REVIEWING FLANERIE: JIBANANANDA DAS AND URBAN CULTURE IN THE 1940S

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Flanerie, the activity of strolling and looking carried out by the flaneur, has gained considerable importance in the study of modernity. In himself, the flaneur is, in fact, a very obscure thing. Originally, the figure of the flaneur was tied to a specific time-space: Paris in the nineteenth century. Walter Benjamin (1896-1940) absorbed this conjecture into his analysis of the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-67), which became in the larger perspective, a critical evaluation of the 'modern'. According to Benjamin, the flaneur is a figure of excess: an incarnation of a unique urban form of masculine passion manifest as connoisseurship and couched in scopophilia. Flanerie, after Baudelaire, can be understood as the observation of the fleeting, the transitory and the contingent, which is the other half of modernity, obverse to the permanent and central image of the self.

Baudelaire has been quite well known and popular among the literati in Bengal from the 1960s by courtesy the translations of Buddhadeva Bose. But the reception of Benjamin was rather delayed. When he was ultimately discovered, his works that relate to the scopic regimes of modernity seemed to be of seminal importance. His reflections on the dream-world of mass culture, because it is concentrated in the experience of vision, appeared to us as a — with acknowledgement to Susan Buck-Morss — 'dialectics of seeing'.[1] Bengal, particularly Kolkata, shaped and conditioned by a strong Marxian intellectual climate, found in this historical materialist notion an innovative avenue to come to terms with the after-effects of modernity. Brecht and his *versfremdung* metamorphosed the Bangla stage in the 1960s. Benjamin's *Passagen Werke* similarly encouraged us to 'see' differently in the 1990s.

In Bangla literature, the meaning and significance of urban modernity remains, till date, a little elusive. I would claim that Benjamin's experience of Baudelaire, whom he considers a lyric poet in the era of high-capitalism, can be compared and contrasted with

the foremost of the Bengali modems, Jibanananda Das (1899-1954)-a poet, critic and an author of fiction. Despite their different locations in history, we find points of similarities and contrasts. Both Baudelaire and Jibanananda as spectators were resolutely male, both enjoyed their respective cities as places of residence in the midst of the world and yet hidden from it, here and yet elsewhere. Both the artists as citizens were flaneurs whose mobility through the cityscape allowed them access to the public sphere of the gas-lit streets and to the domestic drudgeries. To both of them, the poet was principally the prince, the observer 'enjoying his incognito wherever he goes'[2]. This paper doesn't claim that Benjamin's ocu1ar-centrism and his concept of flanerie can be applied to the 'full and final settlement of issues concerning modern sensibilities as inherited by these two poets. That would be too naive. But Jibanananda's Kolkata, Kolkata in the 1940s, was in turmoil — the sparks of freedom movement, the war, the riot and the political partition — everything was contributing to the fast-changing face of the city in much the same way as in the Paris of the Second Empire. In Kolkata also, the social uncertainty gave birth to a kind of personalized bohemianism.

I would try to arrive at a space of parallelism and comparison that would be conducive to the study of our own parameters of modernity. I think, Walter Benjamin could be a useful point of reference for one who undertakes such a study.

I would, therefore, begin with flanerie itself — particularly the way it was experienced by Baudelaire. Flanerie constituted one of the main narrative devices of the 'Paris Spleens' collection of 1869, particularly in 'Tableaux Parisiens'[3]. Baudelaire provides an insight into exactly what it is that the flaneur does. For Baudelaire the person of the poet is the 'man' (Baudelaire's work pre-supposes a masculine narrator or observer) who can generate aesthetic meaning and an individual kind of existential security from the visible public — the crowd — of the metropolitan environment in the second half of the twentieth century. Baudelaire's poet is a man who is driven out of his private solitude and into the public by his own search for meaning. "He is the man", I quote Keith Tester, "who is only at home existentially when he is not at home physically"[4]. Baudelaire discusses the artist Constantine Guys as a painter of modern life

in his famous essay of 1863, 'Le paintre de la vie modern'. But the essay is less focussed on Guys (perhaps rightly so; in my opinion Baudelaire saw true modernity in Edouard Manet[5]) and is practically a celebration of the flaneur as an impassioned observer. Baudelaire says:

> (T)o the perfect spectator, it is an immense job to make his domicile amongst numbers, amidst fluctuation and movement, amidst the fugitive and infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel at home; to behold the world, to be in the midst of the world and to remain hidden from the world . . . the observer is a prince who always rejoices in incognito.[6]

The Baudelairian concept posits the poet as the man of the crowd as opposed to the man in the crowd. The poet remains at the centre of an order of things of his own making even though, to us, he appears to be just a component of the metropolitan flux. It is in this sense of being of rather than being in which makes the poet different from all others in the crowd.

