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'Neither Peace nor Love or Dream': Man's Quest for the Meaning of Life in Jibanananda

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'*Neither Peace nor Love or Dream*': Man's Quest for the Meaning of Life in Jibanananda

Biswarup Das

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Introduction

The fundamental question of human life is perhaps related to the meaning of existence. The complexity and demand of the modern world, however, scarcely permit one to ruminate over it. Right from the birth of consciousness in an individual, he is taught by the society the undertakings necessary to live and prosper in the world. The individual gets engaged in the worldly affairs taking the engagement as something natural, for such 'affairs' is the only thing present to his consciousness. He almost loses his ability to think otherwise. The society subtly robs him of his identity by presenting before him the standards that he necessarily needs to follow to become an ideal human being. He gradually but unknowingly is reduced to a unit of the system losing himself in the web of the crowd. '*The crowd is untruth*,' but the individual who has never really succeeded in becoming one thinks '*where the crowd is, the truth is also, that it is a need in truth itself, that it must have the crowd on its side*' (Kierkegaard, '*The Crowd is Untruth*,' 8). Being unaware of the fact that he can also have a discrete 'self,' he keeps himself busy in the ways of the world to attain 'success,' a concept the meaning of which he does not himself know accurately (as it surely is a myth created by the society). But if one day, while away from the crowd, a question like 'where does my engagement lead me to?' or 'am I really the one I've known myself to be?' emerges in his heart, the orderly world suddenly seems broken into pieces. He finds himself lost in the abyss of its meaninglessness. The way of living the society has taught him, the 'oughts' and 'shoulds' he was practicing until the present seem to lose their significance. His consciousness is turned away from the world to himself – from the '*unreflective*' to the '*reflective*' level (Sartre, '*The Transcendence of the Ego*,' 8, 9) – and he realizes that all along he was in an effort to escape the latent agony of his soul. He questions the relevance of the socially designed affairs and finds those to be absurd. He discovers painfully that the activities he had until the present kept himself busy in were merely to avoid the boredom of existence. This discovery is the first step of self-realization, a movement towards the exploration of the subjective entity from the objective one. However, the self-reflection of the individual also brings in him a sense of alienation. It is because he can no longer seek meaning or contentment in the models available in the human world – the myth of success or the morality centred on the concept of 'good' or of 'God' or even the totalizing structure of the society. Meditating deeply he realizes that as a being he is free. It is not that until now, he was not 'free' in the ordinary human sense of the word. But his realization now tells him that what he had known to be freedom is not really that, that the political or the social or even the religious significance of liberty is a hoax. He feels that true freedom can be realized only with the awakening to the meaninglessness of the world. The feeling begets acute anguish in his heart and he comprehends that he needs to construct the meaning of life in his own way. If he wants happiness or contentment he should search for it personally. Even the 'God' in whom he can find solace is to be looked for in his own soul in the conception of his subjective paradise. He thus comprehends that he himself is the author of his subjective world. 'But what should I do now?' – the question starts haunting him like a nightmare. Now comes the decisive moment of his life, the moment when he needs to choose, and his choice is essential for on it depends his existence or his catastrophe. If he is able to choose correctly, his life acquires meaning, and he succeedes in transcending the '*facticity*' (Spade, 'Jean-

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Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*,' 172) of his self. But because the meaning is subjectively founded, he needs to bear the whole responsibility of its outcome at the same time.

