webbs, W. B. Yeats and Christopher Caudwell, Rajani Palme Dutt and Oswald Spengler, modern Bengali literature steered an uncertain course pulled in many directions.

But the West had always made a greater impact on the Bengali's mind than on his dress or his drawing room. The impact was never an unsynthesised influence. Quite often, the deeper the knowledge of the West, the more Bengali the man became and the more vigorous his synthesis. Sudhindranath Datta, for instance, blended a deep knowledge and love of Sanskrit literature with T. S. Eliot, Baudelaire and Paul Valery to create not only a brilliantly precise prose style but a mentality of his own. The act of blending was not itself unique because all the writers of this generation did something of that

nature, but the uniqueness arose in the particular quality of the chemistry in each case.

His lifelong profession of English literature was no obstacle to Jibanananda Das in writing some of the most poignant and deeply personal poetry in praise of the motherland written in any literature. It abounds in the knowledge of Bengali life and landscape in such a wealth of intimate detail as to make it, to me, the least translatable of all his work. (*'One day I shall Come Back'*, is the only one from the collection *Rooposi Bangla* which I have dared attempt in this volume).

Jibanananda entered the most fruitful phase of his career at a time when the vanguard of Bengali literature was dominated by the cultural philosophy of 46 Dharmatallah Street, the headquarters of what began as the wartime Anti-Fascist Writers' & Artists' Association, turned into the post-war Progressive Writers' & Artists' Association and dominated the fifties.

The influence which emanated from its enthusiastic precincts, thronged by almost all the young talent of the time was, predictably, towards an identification with the people and faith in their ultimate victory. To write differently, at that time, was to invite the accusation of escapism—which in fact Jibanananda did. But never for a moment was he deflected from his destined path into an easy conformity with the dominant force of the time. This is significant because the early trend in leftism in Bengali literature did not take sufficient note of the reality of the gap between the English-educated middle class which wrote and read poetry and the vast masses of the illiterate who, overnight, became its main subject-matter.

The resulting tension soon surfaced in different ways. Samar Sen's anguish over the banality of our urban existence was always more convincing than his ritualistic affirmations of faith in the victory of the people. He realised this himself so well as to stop writing poetry altogether. Bishnu De's fine sensibility seemed to find its bedrock of faith in general respect for mankind and sympathy for the toiling masses rather than conviction in his occasional salutes to the flag. The poets patently failed to shed what Marxists would call their 'class' characteristics. In fact, looking back upon that period, it seems doubtful whether except in a handful of poems of Subhas Mukhopadhyay and Sukanto Bhattacharya, and in the generally enhanced

awareness of the condition of the masses, the literary philosophy of 46 Dharmatallah really went beyond a desperate effort to induce oneself hypnotically towards that ultimate affirmative phrase justifying the Eliotesque despair in the preceding lines.

On the other hand, identification flowered in the frankly nostalgic work of those who remained themselves and sought a less obvious nexus with the destiny of the people. Bibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay's sense of identity was in many ways more profound than the rather selfconscious strivings of the leftist writers. Jibanananda's knowledge of the vegetation, the rivers, the seasons, the crops, the habits of common people going about their work was similar in its intimacy to Bibhuti Bhusan's (whose novels were to inspire the urge towards identification in Indian cinema in Satyajit Ray's Apu trilogy)—again without any conscious leftist affirmations. Perhaps one could name alongside these two also the marked nostalgia of a painter like Jamini Roy, of whose work Bishnu De has been such an able interpreter.

It is widely recognised in Bengal today that the post-Tagore era in our poetry found its fulfilment in Jibanananda Das. Nazrul Islam sang in patriotic glory which palled soon on a weary generation; Sudhindranath Datta dug deep into Sanskrit and made a new synthesis with contemporary life and literature to create the firm lines of precise statement; Bishnu De brought a softer touch, a greater emotional feel, an ambience of the poetry of Aragon and Eluard to an intense, intellectual self-awareness; Buddhadev Bose gloried in the senses with delight and abandon; Premendra Mitra struck a romantic note with a broad and general evocation of common people, distant lands; Amiya Chakravarty came out with a modern idiom and great rhythmic skill; Ajit Datta, like Sudhindranath, sough his own brand of synthesis of the Indian and the contemporary, reaching a muscular leanness of form and precision of statement. Each poet made his mark with a distinctive contribution. But it is doubtful if any of them displayed the originality, power, and the enraptured quality of Jibanananda Das' poetry. At any rate, for the younger generation of Bengali poets today, he has practically come to take the place of Tagore. His influence on them is all-pervading. With one difference. It does not extend outside poetry.

2. THE MAN

JIBANANANDA DAS never lived outside the area of poetry. He did write some short stories, essays and even novels, but it was poetry which filled his being. For him there was no Tagorean unity in the appreciation and the practice of the arts, between the way of wearing his clothes and the poetry he wrote, the style of his writing and the decor of the house he lived in. There was no synthesis between appearance and reality, between the life of the imagination and life in the social environment. He lived intensely, exclusively, a life of the imagination both in the rural surroundings of Barisal in East Bengal where he was born and brought up, and in Calcutta where he spent his later years. While he was inexorably withdrawn from the immediacy of life around him, he was still a keen observer of it, but his living participation in it was only through his work. He was not only a poet, he was nothing but a poet.

"If one is really a poet", he himself says in an essay, "it will not be possible for him to offer to the world of the daily grind a second gift as extraordinary as the first, which is his poetry".

Sad as it was, it was not entirely without poetic justice that such a man should have reached his end by being run over by a passing tramcar. Even before his death, bathos haunted his life. People often mistook him for the very opposite of what he was—an intensely alive and warm-hearted human being. For a long time, he was the butt-end of ridicule not only of the conventionalists like Sajanikanta Das (who attacked him in almost every issue of *Shanibarer Chithi,* 'The Saturday Letter') but many who laid claims to modernity. He came of a devout Brahmo family (his father was a very scholarly school teacher and his mother a poet) and, for some time, taught English literature in the Brahmo-dominated City College in Calcutta. From this position he is said to have been thrown out by his puritanical employers for having referred to the glories of the female bosom in one of his poems. Another story speaks of some members of his family demanding to know who Banalata Sen was and why a married man like him should carry on with another

woman. Whether the stories are apocryphal or not, they illustrate points very valid to the times and to him, Practically all his life, he was a teacher of English literature, but to supplement his income, in his later years, he had to sell insurance, even while his poetry was coming into its own.

In his dealings with people, he always found it hard to communicate, as even an admirer like Buddhadev Bose confirms; in fact his face was, more often than not, a mask which very few ever penetrated. No wonder people failed to understand him. Certainly it was a life far removed from the Tagorean model of tranquil unity and all-pervasive synthesis. It was much more typical of the contemporary period, with its tensions, its secret core of pain, its disbelief and disillusion. In his work as in his life, he belonged to the post-Tagore era.

3. THE POET

> Where were you so long?' She asked, and more
> With her bird's-nest eyes; Banalata Sen of Natore

THE ORIGINALITY of his imagery is only one aspect of the remarkable poetry of Jibanananda Das. Yet, in writing about him in any language other than his own, it is the best starting point because, even in translation, something of the individuality and power of the images comes through. Besides, in translation, the imagery conveys a sense of that successful integration of the most traditional and the most contemporary which distinguishes his poetry. It is, in fact, the key to the understanding of Jibanananda Das.