> But from afar, I watch with tenderness.
> My anxious eyes fixed on your steps unsure,
> Just like a father; and, miraculous!
> Unknown to you, new pleasures I explore.[7]

In the 'crowds' items of the Paris Spleen, Baudelaire proclaims that "it is not given to everyman to have a bath of multitude" and he continues, "multitude, solitude; identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet. The man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd." [8] Such a princely incognito, such a royal anonymity gives the Baudelairian poet an ability to make for himself the meaning of the urban space and spectacle of the public.

Walter Benjamin attempted to theorize the poetic pleasure of travelling through the passages of a modern city. For him, Paris arcades were the ideal locations "of the original temple of commodity capitalism"[9], of all the characteristics of commodity culture in embryonic form. During the second empire of Napoleon III, this urban phantasmagoria was used by Marx to describe the deceptive appearance of commodities as 'fetishes' in the marketplace. Benjamin, rooted very much in historical materialism, found it convenient to compare Parisian spectacles with the magic lantern shows of optical illusions. It is this kind of Benjaminian position that makes Baudelaire's concept of modernity valid as a liberation process of the poetic precisely in the fashionable and historical dimensions which classical taste left out of its account of the beautiful. Thus Baudelaire makes a profound eulogy for the artist who "is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains"[10]. Susan Buck-Morss includes, in her study of the *Passagen-Werk*, Baudelaire's own version of recording the poetic experience:

> I will walk alone, training my fantastic fencing
> Sniffing out of every corner a hazardous rhyming
> Stumbling over the words like cobbles
> Running sometimes into verses dreamt all the while.[11]

This much for Baudelaire for the time being. Now I would request the reader to remember the rhetoric of walking to be found almost a century later in Jibanananda Das — a poet lonely, hunted, victimized, devoted to suffering rather than action — who for these times represents the prime instance of post-Tagore modernity in Bengali culture. He first referred to this kind of wandering in a poem named 'Path Hata' (wandering), written in the early 1940s:

> কী এক ইশারা যেন মনে রেখে একা একা শহরের পথ থেকে পথে
> অনেক হেঁটেছি আমি; অনেক দেখেছি আমি ট্রাম-বাস সব ঠিক চলে
> তারপর পথ ছেড়ে শান্ত হয়ে চলে যায় তাহাদের ঘুমের জগতেঃ
>
> সারারাত গ্যাসলাইট আপনার কাজ বুঝে ভালো করে জ্বলে।

কেউ ভুল করে নাকো – ইঁট বাড়ি সাইনবোর্ড জানালা কপাট ছাদ সব
চুপ হ'য়ে ঘুমাবার প্রয়োজন বোধ করে আকাশের তলে।

একা একা পথ হেঁটে এদের গভীর শান্তি হৃদয়ে করেছি অনুভব;
তখন অনেক রাত – তখন অনেক তারা মনুমেন্ট মিনারের মাথা
নির্জনে ঘিরেছে এসে; - মনে হয় কোনোদিন এর চেয়ে সহজ সম্ভব

আর দেখেছি কিঃ একরাশ তারা-আর-মনুমেন্ট-ভরা কলকাতা?
চোখ নীচে নেমে যায় – চুরুট নীরবে জ্বলে – বাতাসে অনেক ধুলো খড়;
চোখ বুজে একপাশে সরে যাই – গাছ থেকে অনেক বাদামী জীর্ণ পাতা

উড়ে গেছে; বেবিলনে একা একা এমনই হেঁটেছি আমি রাতের ভিতর
কেন যেন; আজো আমি জানি নাকো হাজার হাজার ব্যস্ত বছরের পর।

(পথ হাঁটা)

[Keeping in mind some sign, lonely in the streets of the city,
I've walked a lot, seen a lot of trams and buses move on time,
Then leave the roads, become quiet, go to their world of sleep:

The gas—light understands its job and burns well throughout the night
It does not falter — bricks, buildings, signboards, windows and roofs and everyone else
Feel the urge to sleep in peace under the sky.