The awakening to an awareness of having a self, the dilemma at this awareness, the quest for contentment and the meaning of life, the choice leading to the construction of meaning or to catastrophe – all the aspects of man's search for his subjective existence in a world devoid of meaning reverberate poignantly in the lines of the modern Bengali poet Jibanananda Das (1899 –1954). In a world like this, '*essence*' always '*precedes existence*' (Sartre, *'Existentialism and Human Emotions*,' 13). '*What am I – a specter or a soul*?' Cries out the speaker's heart in Jibanananda's '*Spectral'* (from '*Agranthita Kavita*'). The speaker as if articulates the ardent longing of the poet's soul. It is as though the poet himself who out of bewilderment in his quest for his identity both as a man and as a poet raises his '*eyes and fly from one star to another/ Silenced by the ignorance of the heart*' (*Spectral*). The '*ignorance*' of the heart is that of the poet himself whose greatest desire is to achieve novelty both in style and themes in composing poetry, but is oblivious about how to attain success in his enterprise. Like some of his contemporaries (Buddhadev Bose, Bishnu Dey, Amiya Chakravarty, Sudhindranath Datta) Jibanananda Das undoubtedly played a leading role in introducing modernist elements in Bengali poetry and founding a post-Tagorian poetic standard, but, unlike them, his effort was never to revolt consciously against the great poet whose influence on Bengali poetry, he knew, was too immense to overcome. What he wished was to found a separate identity of his own as a poet so that he did not get dissolved in the world of Tagore. Tagore's influence on Bengali literature symbolizes the '*essence*' of the circumstance the poet finds himself in, and his quest for his poetic identity implies his craving for '*existence.*' The world of poetry is the inert '*being in itself*' (Spade, 73) having no meaning of its own, and the Tagorian paradigm is the '*being for itself*' (Spade, 80), the consciousness establishing the significance of it and also setting up the poetic standard. Jibanananda as a poet can either follow the established poetic norm or try to found one of his own. He is free to choose from the two options. If he chooses the first one, his 'self' will be lost; and even though he is successful as a poet (the common reading folk is used to the Tagorian tradition), he would become merely a unit of the system. The poet, however, chooses the second option and sets out on the way to the construction of individual identity, fully conscious of the circumstance, the standard of normalcy.

Very few persons are ever able to question life about its meaning. Lesser even are those who ever become aware of their freedom and then try to fashion their life in a personal way. A person like that is destined to confront the anguish of life because he can no longer thrust the responsibility of his choosing on an external subject. He is the sole author of his life and needs to accept its outcome even though it is a failure. Jibanananda Das was one such penetrating soul whose literary career brings out the anguish of subjective existence. His first collection of poetry '*Jhara Palak*' (*Fallen Feathers*) came out in 1927. The collection bears the influence of Kazi Nazrul Islam, Satyendranath Dutta, and Mohitlal Mazumder. But soon he was able to shift his attention from the external influences and walk ahead on the road of poetry on his own to explore the undiscovered region it led to, an effort symbolizing his pursuit of subjective identity. His very next collection '*Dhushor Pandulipi*' (*Grey Manuscript,* 1936), is a manifestation of his success in achieving a poetic standard of his own. With time, the uniqueness of the poet in Jibanananda became more and more predominant. In the succeeding years came out his other key collections one by one – *'Banalata Sen'* (1942), *'Mohaprithibi'* (*Great Universe*, 1944), *'Saat – ti Tarar Timir'* (*Darkness of Seven Stars*, 1948), and *'Shrestho Kobita'* (*Best Poems*, 1954). His two other major collections include *'Rupasi Bangla'* (*Bengal, the Beautiful*, published posthumously in 1957) and *'Bela Obela Kalbela'* (*Times*, *Bad Times, End Times*, published posthumously in 1961). However, as his style and diction matured, his poetry became more and more incomprehensible to the ordinary reading public. Critics began to treat him harshly. Sajanikanto Das, a critic contemporary to Jibanananda, attacked him in almost every issue of the weekly magazine *'Shaniberar Chithi'* (*The Saturday Letter*). Even Tagore who did not deny Jibanananda's poetic talent could not approve either his choice of themes or his style. He was an outsider in the contemporary poetic world. But destiny had a great reward in store for the gifted individual. During the last years of Jibanananda's life, his popularity began to ascend, and in 1952 he received the *Rabindra Puraskar Award* for his poetry. Three years after that in 1955, the year following that of his death, he was awarded the Indian *Sahitya Academy Award*. His rapidly growing popularity soon made him emerge '*as the foremost Bengali poet,*' and his '*many volumes of poetry came into widespread demand*' (Das Gupta, *Introduction*, *'Jibanananda Das, Selected Poems*,' XI). Today Jibanananda is placed among the most significant Bengali poets, and his position rests only after Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Jibanananda's poetry '*is a search for awareness, for light, and for this he must sift through the darkness that is filled with half-truths, weariness and existentialist despair*' (Tishani Doshi, '*The Hindu*,' July 6, 2003). His poems portray the affliction of the soul awakened from the stupor of the human world that lacks both in meaning and identity. The soul that once had participated with passion in the affairs of the material

