

Pastoral Imagination and Environmental Anxiety in Jibananda Das**Mumu Ananna Rozario¹**

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This Paper examines the pastoral imagination and underlying environmental anxiety in Jibananda Das's Ruposhi Bangla and Banalata Sen through the lens of ecological literary analysis. Jibananda Das's poetic landscapes, rich in rural imagery and natural symbolism, evoke a deep connection to Bengal's ecological heritage. However, beneath this lyrical celebration lies a subtle yet persistent anxiety about environmental degradation, displacement, and the alienation of modern existence from Nature. The study argues that Das's pastoral vision is not merely nostalgic but critically engages with the environmental transformations occurring during his time. By highlighting the tension between idealized rural beauty and the foreboding signs of ecological loss, the paper reveals how Jibananda Das anticipates modern ecological consciousness. His poetry, thus, becomes a powerful site for exploring the intersections of memory, landscape, and environmental thought in early 20th century Bengali literature. Through close textual analysis, this paper demonstrates how Jibananda Das constructs a poetic space where Nature is not only a site of beauty and memory but also a space of loss, displacement, and ecological anxiety. His repeated invocation of a vanishing Bengal and fragmented Natural imagery reveals a deeper awareness of the tensions between human and non-human worlds. While Ruposhi Bangla envisions an almost mythical homeland filled with lush flora and fauna, it also gestures toward a nostalgia that is inseparable from a fear of irreversible environmental change. Similarly, Banalata Sen evokes timeless beauty and quite rural moments, yet these moments often emerge in contrast to the chaos and fragmentation of modern life, suggesting a longing for ecological harmony that is increasingly elusive. By reading Jibananda Das's poetry through an ecological lens, this paper argues that his work anticipates many concerns of contemporary environmental thought, including the alienation of modern individuals from Nature, the emotional and cultural impact of environmental loss, and the role of memory in constructing ecological consciousness. In doing so, the paper situates Jibananda Das not only as a poet of nostalgia and romanticism but also as a prophetic voice whose poetic visions offer valuable insights into the early literary expressions of environmental anxiety in South Asian literature. His work remains deeply relevant today, as ecological crises demand a renewed engagement with literature that foregrounds the intimate, fragile ties between humans and the Natural world.

Keywords: Jibananda Das, Ruposhi Bangla, Banalata Sen, Environmental Anxiety, Pastoral imagination, Ecological consciousness.

Introduction

Jibananda Das was born on February 17, 1899, in the village of Barishal in the Bengal Presidency, which is now part of Bangladesh. He came from Bengali Hindu Kayastha family that valued education and literature. His father, Satyananda Das, was a teacher, while his mother, Kusumkumari Das, was a well-educated woman and a poet herself. He was known for spiritual and moralistic poetry. This literary environment played a significant role in shaping Jibananda Das's early interest in literature and poetry. Jibananda Das (1899-1954) remains one of the most enigmatic and influential poets in Bengali literature. His life was marked by personal struggles, academic pursuits, and an unwavering devotion to poetry. Though often overlooked during his lifetime, Das's work has since earned him the reputation of a pioneering modernist poet, whose unique voice shaped the course of 20th century Bengali Literature. From a young age, Das showed an affinity for reading and writing. His exposure to Bengali classics, as well as Western literature introduced by his schooling, fostered a broad literary curiosity. Das attended the Brajamohan School in Barisal and later enrolled in the prestigious Presidency College in Kolkata, where he pursued his education in English literature.

Jibananda Das was deeply influenced by both Indian and Western literary traditions. He graduated from Presidency College with honors and later obtained a master's degree in English literature from the university of Calcutta. His academic training introduced him to the works of European poets and novelists, including T.S. Eliot, W.B Yeats, and the French symbolists, whose influence can be seen in his modernist poetic style. Despite his academic achievements, Das struggled to find a stable and rewarding professional career. He took up several teaching positions at different colleges across Bengal, including Ripon College in Kolkata and City College, but his introverted nature and unconventional style made it difficult for him to thrive in academic environments.

Jibananda Das began writing poetry early in life but faced significant challenges in gaining recognition. His first collection, *Jhara Palok* (Fallen Feathers), was published in 1927 and received little critical attention. Unlike the popular poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, which was widely celebrated for its lyricism and accessibility, Das's poetry was considered obscure and unconventional at that time. His complex imagery, unconventional rhythms, and introspective tone did not resonate immediately with readers and critics, who were accustomed to more traditional forms. Despite this lukewarm reception, Das continued to write prolifically. His subsequent collections, including *Ruposhi Bangla* (Beautiful Bengal) published in 1934, began to show the depth of his engagement with themes like Nature, time, loss and identity. These works highlighted his ability to blend rural Bengali imagery with a modernist sensibility.