Walking alone I have felt in my heart their great serenity;
It was the dead of night then — stars had covered the head of the monument
In solitude then; I wonder if anything easier and more simple

I have I ever seen: stars and monuments in abundance in Kolkata?
Eyes lower down — the burns silently — the wind carries dust
and straw;
I move aside, eyes closed — brown and worn-out leaves

Have flown away in the air; in Babylon I walked all alone like this;
I don't know why, I still do not know after all these busy millennia [12].]

It is the walk of a poseur who wishes to communicate his illness and perhaps even a finely crafted decadence which constitutes a vital motif for the European dandy .I quote Rob Shields who discusses Benjamin's note on flanerie: "At its exaggerated height, the flaneur was said to pace himself behind the fashionable amble of a pet tortoise"[13]

Interestingly, Benjamin has carefully noted the use of gaslights in Paris during the era of Napoleon III. To come back to our point, we find in Jibanananda this slow casual walking taking the form of a modern ritual. And we should turn here to the much-quoted lines of 'Banalata Sen':

হাজার বছর ধরে আমি পথ হাঁটিতেছি পৃথিবীর পথে

(বনলতা সেন)

[I have been walking on this earth for a thousand years.]

What is more important is that the poet, in line with Aragon and obviously with Baudelaire, evokes and wanders between the mythical and the actual. Baudelaire's night-walk and Jibanananda's nocturnal strolling both represent an attitude emblematic of a historical revelation. Rilke, while he was serving Rodin as a secretary, noted in his *Notebooks for Malte Brigge* the anxiety he felt while walking on a Paris pavement. In our case, when Jibanananda Das finally left his native Barisal in the 1940s and came to settle permanently in Kolkata, the story of an abrupt transition to city-1ife began to take on a unique dimension in his poetry. An urbanity full of anxiety-ridden city-space dominates his work from this time.

When we talk about modernity in Bangla literature, we usually take a cue from T.S. Eliot and his aggressive critical positions. We think of morbidity and ennui as opposed to an affirmative sense of life as affects that lead to the core of the modern sensibility. When Jibanananda quotes from Eliot the following lines: _

In their last meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on the beach of the humid river
Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hopes only
Of empty men. [14]

he also does not spare his own poems and states:

হৃদয়! অনেক বড় বড় শহর দেখেছো তুমি

(শহর)

[O my soul! You have seen many big cities.][15]

We would note that the city of which he talks does not belong to a specific geographical location. Kolkata, to him, was more than a city, it was an imagined environment which could play host to his ideas on *modernite*.

What was Paris to Baudelaire? During the mid—nineteenth century Paris was not only the French political capital but also the center of the entire continent. Under the

canopy of the empire, the soldiers, the lumpens and the street—walkers and different kinds of unauthorized intruders constituted the city mass. A rootless population having little or no traditional base could be found at the taverns and other meeting places, which the French would like to call *La Boheme*. Karl Marx wrote about them beautifully in *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* which in turn acted as a dossier for Walter Benjamin.

Kolkata in the mid-forties of the last century showed some analogy with Paris of the nineteenth century. Kolkata was then the second city of the British Empire and, because of the Great War, was acting as the South Asian base for the Allies. All of a sudden it was thrown out of the feudal gear; it became cosmopolitan — peopled by fortune-seekers and doubtful settlers, American G.I.s and rustic people who in the War-depression came there to the make a living. Jibanananda discovered here a kind of life very different from his native district town of Barisal. There, at that remote corner on earth, he had a permanent residence — his own place to stay. But in Kolkata, Jibanananda had no fixed address. In north Kolkata, he used to stay in a 'mess' or a boarding house (what an astonishing similarity with Baudelaire!); when he moved to the south, it was a dingy apartment he rented. He had to share it, very unwillingly, with a woman of dubious character. Like Baudelaire he had to often compose his poems outside his home. He had no fixed employment most of the time; like Baudelaire, he too quite often made ends meet from the support he received from his near ones. Moreover, an unhappy conjugal life made the home inhospitable, leaving him almost with no other occupation than walking. Practically ignored by the official circle of the intellectuals he avoided them. Where else could he go?

