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The face of Bengal and other poems: fifty years of Jibanananda Das in translation

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**Introduction**

In their introduction to the translations of Ramprasad Sen's 'Kali' songs (1982), Clinton B. Seely and Leonard Nathan have stated quite starkly that

... the word 'translation' is, at best, a dubious one for what follows: literary verses by contemporary western city dwellers.

It may be worth considering what the results will be if we expand the term to include native speakers of Bengali, but who are 'open' to western influences, in specific terms of language, culture and history. Of course, it remains a fact that they will still be contemporary urban dwellers, contributing to the trend and understanding of translation, by fulfilling various roles - academic commentators, readers or translators. One of my concerns however is, if they, like the authors of the above comment remain anxious to reach out to the original, knowing well that rendering the songs of the Ramprasad cult is at best a literary exercise, open to rectification, for instance. Similar perspective is echoed in William Radice's comment on the two thousand and more songs that Rabindranath wrote and set to music, which are unfathomable in translation. Yet the desire to translate some of these poems remains as powerful as the desire to see them as under- or over-translated pieces of work.

The scenario is no different in the case of one of the finest post-Tagorean poets of Bengal too: Jibanananda Das (1899-1954). The major source of difficulty with Jibanananda's poetry admittedly lies in the representation of 'Banglar mukh' ('the face of Bengal') which has almost become trademark Jibanananda. *Rupashi Bamla* (1930s, published 1957) contains that face in its real, physical and metonymical dimension. It contains about sixty fourteen line sonnets (coudapadi), eulogizing, sometimes even in a cloying, sentimental manner the mineral-vegetable-earthy-mythical life of East Bengal, now Bangladesh, and not the cosmopolitan Bengal. Admittedly the outburst of physical-emotional excesses is essentially rooted in the medieval Bengali mangal kavyas and the padabalis, while the poetic form is clearly tradition-bound to the secularized version of Bengali poetry which primarily Rabindranath Tagore, among

others, helped establish by the early twentieth century. It is easy to be convinced by Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument (2000) that these poems are reflective of a deep-seated idealization and nationalist sentiment like Rabindranath's *sonar Bangla* (golden Bengal), a land that is more imaginary than real. However it is more difficult to empathize with the 'cult' of real physical beauty of Bengal, which Jibanananda endeavoured to depict in his poetry making use of the real flora and fauna and rivers in Bengal - something he experienced all through his childhood and youth. The emotional configurations that Bengal evokes in Jibanananda's poetry perhaps therefore has less to do either with the land as the mother-goddess, or an idealized form of beauty, but one that was anchored in the physical details as well as the folklore and myth exclusive to Bengal. Readers and translators of *Rupashi Bamla* therefore need a certain amount of empathy, if not indulgence in the poetics of time and place, which breathes, according to Clinton Seely, the only English language biographer of the poet, life and feeling into the translated poem. I am guessing that because not many translators have been able to achieve that level of empathy, *Rupashi Bamla* remains one of the lesser translated texts of Jibanananda.

### **The face of Bengal**

However I must also mention one thing at this point. It may seem that the element of human interaction and the civilizational process is absent from Jibanananda's poetry. After his poem "*Bodh*" was published in *Pragati* (1927), Buddhadeb Bose wrote that Jibanananda seemed to deny the world around him unlike most of his contemporaries. But he praised the poet's natural grace and ease with his diction, which he said, is entirely de-Sanskritized, thus making the Bengali language mature and prepared for the modern times. During the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the debate about the obsession with the 'literary' especially the sadhu (pure) Bengali was supreme, and even Rabindranath did not escape this predicament. As he wrote to the young Jibanananda (1919) – one of the very few correspondences that Jibanananda actually had with Rabindranath – he believed that he had poetic talents, but his diction was too colloquial and did not carry the true *rasa* of poetry: 'tranquillity'. Today, with almost all his works published – poetry, prose, fiction, essays, as well as diaries (in progress) – we may be in a better position to judge if Jibanananda'd exquisite poetry indeed ran away from reality or *bastab* as understood in the context of an urban Calcutta of the times, or if he indeed wanted to portray *bastab* as something that changes its meaning with the authorial position. It may even help us understand if the poems of *Rupashi Bamla* reflect nothing but a series of imaginary and sensuous images, or if Bengal becomes both the site for exploring the rich folklore from '*Behular gan*' (Behula's song) to '*Bishalakshir rup*' (the beauty of Bishalakshi) . Finally, it may also help us relocate the importance of Bengal as a poetic system, even though the Bengal as the subject does not span more than 60 of more than the 900 poems he wrote in his lifetime. Bengal in his other poems carry submerged meaning, and is like a vast repertoire from where he draws his inspiration when he needs it.

