



## Nature, Music, Memory: Rabindranath Thakur's Songs on Nature

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### Abstract

This essay attempts to relate Tagore's ideas on Nature, Memory and Music and reveal their interconnectedness. Nature is often the site of functioning of various kinds of memory and music is instrumental in introducing the solitary and melancholic strains of the individual subject to the mnemonic world. The essay explores how Tagore's ideas derive from the native Upanishadic philosophy and how there is a distinctive European Classical, particularly Platonic dimension to his conceptualization of the role of memory in shaping individual and collective consciousness. There is an attempt in this essay to understand Tagore's concept of *Jibandevatā*, which is central to his idea of art, aesthetics, critical writings and his ideational universe.

**Keywords:** *Jibandevatā, memory, music, nature*

One autumn morning a mendicant lady singer was singing *Āgamani* [welcome-note for goddess Durga]. Uma was listening keeping her face on the window-grill. As it is, the autumn sun brings back childhood memories. There was *Āgamani* too; Uma couldn't resist herself.

— "The Notebook" ("Khātā," 1891), *Galpaguchchha, Rachanābali*, IX, 404

Nothing is as close to nature as music. I am pretty sure that if I start humming *Rāmkali* right now looking outside through the window, this vastly expansive bluish green nature washed in sunshine will come running to my spirit like a spellbound doe and keep licking me. Every time it rains on the Padma, I feel like composing a new monsoon song on *Meghamallār* . . . It's the same old subject—it's raining, the sky is cloud-covered, there is thunder and lightning. But the ever-new emotions inside it, the pangs of separation without beginning and endless, are captured only in music to an extent.

— Letter to Indira Devi on 26.09.1895, *Chhinnapatrābali, Sangeetchintā*, 192-93

Suddenly some evening/ The raga *Sindhu-Baroān* would be played,/ And the whole sky would resonate/ With the agony of estrangement of time immemorial (*anādikāler birahabedonā*).

— "The Flute" ("Bānshi," 1932), *Rachanābali*, VIII, 291

The three quotations above are taken from three different genres of Rabindranath Thakur's corpus—letter, short story and poetry respectively. The letter from *Chhinnapatrābali* was written from the rural Shilaidaha, while the short story "The Notebook" and the poem "The Flute" have the urban space of Kolkata as their setting. The time-span of their composition is more than forty years, enough for Rabindranath to change his views on things for several times, or at least evolve them, as anybody even remotely aware of his mental life would attest. Yet they are linked

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together by a single discourse of the relationship of nature, music and memory which remained unchanged for the rest of the poet-composer's life. In all three cases, nature is the site of functioning of various kinds of memory and music is instrumental in introducing the solitary — even melancholic—individual subject to the mnemonic world. The melancholic note is quite obvious in the first and the last quotations, with their reference to *Āgamani* and Sindhu-Baroān respectively; while the other one, taking off from the serenely joyful Rāmkali in the context of a romantic 'expansive bluish green nature washed in sunshine,' moves into a celebratory evocation of the monsoon Padma, and then almost imperceptibly flows into the 'pangs of separation without beginning and endless.' Music, especially Indian music, for Rabindranath, is essentially a gateway to the melancholic. It seems to evoke in him a sense of an originary rupture, a 'timeless estrangement,' that is inscribed in nature, the spiritual site of Indian classical music.

The melancholy and the associated memory of separation long time back, experienced by the individual subject, thus, is primarily impersonal. It has a collective, even civilisational dimension; it is the collective unconscious that stages the play of memory and oblivion captured in music and embedded in nature. But it can have more personal expressions too, as in the first example above. As the passage also indicates, the veil of illusion created by ordinary personal experiences received in everyday quotidian life, when penetrated, can lead individuals to reconnect themselves with the realm of memory, buried in the unconscious. How far such ideas of Rabindranath derive from his native Upanishadic philosophy, which he grew up on, and how far they are inspired by his passionate involvement with the European, especially English, romantic tradition of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, is a matter of conjecture. However, there is also a distinctive European classical, particularly Platonic, dimension to Rabindranath's conceptualisation of the role of memory in shaping individual and collective consciousness. His idea of *Jibandevatā*—central to the role of memory in his art, aesthetics, critical writings and his ideational universe at large—Tapobrata Ghosh shows, has uncanny similarities with the Platonic idea of 'Daemon.'<sup>1</sup>

