

Study Notes on
BANALATA SEN
by Jibanananda Das

Kalyani University | English Major | 7th Semester

10 Marks Questions (300-500 words each)

Q1. Explain how does the poem present life as a long journey.

[10 Marks]

Ans:

Jibanananda Das's poem "Banalata Sen" presents life as a long, exhausting, and often lonely journey through time, history, and the world. From the very first line, the poet places himself in the middle of a journey that has been going on for thousands of years, and throughout the poem, he uses the metaphor of travel and wandering to describe what it feels like to be alive in the world.

The poem opens with the memorable line: "For ten thousand years I have walked the ways of the world." This is a striking and unusual way to begin a poem. The speaker is not talking about his personal life of a few decades — he is speaking of a journey that has lasted for thousands and thousands of years. He has wandered through ancient seas near Ceylon, through the dark waters of the Malay Sea, and through the cities and civilisations of the ancient world — Bimbisara's Magadha, Ashoka's empire, the distant city of Vidisha, and the quiet lanes of Sravasti. This enormous sweep of time and space tells us that life, in this poem, is not just a personal experience — it is a universal human experience of endless wandering through history.

The journey in the poem is not a happy or exciting adventure. It is described as tiring, lonely, and full of hardship. The poet compares himself to a weary sailor whose ship has lost its way in the middle of the ocean. He is drifting, without direction, exhausted by the long journey. This image of the lost sailor captures the feeling that life is often a journey without a clear destination — we wander, we struggle, we search, but we do not always know where we are going or why.

In the middle of this long and tiring journey, the traveller finds one moment of rest and peace — his meeting with Banalata Sen of Natore. She gives him a brief shelter from the exhaustion of the journey. Just as a traveller in a storm finds a moment of calm, the poet finds in Banalata Sen a momentary peace that makes the journey bearable. She is the one still point in a life of constant movement and wandering.

By the third stanza, the journey of the day comes to an end with evening. The birds return home, the world grows quiet, and all of creation seems to pause. This evening scene suggests the end of the long journey of life itself — just as the day ends, so too does the long human journey through time. And in that quiet final moment, only Banalata Sen remains, offering the darkness of her hair as a final resting place.

In conclusion, "Banalata Sen" presents life as a vast, wearying journey through time and history. The poet is a traveller who has wandered for ages, seen great civilisations rise and fall, suffered

loneliness and exhaustion, and found only brief moments of peace and beauty. The poem tells us that the journey of life is long and often lonely, but that moments of beauty — like the encounter with Banalata Sen — make the journey worth taking.

Q2. Bring out the symbolic significance of the poem 'Banalata Sen'.

[10 Marks]

Ans:

"Banalata Sen" is a poem rich in symbols. Jibanananda Das uses symbols drawn from nature, history, and human experience to give the poem layers of meaning that go far beyond a simple love poem. Understanding these symbols helps us understand the full depth of what the poet is saying about life, beauty, time, and the human need for rest and peace.

The most important symbol in the poem is **Banalata Sen herself**. On the surface, she is a woman from Natore, a town in Bengal. But she is far more than a real person — she is a symbol of peace, rest, and beauty. The poet is exhausted from his long journey through time and history, and Banalata Sen is the one who gives him shelter and relief. She represents the human soul's deep longing for a moment of stillness and comfort in the middle of a long, hard life. She is not just a beloved woman — she is a symbol of everything that makes life bearable and beautiful.

Her **eyes** are one of the poem's most celebrated symbols. The poet compares her eyes to "a bird's nest" — dark, quiet, warm, and sheltering. A bird's nest is a place of safety and rest, where a tired creature comes home after a long day of flying. By comparing her eyes to a bird's nest, the poet is saying that her gaze offers him the deepest kind of rest — a feeling of having arrived home after an endless journey. This is one of the most tender and original images in Bengali poetry.

The **sea and the lost ship** are powerful symbols of life's journey and its dangers. The image of a sailor whose rudder is broken and who is drifting helplessly in the middle of the ocean symbolises the feeling of being lost in life — without direction, without control, at the mercy of forces greater than oneself. Many people feel this way at some point in their lives, and the symbol of the lost ship captures this feeling with great honesty.

The **evening** in the final stanza is a deeply symbolic moment. Evening is the time when the long day ends, when birds return to their nests, when the world grows quiet and still. In the poem, evening symbolises the end of the long journey of life — the approach of death and the final rest that comes after a lifetime of wandering. It is not a frightening symbol but a peaceful one — the evening is gentle, and Banalata Sen is there in that quiet darkness.