### **The last fifty years in translation (1945-95)**

It is thus appropriate in this paper to call Jibanananda's poetry as representing the face of Bengal in a definite sense, although not many of the 'Bengal' poems are actually available in translation. As it will be evident, the Bengal in the middle and later poetry resurfaces as memory, recombining more frequently with the images of trams, gaslight, soot and grime of the urban landscape of Calcutta. This paper charts through the various translations of Jibanananda's poems by western translators as well as native speakers of Bengali since 1945. It may be possible to give some critical insight into his poetry with the help of translations, especially since they have tended to cover a fairly wide range since 1945, although there are instances of mediocre translations as well. The major translations appeared in 1962 (P. Lal, ed), 1974 (Marian Maddern

and Sibnarayan Roy, ed), 1990 (Clinton B Seely’s translations of more than seventy poems for his critical biography), and in 1995 (Faizul Latif Chowdhury, ed), with several others making their appearances in different magazines and journals from time to time. I have not been able to trace one book of translations containing 18 poems.<sup>1</sup> However, one must be cautious, because most of the anthologies in translation, with the major exception of Clinton B. Seely’s critical biography (1990), have tended to focus on *Banalata Sen*, *Sat-ti tarar timir* (1948) and a few miscellaneous poems. More specifically, editors have accessed *Jibanananda Dasera sreshtha kabita* (1954) for this purpose, hence almost excluding most of the *Rupasi Bamla* poems, as well as the poems in *Mahaprithibi*, *Bela*, *abela*, *kalbela*, and *Dhusar pandulipi*.

Thus while poems like “*Banalata Sen*”, “*Kampe*” (In Camp) and “*Bamlar mukh ami dekhiyachi* (I have seen Bengal’s face), “*Abar ashibo fire*” (I will return again), “*Sandhya*” (Evening), “*Kuri bachor pare*” (Twenty years after), “*Suchetana*” (Suchetana), “*Hay cil*” (O Kite!), “*Andhakar*” (Darkness), “*Dhan kata hoye gechhe*” (The harvest is done), “*Hajar bachhor shudhu khela kore*” (Thousand years merely play), “*Ratri*” (Night), “*Laghu muhurta*” (Lighter moments), “*Godhulisandhyar nritya*” (Dance of twilight), and a few others have been translated and seldom retranslated a few times since 1945, poems like “*Anupam Tribedi*”, “*Bhikhiri*” (Beggar), “*Manosharani*” (Meditations), “*Saptak*” (Septet), “*Jei shob sheyalera*” (The foxes), “*Alosagarer gan*” (Song of sea and light), “*Prarthana*” (Prayer), “*Muhurta*” (A moment) “*Phut pathe*” (On the sidewalk), “*Dipti*” (Lustre), “*Surya tamasi*” (Darkness of the sun), “*Suryakarajjal*” (Solar brightness) and many others have not been the most popular poems for the translators or the editors. Editors in most cases play it safe by depending on the popular poem, rather than attempt to translate a specific period or even an entire book of poems. Thus although there are more than one hundred and fifty translations of his poems scattered in various anthologies in translation, often the same translated poem appears in different anthologies.

Still it must be admitted that the last fifty years have seen quite a few dedicated translators of Jibanananda Das. Clinton Seely, of course deserves most mention because of his translations of both the rather well known and the relatively less known poems in *Mahaprithibi* or *Bela abela kalbela*, and the like. Others like Marian Maddern and Martin Kirkman, and Bengalis poets like Buddhadeb Bose, critics like Chidananda Dasgupta, translators like Sibnarayan Roy, Golam Mustafa, Faizul Latif Chowdhury, and not surprisingly, the poet himself, have translated some of the poems from various books of poems.

### **Jibanananda Das’s own translations**

The first English translation of the poem *Banalata Sen* appeared in 1945 (*Modern Bengali Poems*). All the poems (“If I were”, “O kite”, “*Banalata Sen*”, “Meditations”) in that anthology of modern Bengali poems were translated by the poet himself. As in the original, the translations appear to be concerned with the extensive use of punctuations, which the latter day translators tend to avoid, often restructuring the poem entirely. Jibanananda as the translator of his own poem however was anxious to retain his lifetime obsession with the meaning of human history in the context of an unfathomable universe. It does reflect the poet’s notion of “*uttarprabesh*” – a term that Jibanananda coined himself, as Seely notes. It denotes an “entrance into the future or into some place or time, which is subsequent (to ‘*purbaprabesh*’ or before) or, by extension, new” (1990:241). In a letter written in 1946, he said more specifically, that

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<sup>1</sup> Ulli Beir and Prithviraj Chakrabarty ed. *Thousand years at play* (Papua New Guinea: U of Papua New Guinea press, 1985).