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Rabindranath himself has commented in several works across genres, particularly poetical and musical, on the centrality of *Jibandevatā* in his life. In *Ātmaparichay* (Introducing Myself, B.E. 1347, 1940), for one example, he writes in a retrospective mood a few months before his death on the function of *Jibandevatā* as his personal guiding spirit. *Jibandevatā*, he believes, has created a unity, an organic whole, out of the diversity of his life and creative corpus. His apparently discrete works become expressions of a singular shaping consciousness that endows his life and activities with meaning. Moreover, by virtue of this unifying spirit, he transcends his isolated existence of a human being and gets integrated into the cosmic schema of existence. This whole process of integration, within his self and with the universe, presided over by a personal guiding spirit, is independent of his individual man's intentions. And memory is central to the whole process, for consciousness is formed out of shreds of memories and oblivions. *Jibandevatā* performs this integration mainly through manipulation of memories of various sorts. Describing him as a 'poet,' Rabindranath tells us:

This poet, who has been composing my life with all its good and bad, positive and negative components, I have described in my poetry as '*Jibandevatā*.' I do not think he is merely creating a unity out of the diversity of my worldly life and connecting it with the universe. I know, from time immemorial he has brought me over a host of forgotten states to this present manifestation of mine. Through him that vast memory of the stream of existences flowing through the universe is buried in me without my conscious knowledge of it. This is why I can feel an ancient unity with the trees and herbs, birds and animals of this world. This is why this immense and mysterious universe does not appear to me hostile and intimidating (*Rachanābali*, XIV, 139-40).<sup>2</sup>

The 'ancient unity with the trees and herbs, birds and animals of this world,' and identification with 'this immense and mysterious universe,' at the root of Rabindranath's songs on nature, thus, has a longer pre-history, spread over cycles of birth and death, than one worldly life can accommodate. It is this ideal yet real universe of perfect harmony, now actualised primarily through memory, that weaves a web of wonder around the poet. '*Ākāsh bharā surya-tārā bishwabharā prān,/ Tāhāri mājkhāne āmi peyechhi mor sthān,/ Bishmoye tāi jāge āmār gān,*' he sings, '*Asim kāler je hillole joār-bhāntāy bhuban dole/ Nādhite mor raktadhārāy legechhe tār tān,/ Bishmoye tāi jāge āmār gān*' (*Gītabitān* 430; 'The sky full of the sun and stars, the world full of life,/ in the midst of this I find myself—/ so, surprised, my song awakens./ Wave after

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wave of infinite time, to whose ebb and flow earth sways,/ the blood in my veins courses to that measure—/ so, surprised, my song awakens’ [*Essential* 333]).<sup>3</sup> Yet, in actual life-practices, there is a persistent sense of estrangement, of loss of this ageless, perfect primordial harmony that is inscribed in the human unconscious. Hence the melancholic association of nature and music in the heart of the individual subject and collectives, that spreads over Rabindranath’s creative corpus.

In the introductory song of the collection of his song-texts *Gitabitān*, ‘*Prathama jugero udayadigangane*’ (*Gitabitān* 1)<sup>4</sup>, which is also a lyrical introduction to his musical philosophy that links together nature, memory, music and human consciousness, Rabindranath invokes *Jibandevatā*, the muse of his life, as ‘*nabashrishtira kabi*’ (the poet of the new creation): ‘In the eastern horizon of the first epoch of creation/ When the first daylight broke out/ Wondering when she would find the right tune/ The earth in her thirst for self-expression kept wandering about/ Come, please come, O the poet of that new creation/ The morning-sun of the day of new awakening—/. . . You brought music of new rhythm and tune/ When the young *Usha* was bathing in dew/ In a playful upheaval of light and darkness./ You play that music even today/ In various *rāgas* in the music of arrival/ To him who inspires a new vision.’ Memory of the first dawn of creation, as invoked in this text, is not only personal; it has a larger human dimension. In his supervision of such ‘human’ forms of memory *Jibandevatā* for Rabindranath becomes a collective guiding spirit, which he refers to as ‘*sarbamānusher Jibandevatā*’ (*Jibandevatā* of Man, *Rachanābali*, X, 659). In “*Mānabsatya*” (Human Truth), an essay appended to *Mānusher Dharma*, the original Bengali source-text of *The Religion of Man*, he talks about this universal category of Man—the composite spirit of humanity—and his species memory. Humanity as a whole, in this perception, has a mind, and the faculty of memory:

Man’s second dwelling place is the world of memory. He has built a nest of time by tying together narratives of his forefathers from the past. This nest of time is composed and woven by memory. This is true not only of individual races, but also of the whole human race. Mankind reaches its unity in the realm of memory. The dwelling place of men—the earth on the one hand, and the world of human memory on the other. Man is born into the whole world, and into the entire span of world-history (*Rachanābali*, X, 653).

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This ‘Man’ is the human spirit immanent in all individual men. However, *Jibandevatā*, as the guide of individuals and collectives, is not to be confused with God. In *Mānusher Dharma* Rabindranath clearly distinguishes between ‘*Visvadevatā*,’ God, and *Jibandevatā*, described elsewhere as ‘the God of human personality’ (*Religion* 16).<sup>5</sup>

‘The agony of estrangement of time immemorial’ (*anādikāler birahabedonā*) evoked by Sindhu-Baroān in “The Flute”— seated in collective memory, the locus of the functioning of *Jibandevatā* of Man—is the subject of several nature-songs of Rabindranath, especially those composed on the monsoon season. Rarely is it observed that it is almost only as exception that the songs produced by the poet on his favourite season are celebratory in mood, tone and rhythm. Mostly they weave a crooning melody of melancholy and wistfulness, to musically comment variously on a state of ‘*biraha*’ (separation) that is timeless. Nature in these songs brings to the fore a primal rupture in the subject’s consciousness. For a few examples, one can think of ‘*Āj Shrābaner purnimāte*’ (On this full-moon night of Shrābana; 458), ‘*Ashrubharā bedanā dike dike jāge*’ (A tear-filled agony stirs everywhere; 459), ‘*Keno pāntha ey chanchalatā*’ (Why this restlessness, o wayfarer; 462), ‘*Āmi Shrābana-ākāshe oi diyechhi pāti*’ (‘I have laid out in that Shrābana-sky’; 467), ‘*Oi mālatilatā dole*’ (The *malati*-creeper swings; 469), ‘*Mamo mana-upabane chale abhisāre*’ (In my mind’s bower there goes on a love-tryst; 472), ‘*Jāe din Shrābanadin jāe*’ (472; ‘The day ends, the *Sravan* day ends’ [*Of Love* 139]), ‘*Āmār je din bhese gachhe chokhero jale*’ (The shadow of those my days that have drifted away in tears; 479), ‘*Saghana gahana rātri, jharichhe Shrābanadhārā*’ (The dense cloudy night, Shrābana downpouring heavily; 481), ‘*Āji Sharatatapane prabhātaswapane*’ (In this mild Sharat sun, in the dreamy morning; 481) and so on. All these lyrics, and many more, invoke a sense of loss of a state of harmony, of an incompleteness. First, second or third person individual pronouns are used in most of them, and yet the angst of separation expressed is hardly reflective of a concrete personal loss. It is rather impersonal, and in that sense human. The restless wayfarer, monsoon, in ‘Why this restlessness, o wayfarer’ receives a message from ‘some distant skies’ that reminds him of an abode left way back, when he set off for this earth. That distant memory is played off

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against the recent memory of union with this earth. The poet implores: ‘Keep patience, do keep patience!/ The wedding garland on your neck is not yet lustreless. . .’ This whole narrative of time past and time present, of memory, oblivion and remembrance in nature is an externalisation of the human memory of a past perfect, which nature brings to the fore from time to time.

Rabindranath writes in *Mānusher Dharma*:

Man cherishes that his ideal of perfection at a given time was already there in the past in the domain of actualisation. This is why in the mythical (*purānic*) imagination of all cultures the golden age (*satyayug*) is located in the past. He thinks that the realisation of ideals which is incomplete today was achieved in its completeness and pristine purity in some remote bygone era (*Rachanābali*, X, 625).