Jibanananda's imagery and idiom are more individual than Tagore's derivations from Sanskrit literary conventions and conceits (which often make him so unrecognisable and trite in translation); he is more specific, free of 'poetic' conventions and never shies away from the downright ugly. Buddhadev Bose, Bishnu De and other conscious rebels against Tagore are far closer to Tagore in following normal syntax and in the naturalistic use of language. With Jibanananda, a tree is hardly ever generic; its name must be taken. Words are often torn out of their normal context and acquire a surrealistic force; sentences are constructed with complicated parentheses and ellipses.

At one end of Jibanananda's wide range of imagery lies the poem 'What Else, Before Death?' (Page 29) which is loaded heavily with complex imagery—visual and aural—drawn from vivid personal experience suddenly taking to the wings of the imagination or inextricably bound up with mixed metaphors and transferred epithets of a strange power.

> 'the dim women at the river sprinkling the flowers of fog'
> . . . .
>
> 'the moist smell of rice carried by the waves into the eyes of the solitary fish'
> . .

'the shadow of the thatched roof is etched on the
moonlit yard'

'the unflickering light, there, where the lovely maidens
of the world glide into bodies of incense'

These are images made remarkable by the intensity and vividness of perception of nature and the ease of their absorption into the mainstream of the thought of the poem, which comes out in the last stanza:

What else need we know before death? Do we not know
How at the edge of each red desire rises like a wall
They grey face of death? The dreams and the gold of
the earth
Reach a tranquil equilibrium, ending a magic need.
What else need we know?
Have we not heard the cries of birds upon the dying sun?
Have we not seen the crow fly across the mist?

The manner in which Jibanananda piles image upon image, builds effect upon effect for the major part of the poem and suddenly arrives at the 'pay-off' is even more dramatically seen in another poem translated here—'The Corpse' (Page 34).

These are images of great subtlety spun by a poet who lived close to nature (in Barisal, what is now Bangladesh), and observed it with keen absorption. Some of the imagery is so simple and literal that it sounds strange to anyone unfamiliar with the object itself. Thus in 'O Kite' (Page 43), the comparison of the eyes with the fruits of the cane plant is absolutely literal because in reality the two do look very alike.

A far cry from this is a poem like 'The Lighter Moment' (Page 47), completely urban, witty, full of mischief, and bitterness:

These forthy words rouse the ire of a mosquito
That leaps from the tip of one nose to another,
As by the river of Bnetinck Street they sit
Counting on their fingers the goods of the world.

and yet, the lightness subserves, as always, a much deeper statement :

For now they will depart for the land of the flying river

Where the bedevilled monkey and the broken bone
Come together to the edge of the water
And reflect upon the reflections
As long as there is time to reflect.

A third type of imagery is derived almost entirely from English idiom.

When I first read the original of the 'Epitaph' (Page 49), it took me a little while to know what he meant by the first two lines. But when I translated them into English, the meaning leapt forward and made the lines in the original sound like a translation :

Here lies Sarojini; (I do not know
If she still lies here); she has lain here for long.

In the Bengali the first phrase does not at first suggest a grave at all ; it almost sounds as if Jibanananda is referring to a live woman lying on a bed—then, at the end of the second line you guess his meaning, with something of a shock administered by the literal transference of the English gravestone phrase 'Here lies—'. Similarly 'The Cat' (Page 35) although not using the same device, immediately suggests an ambience of thought more familiar in Western literature. The two poems have a further similarity in the way in which the thought takes off from the descriptive plane to a sudden cosmic sweep. For instance, at the end of 'Epitaph':

A dry saffron light lingers in the sky
Like an invisible cat
On whose face sits an obstreperous smile
Of hollow cunning.

In all the above, there is an experience-source to which the type of imagery is traceable—nature, the urban milieu, Western literature; but the historical imagery is entirely unaccountable to anything outside of himself—yet it is one of the strongest and most recurrent motifs in his work. It is there at the very beginning of his most famous single poem, 'Banalata Sen':

For aeons have I roamed the roads of the earth
From the seas of Ceylon to the straits of Malaya
I have journeyed, alone, in the enduring night,
And down the dark corridor of time I have walked
Through mist of Bimbisara, Ashoka, darker Vidarbha,

Round my weary soul the angry waves still roar ;
My only peace I knew with Banalata Sen of Natore.

The concept of the soul weary after a long journey through the corridors of time is so deeply embedded in Jibanananda Das that its sudden surfacing can sometimes give the unfamiliar reader a jolt in a poem like 'The Streets of Babylon' (Page 34) literally, the title of the original would translate as 'Walking Along The Street':

The eye moves down and takes in the burning cigarette stub
The wisp of hay pushed along by the wind.
I close my eyes and move to a side—the tree
Has shed many brown, faded leaves, and they have fled.
So in the stillness of night have I walked
Through the streets of Babylon and of Calcutta
Why? I know no more than I knew centuries before.

The poem starts off and continues in a vein of fascinating but clear and logical description of a walk in Calcutta at night; then towards the end, it springs Babylon on us, wrenching us suddenly from our secure moorings to naturalism.

Jibanananda's poetry is littered with references to history, both in a general way and in specific mentions of personalities and periods—Babylon, Phoenicia, Assyria, Nineveh (the vanished civilizations of West Asia and Egypt seem to have held a particular fascination for him), Patanjali, Ambapali, Nagarjuna, Sravasti, Confucius, Attila, are among a few hundred historical names which keep making sudden appearances in his work. In the subtitle to a poem, 'The Last Night Of Capricorn', he compares the consciousness of the historical flow of time to the flight of a bird. The recurrent bird motif is later seen in 'In the Likeness Of the Sun' (Page 44) and many other poems. The sense of space is no less acute than the sense of time; reference to Malaya or Egypt, the Atlantic ocean, the Berin straits are frequent and unpredictable. The animal world comes in for its share too (rather as in Edith Sitwell) sometimes in the most 'unpoetic forms; the sores on the dying horse, the doddering blind old owl, the swan, the camel, the golden lion, the vulture, the decrepit frog, the mosquito. Flowers are conspicious by their absence, but plants and trees are present very specifically, with every name clearly spelt out. Jibanananda has no awareness of

'the beautiful' or 'the poetic', and does not even build up his own new conventions around them.

From the spittle, the blood and the excreta
The fly rises into the sunlight
The golden sunlight gleaming with insect wings.

The ugly becomes meaningful, even beautiful through the force of the vision—the leper licking water out of hydrant, the plague rat dying with blood foaming at the mouth, the mosquito desperately struggling to get inside the mosquito curtain, the motor car coughing smoke inhabit his world side by side with lovely maidens gliding into bodies of incense, the swan floating on water, the fox coming out of the forest into the moonlight.

The poetry engages not only our hearts but our intellect, and its force is often derived from the refreshing connections he makes, so spontaneously, between widely removed objects in space and time, and sense categories. The power of transposition of sense categories is seen in 'Banalata Sen':

As the footfall of dew comes evening;
The raven wipes the smell of warm sun
From its wings;

Vir Savarkar and Nariman rub shoulders with Attila and Marx, Nagarjuna or Sanghamitra with The Times of India, the steppes of Central Asia with a tank in a Bengali village. The most imaginary situations have specific terms of reference. Names abound—Suchetana, Arunima Sanyal, Anupam Tribedi, Mrinalini Ghosal, Subinoy Mustafi, Loken Bose, and Banalata Sen of Natore, on whom he was questioned so closely.

