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## Poetry And Its Bioregion: A Study Of Select Poems Of Jibanananda Das

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### Abstract

The paper seeks to explore how the elements of nature and culture, such as soil, rock, water, wind, trees, plants, birds, mammals, insects, cycles of seasons, dresses worn and other cultural activities form a *bioregion* in the poetry of Jibanananda Das. It studies how the poems of Jibanananda Das play a crucial role in renewing a sense of *place* among the residents of Bengal. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section of the paper introduces the critical issues related to bioregion and its relation to literature; the second section gives a brief overview of the poetic journey of Jibanananda Das and the existing criticism on Das' poetry, and the third concentrates on exploring the elements of bioregion in the selected poems of Das and analyzing them from the perspective of bioregionalism.

**Keywords:** Bioregionalism, Ethnicity, Identity, Culture, Environmental imagination.

### Bioregionalism: An Introduction

In a recent study, *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*, Robert L. Thayer Jr. defines a bioregion: "A *bioregion* is literally and etymologically a 'life- place'— a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human communities" (3). Bioregionalism seeks to explore the human communities' complex relationships with their government institutions and the natural world. Its emphasis on place and community radically changes the way we confront human and ecological issues. It helps us grow our awareness of ourselves and of our relationship to the place where we live. It also helps us harmonize ecological realities with human activities. It proposes that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural beings— our local bioregion— rather than national, state, ethnic, or other more common bases of

identity. The bioregionalists think that there must be an interaction between human beings and the specific location or bioregion where they live.

Peter Berg, the seminal thinker and organizer, thought of bioregionalism as post-environmental. In a personal interview on December 10, 2010, Berg says, “You can’t really change what you do until you change your idea of who you are. And your idea of who you are should stem from the place where you are” (qtd. in Glotfelty xvii). Berg has given a bioregional paradigm. It redefines human identity. Berg suggests alternative answers to fundamental questions of identity such as “Who am I? Where am I? And what am I going to do about it?” Firstly, bioregionalism defines the “I” as a “member of *Homo sapiens*, a mammalian species sharing the biosphere interdependently with other species and the natural systems that support them” (qtd. in Glotfelty 4). Secondly, it addresses the whereness of the “I”. It says that the “I” is in a “*bioregion*, an ecological homeplace that has distinct continuities that affect the way” (4) the “I” lives and are affected by the “I”. In reply to the third question “What am I going to do about it?” it says that the “I” can re-inhabit the place where the “I” lives by “restoring and maintaining natural systems, finding sustainable ways to satisfy basic human needs such as water, food, energy, materials, and culture, and [ . . . ] support[ing] other people involved with the process of re-inhabitation.” (4) As Doug Aberley has explained in his succinct history of the movement, “Bioregionalism is a body of thought and related practice that has evolved in response to the challenge of reconnecting socially-just human cultures in a sustainable manner to the region- scale ecosystems in which they are irrevocably imbedded” (13).

### **Bioregionalism and Literature**

An important role of bioregionally minded critics is to identify literature that raises bioregional and biospheric awareness. They think that literature has scope to reflect and develop the character of the bioregion. The bioregional-minded critics also believe that literature and stories can play a crucial role in renewing a sense of place among residents. To them, the works of literature “inspire residents to resist environmentally harmful practices” (Lynch et al. 13). Literary criticism based on Bioregionalism can inspire readers to connect the texts they read with their own lives, places, and practices. It helps them imagine how to move, both physically and imaginatively, from the word to the world. In his influential work of ecocriticism, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Lawrence Buell emphasizes that the environmental crisis is “a crisis of the imagination” (2) and that solving this crisis depends on finding better ways to imagine nature and humanity’s relationship to it. He argues that literature and other creative arts not only reflect but also influence the ways a culture imagines itself and its place in the natural world.