‘Memories’ of that era of perfection haunt his songs in the form of ‘messages’ inscribed in nature.

The connection between nature and memory receives another intensely personal yet impersonal expression in ‘Āmi Shrābana-ākāshe oi’: ‘I have laid out in that Shrābana-sky/ My tearful eyes in the clouds/. . . They stare wistfully at the one who has gone out of sight/. . . The path he took at the twilight of the parting-moment/ An agony is wrapped in its grasses, quivers in my breath/ Those repeated backward glances hang in the monsoon-shadows.’ Nature here is not just a passive locale for the story of memory to unfold in; it is an active evoking agent in which the boundary between the human and non-human dissolves through coalescing of the eyes and the clouds, human agony and grasses, and glances and shadows. What is apparently a musical rendering of personal emotions, transcends the personal through a haunting deployment of the midnight *rāga* Sāhānā set to Kāhārṇā. The wonderful combination of words and music creates a lasting ambiance of pining for a lost unity, not necessarily amorous. A similar evocation of the general through specific in memory is to be found in ‘Āmār je din bhese gachhe chokhero jale,’ composed in the same year as ‘Āmi Shrābana-ākāshe oi’ at the ripe age of seventy six, in Bhairabi-Kālāngrā and a laid-back Kāhārṇā: ‘The shadow of those my days that have drifted away in tears/ covers the Shrābana skies/ The music that stopped that day, stopped in the abyss of unfathomable grief of estrangement/ Vibrates through the east winds, alas, it does. . .’ One might also remember the subject’s travel down the memory lane in ‘Purnachānder māyāy āji

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bhābna āmār path bhole’ (429) to an unspecified past that locates itself somewhere in the endless cycle of birth and death: ‘Under the full moon’s spell tonight my thoughts lose their way/ As if birds of another shore, they stray, stray, stray away/ The melody of light-and-shadow of some unknown land of remote past/ Beckons me: come, come, come away/ They wander about looking for their companion/ In the land where my lost Phālgun-nights have gone away/ Where in light-and-shade some agony of long lost days/ Cry, cry, cry away.’

Memory, of course, is more quotidian in a song celebrating a summer dawn, ‘Baishākhher ei bhorer hāoā āse mridumando’ (434). Through association the cool morning breeze reminds the subject of some long-forgotten experiences: ‘This daybreak-breeze of Baishākh wafts in/ And brings to my mind the rhythm of those feet/ . . . This daybreak-breeze of Baishakh carries some joy,/ As if of the gentle touch of that flowing, unbound hair./ The trembles in the *champā* grove are only in my breast/ The quivers of a swaying heart from another morning.’ ‘Madhyadiner bijan bātāyane’ (On the midday desolate window; 436) and ‘Heriyā shyamal ghano neel gagane’ (A vision of the greenish blue sky; 440) also take us back to the experiences of early youth and a personal ache of separation respectively. But concrete personal memory starts accommodating a deeper philosophical awareness of an ordinary human angst of estrangement only with the appearance of a guiding spirit, presumably *Jibandevatā*, in ‘Ogo āmār Shrābanmegher kheyātarir mājhi’ (443): ‘O my boatman of the ferry-boat of Shrāban-clouds,/ Set your sail this day to the tear-filled east wind/ . . . Your Sāri songs bring to my mind those her eyes,/ A skyful of agony rings out in wails.’ The ordinary individual memory, almost epiphanically, leads to an extraordinary impersonal vision of a snapped harmony way back in the history of existence, still resonating in the cosmic sphere, in the wide open skies. This realisation of universal ‘wails,’ verging on the spiritual, receives an uncanny turn in ‘Timira-abagunthane badana tabo dhāki’ (443) where nature spills over from the background into the foreground to stage this whole complex play of feelings and emotions: ‘Pulling over your face the veil of darkness/ Who’re you standing in my yard all by yourself./ The night comes thick dark, the stars sunk in cloud,/ Rain falling on the river’s water with a ringing sound,/ The wind rushes aloud, the *tamal* grove’s rustling in its wake./ The thought that you’re drawing in my heart/ I don’t know by what magic

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to put in words./ In bonds I'm held, I'll break loose, go out on the path—/ So this night isn't spent in these futile tears' (*Of Love* 118). Similar ideas and images occur in 'Ei Shrābana-belā bādalo-jharā' (445) that invokes a faintly-known 'estranged woman from some forgotten days,' who 'veiled in shadows, roams around in the crannies of the dense forests,' and invites the subject to the 'desolate path.'