To the question whether Jibanananda's poetry as a whole was escapist, the answer would be an emphatic no. Who would call escapist the poet who wrote:

Somewhere, the flutter of wings—
From some quarter, the music of the sea ;
Dawn awaits us, somewhere.

Time and again Jibanananda takes stock of the human predicament, laments its inadequacy, but goes on to affirm his faith in its future :

Having come forward to remove the gloom

Are we luxuriating in the gloom ourselves?
We seek to be its removers
And we are.
Across the miles upon bewitched miles of ocean
Before moonrise fly the birds and so must we,
Forgetting the moon,
Fy, fly in this eternal moment before the light.

— 'In The Likeness Of The Sun'

The meaning is clear when we remember that the bird flying across the ocean is Jibanananda's declared symbol of the consciousness of history.

The word 'yet' is one of the most frequently used in Jibanananda's vocabulary. It provides the nexus betwen his agony over the present human condition and his faith in man's deliverance from it. Sometimes, especially in his early poetry, the agony is too much to bear and the soul of man, weary with the blows history has dealt it, wants to go back to where it came from—to death, to the darkness of the womb. The cry of pain is loud and uninhibited, and the death-wish unashamed:

I have seen the sun red in the morning sky
Order me to stand up and meet the world face to face
And in response my heart has filled with sorrow, hatred
and blind rage ;
Under the attack of that sun, the earth squeals
With the voice of billions of skewered pigs ;
Some festivity !
I have tried to drown that sun
In the unrelenting darkness of my heart
And to go to sleep again,
To immerse myself eternally in the vaginal depths
Of darkness; to merge into it, like death itself.
My soul yearns for this endless, dark sleep ;
Why awaken me ?

— 'The Darkness'

But almost equally frequent is the word 'sometime', denoting the deliverance of man at some point of time, at the end of certain labours; 'dawn awaits us, somewhere'. The labours themselves remain undefined, but from the trend of his poetry we can deduce that they lie in the direction of honesty, purity of ends and means. Fortunately, man has a soul, and therefore will arrive at deliverance :

For ages man has carried on his shoulder
His own corpse
Having killed his brother and sister
And seen their blood,
The stink in his soul has made him
Cry out to the stars, to the sky, to love,
To awake the powers of knowledge
And call upon them all
To cleanse him of that clotted blood ;
Would he, if he did not have a soul ?

— 'Anandah'

The word Jibanananda actually uses in the poem is 'Hriday' or heart, not 'Atma' or soul although in point of his meaning, the two seem to be almost interchangeable.'

It is here that one begins to see Jibanananda's closeness to the spirit of Tagore although his idiom is so different. Compare for instance Tagore's 'Hissing Serpents' (Page 10) with Jibanananda's 'A Strange Darkness' (Page 52); although Tagore is the more militant of the two, the values whose collapse shocks them both are essentially the same. Jibanananda's 'The Traveller' (Page 50) underlines the similarity beyond question—the faith in the eternal soul, it sojourn on earth and its endless journey could not be more clearly stated. While this theme is echoed and re-echoed in innumerable poems of Tagore, one can perhaps take an example:

All through my night of impenetrable dark
Filled with pain and death
I see a point of light from time to time
Beckoning to me, I wonder towards what.
As the wanderer looking in at the window
Glimpses a fragment of the glow within,
So this ray of light that reaches within me
Gives me a sign
That when this intense curtain of darkness lifts,
Unreservedly it will reveal
Over a timeless ocean of becoming,
Where the sun takes its cleansing evening dip,
And like giant bubbles, stars rise and burst forth ;
There, at the end of night, I am the wayfarer
Journeying to the sea of unending sentience.

— Tagore : Poem no. 20, *Rogasajjyay* (From The Sick Bed)

The Brahmo influence, with its revival of the Upanishads, was substantial enough in Jibanananda's own early life ; its reinforce-

ment by Tagore is seen repeatedly in the themes of the later poetry of both. Like Tagore (and Dante and many others) Jibanananda identifies a woman-soul with the images of deliverance. Perhaps this begins with *Suchetana* which, according to some critics, marks the beginning of an affirmative phrase. In his later years, this woman-soul is not merely the refuge, the point of return to oblivion, the culmination of the death-wish in the darkness of the womb; she has become a more chaste image of the dedicated life, a vision of the purity lying beyond the ugliness of the immediate.

The adolescent abandon of Jibanananda's early work is not unlike Tagore's. In most of the poems of *Jhara Palak* (Fallen Feathers) and some in *Dhusar Pandulipi* (The Greying Manuscript) there is a similarity to Tagore's 'Nirjharer Swapnabhanga' (The Awakening of the Fountain) which is best seen if Jibanannanda's poems are compared with the early work of Sudhindranath Datta, Bishnu De or Amiya Chakravarty who belonged to his generation or to Samar Sen, who came somewhat later. The comparisons invariably find the other poets more controlled and self-aware, colder and more 'intellectual'. Like Rabindranath's, Jibanananda's early poetry is expressive inspite of its emotional abandon, forceful despite its lack of precision in form or content. Vague longings towards the indefinite fill the adolescent ramblings of both. The middle periods of both see an emergence and consolidation of their vision of life and the predominant characteristics of their sensibility, the late period maturing through phases of doubt into a serenity of faith.

But then it is not only in the sum-total of his many-sided genius that Tagore towers over successive generation. As a poet Jibanananda's emotional power does not have the support of Tagore's clearer architecture of philosophical understanding. His spiritual enquiry is neither many-sided nor systematic. In the composition of his being, emotion takes precedence over intellect. His intense subjectivity is his strength as well as his weakness. Shelley's 'Ode To The West Wind' is powerfully emotional, yet it is addressed to an object outside of himself whose existence did not depend upon him. Jibanananda's 'Windy Night' (Page 38) is supremely and exclusively enclosed within himself. Jibanananda would never have written anything like Shelley's 'Feelings Of A Republican On The Fall of Bonaparte', or Rabindranath's

'Africa'. His satirical pomes like 'Juhu' or 'Anupam Tribedi.' refer obliquely to contemporary personalities, but without involvement. He has been called 'poet of loneliness', 'poet's poet', 'poet of time', but no one has claimed him on behalf of any political or social philosophy or seen in him (unlike in Tagore) a specific relationship to the specific events of his period. He is deeply concerned with the condition of man in our time (and in hisotry) but in a very withdrawn manner, never revealing any reaction to a contemporary event—something that might seem strange in a poet of such sensitivity.

In his affirmation, he is, if anything, too close to Tagore Tagore also dealt in broad categories and macrocosmic visions of man's fate but in the post-Tagore era of greater realism, nearness to events in a fast-communicating world, Jibanananda's responses to them are, compared to other poets of this era, too broad and general. Tagore's faith in the eternity of the soul and the indestructibility of the human spirit helped to mould the most advanced social thinking of his time and was suited to them. In Jibanananda's phases of despair, his microcosmic perceptions are acute, his dissatisfactions with contemporary values highly individual and penetrating, but his affirmations, such as in 'The Traveller' are derivative and without the feel of a new synthesis brought out from within personal experience. If the affirmations of others were hollow because they were somewhat forced echoes of a social-political philosophy, Jibanananda's were also weak in their lack of precision and individuality. So much so that in a poem like 'The Traveller', or 'Bothways', the imagery is not nearly as individual as before, and the use of words has drawn much closer to Tagore's own.