Perhaps my poetry has displayed an awareness of history and society, has sought a new entrance (uttarprabesh) into an even higher level of awareness; but has it gained that insight which could direct society to a new path? (1990)

The poem (“*Manosharani*” or “*Meditations*” (1962) he translates, reflects some of this awareness:

...Outside the rage momentarily undoes  
What were patterns of human hope and love.  
In the sharp history of man, with his back turned  
    upon the sensuousness of the sea,  
And neck craning on to some usable good  
Every phase was glad of its own death  
Had it felt that keeping to their own past intent  
Were sons whom it bore -  
Holding out hopes of mature dispensations.  
The golden sun, the wings of this, the wisps of grass which  
Grown miraculously somewhere in the waste  
Is at peace with its life and out mockery;  
The river bickering down with its sudden waters of death:  
Mirrored in the eyes of a couple of mating flamingoes \_  
    too late to be saved-

However Jibananda's own translation of poems like “*Andhakar*” (Darkness) and “*Nabik*” reveals the poet's uninhibited approach to his own texts. In “*Andhakar*” he translates:

In deep darkness  
I awoke once more  
Distracted by the splash and fret of the river flowing by.  
I saw the pale moon went to gleam on Vaitarani  
Had caught Kirtinasha in its still noose of shade

*gabhir andhakarer ghum theke nadir chalchal sabde jege uthlam abar:  
takiye dekhlam pandur chand baitaranir theke tar ardhek chaya gutiye niyeche jeno  
kirtinashar dike*

There can be no doubt that the above lines are difficult to translate, and may need some restructuring, especially given the absence of a compounding like *chalchal*, which is a key sound text in the line, because it is that sound that wakes the poet up from sleep, and into consciousness. *Chalchal* however has been translated as ‘splash and fret,’ which does not communicate the sound-text of the original. Still, the poem does manage to communicate the existential anxiety, and the awareness of being in troubled times. These are his urban poems of the inter-war and postwar period. It is also evident in his translation of “*Sailor*,” first published in *Poetry* in 1959, reprinted in *Banalata Sen* (1962):

O sailor, you press on, keep pace with the Sun;  
You have been caught awhile in the mirrors of Babylon, Neneveh, Egypt, China, Ur;  
Loosened your self and headed for other shores,  
The impulse from Vaishali – Byzantium and Alexandria  
Has been to you like thin, straight candles glowing on remembered beaches.  
They are good, but whet the quest;  
You want deeper knowledge, completer experience.

As long as the honeybees with wings sparkling like spray in the sun  
And the heron with a surer touch than the jet plane  
Brings home the virgin vastness of the blue  
Man will not rest content;  
Purged of follies, sin and tragic mistakes  
His sailor-soul fare forward

To move into a better discovery of life on this planet,  
A greater joy – a deeper communion.

Jibanananda's translation is a restructuring of the original, but it does highlight the unrest that the poem wishes to communicate. The sailor is indeed a convenient symbol for the soul of man that craves for the distant and the mysterious and the unknown. The past is relived in the present, as "remembered beaches" too, which makes it meaningful. However, the concrete images of the past – Vaishali, Byzantium, Alexandria – and all the 'foreign' imagery in the poem are as real as the native honeybees and spray flies in the sun, and the heron, and the virgin vastness of the blue sky. All these latter items are available in Bengal. It must be remembered that Jibanananda did not travel outside of Bengal many times in his life, nor did he visit any historical site in the Middle East and North Africa or travel to Europe, much less America, unlike a few of his contemporaries like Sudhindranath Dutta or Buddhadeva Bose. All the foreign connections in his poems, therefore are imaginary, which recombine with the images from Bengal at some point of time or the other in the poem, as I have just shown above. While it would have been apt at this point to digress into a brief study of the meeting points of the foreign and the native in Jibanananda's poetry, I must limit my comments to a minimum for lack of space.

### Clinton Seely and others

Of course, the above poems, as many other in this volume, nullifies Buddhadeva's earlier comment that the poet is bereft of social or political consciousness, as Clinton Seely, the leading translator of Jibanananda's poems comments (1990). He draws evidence from what Jibanananda says elsewhere in *Kabitar katha*, to begin with. According to Jibanananda, the subject of poetry is inexhaustible, and it is wrong to limit the poet to one particular ideological position or the other - referring to the progressive poets of the times. Curiously, even "Bodh", the poem that triggered Buddhadeva's comment, may be read as a pointer to that awareness that forms the core of his poetic belief. Formal boundaries become less important in the writing of the poem hence. In recent years much energy has been spent to identify "uttaradhunikata" – postmodernity – in Jibanananda's poetry, especially keeping in mind that Jibanananda does not limit his aesthetic to the poetic and the beautiful, but finds indefatigable pleasure in constructing a poetics based on the awareness of the world in all its conceivable variety. Needless to say, Clinton Seely as translator is sensitive to this awareness, which demands much closer attention to the source text. A certain amount of restructuring is always necessary, as the poetic essence is also a major source of understanding, as Seely's various translations will demonstrate below, I hope. In "Bodh," (1929), this awareness comes to light:

Into the half light and shadow I go. Within my head  
Not a dream, but some sensation is at work.  
Not a dream, not peace, nor love.  
Inside my heart a sensation is born.  
I cannot escape it  
For it places its hand on mine,  
And all else pales to insignificance – so futile it seems.  
All thought, an eternity of prayer,  
Seems empty.  
Empty.