This engagement with an unspecific remote past takes an altogether different form in 'Kon purātan prāner tāne' (449), reminiscent of the invocation of a cosmic species-memory in 'The sky full of the sun and stars, the world full of life' and 'In the eastern horizon of the first epoch of creation.' Like them, this lyric invokes an uninterrupted flow of primal life-force in the universe through multiple forms, living and non-living: 'Drawn by what ancient life-force/ My mind runs towards the earth/ My eyes sink in the tender grasses, thoughts drift in the east wind— / The music of Malhār floods my heart with songs of Shrāban. . .' Again, in 'Āj Shrābaner āmantrane' (450), the poet reads the message from the first epoch of creation in the vibrant, youthful nature today: 'I hear in my soul the message from the first epoch/ In the abode of the tender green life./ The east wind drifts under the skies, thoughts in my mind follow its trail/ In its travel to an unknown timeless time.' In lyric after lyric after this, Rabindranath is clearly preoccupied with this 'human memory' inscribed in nature, presided over for him by the *Jibandevatā* of Man. In 'Āj ākāsher maner kathā jharo jharo bāje' (The sky opens up its heart through incessant downpour today; 454) he talks about an airborne 'ancient pang of another age'; 'the messages in all the dim memories, like faint murmur of leaves/ Wails up in a wet, tearful tune.' The Indian collective memory, under the aegis of *Jibandevatā* of a community, is active in his intertextual remembrance of Kālidasa, and his *Meghaduta* in particular, a perennial favourite of Rabindranath's, in 'Bahu juger opār hote Āshādh elo' (Āshādh has come to my mind from beyond ages; 455); the unknown ancient 'poet' here contains oblique references to both Kālidasa and *Jibandevatā*. The 'profound message' from the first of the artists in 'Eki gabhir bāni elo' (456), that reveals itself through all forms of being today, of course, takes us back to his notion of *Jibandevatā*, who once played the prelude to life and creation: 'What profound message reached through the deep dark clouds/ Overflowing the whole sky/ . . . Who is it who

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first played the flute in tune and rhythm,/ And invoked life in remote dark ancient times./ The music of his flute Āshādh brought me today/ And took my heart away for that unknown.’

Such a deeply personal yet collective form of remembrance, of separation from the Baul’s ‘*maner mānush*,’ (‘the man of the heart’) or Rabindranath’s own *Jibandevatā*, or the memory of estrangement from a more perfect mode of existence, reaches one of the best musical culminations in ‘Āji barishanamukharito shrābanarāti’ (472): ‘This Shrāban night resounding with the sound of rain,/ I string a garland of remembered agonies, alone./ . . . I keep the door of my dark dwelling open,/ It seems he is coming, my companion of the nights of suffering./ He is on his way, bringing music to the downpour,/ Rousing thrill in the kadam grove.’ The fulfilment of the prospect of union of course remains only a possibility in this tantalisingly open-ended narrative: ‘Even if he wouldn’t come, still out of futile assurance/ I’ll keep laid over the dust our seat of union, waiting.’ This union with the guiding spirit—who is active since time immemorial through memory, and thus himself turns into memory incarnate—is possible only in the domain of the unconscious, the locale of memory, mainly through dreams. Rabindranath writes: ‘I know, from time immemorial he has brought me over a host of forgotten states to this present manifestation of mine. Through him that vast memory of the stream of existences flowing through the universe is buried in me without my conscious knowledge of it.’ But then, his unconscious, or ego, he believes, is not something radically segregated from the apparently external universe, which is only an extension of the self. The boundary between the two, man and Man, and man and the universe dissolves in this Upanishadic imagination. As Rabindranath continues, ‘This is why I can feel an ancient unity with the trees and herbs, birds and animals of this world. This is why this immense and mysterious universe does not appear to me hostile and intimidating.’ Nature for him is the site of functioning of human memory, or even of the human unconscious. The musical search for fulfilment through overcoming the primal rupture thus takes place as much in nature as in the individual unconscious. In ‘Āmi ki gān gābo je bhebe nā pāi’ (473) the poet sings: ‘What song I’ll sing, I have no idea—/ I keep searching in the cloudy sky, the restless wind./ There are hints in the trees of the woods, in their silent dance—/ My heart seeks from them the music of self-expression,/ So I roam around restless the whole day./ . . .