Jibanananda's affirmations turn out to be an act of falling back upon the mainstays of the Tagore-Brahmo-Samaj philosophy. Well after the time when Tagore, in his really angry moments, saw the failure of his Upanishadic synthesis, found that 'fine words of peace' would 'ring hollow' in the midst of 'hissing serpents', and called upon all to fight the demons, Jibanananda's quest leads him to a reassertion of the broadest Tagorean values. Take the ending of the last poem in the standard collection of his best poetry :

Rising through the world's terrifying roar

The indestructible voice
Ripples over the endless expanse of grace
Benumbed with light and joy.

— 'Bothways'

One could even conclude that Jibanananda represents the agonising failure of the Tagorean value-world to survive in the tougher context of post-Independence India. Like W. B. Yeats, whom he admired so much, he laments that :

The blue-dimmed time is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Although it would be idle to dismiss Jibanananda as an escapist or to discount his deep sense of concern for humanity, the strength of his poetry lies more in its cry of pain, its intense sensuousness, its contemporary and individual sense of beauty, and its self-absorption, than in its somewhat amorphous social content or its over-generalised affirmations.

But in the directions of his strength, Jibanananda goes so far beyond the limits of other poets that one is content to leave his philosophical problems alone. The infinite delicacy and inwardness of 'The Dream', the mordant irony of 'The Lighter Moment', the power of narration of thought in 'Anupam Tribedi' (Page 51) the satire of 'The Professor', the adolescent purity and innocence of 'The Kite,' the imaginative abandon of 'Windy Night,' the controlled passion of 'Banalata Sen', the fury of 'Strange Darkness', the urbane vision of 'The Cat', the telling simplicity and depth of 'The Orange', the strength of affirmation, however general, of 'In The Likeness of The Sun—to name only a few—represent an altogether extraordinary depth of feeling and power of expression in a number of sharply different directions. We have in Jibanananda Das a sensuous, rustic, nature poet with acute power of observation and knowledge of the rural environment; an urban and contemporary mind shuttling across wide ranges of time and space; a regional poet seeking an intense identification with his specific environment; a universal spirit deeply concerned with the destiny of mankind; a thinking man with a fine

ability to state philosophical thoughts a exciting poetry; a man steeped in tradition yet free of convention.

It is a formidable range for any poet to assay with such burning intensity. One doubts if any other contemporary poet has achieved it.

4. TRANSLATIONS

from:

DHUSAR PANDULIPI (*The Greying Manuscript*), 1936
Banalata Sen, 1942
MAHAPRITHIVI (*The Wide World*), 1944
SAT-TI TARAR TIMIR (*The Darkness of the Seven Stars*), 1948
SHRESHTHA KAVITA (*Selected Poems*), 1954
RUPASI BANGLA (*Beautiful Bengal*), 1957
BELA ABELA KAL BELA (*Time, The Wrong Time and The End of Time*), 1961.

All translations in this book are by Chidananda Das Gupta

In translating these poems, my foremost thought has been to make the English rendering enjoyable as poetry. At times, in doing so, a certain degree of sacrifice of the literal meaning has been unavoidable. Sometimes a statement, elaborate in Bengali, has been a little simpliefied; at other times a simple statement, hard to follow in English, has been slightly elaborated, to make it comprehensible in a foreign idiom. Effort has of course been made to see that the original's obliqueness or deliberate suppression of logical and syntactical links are not removed altogether. Sometimes Jibanananda's very complicated and apparently arbitrary syntax has been smoothed out to a clear flow. On occasion a word, or even a line, has been dropped, and its intention incorporated somewhere just before or after. Names of trees, plants, places or other elements incomprehensible in English have often been reduced or eliminated for fear that they should become an unpleasant burden on the poem when read in translation.

Jibanananda thoroughly approved of this, and gave his blessings readily to all the five translations which I had prepared a few months before his death in 1954. Among these was 'Spring Has Passed' which has all the departures from the original occurring in these translations from time to time. (The four other translations which he himself checked and approved of were 'Epitaph', 'The Lighter Moment', 'Banalata Sen' and 'The Orange').

Yet some of the rendering is fairly literal; there are few departures in 'What Else Before Death?', 'The Corpse', or even 'Banalata Sen'.

For a Bengali, the temptation to convey all of the many layers of thought, feeling and rhythm of the original is great. Every nuance missed out causes endless regret. But restraint is necessary because such enthusiasm may well turn the poem into something far removed from poetry. To stay close enough to the poet and to poetry at the same time is surely the ideal in translation. How far the present work has succeeded in achieving its aim I do not know.

What I do know is his poem 'The Professor'.

WHAT ELSE, BEFORE DEATH?

We who have walked the fields of hay in the autumn twilight
Seen the dim women at the river sprinkling the flowers of fog ;
Women of the dim past, of distant villages ;
We who have seen the trees filled with fireflies,
Seen the unavaricious moon stand at the top of the field without crop ;

We who have loved the long, dark nights of winter,
Heard, upon the hay, in the enchanted night, the flutter of wings ;
Smelled out the old owl and lost him again in the dark ;
Felt the glory of the winter night
Filled with the rapture of wings across fields upon fields,
Heard the crane on the boughs of the ancient tree —
We who have delved these secret mysteries of life ;

We who have seen the wild duck escape the hunter's aim
And fly to the end of the earth in the pale blue moonlight,
We who have placed our hands on sheafs of corn
And, like the evening crow wound our way home full of longing ;
Smelled the child's mouth, the grass, the sun, the bird, the star, the sky —
We who have seen their marks on the cycle of the year ;

Seen the green leaf turn yellow in the autumn night
The light and the bird play at the tree-framed window,
The rat in the winter night white with the flour,
Known the moist smell of the rice
Carried by the waves into the eyes of the solitary fish,
Across the pond the swan in the dark touched by the wand of sleep,
Wafted away from all by the touch of some soft maidenly hand;

Clouds like minarets call the golden kite to their windows
Under the cane-creeper blue lies the sparrow's egg.
The river bathes its bank with the smell of soft-lapping water,
The shadow of the thatched roof is etched in the moonlit yard ;
On the salt white slope descends the thick mist of tense longing ;
The air is laden with the odour of crickets in the fields ;

We who have seen the red fruits lying under the enraptured tree
The crowding fields watching their reflections in the river,
The blue skies seeking the depths of deeper blue,
Eyes cast their soft shadow across the paths of the earth ;
We who have seen the evening descend down the row of betel-nut trees
And the morning arrive easy and fresh as a sheaf of corn;

We who have known how the daughter of the earth
At the end of days, months and seasons,
Comes in the dark whispering of rivers; we who have known
That behind the fields and the paths and the steps to the tank
Shines another light, pale in the mellow afternoon,
Beyond the seeing of eyes, the unflickering light
There, where the lovely maidens of the world glide into bodies of incense ;

What else need we know before death ? Do we not know
How at the edge of each red desire rises like a wall
The grey face of death? The dreams and the gold of the earth
Reach a tranquil equilibrium, ending a magic need.
What else need we know?
Have we not heard the cries of birds upon the dying sun?
Have we not seen the crow fly across the mist?

MRITYUR AGE, DHUSAR PANDULIPI

THE VULTURES

Across the skies of Asia, winging through the afternoon light
From one vast field to another the vultures fly,
Walk the silent meadows far from the tenements of man ;
Where the firm silence of the earth
Stretches like another sky, there the vultures land softly
From the dense cloud — elephant guardians
Of the quarters of the sky, stricken by smoke,

Deflected from distant light, fallen on the fields
Dead but for a moment, climbing again the dark wide-winged palms.