## Locating the poetry of Jibanananda Das: An overview

Today what we call modern Bengali poetry started its journey in the 1930s. It was that very decade when a group of young writers started searching for liberation from Rabindranath Tagore. This search for liberation became a deliberate pursuit with a whole generation of poets, among whom Buddhadev Bose was the most articulate. The young writers associated with the Kollol group were strongly influenced by post-war frustration. Some of them were influenced by Marxist utopia. After the success of the social revolution in Soviet Russia, a new zeal was born in the minds of the people and society. In this period, the Bengali common readers discovered a new world in the European writings. They were influenced by their work. They were seeking a way to express the post-war sensibility. To capture that sensibility, they needed new stylistics. Hence, they struggled to free poetry from Tagorean stylistics and values. Their struggle was fuelled by Kollol magazine. Fifteen years before Tagore's death, this group began publishing the magazine. All of the young poets associated with this group had the same view on the liberation from Tagore. They thought that if they could not get liberated, modern poetry would remain as nothing but a resonance of Tagore. It was a hard challenge for them to avoid him and at the same time, to become very much unlike him in content and form.

Jibanananda Das had to struggle to be recognized. Like many others, he also used to send his poems to Tagore with a hope to have words of encouragement. But unfortunately he received no such response. Tagore admitted that the young poet had some talent but complained that he persecuted the language. He could not think Jibanananda to be his successor. Such rejections came not only from Tagore, but also from many remarkable contemporary figures, though he is the most conspicuous among the contemporary writers. Buddhadev Bose marks him as “the loneliest” poet (qtd.in *A Certain Sense* v); and to the tradition-minded readers, as Sisir Kumar Das says, he was a “different, exotic, and imitative of western poets” (v). For his pessimism and “lack of social awareness” (v), the Marxist showed no interest in him. The magazine *Sanibarar Chithi* (The Saturday Letter) intentionally misspelled him while criticizing his poetry in the magazine. To them he was “*Jibananda*”. Save these, many other critics maintained a studied silence about him.

It is Buddhadev Bose who, among few, could sense the future of Bengali poetry to become modern in the true sense in the hand of Jibanananda Das. In his essay “In Memory of Jibanananda Das”, he says, “his poetry has to be read slowly, to be understood bit by bit” (my translation) (Bose 85). In the same essay he also says, “though he is romantic from tip to toe, by spirit, he is quite opposite to romanticism” (my translation) (98). Bose firmly believes that no literature from his own country, from the Mahabharata to Rabindranath, except Satyendranath Dutta and Nazrul Islam, did infect Jibanananda Das. Like Buddhadev Bose, Sanjay Bhattacharya was another person to take Jibanananda Das sympathetically. After his death, his actual place in Bengali poetry was recognized. Born in Barishal, Jibanananda Das is fortunate to have a green landscape filled with a diversity of life. The serene natural beauty shaped his poetic subconscious, which does not forget to portray its wideness. Throughout his life, he wished to have that peaceful, non-urbanized world in his heart. But he could not. Having been introduced to English and other western literature, philosophy, and science, he

begins his journey as a poet. The rural and urban co-exist in Jibanananda and makes his poetry complex, modern, and life-like.

