

Exploring Time and Space: A Postcolonial Analysis of Historical and Geographical Imagery in the poem Banalata Sen

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Abstract

The poet-narrator of Banalata Sen intricately blends historical and mythological references, creating a vivid tapestry that transcends time and geography. His journey spans from the oceans of Ceylon to the Malabar Coast, touching upon the reigns of Emperors Bimbisara and Ashoka. He navigates through ancient cities such as Vidarbha and Vidisha, delving into India's rich cultural and historical heritage. However, despite this vast historical canvas, the poem ultimately centres on the intimate presence of Banalata Sen of Natore. She emerges as a timeless sanctuary for the weary traveller, providing a deeply personal connection that contrasts with the grandeur of historical exploration. This juxtaposition symbolizes tranquillity and profound meaning amidst the endless expanse of history and space.

Keywords: Jibanananda Das, Banalata Sen, weary traveller motif, ancient India, Vidarbha and Vidisha

1. Introduction

Banalata Sen, a masterpiece of Bengali literature by Jibanananda Das, was first published in 1942 in the collection of the same name. Renowned for its vivid imagery, rhythmic elegance, and deep philosophical insight, the poem explores themes of time, life's fleeting nature, and the pursuit of solace.

The narrative follows the poet's symbolic journey across vast stretches of time and history, leading to his encounter with Banalata Sen. She emerges as a symbol of tranquillity, beauty, and simplicity amidst life's chaos. Her character is often seen as a representation of the poet's yearning for comfort, love, or spiritual fulfilment.

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2. Discussions

The poem is structured into three stanzas, each brimming with rich imagery and references to history, mythology, and nature. The first stanza recounts the poet's timeless journey through ancient epochs and civilizations. In the second, Banalata Sen appears, offering a moment of rest and connection. The third stanza contemplates the fleeting nature of existence, concluding with an image of ultimate peace, like a bird returning to its nest.

Far more than a portrayal of a person, Banalata Sen is a reflection on the transient nature of life and the timeless search for meaning. Its universal themes and expressive beauty ensure its lasting appeal across generations.

Jibanananda Das's Banalata Sen is a seminal work in modern Bengali literature, seamlessly blending elements of history, mythology, and personal experience. The poem, narrated by a weary traveller, delves into themes of time, history, and human desire, traversing oceans, ancient cities, and significant historical periods. The references to figures like Emperors Bimbisara and Ashoka, as well as regions like Vidarbha and Vidisha, enrich the narrative. Despite this expansive historical backdrop, the poem centres on Banalata Sen of Natore, symbolizing beauty, comfort, and eternal refuge.

Das juxtaposes the grandeur of history and geography with the intimacy of human connection, highlighting India's cultural wealth and the universal search for peace. This blend offers a timeless exploration of history, space, and the human soul.

Banalata Sen, first published in 1935, celebrates Bengal's beauty while intertwining the ancient history of India with Das's contemporary literary vision. The poem forms a bridge between the past and present, capturing both historical significance and poetic imagination.

Das says:

"I have walked the roads across the earth's breast for a thousand years.

*In the darkness of night, I have ranged far-from Ceylon waters
To the Malay Sea; in Vimbisara and Ashoka's grey world
Have I been, and the still more distant darkness of Vidarbha."*

In Banalata Sen, Jibanananda Das portrays Banalata Sen as either a simple village woman or an embodiment of Bengal's timeless feminine beauty. The poet finds a deep sense of peace and solace in her presence. The opening line, however, hints at the unbroken flow of human history and the long journey of our ancestors. The speaker's voyage from the waters of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to the Malay Seas (Malaysia) symbolizes the Bay of Bengal, highlighting its profound geographical and cultural significance to Bengal.

"Das invokes historical figures like Bimbisara and Ashoka to highlight the splendour of ancient India. He also alludes to ancient cities such as Vidarbha, Vidisha, and Shravasti, suggesting that the beauty of Banalata Sen — representing Bengal's charm — has roots in these historical locations. These cities embody a shared cultural and historical heritage, linking Bengal to the broader Indian subcontinent. Das underscores the absence of cultural or ancestral differences between Bengal, Vidisha, and India as a whole. In his poetic imagery, Banalata Sen's face mirrors the intricate carvings of Shravasti, representing India's unified cultural identity. This realization fills Das with a deep sense of pride as he reflects on the nation's rich historical consciousness."

Bimbisara was a prominent ruler of the Magadha Kingdom, known for laying the foundation of imperial supremacy in the Indian subcontinent. Vidarbha, a region located in present-day Maharashtra, holds significant historical and cultural

importance. According to the Mahabharata, Rukmini, the wife of Lord Krishna, was the daughter of King Bhishmaka, the ruler of Vidarbha. During the 1st to 2nd century, Vidarbha was an integral part of the Satavahana Empire.