Wafted from hill to hill, reaching open sea,
They watch the ships around gather in the dark into Bombay's port,

Circling some moaning tower beyond the pale of earthly birds
Their wings take them beyond an undefined death;

Is it the river of oblivion or the dim lagoon of life's severance
That moans in the deep . . . watches the hordes melt into the blue.

SHAKUN, DHUSAR PANDULIPI

BANALATA SEN OF NATORE

For aeons have I roamed the roads of the earth
From the seas of Ceylon to the straits of Malaya
I have journeyed, alone, in the enduring night,
And down the dark corridor of time I have walked
Through mist of Bimbisara, Asoka, darker Vidarbha.
Round my weary soul the angry waves still roar;
My only peace I knew with Banalata Sen of Natore.

Her hair was dark as night in Vidisha :
Her face the sculpture of Sravasti.
I saw her, as a sailor after the storm
Rudderless in the sea, spies of a sudden
The grass green heart of the leafy island.
"Where were you so long?" She asked, and more
With her bird's-nest eyes, Banalata Sen of Natore.

As the footfall of dew comes evening ;
The raven wipes the smell of warm sun
From its wings; the world's noises die.

And in the light of fireflies the manuscript
Prepares to weave the fables of night ;
Every bird is home, every river reached the ocean.
Darkness remains ; and time for Banalata Sen.

BANALATA SEN, BANALATA SEN

THE ORANGE

Once I am dead,
Shall I ever come back to earth again ?

If so be it that I do,
Let me come back, on a wintry night,
As the frail, cold flesh of a half-eaten orange
Set on a table, by the dying one's bed.

KAMALALEBU, BANALATA SEN

SUCHETANA

Like an island far as the star of evening
Are you, Suchetana,
There, where among the forests of cinnamon trees
There is peace.

The world's blood and toil and glory
Are true ; yet the last truth they are not.
Let Calcutta be the pride of heaven some day ;
Yet shall my heart be yours.

I have striven, worn my feet roving
Seeking to give man what belongs to him,
And I am weary roving in the burning sun of day.

Yet so striving to love man,
I see man, my own flesh and blood,
Strewn around dead, killed by my own hand.
The world is sick and in pain,
Yet we are its debtors, and shall remain.

I have seen the ships anchor in harbours
In the burning sun, laden with the crop of death ;
Carcasses heaped of innumerable beings,
The wonder of dead flesh
Beaten into gold, silences us
As it did Buddha and Confucius.
Yet ceaselessly the glory world sounds its call
And beckons to us all.

This is the road to life, Suchetana,
The road of deliverance,
But after many centuries
And many labours of the great—
How bracing thus sun-warmed breeze:
Life as good as this we shall build
With our weary, tireless hands,
But not yet; that day will come.

The good earth called me to be born
In human home, and I,
Knowing I should not, yet came.
The meaning of this I know now ;
For with the tip of my finger
I have touched the stuff
Of the dew on the leaf at dawn.

What I saw is what will happen
And what will happen
Is what seems not destined to happen—
In the timeless dark the eternal sunrise.

SUCHETANA, BANALATA SEN

THE STREETS OF BABYLON

I do not know what faint whisper has made me walk
Through the streets of the city, alone, from one post to another.
I have seen the trams and buses ply with such faith,
Then enter, at the end of day, into the world of sleep.
All night long the gas lamps do their duty so well;
None errs; bricks and houses, windows and roofs
All close their eyes at last under the sky.
I have felt their peace in my bones, walking through
The dead streets of the night; seen them gathered
Round the top of the tower; it seems I have not seen
A simpler, more moving event. The starlit city, crowded with towers;

The eye moves down and takes in the burning cigarette stub
The wisp of hay pushed along by the wind.
I close my eyes and move to a side—the tree
Has shed many brown, faded leaves, and they have fled.
So in the stillness of night have I walked
Through the streets of Babylon and of Calcutta
Why? I know no more than I knew centuries before.

PATH HANTA, BANALATA SEN

THE CORPSE

Here, where the silvery moon lies wet in the forest of reeds
Where many mosquitoes have hopefully built their homes;

Where, wrapped up in themselves, and silent in desire,
The golden fish devour the blue mosquitoes;

Where, in this far corner of the world, the river lies
Deep and alone, painted in the colour of the silent fish;

And lying next to the field, in the midst of tall grass,
The river's water stares endlessly at the pale red cloud;

Or the darkness of the starlit sky
Looks like the head of a woman with a knot of blue hair.

The world has other rivers; but this river
Is the red cloud, the yellow moonlight carved up in patches ;

All other light and all other darkness has ended here,
Only the red and blue fish and the cloud remain ;

Here, forever, floats the corpse of Mrinalini Ghosal
Red and blue, silvery and silent.

SHAB, MAHAPRITHIVI

THE CAT

All through the day I keep meeting the cat ;
In the shade of the tree, out in the sun,
Amidst the dense shade of the leaves
After a spot of success with a few bones of fish
He lies hugging the skeletal-white earth
Wrapped up in himself like a swarm of bees.
And yet he scratches at the trunk of the Gulmohar tree,
Walks behind the sun, stalking it.
One moment he is there ;
The next, he has vanished.
I saw him in the autumn evening stroking, with soft white paws,
The scarlet sun; then he gathered the darkness
Like little balls, grabbing each with a jab of his paws
And spread them all over the earth.

BIRAL, MAHAPRITHIVI

ONE DAY EIGHT YEARS AGO

He had been taken to the morgue, they said.
The moon had set, the darkness had arisen
Last night, the fifth night of the moon, when he felt
A rush of affection for death.

Next to him lay his bride, his child ;
Yet what ghost did he see in the moonlight
Beyond love, beyond hope ? How came he awake ?
Had he not slept for long ? Did he long to sleep ?

And was this the sleep of his longing—
The sleep of the plague rat, foaming blood at the mouth
Neck thrust into the dark crevice,
Never to awake again ?

"Never to awake, never to know
The unbearable burden of knowing,
And knowing always, never"—
Said to him, after the moon had set,
A silence, creeping up to his window,
Like a camel's neck.

Yet the owl keeps awake, longs to live ;
The aged frog begs for two moments
Warming to the hope of another dawn.

Around the defeating net I hear
The mosquito's desperate roar
Keeping in the dark a cloistered vigil
Belonging, with love, to life.

From the spittle, the blood and the excreta
The fly rises into the sunlight,
The golden sunlight gleaming with insect wings.

A pervasive life like a close-lying sky
Holds them all in its thrall ;
The grasshopper struggles with the child's strangling hand ;
And yet, when the moon had set, rope in hand
You departed in the dark for the banyan tree
(Not for man indeed the life of the insect).

Did not the branch of the banyan protest ?
Did not the fireflies swarm the golden flowers ?
Did not the doddering blind old owl declare—
"Time to catch a rat, now that the moon has set."
Did not the owl whisper this wisdom in your ear ?

This feel of life, the smell of ripe corn this autumn afternoon
You spurned, to be dead as the trampled rat
With the blood-smeared mouth, seeking refuge
From the agonies of your soul ?

Listen yet to the tale of this dead.
No failures in love ; life in matrimony
Left no yawning gaps ;
The churning of time turned up
The right trace of honey in the everyday, in the mind;
A life unshaken ever by the fevers of the have-not.
Dead nevertheless.
Spreadeagled on the table, in the morgue.