Apparently it may seem to be an abstract poem, but the images are sharp and specific, especially when it comes to his awareness of the others and the world around him:

Those who were born to this world  
As children,

Those who spent their time  
 Giving birth to children,  
 Or those who must give birth to children  
 Today, or those who come to the sown fields of this world,  
 For to give birth – to give birth -  
 Is not my heart  
 Like theirs, their heart and head? Is not their mind  
 Like my mind?  
 Then why am I so alone?

That the poet is alone, a lone soul in the chaotic world around him, seems to be characteristic of his urban poetry, as I have briefly mentioned before. Seely's translations (1990), most of which are not available in anthologies, makes them clear. In a poem called "*Akashlina*" ("Merged into the skies") the imaginary woman figure reappears – much like the woman figure in the famous "*Banalata Sen*" (1941) – as Suranjana. Most of his women are imaginary, and they share a world bereft of emotion because outside the poet's self in the urban setting, neither love, nor nature exists:

Suranjana, do not go over there,  
 Do not speak to that young man.  
 Come back Suranjana...  
  
 Come back to these fields, these waves,  
 Come back to my heart.  
  
 ...Suranjana,  
 Today your heart is grass-  
 Wind beyond winds,  
 Sky beyond the farther shores of sky.

The verdant fields, the layers of sky and wind of course belong to Bengal if one wishes to trace its source, as does this consciousness. In a poem called "*Anubhab*" or "Feeling",

Shall we not travel once again the amazing path?  
 ...From the Atreyi river to the vast ends of the Bay of Bengal;  
 Dawn proceeding from the west to  
 A Bengal of evening deltaic shores;  
 ...The owl of a worthless storehouse unknowingly flies  
 Into moonlight, like some luminescence.  
 Today it is not peace – it is not happiness,  
 It is not pain, either;  
 As we sought to abolish discriminatory differences, endless divisions arose,  
 Are being exhausted – in this sort of classless, selfless feeling.

While as I have already mentioned that the *Rupashi Bamla* poems have not been abundantly translated, those that have been, try to capture the essence of the poem. They grapple with the languid beauty of Bengal, sometimes a still picture, sometimes dynamic, and sometimes resplendent in its mythic aura. Marian Maddern and Sibnarayan Roy note in their introduction to *I have seen Bengal's face: a selection of modern Bengali poetry in English translation* (1974): for Das the South-eastern region of Bengal with trees, birds, paddy fields, rivers and skies "nourished his spirit" (1974: 20), which their translations tend to reflect. However, the short selection has only one poem from Rupashi Bamla:

I have seen Bengal's face – therefore I no longer  
 go seeking earth's beauty: waking and rising in the dark  
 ... gazing around I see domes of leaves,  
*jam, bat, kanthal, hijal, asath* leaves, silent.  
 On the clumps of cactus and zeodary their shadows fall.

Near Champa, from his boat, long ago, merchant Chando  
saw thus the blue shadows of *bat, hijal, tamal*, Bengal's incomparable  
beauty.

The use of the *Behula* and *Chando sadagar* legend (*Manasa mangal*) is characteristic of this poem, as it is in others as well in the volume. Consider another one, translated by Seely:

There is a place in this world – the most beautiful, compassionate.  
There the green delta is awash with honey-sweet grass;  
Trees have names like jackfruit, *aswattha*, banyan, *jamrul*, cashew.  
There is clouds at dawn awakes the *nata* fruitlike red round sun.  
There Varuni resides at the mouth of the Ganges – and there Varuna  
Yields abundant river waters to the Karnafuli, Dhaleswar, Padma, Jalangi.