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world now with time has painfully realized its meaninglessness

Having mounted all the stairs
He arrived at the last empty step
Life, time and universe
Yield only one meaning
The way itself is all. ('*Icy Winds' and* from, *'Agranthita Kavita'*).

To live without an actual purpose or, in other words, to go on toiling without any real outcome -- that is what life can offer a man at best. The harsh reality, however, does not pose a problem so long as one is not aware of it. Most people live in obscurity about this truth. They go on living, involving themselves in all sorts of human enterprise – jobs, politics, business, rituals, popular entertainment, and so on – available to their consciousness, unaware of the despair of life they escape. The protagonist too, has done the same thing. He says:

Have I not lifted the plough like any peasant?
Carried buckets of water
Sickle in hand, gone into the fields?
Like fishermen
Have I not wallowed in the puddles
And wrapped my body in the smell of fish
And water weeds and algae
The same as they? (*Within My Head*, from *'Dhusar Pandulipi'*)

He has participated in the drama of life like any other man, and has played his role apparently with success. At that time '*Like the wind has life flown/ Under the canopy of stars my mind has slept; / My boundless wishes I've fulfilled without let.*' But one day while moving '*between light and dark*' he suddenly feels within his head –

A sense gathering force
That I cannot dismiss;
It's not a dream, not a breath of peaceful air
Nor love. It places its hand upon mine
Suddenly, making all action seem vain
Inane, empty. (*Within My Head*)

The newly emerged '*sense*' questions the meaning of life. He reflects upon himself to discover the futility of all the work to which he had invested his time and energy until the present moment. He sees himself in a place with emptiness all around. There is no real success to attain, no real hurdle to overcome, no real aim to achieve. Everything a man knows to be composing the meaning of life is a relative matter within a particular social context. The '*sense*' leads him to realize – '*The way itself is all'*. It is not that after the awakening to this awareness he has not tried to escape his newly founded habit of reflection – '*I want to ignore him./ In my comings and goings,/ I try to drive him away/ To smash his skull to pieces*'. But his effort has proved to be futile – '*But like a living thing, relentlessly,/ He keeps circling me*' (*Within My Head*). It is impossible to escape reflection once one has become conscious of the human reality, to retreat joyfully to something he has found meaningless. That Jibanananda personifies consciousness here is very significant. The personified abstraction is the aftermath of the awareness of human absurdity. The realization of the protagonist reflects the perception of the poet himself.

The cognizance of the purposelessness of worldly enterprise leads to the consciousness of personal freedom. Now he '*knows himself to be the master of his days . . . convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go.*' (Camus, *'The Myth of Sisyphus*,*'* 89) At this particular moment, if he can realize that only he can project meaning in his life, he is saved. He is then on the way to the quest for contentment and the construction of subjective identity. Otherwise, to escape the anguish he might choose self-destruction, the final choice to break away from the dilemma of the freedom to choose.

Jibanananda reveals his penetrating insight into the human psyche in '*One Day Eight Years Ago*' (from *Mahaprithivi*). In the poem '*grandpa*' tells the story of a person who had committed suicide one night eight years ago for some unknown reason. His body laid '*Spread-eagled on the table, in the morgue.*' The persons belonging to the acquaintance of the dead man were much bewildered at his act of putting an end to his life. They told him that the man had:

No failure 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.