We know, do we not,
That neither love nor the heart of woman
Or the touch of the child, the warmth of home
Suffice unto man ; that beyond all glory
And achievement, there lies in our blood
That which drains us of all,
Empties us from within.
The morgue, we know, puts an end to it all.
Spreadeagled on the table, that is where you lie.
Yet every night I look at the decrepit owl
Back on the banyan tree and hear it say,
(And here it rolls an eye):
"Time to catch a rat, now that the moon has set."

O grandpa, my grandpa profound !
I shall also, like you, stay and grow old !
The old moon I shall wash out with the ecliptical flood
And when the dark descends
Hand in hand the two of us shall raid and empty.
The world of plenty.

ATH BACHHAR AGER EK DIN, MAHAPRITHIVI

THE WINDY NIGHT

The night was windy last night—and full of stars.
The whole night the wind played on the net over my head
Sometimes swelling it like the moonsoon-tossed sea
Sometimes tearing it away from the bed
And wafting it away towards the stars.

At times — half-awake — I felt
The net was no longer overhead
It was flying like a white balloon over the blue sea past the stars.

All the dead stars had come to life last night —
There was no room in the sky to hold them all
I saw the faces of all the beloved dead among the stars.
Stars shining in the dark like the dew-moist eyes of the
Love-laden kite upon the banyan tree ;
The whole wide sky was glittering like a leopard-skin shawl
Flung across the shoulder of some Babylonian queen ;
Such a marvellous night was last night.

Stars that had died many thousands of years ago
Peeped in through the window last night
Carrying with them each its own dead sky ;
The damsels whom I had seen perish in Assyria, Egypt and Vidisha
Stood there, spear in hand, in rows across the misty edge of the sky.

To conquer death ? To celebrate the victory of life ?
To raise awesome monuments to love ?

I feel torn, crushed, dazed by the torment of the night ;
Under the ceaseless widespread wings of the sky
The earth was brushed away like a fly
And from the depths of the sky descended the wild winds
Screaming through my window
Like a thousand zebras in the flaming yellow steppes
Leaping to the roar of the lion.

My heart is filled with the smell of the green grass of the veld
Of the burning sun stretched across the endless fields

And with the hairy, wild, huge ecstasy of the darkness
Like the roar of the mating-mad lioness
And with the blue, tearing madness of living.

My heart tore itself from its moorings on earth
And flew like a swollen, drunken balloon across the blue sky
Like a distant star-mast flung across space,
Heady as an eagle.

HAHOYAR RAT, MAHAPRITHIVI

WILD SWANS

The grey wings of the Owl swing away towards the stars ;
Across the marshland, beckoned by the moon
The wild swans fly across the marsh ;
The rising sibilance of a myriad wings assail the ears ;

Along the edge of the night their rapid wings,
Sounding like engines, fly, fly into the night
Leaving behind them an expanse full of stars,
The smell of swan bodies—and some swans of fancy.

Suddenly the face of Arunima Sanyal swims into view
Rising out of a dim past in forgotten villages.
Fly, fly in silence in this winter moonlight,
O you swans of fancy, keep flying after all the noises of the world have fled
Fly deep within the moonlit silence of the heart.

BUNO HANS, MAHAPRITHIVI

THE AEONS, LIKE FIREFLIES

Amid the darkness of time
The aeons, like fireflies, dance.

The moonlight spreads itself upon the sands ;
The shadows of tall deodars
Lie still; fallen columns of the lost kingdom,
Faded and dead, in silence frozen.
The world's noises have faded.
Our bodies are wrapped in the sleep of death ;
There is a faint odour of the dead in the air.
A faint rustle; and a voice asked:
'Remember ?
'Banalata Sen ?' Asked I.

HAJAR BACHHAR SHUDHU KHELA KARE,
MAHAPRITHIVI

WINTER NIGHT

On such nights does death creep into my heart.
The old owl sings of the fallen leaves and the dew;
Between the end of the town and the beginning of the country
Roars the lion—
The stricken lion of the dusty circus,
Through the depths of the winter night
The cuckoo sings too, all of a sudden,
Telling the world that spring was,
And will be, again.

But I have seen countless cuckoos grow old
Myself am a little like the aged bird.
The lion roars again
The stricken lion of the dusty circus,
Ageless, doped, blind, and plunged in darkness.

Seeking the remainders of life in the sea around,
In the living moss stuck to the tail of the dead fish
All is lost in the mist, in the endless water.

Never again
Never again
Shall the lion find the forest
The cuckoo's song
Like a broken machine shall disintegrate
And lose itself in bits and pieces
To the silent, magnetic mountain below.
O world hugging the river of oblivion,
Turn on your side and go to sleep again
For no surprise awaits you around the corner
None at all, at all, ever again.

SHITBASTRA, MAHAPRITHIVI

INTO THESE EARS

Gazing at the stars
Nursing the pain in their hearts
The young men poured out poetry, and departed.

The dumb beauties of the world half-heard their words
In ignorant awe
Yet, into the ears of these inert deaf golden images of brass
Alas, the young men poured countless immortal words,
Gazing at the stars
Nursing the pain in their hearts.

IHADERI KANE, MAHAPRITHIVI

RAINY NIGHT

In the heart of the deep dark rain
I am awakened, slowly,
By the rolling of the waves
In the Bay of Bengal
Hundreds of miles away.

The dark sky lies still
Holding the curves of the earth in its arms
Listening to the sounds of the sea.

At the distant lighted edge of the sky
I hear huge gates swinging open
And being closed again.

Heads resting on pillows they sleep
In order to awake to-morrow.
The faint lines of laughter and love
That lay etched deep into the moist, ancient rock
Stir slowly as they come to life.
From the depths of the unshaken earth they seek me out
And bring me out into the night.

The rolling of the bay comes to an abrupt stop;
Miles upon miles of earth lie still in silence.

A misty hand is laid on my shoulder
I hear a whisper say —
If I would touch those gates swinging open and closing again,
I could, on a night like this.

I raise my eyes
And like a grey cloud
Enter through the double doors of darkness
Into a cavernous mouth that devours me.

SHRABAN RAT, MAHAPRITHIVI

THE DREAM

The manuscript spread before me
In the light of the earthen lamp
I sit in silence, listening to the dew drop on the leaves.
From the Neem tree above the window
The solitary bird flies out into the mist —
Is it the flutter of its wings that puts the light out ?
In the dark I grope for a box of matches;
I pause; for I do not know
Whose face I shall see when I strike the light.

Perhaps the face that once the lean blue moon,
Bent as the horn of the deer, did glimpse once
Behind the leaves of the Amlaki tree
And that my ancient manuscript once caressed
But the world no longer remembers.

Yet when all the lights of the world finally go out,
There is no more man, only man's dream lives,
This face and I shall lie within the dream.

SVAPNA, MAHAPRITHIVI

O KITE

O Kite, Kite with golden wings,
Wail no more in this wet cloudy noon
Round and round over the river's bank.

Your wailing brings back to mind her eyes
Pale as the cane plant's fruit.
Like the fairy princesses of the earth she has gone,
Trailing her beauty behind her —

Why seek to bring her back,
Why touch the hidden springs of pain ?

O Kite, Kite with golden wings,
Wail no more in this wet cloudy noon,
Round and round over the river's bank.

HAY CHIL, MAHAPRITHIVI

NINE SWANS

I see nine swans in the water
Soft as the olive leaf, every morning.
Three times three makes nine by logic
But these become nine by some sheer magic.

The river is deep, fathomless
The light white cloud dips into it
And dives down and further down
And yet does not reach the end of time.