There the citrus branches droop in darkness upon the grass,  
And the buzzard flies away home upon dark evening breezes.  
There a yellow sari clings fast to some beautiful woman's body -  
Sankhamala is her name. In no other river, on no other grass of  
This vast world will you find her – Bisalakshi had granted her a boon,  
And so she was born amidst the paddy and grass of blue Bengal. (35)

To sum Seely up, Bisalakshi – literally, the large (*bisala*) eyed (*akshi*) one – signifies one of the auspicious names for the Bengali mother-goddess, more commonly known as Durga. The poem makes a simpler statement: there by the grace of goddess Bisalakshi, do I. Fairy-tale princess Sankhamala represents Jibanannada and everyone else fortunate enough to have been born in Bengal, the world's most beautiful and compassionate place, where rivers empty in to the Bay of Bengal, in which dwell the Hindu god of waters, Varuna, his wife Varuni. Such vivid images of Bengal may have been the effect of a brief sojourn in Delhi, where Jibanananda was teaching in the mid-20s. Absence from the native Bengal may have been enough to convince him of the treasures of Bengal (1990). Thus in the early 1930s he wrote those fourteen line sonnets, which have been barely translated, except those by Seely.

Who would leave this delta to seek the beauty on the paths of the world?  
The dry banyan leaves seem to call forth a tale of the end of an age:  
... Who would reject them and set out for a foreign land? I shall not  
Give up *basmati* paddy fields for Malabar or Ootecamund.

Thus the poet will not trade Bengal for Malabar (southwestern Indian coast) or Ootecamund (hill station in the Nilgiris), and one life span seems insufficient to experience the riches of Bengal. It is a natural desire of the poet to be reborn in Bengal not as a human being, but as a *shalikh*, or a *shankhachil* (white hawk) in "*Abar asibo fire*" ("When I return"):

When I return to the banks of the Dhansiri, to this Bengal,  
Not as a man, perhaps, but as a *salik* bird or white hawk,  
Perhaps as a dawn crow in this land of autumn's new harvest,  
I'll float upon the breaths of fog one day in the shade of a jackfruit tree.  
Or I'll be some young girl's pet duck – ankle bells upon her feet –  
And I'll spend the day floating on duckweed-scented waters,  
When again I come, smitten by Bengal's rivers and fields, to this  
Green and kindly land, Bengal, mitened by Jalangi river's waves.

Perhaps I'll watch the buzzard soar on sunset's breeze.  
Perhaps I'll listen to a spotted owl screeching from a *simul* tree branch.  
Perhaps a child scatters puffed rice upon the grass of some home's courtyard.  
On the Rupsa river's murky waters a youth perhaps steers his dinghy with  
Its torn white sail. Reddish clouds scud by, and in the darkness, coming  
To their nest, I shall see white herons. Among them all is where you'll find me.

Dhansiri is both a real river and a metonym for Bengal. All the poems in this volume are full of such images, and there can be little doubt that Clinton Seely has tried to capture the images as vividly as the translation would allow, without changing the structure of the poems (*couddapadi* or the fourteen lines structure). As I have already mentioned, other translators are more often engaged in a free translation of the other poems. The trend began with P. Lal's own 'transcreations' in 1962 of the few of Jibanananda's poems as well as those whom he published in the slim volume called *Banalata Sen*.

### **P. Lal and *Banalata Sen***

The volume *Banalata Sen* contained seventeen poems in translation, with four versions of "*Banalata Sen*". Needless to say, it remains one of the most widely read and translated poems in the Jibananandian canon. The poem weaves a magical effect with the images of Bengal and the imaginary woman figure of Banalata Sen (Bana (wild) lata (creeper), and Sen- a Baidya surname),<sup>2</sup> which ends in a transfixed image of Banalata Sen, darkness and the self. Below are examples of several translations of the last line.

*thake shudhu andhakar, mukhomukhi basibar natorer banalata sen.*

Only darkness remains, the time to return to Banalata Sen of Natore (Martin Kirkman).

Only darkness remains, and to sit face to face with Banalata Sen (Sanat Bhattacharya)

Only darkness, and her face: the face of Banalata Sen (P. Lal and Shyamasree Devi)

The poet himself however transcreates his own line, sacrificing the effect of the original, in this case:

I am ready with my stock of tales  
For Banalata Sen of Natore.

For some inexplicable reason, no translation of Banalata Sen seems satisfactory enough. Images like

*pakhir nirer mato chokh*

So she turned her bird's nest eyes (P. Lal and Shyamasree Devi)

admittedly do not carry the magic spell of the Bengali. Once again the image of the dying sun on the wings of the kite, the soft fall of dew, fireflies, cinnamon island, the land of Vidisha, sea-foam, the distant sailor, rivers – are dreamy, ephemeral and lose their life outside Bengali, it seems. I am sure this critical remark does not help us understand exactly why the poem does not translate well into English, but this is also a general complaint against translating Jibanananda into English. Other poems in this volume are "Birds", "The cat" (Aloke Ranjan Dasgupta), "Dusk Interlude" (P. K. Saha), "Sailor" (Jibanananda Das), "The dead bird" (P. Lal and Shyamasree Devi), "Twenty years after" (Jibanananda Das), "Grass" (Buddhadeva Bose) etc. I must mention that the production is actually marred by a lack of introductory or prefatory material, hence sustaining a commentary on just the texts becomes difficult. However I am guessing that the editors intended these as new texts, which is evident from no mention of the Bengali titles of the poems, although almost all the poems belong to *Banalata Sen*, and one to *Sat-ti tarar timir* ("Sailor"). Despite the obvious weakness of transcreation in P. Lal's volume, the translations are quite competently done, although in some cases the transcreations may not be always within the