Jibananda Das's personal life was marked by solitude and a reserved demeanor. He married Surbala Das in 1939, but the couple did not have children. Many biographers suggest that Das was deeply introverted and somewhat socially withdrawn. His poetry often reflects a sense of loneliness and existential solitude, which may have mirrored his own internal world. Despite his quiet life, Das was known among his close friends and literary circles as a serious thinker and a passionate lover of poetry. He was involved with literary journals and contributed essays, poems, and critiques, though he never sought public fame or popularity. Das's life coincided with significant political and social upheavals. The Bengal region underwent intense changes under British colonial rule, including the rise of nationalist movements and eventually the traumatic Partition of India in 1947. Though Das's poetry rarely addressed political issues overtly, these events shaped the cultural landscape in which he wrote. The trauma of partition, which divided Bengal into West Bengal (India) and East Bengal (East Pakistan, now Bangladesh) affected Das deeply. The displacement and communal violence experienced by millions found indirect expression in his themes of loss, alienation, and fractured identity. The final years of Jibananda Das's life were marked by relative obscurity and hardship. Though his poetic genius was recognized by some literary contemporaries, widespread acclaim eluded him during his lifetime. He continued teaching but did not hold permanent or prestigious positions. Tragically, Jibananda Das died on October 22, 1954 in Kolkata after being hit by a tram. Some reports tell that the accident was accidental, while others speculate about the possibility of suicide, given his solitary life and emotional struggles, however no definitive evidence supports this claim.

It was only after his death that Das's poetry gained the recognition it deserved. Modern critics and readers have come to appreciate his innovative style and profound themes. His work is now regarded as a cornerstone of modern Bengali poetry, influencing generations of poets and scholars. His explorations of Nature, time, memory and existential angst resonate strongly in contemporary literary and ecological studies. Jibananda Das's life was one of quiet dedication to his art amid personal and societal challenges. Though he lived largely outside the literary spotlight during his lifetime, his poetry's depth, originality, and emotional resonance have made him one of Bengal's greatest literary figures. His journey from a sensitive boy in Barisal to pioneering modernist poet reflects the struggles of an artist ahead of his time, whose voice continues to inspire and move readers decades after his passing.

Ecological Perspective on Jibananda Das's *Ruposhi Bangla*

Jibananda Das's *Ruposhi Bangla* (Beautiful Bengal), published posthumously in 1957, and is widely regarded as one of the most evocative collections of Bengali poetry that paints a vivid picture of Bengal's Natural landscape. Beyond its lyrical celebration of rural beauty, *Ruposhi Bangla* is imbued with ecological consciousness, reflecting an intricate relationship between humans and Nature. Through an ecological lens, Das's work transcends mere pastoral nostalgia to reveal a profound awareness of environment change, loss, and the ethical responsibilities of dwelling within the Natural world. This essay explores how *Ruposhi Bangla* can be read as an early form of ecopoetry and as a poetic articulation of ecological identity and environmental anxiety.

When death comes, who knows?

On black day the great hibiscus blooms, it falls

Yet in its fragrance lives the soul of the evening breeze.

As long as I live I am in the fields and the rivers,

No fear of death.

The ancient banyan tree's shadow still lies upon my face.

At first glance, Ruposhi Bangla offers a pastoral vision steeped in the lushness of Bengal's rivers, forests, and rural life. Das's poems evoke images of tranquil countryside scenes filled with birdsong, flowing rivers, swaying trees, and the rhythms of agricultural life. This pastoral imagination serves as an aesthetic homage to the Natural beauty of Bengal, foregrounding the intimate connections between people and their environment. However, unlike conventional pastoral poetry that often idealizes Nature as untouched and static, Das's poetry reveals an awareness of ecological vulnerability. His portrayal of the landscape is suffused with a subtle tension between celebration and loss, suggesting that the idyllic rural world he describes is fragile and threatened. The Natural elements are not only sites of beauty but also witnesses to environmental change and cultural transformation wrought by colonialism, urbanization, and modernization. Thus, Das's pastoralism is not escapist; it is critical and reflective, inviting readers to consider the consequences of human interference with Nature.

Though the term "ecopoetry" was coined decades after Das's death, scholars such as Akaitab Mukherjee argue that Ruposhi Bangla can be regarded as a precursor to the genre. Ecopoetry, broadly defined, is poetry that foregrounds ecological concerns, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life and often calling attention to environmental degradation. In Ruposhi Bangla, Das's poems articulate a mode of 'dwelling' a concept of explored in deep ecology and environmental philosophy that emphasizes living harmoniously with one's Natural surroundings rather than dominating or exploring them. His depiction of the rivers, birds, and forests portrays Nature as a co-inhabited space, one that is part of human identity and memory. The poems resist a purely anthropocentric viewpoint by granting agency and presence to non-human elements of the environment. For instance, rivers are not mere backdrops but dynamic entities with rhythms and moods that shape human experience. This relational perspective aligns with ecological thinking that critiques the human or Nature divide and underscores the ethical imperative to live in balance with the environment. Das's poetry thus anticipates contemporary environmental concerns by highlighting the interdependence between humans and the ecosystem they inhabit.