The **darkness of her hair** in the final stanza is also symbolic. Darkness here does not mean something frightening — it means peace, rest, and the end of the blinding light of day. After a lifetime of struggling in the harsh light of the world, the poet finds comfort in the soft darkness of her hair, which symbolises the final, restful peace of death or sleep. In conclusion, every major image in "Banalata Sen" carries symbolic weight, making the poem one of the richest and most meaningful in modern Bengali and Indian poetry.

Q3. Analyse the use of historical references (Bimbisara, Ashoka, Vidisha, Sravasti, Vidarva) in the poem.

[10 Marks]

Ans:

One of the most distinctive features of "Banalata Sen" is the way Jibanananda Das weaves references to ancient history and civilisation into his poem. The historical references — to kings like Bimbisara and Ashoka, and to cities like Vidisha, Sravasti, and Vidarva — are not just decorative details. They serve a very important purpose in the poem: they establish the idea that the poet's journey is not just personal but universal and ancient, stretching back thousands of years through human history.

Bimbisara was a powerful king of the Magadha kingdom in ancient India, who lived around the 6th century BCE. He was a contemporary of the Buddha and Mahavira, and his kingdom was one of the most important in ancient Indian history. By mentioning Bimbisara, the poet places himself in a time of great ancient civilisation — a world of kings, kingdoms, and epic history. The reference tells us that the poet's wandering began not yesterday but in the very depths of ancient time.

Ashoka was one of the greatest emperors in Indian history, who ruled the Maurya Empire in the 3rd century BCE. After a great and bloody war, Ashoka converted to Buddhism and spent the rest of his life promoting peace and compassion. His name carries a sense of both great power and great sorrow — he is associated with the turning away from violence toward peace. In the poem, the reference to Ashoka's dark world suggests a time of vastness, history, and the weight of human experience.

Vidisha (also spelled Baidisha) was an ancient city in central India, known for its beauty and culture. It was a place of great historical significance in ancient India. In the poem, Vidisha is described as misty and distant — it represents a beautiful but remote and half-remembered world. The mention of Vidisha gives the poem an atmosphere of ancient, dreamy beauty — a world that once existed and is now only a faint memory.

Sravasti was an ancient city in northern India, closely associated with the Buddha. It was one of the great cities of the ancient world, where the Buddha spent many years teaching. By referring to Sravasti, the poet evokes a world of spiritual depth and ancient wisdom. Like all the other historical references, Sravasti represents a chapter in the long human journey through time — a moment of civilisation that has passed but still resonates in human memory.

Vidarva (Vidarbha) was a kingdom in ancient India mentioned in Sanskrit epics. Together with the other historical references, it contributes to the poem's vast geographical and historical canvas. The overall effect of all these historical references is to make the poet's journey feel enormously long and deep. He has not just wandered through one lifetime — he has wandered through the entire span of human civilisation, from ancient India to the present day. This makes his exhaustion entirely understandable, and it makes his encounter with Banalata Sen — his one moment of rest — all the more precious and meaningful.

Q4. Comment on the use of imagery and symbolism in the poem 'Banalata Sen'.

[10 Marks]

Ans:

"Banalata Sen" is celebrated as one of the finest examples of poetic imagery in modern Bengali literature. Jibanananda Das had a unique gift for creating images that are both vivid and deeply meaningful. Every stanza of the poem is filled with images and symbols that work together to create a world of great beauty, sadness, and longing.

The most famous image in the poem is the description of Banalata Sen's eyes. The poet writes that her eyes are like **"a bird's nest"** — dark, warm, quiet, and sheltering. This is a deeply original and tender image. A bird's nest is a place where a tired bird comes to rest after a long day of flying. By comparing her eyes to a bird's nest, the poet is saying that her gaze offers him the deepest rest he has ever known. In her eyes, he feels completely at home and at peace. This image perfectly captures the emotional core of the poem — the exhausted traveller finding a moment of shelter and warmth.

The image of the **lost sailor** is another powerful piece of imagery. The poet compares himself to a helmsman whose rudder is broken and who is drifting in the middle of the ocean. This image vividly captures the feeling of being lost in life — helpless, directionless, and at the mercy of forces you cannot control. Then, suddenly, the sailor sees a green island covered in cinnamon trees — a vision of beauty and life in the middle of the vast, threatening sea. This is how Banalata Sen appears to the poet — like a beautiful, saving vision when he is most lost and most desperate.