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<sup>2</sup> Clinton Seely has noted that Jibanananda's characters, both in his prose and poetry, tend to belong to the Baidya caste.

normal range of acceptance. Like Buddhadeva Bose translates “Ghas” (Grass) paying attention to the details, but changing a few items nevertheless:

The world this morning, filled with soft green grass, gentle like lemon-leaves,  
Like an unripe orange it is – this green grass – as fragrant – with the deer ripping it off with teeth.

*kachi lebu-patar mato naram sabuj aloy prithibi bhore giyeche ei bhorer bela;*  
*kaanca batabir mato sabuj ghas – temni sughran – harinera dant diye chire niche (Banalata Sen)*

The following items have been changed: *lebu pata* (lime leaves), *batabi* (pomelo or a large grapefruit), *bhorer bela* (dawn). Replacing ‘lime’ with ‘lemon’ may be acceptable, but replacing ‘grapefruit’ with ‘orange’ may be debatable, as ‘dawn’ with ‘morning’. Pomelos grow in Bengal in abundance, especially during the late monsoon, while oranges may not be identified with the season here, which is most likely the rainy season, when the grass in the alluvial plains of Bengal grow thick and wild, and do get a dense colour. In India, oranges appear in the markets in winter, or at least presumably it did before the days of cold storage. The emphasis of the first line too has been changed from *naram sabuj aloy* (soft green light) to ‘soft green grass’. The phototropic effect – the craving for light in all its possible hue - has been reduced in the translation, I think.

### **Bengal’s face in various hands**

In Faizul Latif Chowdhury’s 1995 publication (*I have seen the Bengal’s face*) of Jibanananda’s poems in translation, there are forty poems translated by seventeen translators. The common translators of course are Clinton Seely, Marian Maddern, Martin Kirkman, Chidananda Dasgupta, Sibnarayan Roy and the poet himself. In the translator’s note he explains why the grammatical mistake in the title of the book. He thinks that the Bengal of Jibanananda is a different Bengal than meets our “plain” eye (12). Hence the ‘mistake’ to draw our attention to something exclusive. Arguable though the gimmick be, it is clear that the editor wishes to keep Bengal as the common element of the poems, which as I have tried to indicate above is an important feature in his poetry. However, most of these translations are reconstructions, but they try to pay close attention to the details of the lines as well as the objects from the real world. As Afzar Hussain translates “*Mrityue age*” (Before death)

We have loved the long winter night  
in the dark, have listened to the music  
of flapping wings across a thatched roof,  
on a magic night; the smell of an ancient  
owl: where then has it been lost in the dark  
We have felt the winter night’s form and beauty  
replete with the deep delight of winging across  
the field; the twigs of *Ashwatha* on which  
the cranes cry, and we have felt these solitary spell of life;

(25)

*(amra bosechi jara andhakare dirgha shit ratritire bhalo  
kharer caler pare suniyachi mugdha rater danar sanchar;  
purono penchar ghran; - andhakare abar se kothy haralo?  
bujhechi shiter rat aparup; - mathe-mathe dana bhasahbar  
gabhir ahlade bhara; ashather dale-dale dakiyache bak;  
amra bujhechi jara jibaner ei sab nibhrita kuhak;)*

he tries to make himself aware of the key words, phrases and images in the lines here (*purno pencha, danar sanchar, shiter raat aparup, mathe-mathe dana bhasabar*, etc). In poems that engage with symbolism, the focus is more on a play of words, as Chidananda Dasgupta translates “*kamalalebu*” (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.

*(ekbar jakhon deha theke bar hoye jabo  
abar ki fire asbo na ami ei prithibite?  
Abar jeno fire asi  
kono ek shiter rate  
ekta him kamalalebur karun mangsha niye  
kono ek parichito mumursher bichanar kinare.)*