"When the new industrial processes had given refuse a certain value," Benjamin writes,

> ragpickers appeared in the cities in large numbers. They worked for middlemen and constituted a sort of cottage industry located in the streets. The eyes of the first investigations of pauperism were

fixed on him with the mute question as to where the limit of human misery lay … A ragpicker cannot of course be part of the Boheme. But from the litterateur to the professional conspirator, everyone who belonged to the boheme could recognize a bit of himself in the ragpicker"[16].

Baudelaire writes in one of his Parisian Tableaux (*Ragpicker's Wine*):

One sees a ragpicker knocking against the wall
Paying no heed to spies of the cops, his thralls
But stumbling like a poet lost in his dreams;
He pours his heart out in stupendous schemes.[17]

Jibanananda also takes stock of these intellectual loafers. He wrote a number of poems, including 'Beggar' and 'Easy Moments', on these wretched 'creatures'. Let us listen to his commentary:

একটি পয়সা আমি পেয়ে গেছি আহিরীটোলায়,
একটি পয়সা আমি পেয়ে গেছি বাদুড়বাগানে,
একটি যদি পাওয়া আরো –
তবে আমি হেঁটে চলে যাবো মানে মানে।
… … …
ভিড়ের ভিতরে তবু – হ্যারিসন রোডে – আরো গভীর অসুখ।
(ভিখিরি)

[I could manage a coin at Ahiritola,
I could manage a coin at Badurbagan,
If I get one more -
I would quietly leave.
… … …
Yet at the heart of the crowd — on Harrison Road — a deeper

sickness.]

An important analyst has noted that the flaneur is like a detective seeking clues, like the one who reads people's characters not only from the physiognomy of their faces but via a social physiognomy of the streets. Benjamin himself notes: "the figure of the flaneur prefigures that of the detective"[18].

Here we could well mention some of the poems of *Satti Tarar Timir* (Darkness of the Ursa Major) particularly the street names, the uncanny characters. Should we forget the great lines of *Ratri* (The Night):

আমিও ফিয়ার লেন ছেড়ে দিয়ে – হঠকারিতায়
মাইল মাইল পথ হেঁটে – দেওয়ালের পাশে
দাঁড়ালা বেন্টিঙ্ক স্ট্রীটে গিয়ে – টেরিটিবাজারে;
চীনেবাদামের মতো বিশুষ্ক বাতাসে।

(রাত্রি)

[I, too, left Phears Lane — adventurously
And walked miles — to stand by the wall
At Bentinck Street — at Tiretta Market;
The wind was dry like groundnuts.]

These were the ways the two poets saw the city, and for both these glances were historically conditioned. What I am trying to emphasize is that this construction of an entirely different kind of visual perception carry a mythic resonance and depth that propel them beyond their place and time and transform them into archetypes of modern life.

Suddenly, one discovers a strange presence of the transitory, the fugitive and the contingent in both the poets. Baudelaire asks:

Shall I never see you till eternity? [19]

Jibanananda becomes more ambitious:

একটি মুহূর্তে যদি অনন্ত হয় মহিলার জ্যোতিষ্ক জগতে।

(সূর্য নক্ষত্র নারী)

[If a moment encapsulated my eternity
In the galaxy of the lady.]

Modernity in Bengali culture is now far more clearly legible. At least we now have several perspectives to situate ourselves within the frames of modernity I would belong among those for whom Walter Benjamin created a deeply convincing space of analysis. I find it convincing as I try to formulate my arguments on our 'modern condition'. As a theorist of modernity the western thinker is as relevant to me as the neighbouring practice.

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11. Quoted in Rob Shields, 'Fancy Footwork: Walter Benjamin's notes on Flanerie' in Keith Tester ed. *The Flaneur*.

12. All translations of Jibanananda's poems in this paper are mine. The poems — if not otherwise mentioned —are compiled in Debiprasad Bandopadhayay ed. *Jibanananda Dasher Kabya Sangraha* (Kolkata: Bharabi, 1993).

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