While Ruposhi Bangla celebrates Bengal's Natural splendor, it is also permeated by an undercurrent of environmental anxiety. Das's poetic voice expresses a sense of mourning for a disappearing world a land shaped by centuries of human nature interaction now vulnerable to destruction and alienation. The mid-20th century Bengal that Das writes about was undergoing rapid transformation. Colonial exploration, industrialization, and demographic shifts were altering landscapes and disrupting traditional ways of life. In this

context, Das's poems can be read as elegies for an environment in decline, capturing both personal and collective grief over ecological loss. Moreover, the environmental anxiety in Ruposhi Bangla intersects with cultural concerns. The destruction of Natural landscape parallels the erosion of cultural identity and heritage. The poems mourn not only the loss of trees or rivers but also the displacement of the cultural memory embedded in these landscapes. This intertwining of ecological and cultural loss exemplifies what some scholars term "ecological nationalism" a mode of national pride rooted in the natural environment and a call to protect it as a shared heritage. The concept of "ecological nationalism" helps situate Ruposhi Bangla within a broader political and ethical framework. Khadiza Akter and others argue that Das's poetry fosters a sense of ecological nationalism, where love for the land translates into a responsibility to safeguard it. This is particularly poignant given the historical context of Bengal, a region scarred by colonialism, partition, ongoing environmental challenges.

Das's poetic landscape becomes a symbol of collective identity, cultural memory, and ecological belonging. By linking Nature with national pride, his work urges readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment, not as passive users but as active stewards. This ecological ethic resonates with contemporary environmental movements in South Asia, where protecting Natural heritage is tied to preserving cultural and National integrity. Another important ecological dimension of Ruposhi Bangla is its treatment of memory and time. Das's poetry is deeply temporal, weaving together the past, present and future in its vision of Bengal's environment. The Natural world is portrayed as a repository of memory a living archive that carries stories of ancestors, historical events, and cultural rituals. This temporality enriches the ecological reading by emphasizing sustainability and continuity. The poems suggest that human survival depends on maintaining this chain of ecological and cultural memory. Disrupting the Natural environment means severing ties with history and identity. Furthermore, Das's use of cyclical imagery of seasons, river flows, and life cycles underscores an ecological worldview that sees Nature as a dynamic, regenerative force. This contrasts with modern, industrial conceptions of Nature as a resource to be exploited.

Banalata Sen

Jibananda Das's poem Banalata Sen is one of the most iconic and celebrated works in modern Bengali literature. Written in early 20th century, it captures themes of love, memory, time, and transcendence through the lyrical encounter with Banalata Sen, a woman who symbolizes the timeless beauty and mystery of rural Bengals. While the poem is often studied for its emotional and philosophical depth, an ecological reading reveals layers of meaning that emphasize the interconnectedness between human and the Natural world. This essay explores how Banalata Sen can be interpreted as an ecopoetic text that reflects on Nature not merely as a backdrop but as an active participant in the shaping of human identity, memory, and existential longing.

For a thousand years I have walked the paths of the world,

From the seas of Ceylon to the farthest lands of Malaya.

Much I have travelled,

In the dark world of Bimbisara and Ashoka, farther still in the dark night of Vidarbha

I am weary of the world's oceans, its endless waves

Unlike many traditional poems where Nature serves primarily as a passive setting for human drama, Banalata Sen presents the Natural world as an intimate and active force shaping the emotional and psychological landscape of the speaker. The poem's imagery of the night sky, flowing rivers, and distant horizons evokes a sense of timelessness and continuity, suggesting that Nature holds the key to understanding human existence. The poet's journey through various landscapes "the nights of Vidarbha", "the waves of the ocean" creates a dialogue between the self and the environment. These geographical and Natural references are not mere locations but carriers of historical memory and existential meaning. This dynamic interaction reveals a worldview where human life is deeply embedded in and inseparable from the Natural world.

Banalata Sen herself is often interpreted as a symbol of Bengal's Natural and cultural essence. She represents not only the beauty of the land but also a harmonious state of being, where human and Nature coexist in peaceful balance. The poem's portrayal of her evokes a pastoral ideal, reflecting the interdependence between the human spirit and the environment. From an ecological perspective, Banalata Sen embodies a form of dwelling a concept in environmental philosophy that emphasizes living in respectful harmony with one's surroundings. Her presence in the poem suggests reconciliation between the restless human condition and the calm, enduring rhythms of Nature. She is a figure of solace who guides the speaker back to a sense of rootedness and belonging in the Natural world.