This poem however also throws into sharp relief the poet's desire in the 1940s – that was when this poem was composed - which were trying times in many ways, personal and historical. Thus the desire to return now is not by the Dhansiri, or the Jalsiri or on a thatched roof of a cold winter village night in Bengal with the screeching owl, but to come by the bedside of a dying patient in the form of a pitiful flesh of an orange. The season of winter, which is peaceful and mysteriously beautiful as in *kartiker nabanna* (the new rice in the month of Kartik) in his *Rupashi Bamla* poems, now takes on a different meaning in the urban context. In the volume there is another poem translated by Faisal Shahriar, called "Walking alone" (*path hanta*). Here there is no dew, no soft grass or cloud or any rural image from Bengal, but the city of Calcutta comes alive in a maze of machines and masonry, but freedom from this incarcerating existence is sought by the brilliant invocation of the monument against a starry Calcutta night. Interestingly, the translator inserts the word 'miles,' for this apparently aimless walking. The word "*mailes*" as Jibanananda uses in Bengali in "*Amake tumi*" (You to me) - "*amake/tumi dekhiyechile ekdin: masto baro maidan – debdaru pamer nibir matha – mailer par mail*" – "You/had shown me once:/a vast maidan – intimate heads of palm and debdaru/ mile after mile" - is associated with the poet experiencing vast forest lands possibly in the Palamau region of Bihar and the familiar plains of Bengal. In "Walking alone" of course the context is the city itself.

I have walked alone for hours on the streets of the city  
with something at the back of my mind – watched the street-cars and buses going on their rounds;  
...I have walked alone for miles, have known their calm at heart;  
It was the dead of night – stars had clustered around  
The lonely peaks of the city's monuments – have I ever known such natural grace

*(ki ek ishara jeno mone rekhe eka-eka saharer path theke pathe  
onek hetechi ami; onek dekhechi ami tram-bas sab thik chale;  
... eka eka path hente gabhir santi hrdaye karechi anubhab;  
takhon onek raat – takhon onek tara monument minarar matha  
nirjane ghireche ese; - mone hoy konodin er ceye sahaj sambhab  
ar kichu dekhechi ki?*

The desire to experience simplicity in an otherwise chaotic, mundane surroundings and the hustle and bustle of the city seems to run all along the 'urban' poetry he wrote. However his urban poetry is also marked by doubts and questionings. The two poems translated from *Mahaprithibi* (The world at large) in this volume are "Sahar" and "At bachor ager ekdin". While "Sahar" resembles "Path hanta" in significant ways, the latter poem has as its theme a man committing suicide. The poem is unable to answer why the man committed suicide. The man was apparently happy, living a normal life, and no one was aware of his depressive state of mind. Such a theme is not surprising, because most of his urban poetry does reveal a subterranean presence of death,

as critics have time and again noted. However, this poem reveals in no uncertain terms fatigue, and depression, which leaves its mark on everyday life, even though there is domestic happiness..

His wife lay beside – the child therewith;  
hope and love abundant – in the moonlight – what ghost  
did he see? Why his sleep broke?  
Or having no sleep at all since long – he now has fallen asleep in the post mortem cell.

*(badhu shuyechilo pashe – shishutio chilo  
prem chilo, asha chilo – jyotsnay, - tabu se dekhilo  
kon bhut? Ghum bhenge gelo tar?  
Athaba hoyni ghum bahukal – lashkata ghare shuye ghumay ebar)*

The lines are packed with images of death and decay, with life fluttering intermittently:

From sitting in blood and filth, flies fly back into the sun;  
How often we watched moths and flies hovering in the wave of the golden sun.  
The closeknit sky, as if – as it were, some scattered lives, possessed their hearts;  
The wavering dragonflies in the grasp of wanton kids  
Fought for life;  
Yet with a noose in hand you approached the *aswattha*, alone, by yourself,  
For you'd learnt  
a human would ne'er live the life of a locust or a robin  
The branch of *aswattha*  
had it not raged in protest?

*(ghanishtha akash jeno – jeno kono bikirna jiban  
adhikar kore ache ihader mon;  
duranta shishur hate faringer ghana shiharan  
maraner sathe lariyache;  
chand dube gele par, pradhan andhare tumi ashather kache  
ekgacha dari hate giyechile tabu eka – eka;  
je jiban faringer, doyeler – manusher sathe tar hoy nako dekha  
ashather shakha  
kareni ki pratibad?)*

The translation does not carry the intensity of the sickness. It is this sickness that also lies at the heart of urban existence. There can be no doubt that life in the city never satisfied him, always left something to be desired, yet it will be wrong to assume that he escaped into an idealized version of nature in his poems, using it as a means to escape the oppressive reality. Such a version of reality is unacceptable to Jibananda, hence he is keen to explore the *gabhiratara asukh* (deeper sickness) in a poem called *Bhikhiri*, which Seely translates with as much care for the text which contains the poetics of time and place. It is this poetics which gives the poem its distinctive identity, for the experience is unique to Jibananda's experience of a diseased state of life in Calcutta – a world apart from the verdant Bengal of *Rupashi Bamla*:

I got one pice at Ahiritolla,  
I got one pice at Badur Bagan.  
If I could get one more,  
I'd walk away with dignity  
– he said, stretching out his hand in the dark.  
It was as if a blind man yearned with all his being to weave cloth,  
But his efforts became as the conch shell craftsman's saw in crippled hands.