On all sides the tall grass spreads a soft bed
Still autumn waters have become the blue sky
The flock of swans has merged into the soft afternoon light
Far in the lap of some pale woman;
The colour of puffed rice flows from the basket —

Suddenly the river becomes a river
I remember the nine swans.

HANS, MAHAPRITHIVI

IN THE LIKENESS OF THE SUN

After continual crisis comes the danger
Failing to affect us
Turning into a matter of understanding —
And no more.

The river's water flows through the sand,
The sun flashes over it now and then ;
The silvery bird flies out above the water.
Death and pity are as two crossed swords

That destroy and rebuild the town, the bridge, the human quarter ;
The sky sharp as a blade lies above.

So it has been a long time—watched over by the sun and the wind.

Those that saw it all, loved it all
Time in its exigent wisdom has put up for sale,
And they have vanished.

Come then let us to ourselves and to our own worlds
Determine to shine in total truth ;
Is time marching towards a new dawn ?
O quarters of the earth, somewhere I hear the bird,
Somewhere there is sunrise yet to be met.
Not only death —
But what is visible over the ocean of death
By advancing upon it we have seen,
Some of it we have forgotten, some remembered.
And even after obtaining our discharge
From the sand the blood and the grime of the earth
Even in the darkness of the in-between
We have given the whore the slip
And to the lover taught deceit
All in cold blood, have we not ?

The revolutionary turns to the gold,
The lover submerged in lifelong death,
Finds bliss in the caravan's delicate merchandise ;
Where then lies, beyond our seeing, the affirmation of life ?

We wait upon the silent hour ;
Across the miles upon bewitched miles of ocean
Before moonrise fly the birds and so must we,
Forgetting the moon,
Fly, fly in this eternal moment before the light.

The waves behind have decided us and gone past ;
In front advances the benumbed endless ocean ;
Fluttering with broken salt-wounded wings
Like traitors some have fallen along the dark lanes of the sea.
Death like this has been countless
And will be.

'Ending the death of individuals
We are all dead ourselves' —
With such death rooted in their hearts.
In dismissing history's wide-flung space,
All along the edges of the furthest-receded spirit of man
They arise again in the endless dark sunlit spree
Of nineteen forty three, forty-four, and eternity.

SURYAPRATIM, SAT TI TARAR TIMIR

THE PROFESSOR

With a wan smile I said :
"Why do you not with your own hand
Pen the poem ?"—The shadow made no reply.
And small ownder, for he was no poet,
But only the timeless Prologue
Seated on a gilded throne
Of ink, Mss, and notes of his own.

No, no poet, only a toothless professor
Seeking eternity, drawing fifteen hundred a month
For picking to the bone fifteen hundred poets
Once living, but now altogether dead,
Scattering the flesh and the wriggling worms
To the four winds; though once they had sought
To warm their hands at the fire of life,
Felt pangs of hunger and of love,
And swum with the sharks on the seas.

SAMARUDHA, SAT TI TARAR TIMIR

THE LIGHTER MOMENT

Now at the end of day
The three not quite virginal beggars
Find their minds attuning to the quiet.
Swallowing a mouthful of air
They stand over the roadside
And with another mouthful of air
Rinse their precious mouths.
For now they are bound for the land of the red river,
Where the washerman and his donkey
Ride magically on each other's back
And reflect upon the reflections in the water.

Yet before they depart, the three beggars get together
Sit in a circle around three mugs of tea,
One styling himself king, the other the king's minister
The third, his august general.
A beggar woman too, out of sheer love
Of her three lame uncles
Or getting related precipitately
By no more than the lure of tea, draws near,
And four pairs of mouths and ears melt together
In one infernal harmony.

They pour some water from the hydrant
Into the tea, seeking to make life
More honest, more full of sympathy.
One shook his head and said:
"What good would be the well-filtered water
Of Chetla's market or the spouts of Tala
Since neither a husband's brother nor a brothre's wife
Would spare a copper for the beggar ?"
Thus they pronounced, shaking their shaggy manes
As they cast their eyes on the lone woman,
Feeling her presence as a ghost of a female,
Caught there amidst them in the dim steam of a cup of tea;
Perhaps once a swan, now no more than a lame duck.
She had a cup, yet they came out with another one
"We have no gold, yet we are slaves of none."

These frothy words rouse the ire of a mosquito
That leaps from the tip of one nose to another,
As by the river of Bentinck Street they sit
Counting on their fingers the goods of the world.
Stroking their hair into angry buns they counted
The why and wherefore of all expenditure ;
To whom are payments made, to what end
And by whom, at what hour of dusk,
And how retribution overtakes the wary, calculating devils.
Speculation was rife on what would happen
If to a man one gave
The life-giving medicine, free of cost,
After he was altogether dead.
For now they will depart for the land of the flying river
Where the bedevilled monkey and the broken bone
Come together to the edge of the water
And reflect upon the reflections
As long as there is time to reflect.

LAGHU MUHURTA, SAT TI TARAR TIMIR

COME BACK, SURANJANA

Don't go there, Suranjana, I beg of you,
Don't speak to that young man, over there.
Come back, Suranjana —
In this night of silvery fire stretched across the sky.

Come back to this field, these waves ;
Come back to my heart.
Don't don't walk away with that man
Further and further away, into the distance.

What can you have to say to him, to him ?
In skies hidden behind skies
You are like the earth
His love like the grass over it.

Suranjana, your heart is as grass to-day ;
The wind stirs beyond the wind,
The sky stretches beyond the skies.

AKASHLINA, SATTI TARAR TIMIR

EPITAPH

Here lies Sarojini; (I do not know
If she still lies here); she has lain here for long ;
Then, perhaps, she has arisen and merged into the cloud
That is lit up where the darkness ends.

Went up there, did she, Sarojini,
Without a ladder, or the wings of a bird ?
Or is she a mere parcel of the earth's geometry ?
But that spectre says: No, I do not know.

A dry saffron light lingers in the sky
Like an invisible cat
On whose face sits an obstreperous smile
Of hollow cunning.

SAPTAK, SAT TI TARAR TIMIR

SPRING HAS PASSED

At close of day the immemorial foxes
Enter in quest of kill the hill-side forest,
And prowling in silence in the inviolate dark,
Come upon a clearing, and suddenly behold —

The snow sleeping in moonlight.
Could their quadruped beings cry out upon the moment,
As with human souls, the event of their heart,
Then would a wonder deep as pain dawn
In their minds ;—So in the dark of the blood
My soul leaps up when you appear,
Suddenly, after spring has passed.

SEI SAB SHEYALERA, SAT TI TARAR TIMIR

THE TRAVELLER

Aeons ago, it would seem,
In the limpid waters of some distant ocean
Life began.

Behind it lay the hieroglyphic fog,
Bereft of birth and death, of identity.
Forgetting slowly the language of that fog,
Falling in love unknowingly with some undefined being,
And drawn to the light, the sky, and the water
A new meaning grew, on the earth cradle.

So entwining in his heart
The black and white of death and life
Man has come on his journey to earth.
Amidst the inky skeletal dust, the blood strewn all round
Picking my way along the signposts of shiftless longing
I came to make known the sign of my birth in this dust—
To whom ?
The earth ? the sky ? the sun that burns in the sky ?
The speck of dust. the atom, the molecule, the shade, the rain,
the droplet of water ?
The city, the port, the state, the world of knowledge and
ignorance ?

The fog that hung over birth
The fog that will remain entangled with our death
Bends now its darkness towards the ellipse of light;
The mind swims out in love to the blue expanse
Urging us on to the ageless dark ocean.