Banalata Sen traverses vast temporal and spatial dimensions, weaving together historical, mythological, and geographical references. The speaker's wanderings through distant lands and epochs evoke a deep sense of human dislocation and yearning. Yet, the eventual encounter with Banalata Sen brings a moment of peace and recognition, grounding the speaker in a particular place and time rural Bengal. This movement across space and time reflects ecological themes of migration, displacement, and the search for home. The poem can be read as an exploration of how humans relate to place and environment in the face of alienation and change. In an era marked by colonial disruption and modern transformation, Das's poetry underscores the importance of reconnecting with one's ecological roots to restore identity and balance.

A key ecological theme in Banalata Sen is the role of memory not just individual but collective and ecological memory. The Natural elements in the poem carry stories and histories that transcend human lifespans. Rivers, forests, and skies serve as repositories of ancestral experience and cultural heritage. This ecological memory fosters a sense of continuity and responsibility. The speaker's recognition of Banalata Sen can be seen as a metaphor for acknowledging the deep, enduring connections between people and their environment. This recognition calls for an ethic of care and stewardship, emphasizing that protecting the Natural world is integral to preserving human identity and cultural legacy.

The structure and rhythm of Banalata Sen also contribute to its ecological significance. The poem's cadence mirrors the ebb and flow of Natural cycles the rising and falling of tides, the passage of day and night, the seasons' endless rotation. This rhythmic quality evokes the interconnectedness of human life and Natural processes. Das's evocative language captures the sensory richness of the environment, from the dark velvet of night to distant shimmering of horizons. These linguistic choices immerse readers in the Natural world and emphasize the mutual shaping of human emotions and ecological rhythms. The poem thus becomes a meditation on the inseparability of life's emotional currents and Nature's temporal cycles. Beneath the poem's serene surface lies a subtle undercurrent of environmental anxiety and existential longing. The speaker's long wanderings and search for Banalata Sen reflect a broader human quest for meaning and belonging in a world marked by uncertainty and change. From an ecological viewpoint, this longing can be interpreted as a response to environmental degradation and cultural dislocation. The poem's nostalgic tone reflects awareness of a world in transition where traditional connections to land Nature are threatened by modernity, colonialism, and urbanization. This ecological anxiety adds depth to the poem, making it only a celebration of Natural beauty but also a call to preserve and restore the fragile balance between humans and the environment. Today, Banalata Sen continues to resonate as a work of ecological insight and ethical reflection. In the face of global environmental crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss and cultural homogenization, Das's poem invites readers to reconsider their relationship with Nature. By portraying Nature as an active, living presence intertwined with human identity, Banalata Sen anticipates contemporary ecopoetry's aims: to foster ecological awareness, challenge anthropocentrism, and inspire ethical action. The poem's themes of memory, place, and belonging remain vital to environmental discourse, highlighting the necessity of cultural and ecological preservation.

Conclusion

Jibananda Das's Ruposhi Bangla remains a profoundly ecological work, ahead of its time in articulating a poetic vision that blends aesthetic beauty with environmental consciousness. Through its pastoral imagery, relational understanding of Nature, expression of ecological anxiety, the collection invites readers to reflect on their place within the Natural world and the responsibilities that come with it. In the face of ongoing environmental crises, Ruposhi Bangla offers valuable insights into how poetry can foster ecological awareness, cultural identity, and ethical commitment. It serves as a reminder that literature not only reflects human experiences but can also be a powerful agent for imagining sustainable futures rooted in harmony with Nature.

Jibananda Das's Banalata Sen is much more than a lyrical meditation on love and memory. It is a profound ecological text reveals the intricate ties between humans and the Natural world. Through its rich imagery, symbolic figures, and rhythmic language, the poem emphasizes ecological harmony, environmental continuity, and the ethical imperative to protect the landscapes that shape human identity. In exploring themes of displacement, longing, and renewal, Banalata Sen offers valuable insights for contemporary readers grappling with environmental challenges. It reminds us that our emotional and cultural lives

are inseparable from the health and vitality of the ecosystems we inhabit, urging a renewed commitment to living in harmony with Nature.

Jibanananda Das's poetry offers a nuanced perspective on the relationship between humanity and the Natural world. Through his pastoral imagination, he captures the beauty of rural Bengal while also acknowledging the environmental anxieties that accompany societal progress. His works serve as a poignant reminder of the need to preserve the delicate balance between development and ecological sustainability. In an era where environmental concerns are increasingly pressing, Das's poetry remains a timeless reflection on the enduring bond between humans and the earth.

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