I got one pice while roaming through the parks,  
I got one pice at Pathuria Ghata.  
If I could get just one more,  
I'd have some husked rice till the light from the gas lamp fell upon his face.

But in the crowd - on Harrison Road – was a deeper sadness.  
A world's mistake: a beggar ignored. The world's failing. (157)<sup>3</sup>

The city with its alienating network of trams, gaslight, soot, grime and of course, beggars in places like Ahiritolla, Harrison Road, Pathuriaghata tend to form an inescapable mesh, which may be the reason why the protagonist in “At bachor ager ekdin” felt depressed. It is tempting to cite poem after poem keeping the inter-textual link in mind. These poems describe the city of Calcutta in its myriad forms of ugliness, squalor, decadence, transformed in the spell of darkness, or the night. . In one poem that I will have the time to cite, “*Ratri*” (Night), translated by Seely, lepers lap some water from the hydrant, motor-car passes by “coughing like a goat./ Scattering sloshing petrol.” From somewhere the great night of the city seems like the jungles of Libya, where the animals are orderly, overpaid, and indeed wear clothes.

I turn off, leaving Phear Lane, defiantly  
Walk for miles, stop beside a wall  
On Bentinck Street, at Teritti Bazar,  
There in the air dry as roasted peanuts.

The warmth of intoxicating light kisses my cheek.  
Smell of kerosene, lumber, shellac, gunny, leather  
Blending with the hum of dynamoes  
Draws taut the bowstring.

### Conclusion

I have found little opportunity to bring to light the works of a few other editors and translators like Pranab Bandopadhyay (1975), Kabir Chowdhury (1970-71), who mostly edited and translated respectively some of Jibanananda's poems, in the context of prioritizing Bangla poetry – meaning both Bangladeshi poetry as well as those from West Bengal – poems by Buddhadeva Bose, Subhash Mukhopadhyay, Amiya Chakrabarti, Samar Sen and the like. Also, Buddhadeva Bose brought out translations of Jibanananda's essay “On Poetry” and a few translations, including the author's own. (1971). It is interesting to note that all these were published during the 1970s, when these poets and editors were keen to highlight the new Indian writing, mostly in translations. While a detailed study of Bangla poetry in translation of this period would have been a good fit in the context of Jibanananda translation, I guess that must wait another occasion. Suffice to say that the trend of translation of India writing during that period did get a shot in the arm mainly because poets like Buddhadeva and Amiya were antitheses to Jibanananda in many ways. They were cosmopolitan in their approach to publication, and were also engaged in the comparative literary studies (Buddhadeva was pioneer in introducing Comparative Literature studies in Jadavpur University in Calcutta).

I will conclude hoping that I have been able to sketch the trends in Jibanananda translation in the last fifty years by using some illustrations. Translation being largely dependent on practice, I think it is important to ‘see’ the translations themselves, before being able to remotely sense a general theory. Unfortunately lack of sufficient translations and re-translations of at least the

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<sup>3</sup> “Bhikhiri”, trans. by Clinton B. Seely, *A poet apart: the literary biography of the Bengali poet Jibanananda Das (1899-1954)*, 157.

major works of the modern Bangla writing is not helpful in that direction. I have therefore consciously tried to keep this paper jargon-free, hoping that the translations themselves should be a pointer to a trend or its lack thereof. At this point however, I am tempted to pay my obligatory respects to the postcolonial thinkers for whom the question of source is an necessary problematic. Illustrations that I have used show that most translators, including the poet himself, are aware of this critical issue in practice. In this context I will also risk the statement that Seely may be considered the major translator of Jibanananda's poems, although he is unsurprisingly unenviable to the budding translator. One reason for this could be the amount of information needed to translate as Seely does: to both pay attention to the text, the biographical and critical information, as well as translate the arguable element of 'intention' into the poem. Other translators like Faizul and Azfar Hussain have a love for the poet's work, but they are always not equipped with enough textual and contextual information to edit the poem in translation. Of course, in the case of Buddhadeva Bose, the matter must be judged differently; perhaps being a poet himself, it must have 'felt' right to alter whatever he altered. We have also had opportunity to see how the poet himself transcreated, but that must not lead us to believe that transcreation alone is the best approach to translation of his poetry. P. Lal's approach, while being novel and competent too, does play with the concept of the 'new' texts of Jibanananda's poems. Faizul Latif Chowdhury's approach however does not break new grounds – he merely pays homage to his predecessors - except the fact that he has been able to bring more 'hands' besides recycling older material, which deserves merit. However, all these translator have, to a greater or lesser degree, been sensitive to Jibanananda's Bengal as the prime marker of his poetry. This seems to me a positive beginning, although the poetics with which to construct that Bengal is yet to be founded.

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