Yet every day
The sun brings with it
The day, the light, the way of life and of death
Whose meaning to eternal history
Remains unfathomed.

Towards this end man marches
Love and decay and pain marking his every step,
The river and the human heart, grey and forever flying,
Reach the end of night at dawn — the countless dawns of the eternal story —
New suns, new birds, new signs in towns and habitations
With new travellers merge the travellers to the land of life ;
In their hearts there is light and song and journey's rhythm —
The journey without end, perhaps given to man, in eternity.

YATRI, SHRESHTHA KAVITA

ANUPAM TRIBEDI

Anupam Tribedi's face fades in on this cold night,
Although he is no longer physically tumbling
Inside the belly of the rotund earth.
The silence of winter standing at the table
Brings his memory bustling back into the thoughts

Of the dead and the living ; the books on the table
Bend the mind to all from Plato to Tagore
Who, after emptying their thoughts on us,
Sleep now under dewy blankets out in the cold.
Tribedi, having snuffed out his candle on earth,
Must be waking them from their slumber;
Bodhi and resurrection, tantra and cabala
Hegel and Marx had been pulling him along by the ear
In opposite directions, when,
Arms akimbo, brows knitted,
Suddenly he knew he liked love better than knowledge,
And a totem even better than love ;
As the image of the camel—in a woman's heart—
Bent upon the conquest of mirage
She walks ; the cream-coloured sari clings to her form ;
Look closely and discover
How clever the readymade lady—surely from South Bengal ?
The knot at sari's end hardly in focus,
Sweeping through Uttarpara and Bandel, ashipur and Behala
Bearing the load of the Stalins the Nehrus or some Block or Roy.
If past the three cubits of earth there be further sacrificial space,
It can't be love; or so thinking, Tribedi lost heart.
Ears pulled by equal dialectic we live
Between spirit and substance; Tribedi's was pulled too hard.

ANUPAM TRIBEDI, SHRESHTHA KAVITA

A STRANGE DARKNESS

In this strange darkness descended upon the day
The finest vision belongs to the blind.
The world is led by the counsel
Of the loveless, pitiless ghosts;
And upon the hearts of those that yet believe
In light, in the undying flame of man's enduring quest
Hyenas and vultures feast.

ADBHUT ANDHAR EK, SHRESHTHA KAVITA

ONE DAY I SHALL COME BACK

One day I shall come back, come back to Bengal
To the bank of this river with the terraced rice field,
Perhaps not as a man, but in the shape of a swallow
Perhaps as the crow of dawn descending on this season of new rice
Cradled by the fog gliding into the shade of this jackfruit tree ;
Perhaps as a swan belonging to an adolescent girl,
Ankle bells round red feet,
Floating all day in water filled with the smell of grass;
I shall come back, called by Bengal's rivers and fields,
To this green bank washed by the river's water.

Perhaps you will see an owl flying in the evening breeze
Perhaps you will hear the owl on the cotton tree
Perhaps a child will throw fistfuls of puffed rice on the grassy courtyard
Perhaps a boy will ply a boat on the muddy waters of the Rupsa
With a torn white sail, as in the dark across the red cloud
The white cranes return; there will I be, among them.

ABAR ASIBA PHIRE, RUPASI BANGLA

TONIGHT

It would have been nice to have had you here
Tonight; we could have talked, among the trees, under the stars,

But I have found,
Working through the laws that regulate
Thought, feeling and emotion,
That in their end result, in India or China,
New York or London, the mystery of tonight
And the history of mammoths all
Fall into patterns inevitable.

Where are you at this moment,
With what dice rolling in your hand,
Why enquire; all enquiries do not benefit.

Within the mornings noons rivers stars I have known
Lies all that there is to be known.

AJKER RAT, BELA ALBELA KALBELA

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jibanananda Das' own works

POEMS : *Jhara Palak* (Fallen Feathers) 1924.
Dhusar Pandulipi (The Greying Manuscript), D.M. Library Calcutta, 1936.
Mahaprithibi (The Great Earth), Purbasa Ltd., Calcutta, 1944.
Sat-ti-Tarar Timir (The Darkness of Seven Stars), Gupta Rahman & Gupta, Calcutta, 1948.
Banalata Sen, Signet Press, Calcutta, 1952.
Sreshtha Kabita (Selected Poems), Bharabi, Calcutta, 1954.
Rooposi Bangla (Beautiful Bengal), Signet Press, Calcutta, 1957.
Bela Abela Kalbela (Time, The Wrong Time, And The End of Time), New Script, Calcutta, 1969.
ESSAYS : *Kabitar Katha* (On Poetry), Signet Press, Calcutta, 1955.

Writings on Jibanananda Das

Nirukta magazine Article by Sanjay Bhattacharya, Asarh, 1350 (1943).
Parichay " Article by Subhas Mukhopadhyay, Sravan, 1360 (1953).
Article by Manindra Roy, Sravan, 1362 (1955).
Moyukh " : Jibanananda memorial number, 1954.
Kabita " : Jibanananda special number. Editor by Bhuddadev Bose, Paus, 1361 (1954) Calcutta.
Usha " : Jibanananda special number. Edited by Buddhadev Bose, Paus, 1361 (1954) Calcutta.
Ekak " : Jatindranath Sengupta and J. Das combined special number, Kartick-Chaitra, 1361 (1954) Calcutta.
Ananda Bazar Patrika : Article by Ajit Datta, 14th Kartick, 1361 (1954) Calcutta.
Kranti magazine : Article by Narayan Gangopadhyay, Kartick 1361 (1954).
Uttarsuri " Jibanananda special number, Paus-Phalgun, 1361 (1954).
Article by Arun Bahttacharya, Baisakh,-Asarh 1963 (1956).
Article by Amalendu Basu Kartick-Paus.
Article by Arun Bhattacharya, Kartick-Paus, 1367 (1960).
Kabita " : Article by Nirupam Chattopadhyay, Aswin, 1363 (1956).

Adhunik Bangla Kavya Parichay : Article by Dipti Tripathi, Navana, Calcutta, 1958.

Kabitar Dharma O Kabitar Ritu-badal : Article by Buddhadev Bose, New Age Publishing, 1958.

Kaler Putul : Article by Buddhadev Bose, New Age Publishing, Calcutta, 1959.

Ekti Nakshatra Ase : Book by Ambuj Basu with an introduction by Amalendu Basu, Dipanvita Publishers, Calcutta, 1965.

Dainik Kabita : Edited by Kabita Sinha, 25th Baisakh Sankalan, January-April, 1968 (interview with Jibanananda's wife, Labanya Das). Edited by Pranabendu Das Gupta, May, 1966.

Kabita Parichay : Edited by Amarendra Chakravarty, 7th Collection, 1966, containing article by Binay Majumdar entitled 'Adbhut Andhar Ek : Jibanananda Das'; 8th Collection, article by Aloke Sarkar 'Ghora: Jibanananda Das'; 11th Collection, Magh-Chaitra, 1969—article by Tirthankar Chattopadhyay entitled 'Mrityur Age : 'Jibanananda Das'.

Modern Bengali Poems : Edited by Debiprosad Chattopadhyay, with translations mainly by Martin Kirkman, Signet Press, Calcutta, 1945.

Studies in Modern, Bengali Poetry : Edited by Nirmal Ghosh and with an article on Jibanananda by Amalendu Bose, Novela, Calcutta, 1968.

Journal of Asian Studies : Asia Society, New York; article by Mary Lago on imagery in the poetry of Jibanananda Das.