The man, content apparently, was '*Dead nevertheless*.' Next to the man '*lay his bride, his child*' before he made the final decision of his life. Jibanananda contrasts with subtlety the man's longing for death with the world's primordial instinct for life – '*Yet the owl kept awake, longs to live;/ The aged frog begs for two moments/ Warming to the hope of another dawn.*' It is undeniable that like every living creature man's greatest yearning is to live. A lame excuse is sufficient for one to be optimistic about his place in the world. He never ceases to feel that everything will be fine in the future. The man's act of self-destruction baffled everyone consequently – none could make out why '*Last*

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night, the fifth night of the moon, he felt/ A rush of affection for death.'

Man exists simultaneously into two spheres – he has a social presence, and is also an individual being. As most people live primarily in the society, they scarcely exist as an individual. Each devotes himself into imitating the worldly laws and customs, and as such the 'being' in him gets almost wiped out by the magnitude of his 'becoming.' The society judges the quality of his life and his happiness in terms of his material success and his participation in social affairs. The dead man was successful and content in this sense. The man was for long under the spell of social role-playing – a man having his profession, a loving husband, a caring father, a follower of the social norms. His community might have eulogized him for all that. But suddenly one day, we never know how, the world had appeared to his consciousness in a new form, one devoid of the romantic illusions giving it an optimistic mould and he felt that '*It all lied, it all stank, it all stank of lies, it all pretended to be meaningful and joyful and beautiful, and it was all just concealed putrefaction*.' From then on to him, '*The world tasted bitter. Life was torture*.' (Hermann Hesse, *'Siddhartha*,*'* 22)

Buddha told Siddhartha, '*Beware of too much wisdom*' (Hesse, 43). The wisdom about the irrationality of the world was probably the cause leading the man to suicide. Perhaps he had meditated too much upon the matter, and his life became a torture to him accordingly. Grandfather rightly speculates, '*Had he not slept for long? Did he long to sleep*?' Surely he could not sleep with the '*unbearable burden of knowing.*' His self-reflection manifested to him the inner emptiness of life. The irony is that the man failed to see the brighter side of his discovery – if life has no inherent meaning, he needs to transcend this meaninglessness by fashioning the way himself. He realized his freedom to choose but could not direct that freedom to construct the meaning of life. Instead, he applied his freedom to put an end to choosing itself. His suicide is, in fact, a '*confession,*' a confession that '*life is too much*' that he was unable to '*understand it*' (Camus, 7).

The longing of the troubled heart to escape the absurdity of the world recurs again and again in Jibanananda. In '*Darkness*' (from '*Banalata Sen*') the soul agonizingly articulates –

Don't you know, blue musk-deer moon,
I woke up to the stupid light of day
And saw myself again as a creature of the earth
And I was afraid.

If one needs to survive in the human world, it' is not sufficient merely to struggle with, as is popularly believed, the external forces. One needs equally to keep oneself in oblivion about the self, about one's freedom to choose. So, in a sense, a person's endeavour to live as a social entity is his choice to escape the anguish of existence. Before the soul '*woke up*' to the absurdity of human affairs and felt afraid to find itself as '*a creature of the earth*,' that is, an entity that is nothing else but a unit of the crowd following the social '*ordering . . . to stand to attention*,' the person was busy in an endless chain of human affairs and role-playing. One venture after the other had kept him from the boredom of social life. Life was moving on in this way until one day suddenly he felt everything to be merely a childish fancy, a '*deceiving elf*' (Keats, '*Ode to a Nightingale*,' line 74) that cannot keep one for long under its spell. His face then '*turned stiffy towards the world*' and his heart was '*filled with hatred*.'

For the world fermented in the heat of the sun,
Festive with the squealing of pigs,
Bursting with sordid joy.
Drowning the roaring sun
In the unrelenting darkness of my heart,
I sought to go to sleep again,
To merge into the breast of the dark,
Into the vaginal darkness of limitless death.