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What message is hidden there in the shades of my mind/ In the twilight zone of dreams—I seek to explore.’ The exploration of ‘*swapnapradosh*’ (twilight zone of dreams) through a profound engagement with nature, one’s extended self, then, is the key. Both carry for the poet cryptic inscriptions of *Jibandevatā* in the form of memory.

The union thus is potentially actualised only in dreams, in the dimly lit domain of the unconscious, when the individual’s ‘*swapnaswarup*’ (innermost self) meets his ‘*swapnadosar*’ (dream-companion/ dream-double)—*Jibandevatā*—in ‘*Āmi takhan chhilem magana gahana ghumero ghore*’ (466-67): ‘I was then immersed in deep slumber/ When rain came down on that dense dark night/ . . . My innermost self came out, and found its companion/ In my dream-double from the far-off shores/ . . .’ Expectedly, this dream-union of selves, initiated by and in nature through incessant rains on the dark night, becomes complete only through a smooth merger of the self with nature. Thus ‘It crossed the limits of my body—and got lost in the sonorous music of the tossed forest./ Merged into the scent of wet *juthis* in the grove, into the rhythm of the intoxicated wind. . .’

Rabindranath’s fascinating engagement with memory in music, though most diverse and fulfilling in his monsoon songs, is by no means confined only to that cluster. There are many more songs on monsoon and other seasons that deal with memory, which I wish I could discuss briefly but for want of space, which are no less philosophically and musicologically rich. In my reading, they together form a single text that contains a part of the history of the poet’s psyche which inhabits an incredibly expansive time-zone through various forms of memory. While these forms of memory find their single binding principle in the personal construction of *Jibandevatā*, in musical terms they offer a discourse of selfhood that transcends the imaginary rigid distinction between the personal, the communal and the global, and equally importantly in our context today, of the human and the natural. And this almost spiritual discourse of alternative selfhood and identity, that explores the individual psyche only to transcend the debilitating ego for a more harmonious cosmic existence, is presented here in essentially secular terms. What unfolds here is

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the discourse of an alternative modernity that ceaselessly looks back even as it is immersed in a radically futuristic vision.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Tapobrata Ghosh's article "Smritijātrāy Rābindranath" for a discussion of the possible Platonic implications of Rābindranath's idea of *Jibandevatā*.

<sup>2</sup> Given Rābindranath's fascination with Buddhist culture and philosophy, especially since his middle ages, such ideas may have Buddhist echoes in them. Thomas Butler writes on a Buddhist thought on memory: '... All the material of past memory still exists somewhere out there, in a great receptacle in the sky, the bin of memory, the Akasic record from which we all draw our karmic life plans' (Butler 13). Translation of this passage from Rābindranath, and other subsequent passages and song-lines from the original Bangla, unless otherwise mentioned, are mine.

<sup>3</sup> The translation here is Amit Chaudhuri's. Rābindranath's own sense-translation of these lines goes like this: 'My heart sings at the wonder of my place/ in this world of light and life;/ at the feel in my pulse of the rhythm of creation/ cadenced by the swing of endless time' (Ray Intro., II, 355).

<sup>4</sup> All song-lines in Bangla invoked in this article are quoted from this book, and henceforth will be cited only by corresponding page numbers.

<sup>5</sup> Rābindranath writes in *Mānusher Dharma*: 'God is there; He has His abode in cosmic spheres, in celestial bodies. *Jibandevatā* is specifically in the seat of life, in hearts, at the centre of all feelings and experiences. It is him that the Bāul calls the man of the heart' (659).

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