In his lifetime, he published only 162 poems in book form. In 1927, the shy poet took an initiative to publish a book (*Jhara Palak/ Fallen Feathers*) with those poems which were published in the journals like *Prabasi, Bangabani, Kollol, Kalikalam, Pragati, Bijli* etc. It was a self-production. No one came forward to publish him. One can feel the shadow of Satyendranath Dutta and Nazrul Islam in those early poems. But there is a scent of newness in his language, even if the book cannot show the flash of genius. The book could not have created any impact on the Bengali reading public, but it certainly heralded a new era in Bengali poetry. Nine years after this book appeared *Dhusar Pandulipi (The Grey Manuscript 1936)*. Poems like “Bodh” (A Certain Sense), “Kampe” (At the camp, which Sudhindranath Dutta did not want to publish in the magazine “Porichay” [Identity]), “Shokun” (Vultures) brought him to the light. Readers of Bengali poetry will now recognize the poet they have been waiting for. The long desired diction, image, and thought are now available to them. They can recognize themselves in the new poetry. That the grey world is the actual world is now beginning to emerge in Bengali literature. The long-awaited rhythm, syntax, manipulation of diction and prosody are now accessible to modern readers. Two years before the publication of *Dhusar Pandulipi (The Grey Manuscript)*, i.e., in 1934, Jibanananda Das was busy in writing the poems of *Rupasi Bangla*. But he kept it hidden from public eyes. The poems present a colorful, sensuous geography which is totally different from that of his predecessors and contemporaries. Six years later, in 1942, came *Banalata Sen* to make Jibanananda the greatest modern poet. In this book he crosses the border of limitations that he had in *Dhusar Pandulipi*. His awareness to history, his estrangement, and his love— all touch the peak. As if the poet has found the exact thing to express in an exact language. It is as if he was searching for this language that makes his thoughts presentable. Bengali poetry never saw the blending of time, history, geography, and mythology in a single point of time. This book presents Jibanananda’s mastery of creating fairyland atmosphere. He curves a world of his own out of the sensuous and earthy nature.

*Banalata Sen* is followed by *Mahaprithibi (The Great Earh, 1944)* and *Satti Tarar Timir (The Darkness of Seven Stars, 1948)*. These books “present a new landscape, radically different from the world of *Banalata Sen*” (S.K. Das xi). In this phase, his poetry becomes urban in all senses. The harshness and the cold and callous inhumanity of the urban world are now the chief issues in his poetry. Now the rough takes the position of the exotic, the mysterious. As a modern poet, he condemns the result of modernization. There is no way to escape. No sorrow is personal now. It is the agony of modern people.

### **Jibanananda Das’ poetry and its bioregion**

The poetic world of Jibanananda Das is colorful and sensuous, dark and melancholy, and totally different from the geography celebrated in Bengali poetry both by his predecessors and his contemporaries. Das is unique in creating a world with exotic geographical features. Out of a familiar world, he constructs an unfamiliar

geography. As Sumita Chakraborty thinks, Jibanananda Das develops an “objective, dispassionate, almost detached, impersonal philosophy which certainly displays an awareness of scientific attitude and seeks to come to terms with the wonderful variety of characteristics of the nature” (17). And that is why his philosophy of nature is said to be influenced by Darwinism and its concept of biological evolutionism.

The immense variety of species and plants, the landscape and the physical geography create a specific bioregion. This bioregion gives Jibanananda Das much scope to imagine, think, and create his poetry. There are two important aspects of the bioregion. The first is the presence of the bioregion. The second is its realization of that presence (of the bioregion). If J. Das could not perceive the biodiversity and other constituent parts of a bioregion too deeply, he could not have portrayed Bengal. There is the bioregion and that is why Jibanananda is/ or the *Rupasi Bagla* is. The poems are the very result or outcome of that bioregion. And it is that Bengal that can only be identified by or marked by its bioregion, not by its political demarcation. The boundary of this bioregion cannot be partitioned either politically or religiously, as the bioregion denies any political, economic, or religious partition.

The book *Rupashi Bangla* (published posthumously in 1957; written in 1934) addresses nature, rather we should say, many faces of Nature. In a book of 61 poems we have a list of rivers, trees, plants and grasses, fruits, flowers, fishes, birds, animals, reptiles, insects, foods and the cultural activities which are strongly connected to Bengal. All these elements do create a bioregion in the poetry of Jibanananda Das. It is the presence of all these things that makes Das’ poetry unique in the world. Das is Bangali not only because of the Bengali language; he is Bangali because of this bioregion. The river, trees, birds, and insects are not just images in the poems; they are alive and very much physically present in them. They take an active part in the poems. To some extent, they create the poem. They are not just pretty materials or sources of thought. They are something more, having the ability to structure and shape our consciousness and imagination. The complex relationship between the natural world and the species, including human communities, can well be understood while reading Jibanananda’s poetry.