The imagery of **ancient seas and dark waters** — the seas near Ceylon and the Malay Sea — creates a sense of vast distances and long, lonely journeys. These are not familiar, comfortable waters — they are remote, dark, and mysterious. They symbolise the unknown and often frightening stretches of life through which every human being must travel.

The **evening imagery** in the final stanza is among the most beautiful in the poem. The poet describes birds flying home, fireflies flickering, and the world growing quiet as darkness falls. Evening here is not just a time of day — it is a symbol of the end of life's journey, a time of final rest and peace. The image of all creation settling into quiet darkness is deeply calming and deeply moving at the same time. And in that quiet darkness, Banalata Sen opens her face — the ultimate image of peace and beauty at the end of a long, hard journey.

In conclusion, the imagery and symbolism of "Banalata Sen" work together to create a poem of extraordinary richness. The images are drawn from nature, history, and everyday life, but they carry meanings that are universal and timeless. Das uses these images not just to describe the world but to capture feelings that are too deep and complex for ordinary language — and he does so with great beauty and skill.

Q5. Evaluate 'Banalata Sen' as a modern lyric poem.

[10 Marks]

Ans:

A lyric poem is a short, personal poem that expresses the deep feelings and emotions of a single speaker. It is musical, imaginative, and focused on the inner world of the poet rather than on telling a story. "Banalata Sen" by Jibanananda Das is a perfect example of a modern lyric poem — it has all the qualities of the traditional lyric while also reflecting the concerns and techniques of modern poetry.

As a lyric poem, "Banalata Sen" is deeply personal. The speaker uses the first person "I" throughout, and everything in the poem is filtered through his personal experience and feelings. He speaks of his own exhaustion, his own longing, his own sense of being lost in the world. The poem does not tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end — instead, it captures a mood, a feeling, a moment of intense emotion. This is the essence of the lyric form.

The poem is also musical in quality. Even in English translation, "Banalata Sen" has a flowing, rhythmic quality that is characteristic of lyric poetry. In the original Bengali, the poem is celebrated for its beautiful sound and rhythm. The repetition of the name "Banalata Sen" itself works like a musical refrain — each time the name appears, it carries the same sense of longing and peace.

What makes the poem modern rather than traditional is its treatment of time, history, and the self. A traditional lyric love poem might simply praise the beauty of the beloved. But Das does something far more complex — he places his love in the context of thousands of years of human history, seeing himself as a wanderer through all of time. This sense of historical consciousness — the awareness that the individual self exists within a vast stream of time — is a distinctly modern quality.

The poem also has the modern quality of **ambiguity and mystery**. We are never quite sure whether Banalata Sen is a real woman or an imaginary ideal, a personal beloved or a universal symbol. This ambiguity is deliberate — it gives the poem a dreamlike, surreal quality that is very characteristic of modern poetry. The reader is invited to feel the poem's emotion without fully understanding or resolving its meaning.

The imagery of the poem is also distinctly modern in its originality and unexpectedness. Comparing a woman's eyes to a bird's nest, comparing the poet's life to a lost sailor drifting in the sea — these are not conventional poetic comparisons. They are fresh, surprising, and deeply personal images that could only belong to modern poetry. In conclusion, "Banalata Sen" succeeds brilliantly as a modern lyric poem — it is personal, musical, emotionally deep, historically aware, and beautifully original in its imagery.

Q6. Describe the evening scene of the poem at the last stanza.

[10 Marks]

Ans:

The final stanza of "Banalata Sen" contains one of the most beautiful and haunting evening scenes in modern poetry. After two stanzas full of ancient history, weary journeys, and the exhaustion of living, the poem closes with a scene of great quietness, peace, and beauty. This evening scene is the emotional and thematic climax of the entire poem.

The stanza begins with the image of the **end of the day**. The long day — which represents the long journey of life — is coming to a close. Just as birds return to their nests at the end of the day, all living things are returning to their natural resting places. There is a sense of universal settling — of the whole world breathing out and growing still. This is not a sad or frightening ending; it is a gentle, natural, and welcome one.

The poet describes **fireflies** appearing in the growing darkness. Fireflies are small, fragile lights that flicker in the night — they are a symbol of brief, delicate beauty in the middle of darkness. Their appearance in the evening scene suggests that even as the day ends and darkness comes, there are still small points of light and beauty in the world. The fireflies create a sense of magical, gentle wonder in the quiet evening.