The poem consists of three six-line stanzas, following the Bengali metrical form Aksharbretta or Poyar. Banalata Sen is a lyric poem centred on a woman, Banalata Sen, whose name appears at the end of each stanza. The narrative is told from the perspective of an unnamed traveller, describing Banalata Sen from Natore, a town in present-day Bangladesh, once part of West Bengal.

In the first stanza, the traveller reflects on his long journey, spanning thousands of years, before encountering Banalata Sen. He describes the journey as lasting a thousand years, a relentless trek through dark nights from Ceylon's waters to the Malay Seas. Ceylon, the name given to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese in 1505, was transliterated to English until 1954. Malaya refers to regions associated with present-day Peninsular Malaysia. The vast distance—1,464 nautical miles (2,711.3 km)—from ancient Ceylon to the Malayan coast underscores the extensive journey the narrator undertook in search of Banalata Sen from Natore.

Shifting from geographical locations to the passage of time, the traveller reflects on crossing the fading realms of Bimbisara and Ashoka, continuing his journey to the forgotten city of Vidarbha. Despite his exhaustion, he notes that the ocean of life remains turbulent around him. Amidst this endless voyage, he discovers fleeting moments of peace in the presence of Banalata Sen.

In the second stanza, the traveller portrays Banalata Sen, initially likening her hair to the deep night of the once-forgotten Vidisha. Vidisha, historically known as Bhelsa, Besnagar, and Bhaddilpur, is a city in central Madhya Pradesh,

India, situated around 63 km northeast of Bhopal, the state capital. The name "Vidisha" is believed to have originated from the nearby Bais River, which is referenced in the Puranas.

He then compares her face to the finely crafted sculptures of Shravasti. Shravasti, a district in Uttar Pradesh, India, holds historical significance due to its association with Gautama Buddha and its rich tradition of handmade crafts. In his poem, Jibanananda Das compares the ideal beauty of Banalata Sen to the exquisite craftsmanship of Shravasti, possibly alluding to the stone carvings of Buddha's face. Buddha spent more than two decades in Shravasti, where he performed the famous twin miracles, a key event in his spiritual journey.

In the third stanza, the traveller reflects with deep emotion on his journey through history and geography, remembering Banalata Sen. As evening falls softly, like the sound of dew drops, and the hawk brushes away the golden light of the setting sun from its wings, a serene moment unfolds. The world's colours fade, leaving behind the faint glow of fireflies in the fading light. Birds return to their homes, and the world quietly settles into stillness. When the day's activities have ended and darkness envelops everything, the traveller sits with Banalata Sen, sharing with her the songs of his wandering soul. The narrator recalls that encountering her in the shadows felt like a mariner, stranded at sea, suddenly catching sight of a green land rising between distant islands. In their first interaction, Banalata Sen eagerly asks him, with a sense of impatience, where he had been all this time.

Banalata Sen stands as one of Jibanananda Das's most iconic poems, embodying the core of his poetic style and his rich use of imagery. A significant motif in his poetry is that of the tired traveller, which acts as a symbolic presence throughout the work. The poem revolves around four central images — darkness, flowing water, the passage of time, and a woman —

which are explored and transformed as the poem progresses. These images transition from representing distance to intimacy, from isolation to unity, reflecting the emotional and thematic journey that the poem conveys.

The poet-narrator references two distinct mythological and historical realms, evoking imagery that transcends time and geography. He speaks of his travels across Ceylon and the Malayan Coast, passing through ancient India during the reigns of Emperor Bimbisara and Ashoka. His journey leads him through the forgotten cities of Vidarbha and Vidisha. Despite these vast travels, the poet reveals that the only true solace for his weary soul, the enduring moment of peace, lies in the presence of Banalata Sen of Natore.

The poet's use of imagery in the poem is highly effective. In the first and second stanzas, he crafts powerful visual pictures, including phrases like "the grey world of Ashoka," "life's frothy ocean," "bird nest-like eyes," and "a hawk wiping the scent of sunlight from its wings." These vivid images add depth to the poem's visual quality and captivate the reader's imagination.

"The poem, which opens with the poet's ceaseless journey, ends in a moment of peace. As the darkness settles over the world, the poet finds himself returning to Banalata Sen, his long-sought refuge. The solitude he has yearned for is finally realized. In the final line of the poem, 'Only darkness remains, as I sit there face to face with Banalata Sen,' the poet expresses a profound sense of completion and fulfilment, sharing with the reader a similar experience of peace and contentment."

3. Conclusion

Banalata Sen by Jibanananda Das blends historical, mythological, and personal imagery, focusing on Banalata Sen as a symbol of peace. While referencing grand historical figures and cities, the poem delves into the human longing for connection and serenity. It highlights how personal relationships offer refuge in a time-shaping world, exploring emotional depth, beauty, and the search for meaning.

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