The image of '*the vaginal darkness of limitless death*' is very significant. The '*sordid joy*' of the human world creates in the troubled heart a longing to retreat to a state of oblivion before being born. The yearning now becomes synonymous with death in the poet's thought – '*The stillness of death . . . reigns in my heart*'. Because he is alone with himself, the knowledge of the absurdity of the world becomes unbearable to him, and he tells the moon that the '*sleep that envelopes me is too deep/ For you to destroy.*' '*Unlike the enterprise of daylight*' that keeps one forgetful of this absurdity, the solitude of the night manifests to him his inner emptiness, and he never again wishes to wake up '*to the stupid light of day.*' His inner consciousness is at war with the unconsciousness of the world. With his awakened consciousness that he never again wants to disown, he wishes to lie '*Upon the terraced side of the water*' '*Knowing that I shall never, never/ Awake again*.' His wish to die by the river-side, *'Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife*' (Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,* line 73) emphasizes once again his desire to flee from the futility of human enterprise. It appears that he finds in nature something more substantial than he has in the human world.

Becoming conscious of its freedom, if the soul can overcome the anguish of the consciousness, the search for the meaning of life begins. Whether the soul can finally succeed in attaining the meaning is not the primary concern at this stage. Like Keats and Wordsworth, Jibanananda sometimes discovers this meaning in nature, which is captivating and mysterious concurrently. The troubled heart seeks refuge in the lap of nature and becomes aware of the presence of a self

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within, and the way of life now take an inward direction. The poems in the collection '*Rupasi Bangla*' that Jibanananda composed in 1934, a time when he was passing through poverty and frustration, reflect his nostalgia for meaning and fulfillment with the nature of Bengal serving as the backdrop of the story of his heart. The poet's description of Bengal's natural beauty endows the place with a magical quality –

I have seen Bengal's face, that is why I do not seek
Beauty of the earth any more: I wake up in the dark
And see the dawn's magpie-robin perched under the parasol-like huge leaf
Of the fig tree – on all sides I see mounds of leaves of
Black plum – banyan – jackfruit – oak – pipal lying still;
Their shadows fall on the spurge bushes on zedoary clumps;
Who knows when Chand near Champa from his madhukar boat
Saw such oaks – banyans – gamboge's blue shades
Bengal's beauty incomparable.
Behula too someday floating on raft on Gangur's water –
When the full moon of the tenebrous twelfth night died on the river's shoal –
Saw countless pipals and banyans beside the golden corn,
Alas, heard the tender songs of shama – and one day going to Amara.
When she danced like a torn wagtail in Indra's court
Bengal's river field, wild violets wept at her feet like anklet bells.

(*Sonnet 4*, '*Rupasi Bangla*')

The nature of Bengal here becomes a paradisal abode where the soul in frantic endeavour to liberate itself from the hell of the material world at length finds solace. He needs not search for beauty anywhere else, for beauty in its archetypal form is already present here. There is beauty in the greenness of trees under the endless blueness, in the far-stretched fields of corn, in the fragrance of flowers, in the taste of fruits, in the warble of the birds until the fall of night, as well as in the soft music of the river. The semi-darkness of the evening and the reflection of the moon on the river at night are equally bewitching. He wakes up in the darkness of night to discover the solitude necessary to encounter with the self. The mellowness of the surroundings appealing to the senses creates in him a feeling that the quest for contentment has finally found its destination here. He is spellbound to sense that there is no past or future, that everything, every meaning has merged in the present, that the sound of *Behula*'s anklet dancing in the court of *Indra* resonates in the water of the forever floating river, that he has lived through eternity in the music of the flow of water. On experiencing the affinity of the soul with nature, he wishes to '*remain on Bengal's shore*' (*Sonnet 3*) forever. He feels that together with the duck he is carried away to '*some land of legends*' and '*shall not lose*' the inward bliss '*In the crowd of the earth*' (*Sonnet 3*). In this moment of ecstasy he gains the ability to discover his self, and experiences the deliverance of his soul.