As the evening deepens, the **sounds of the world fade away**. The bustle and noise of the day — the movement, the struggle, the noise of living — all gradually disappear. What remains is a deep, peaceful silence. This silence is not empty — it is full of a gentle, restful quality that the exhausted traveller has been longing for throughout the entire poem. The world in this evening scene has become a quiet, safe place.

In this quiet evening, **Banalata Sen opens her face** toward the poet. This is a deeply moving image. Throughout the day — throughout the long journey of life — the poet has been too busy, too lost, too exhausted to fully receive her presence. But now, at the end of the day, in the quiet of the evening, she is there — fully present, fully available, offering her face and her peace to the weary traveller. Her presence in the evening is the final gift of a long and difficult life.

The final image of the stanza — the **darkness of her hair** spreading around them like the falling night — is one of the most beautiful in the poem. Her hair and the night become one; her presence and the darkness of evening merge into a single, peaceful reality. This is not a frightening darkness but a comforting one — the darkness of rest, of sleep, of the final peace after a lifetime of wandering. The evening scene of the last stanza is, in short, a scene of arrival — the long journey is over, and the traveller has finally come home.

Q7. Justify the title of the poem 'Banalata Sen'.

[10 Marks]

Ans:

The title of a poem is always significant — it is the first thing a reader sees, and it sets the tone for everything that follows. In the case of Jibanananda Das's poem, the title "Banalata Sen" is the name of a woman — a woman from Natore, a town in Bengal. Justifying the title means explaining why the poet chose to name this poem after her and what her name and her presence mean in the context of the poem as a whole.

The most obvious reason the title is justified is that **Banalata Sen is the central figure** of the poem. Although the poem begins with the poet's own journey through thousands of years of history, and although it ends with a beautiful evening scene, the emotional heart of the poem is always Banalata Sen. She is the reason for the journey, the destination of the wandering, and the source of the poem's most powerful emotion. Every stanza leads toward her or returns to her. Without her, the poem would have no centre and no meaning.

Secondly, the name "Banalata Sen" is itself meaningful. It is an ordinary Bengali name — the kind of name a real woman might have. By giving his ideal figure an ordinary, real-sounding name, the poet does something very interesting: he makes the universal feel personal, and the ideal feel real. She is not a goddess or a mythological figure — she is a woman with a name, from a specific place (Natore). This ordinariness makes her more moving and more relatable. She represents the kind of beauty and peace that can be found in real, everyday life — not in some distant, unreachable ideal.

Thirdly, the title is justified because Banalata Sen represents something far larger than herself. She is a **symbol of peace, rest, and the one beautiful thing** that makes a long and exhausting life worth living. The poet has wandered for ten thousand years through history and hardship, and Banalata Sen is the one constant source of comfort and beauty in all that time. By naming the poem after her, the poet is saying that she — and what she represents — is the most important thing in his entire existence.

The title is also justified because it creates a sense of **intimacy and personal devotion**. By naming the poem after a person, the poet is dedicating his work to her — placing her at the very top of everything he has created. The repetition of her name within the poem itself — at the end of each stanza — works like a kind of prayer or invocation. Each time her name appears, it carries the weight of the poet's deepest longing and love.

In conclusion, the title "Banalata Sen" is perfectly justified. She is the heart of the poem, the destination of the journey, the symbol of peace and beauty, and the one figure who gives meaning to the poet's long and weary life. The poem is, at its core, a tribute to her — and naming it after her is the most natural and honest thing the poet could have done.

Q8. How does the poet portray Banalata Sen in this poem?

[10 Marks]

Ans:

The way Jibanananda Das portrays Banalata Sen is one of the most original and beautiful character portraits in modern poetry. She is not described in the conventional way of love poetry — with lists of physical features and praise for her beauty. Instead, Das portrays her through a few carefully chosen images and through the emotional impact she has on the exhausted, wandering poet. Her portrait is built more on feeling than on description, and this is what makes it so powerful and so lasting.

The first thing we learn about Banalata Sen is that she is from **Natore** — a real town in Bengal. This detail is important. By placing her in a specific, real location, the poet makes her feel like a real person rather than an imaginary ideal. She is grounded in the everyday world, which makes her beauty and her peace feel accessible and genuine rather than distant and unattainable.