One of the important constituent parts of the bioregion is the river. A reader of Jibanananda can easily have a picture of the rivers like—Ganga, Gangur, Jalangi, Jalsiri, fictitious rivers Dhansiri, Dhaleswari, Kaliadaha, Rupsha, Karnafuli, Padma, Meghna, Ichamati, and so on. There is a long list of trees— *Hijal* (Hijal tree), *Bot* (banyan), *Aswathwo* (peepul tree), *Kanthal* (jackfruit), *Debdaru* (fir trees), *Dumur* (fig), *Jaam* (rose apple), *Babla* (acacia), *Bel* (wood apple/ stone apple), *Aam* (mango), *Boichi* (Indian palm), *Kodom* (bur flower tree), *Taal* (palm), *Tnetul* (tamarind), *Shimul* (bombax), *Bnash* (bamboo), *Sheonra* (sand paper tree), *Sojne* (moringa oleifera), *Neem*, *Jaarul* (giant carpe myrtle), *Karamcha* (Bengal currant), *Supuri* (betel-nut), *Lebu* (lemon), *Paam* (palm fruit) etc. There are the plants such as *Dhaan* (paddy), *Pat* (jute), *Kolmi* (bird weed), *Akondo* (sun-plant), *Fonimonsa* (prickly pear), *Basaklota* (justicia adhatoda), *Khor* (straw), *Laalshak* (red leafy vegetable), *Helench*a (buffalo spinach), *Parthupi-modhukupu Ghaas* (a kind of grass), *Rupshali Dhaan* (a kind of paddy named Rupshali) etc. The fruits that become a signature in the poetry of Jibanananda Das are

*Kamranga* (carambola), *Dhundhul* (luffa cylindrika), *Buno-Chalta* (wild elephant apple), *Lichu* (lichi), *Komlalebu* (oranges), *Aata* (bullock's heart), *Jaamrul* (star-apple), and the flowers like *Padma* (lotus), *Bhantful* (glory bower), *Chanpaful* (chapma), *Verendaful* (flower of jatropha curcas), *Korobi* (oleander), *Aanarosful* (pineapple flower), *Polash* (bastard teak), *Kolmirful* (flower of bindweed), *Sojneful* (moringa flower), *Elachiful* (cardamom flower), *Droneful* (flower of leucas aspera), *Amer boul* (buds of mango) etc. are also there.

With the trees and plants come the birds such as *Shalik* (shrikes), *Moyna* (a kind of talking bird/ parrot), *Kaak* (crow), *Pencha* (owl), *Kuture-Pencha* (spotted owlet), *Neempencha* (scops owl), *Lakhi-Pencha* (barn owl), *Shokun* (vulture), *Doyel* (magpie-robin), *Haans* (duck), *Bok* (osprey), *Maachranga* (halcyon), *Khanjana* (wagtail), *Gangshalikh* (bank myna/ a kind of shrikes), *DanrKaak* (raven), *Chorai* (sparrow), *Chil* (kite), *Gangchil* (see-gull), *Shankhachil* (brahminy kite), *Sonalichil* (golden kite), *Kokil* (cuckoo), *Payra* (pigeon), *Badur* (bats), *Shuk* (a kind of parrot), *Finge* (drongo), *Rajhans* (goose), *Moral* (swan), etc. Animals, reptiles, and fishes are also there, such as *Beral* (cat), *Kukur* (dog), *Ghora* (horse), *Horin* (deer), *Goru* (cow), *Baghini* (tigress), *Indur* (rats), *Byang* (frogs), *Saap* (snakes), *Shamuk* (snail), *Gugli* (oyster), *Chanda-Shorputi* (olive barb), *Rupoli-Chitoli* (chitala chitala of silver colour) etc. With these, Jibananda does not forget to include the insects like *Gubrepoka* (beetles), *Jonaki* (glowworm), *Bhimrul* (hornet), *Moumachi* (bees), *Pipre* (ants), *Mosha* (mosquito), *Shyamapoka* (a tiny insect of green colour), *Kanchpoka* (green jewel bug), *Vomra* (bumbees), *Jhinjhi* (crickets), *Bolta* (wasp), *Foring* (grigs) are also actively present in his poetry.