The soul seeking the meaning of existence since time immemorial might also find its fulfillment in the beauty of the woman whom it has desired in the heart of hearts or has seen in dreams. Having travelled for thousand years from the one end of the world to the other – '*from the Ceylonese waters to the Malayan sea . . . the fading world of Vimbisara and Asoka/ Even further—the forgotten city of Vidarva*' (*Banalata Sen* from *'Banalata Sen'*) – and permeating the consciousness with a new experience every moment, the soul is today overcome with weariness. The 'self' has not becomes its perpetual abode, and so the consciousness has failed to attain 'moksha.' The '*the ocean of life around continues to foam*' consequently. The soul has travelled in darkness, being unable to overcome the sway of the human world to become one with the self.

Paradoxically, however, the soul has all along sensed the presence of meaning in the form of beauty that has not yet become apparent to the consciousness. How to transcend the facticity of life to experience this beauty is unknown to the heart. That is why '*Banalata Sen*' of '*Natore*' had appeared in momentary flashes of '*soothing moments*' but not in the shape of an abstraction akin to 'nirvana.' Banalata Sen is the symbol of the archetypal beauty latent in the individual soul, a form in which the self finds perfection. So long as one is not able to transcend the facticity, it is impossible to be in proximity to the image of perfection. In search of the self, the soul was simultaneously busy in overcoming the external influence of the human world. Once the soul gets the fruitful result of its effort, one gets the ability of pure reflection, and the self with its perfection stands before the awakened individual. Banalata Sen now appears in a new form – one of '*profound refuge*,' something having permanent value. In her, the heart discovers that form of undistorted beauty that inspired the great poet to compose the immortal lines – "*Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know*" (Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, lines 49-50).

The encounter with the self means the discovery of individual existence. Now all the stale affairs of humanity get faded. '*All transactions of the day being over*,' the soul is filled with vivacity in the presence of beauty as it sits '*face to face with Banalata Sen.*' The experience of pure beauty fills life with ecstasy, that has the power to transmute momentary bliss into eternity. The newly experienced life force desires not to lose the self once again to the '*world . . . led by the counsel/ Of*

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the loveless, pitiless ghosts' (*A Strange Darkness* from *'Sreshtha Kavita'*), the life that wishes to pass away with joy from itself to discover its 'self' in the bliss of paradise. The poet himself might have felt so before his death. The popular contemporary belief says that the death was a suicide (1). The tram tried its best to make him aware of its presence, but the poet as though deliberately came under its wheels. He had probably realized the meaninglessness of human affairs, was probably desirous of freeing himself from the frenzied whirlpool of the shallow and repetitive social demands, was probably in his heart of hearts one with Banalata Sen at that moment. His suicide is probably not a confession that life is too much to be understood; it is rather an existential leap when the individual discovers his self in the light of a comparison with an abstraction. The discovery of the self is akin to the discovery of God, a promise of eternity when '*the earth no longer exists, nor creation; / Only you and I lie. / And, against the night sky,/ Stands the eternal tree*.' (*Mortal Swans* from *'Agranthita Kavita'*) (2)

Notes

1. *Adhunik Bangla Kavita*, Ed. Humayun Azad, ISBN 9849012051, Web (The popular belief was that Jibanananda had committed suicide. However, none of the scholars has confirmed it)
2. The English translations of Jibanananda's two sonnets from the collection '*Rupassi Bangla*' and the poem '*Banalata Sen*' are by Faizul Latif Chowdhury (*Classic Poetry Series,* '*Jibanananda Das, Poems*,' 2012, Poemhunter.com – The World's Poetry Archive, Web) and the rest are by Chidananda Das Gupta ('*Jibanananda Das, Selected Poems*,' Penguin Books India, 2006, Print)

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