Apart from all these elements of Nature, there are many cultural elements that hold the signature of Bengal. These cultural elements are also the essential parts of the bioregion. In Jibananda's poetry we find Bangali foods like *Dhan* (paddy), *Dhekite-Bhana-Dhan* (paddy husked in seesaw), *Chal* (rice), *Talsansh* (kernel of palm), *Shaalidhan* (a kind of paddy), *Narkel Nadu* (ball of sweetmeat made of coconut), *Basmati Chal* (basmati rice), *Khoi* (parched rice), *Dhoya-otha-Bhaat* (smoky hot-rice), *Daruchini* (cinnamon), *Kheer* (latex) etc. and cultural practices in the expressions like *Sada Shankha* (white bangles made of conch shell), *Kolke-pere-shari* (a particular design of sharee), *Banglar- Dhani-Shari* (a particular local design of sharee), 'Kishorir-chal-dhoya-vije- haat' (a young girl's hands soaked in water which is used for washing rice), 'Dhan-makha-chul' (hair filled with paddy seeds), 'haater-kakan-beje-othe' (musical sounds of the bangles worn by women), 'Basmati chale veja sada haat' (whitened hands soaked in the basmati rice), *Kartiker Nabanna* (harvest festival of the month of Kartik) etc. These cultural practices have not changed much as the bioregion helps them preserve. The creatures of this bioregion also happened to be the inspirations for poets of the past like Mukundaram who was moved by the *koel's* (the cuckoo) call during his writing. The legacy of this bioregion is emphasized in the line: "Or at evening, as Behula down the Gangura rowed alone/ In the twilight, and heard from shadowy branch the *koel* (the cuckoo) call/ Through mango grove and paddy, her eyes filled only with mist." ('Here the Sky is Blue' 4)

Jibanananda Das' poetry develops an idea of how to live, what to observe, and how to connect with the bioregion in which one grows and lives. Jibanananda's expressions like "*penchar dhuusar dana sararat jonakir sathe katha koy*" (*Rupashi Bangla*, poem no. 46) ("the grey wings of the owl talk to the glow-worm throughout the night") clearly indicate his bioregional imagination. It is that bioregional imagination which produces poetry, and it is that bioregional imagination which is shaped by poetry. As is found in the line, there is no presence of any human being. The action of *kotha koya* (talking), which is supposed to be a human action as believed in anthropocentrism, completely goes on without human intervention or participation. Here, both the teller or speaker (i.e., 'the grey wings of the owl') and the told/spoken (i.e., the glow-worm) belong to the nonhuman group of creatures. They can create an independent, beautiful bioregion if not disturbed by humans. Jibanananda's imagination both develops and is shaped by this bioregion. That is why he could perceive such an image, i.e., talking between the wings of an owl and a glow-worm.

The poems of *Rupasi Bangla* enable the residents of Bengal (both east and west) to recognize their bioregions as culturally and ecologically distinct and value them as such. His poems also play a crucial role in renewing a sense of *place* among the residents of Bengal. Jibanananda's poetry makes us learn how to understand the *place* we live in. His poetry also draws our attention to the kinds of rocks and soil under our feet. It leads us to the source of our drinking water; the meaning of the different kinds of wind. Das' poetry also helps us explore the common insects, birds, mammals, plants, and trees; the particular cycles of the seasons (like *Hemanta*); the times to plant and harvest and forage. The poetry chiefly informs us of the cultures of the people and of those who have grown up in that culture.

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