The most celebrated part of her portrait is the description of her **eyes**. The poet writes that her eyes are like "a bird's nest" — dark, warm, quiet, and full of rest. This is an extraordinarily tender and original comparison. It tells us that her eyes are not cold or distant — they are welcoming, gentle, and full of a deep, quiet peace. In her eyes, the weary traveller finds the same feeling that a tired bird finds when it returns to its nest — a feeling of having arrived home, of being safe, of being completely at rest.

Das also portrays Banalata Sen through comparison with **ancient beauty**. He compares her to the beauty of Vidisha — an ancient city of great cultural and aesthetic significance in Indian history. He says her face is like the darkness of Sravasti. By connecting her beauty to these ancient, legendary places, the poet is saying that her beauty is not modern or temporary — it is ancient, deep, and timeless. She carries the beauty of thousands of years of human civilisation within her.

Perhaps the most important aspect of her portrayal is the role she plays in the poet's life. She is not simply a beautiful woman to be admired from a distance — she is a **giver of peace and shelter**. When the poet comes to her, exhausted from his endless journey through time and history, she gives him a moment of complete rest. She asks him simply: "Where have you been all this time?" — a question full of gentle care and recognition. In that question and in her presence, the poet finds the peace he has been searching for.

In the final stanza, Banalata Sen is portrayed as a calm and patient presence in the quiet of the evening. As the day ends and darkness falls, she is there — opening her face toward him, offering the darkness of her hair as a final resting place. This final image portrays her as something close to a divine figure — a presence that transcends ordinary human love and becomes a symbol of the peace that comes at the end of life's long journey. In conclusion, Banalata Sen is portrayed not just as a woman but as a vision of beauty, peace, and home — the one thing in the world that makes the long and exhausting journey of life worth enduring.

Q9. "As the helmsman, / His rudder broken, far out upon the sea adrift, / Sees the grass-green land of a cinnamon isle" — Explain these lines with reference to the context.

[10 Marks]

Ans:

These lines appear in the second stanza of Jibanananda Das's "Banalata Sen," and they contain one of the most vivid and emotionally powerful images in the entire poem. To understand their full meaning, we need to first understand the context in which they appear.

In the first stanza, the poet has already established that he has been wandering for ten thousand years — through ancient seas, through the civilisations of Bimbisara and Ashoka, across the dark waters of the Malay Sea. He is deeply, profoundly exhausted — not physically tired, but weary in his soul, tired of the endless journey through time and history. It is at this point, at the beginning of the second stanza, that the poet introduces the image of the helmsman.

A **helmsman** is the person who steers a ship — the one responsible for controlling its direction and keeping it on course. But in these lines, the helmsman's **rudder is broken**. The rudder is the part of the ship that allows it to be steered — without it, the ship cannot be directed and simply drifts wherever the wind and waves take it. This is a powerful symbol of helplessness and loss of control. The helmsman, despite being the person responsible for the ship's direction, is now completely powerless. He is "far out upon the sea" — meaning he is not near the shore, not near safety, but in the middle of a vast and dangerous ocean, with no way to steer himself to safety.

This image is a direct metaphor for the poet's own situation in life. He too feels like a helmsman with a broken rudder — he has been moving through the world for thousands of years but without real direction or purpose, drifting through time and history, unable to control where he is going or when the journey will end. This feeling of being lost and helpless in the middle of life is something many people experience, and the image of the broken rudder captures it with great precision.

Then comes the moment of vision: the helpless, drifting helmsman suddenly "**sees the grass-green land of a cinnamon isle.**" A cinnamon isle is a beautiful, fragrant island — covered in green grass and cinnamon trees, it is a place of extraordinary beauty and life in the middle of the empty, threatening ocean. For the lost sailor, this sudden vision of a green, beautiful island is a moment of pure relief and joy — it means that all is not lost, that beauty and safety exist somewhere in this vast, frightening world.

In the context of the poem, this vision of the cinnamon isle is the poet's first glimpse of Banalata Sen. Just as the lost sailor sees the beautiful island and feels an overwhelming sense of relief and joy, the poet sees Banalata Sen and feels the same thing — a sudden, unexpected encounter with beauty and peace in the middle of the long, exhausting journey of life. She is his cinnamon isle — the one beautiful, restful thing he finds in the vast ocean of time and history. These lines are therefore both a beautiful piece of imagery and a perfect expression of what Banalata Sen means to the poet — she is the saving vision that gives him the strength and the will to continue his journey.

Q10. How does the poet compare himself with the helmsman / sailor / pilot?

[10 Marks]

Ans:

The comparison of the poet to a helmsman or sailor is one of the most important and sustained metaphors in "Banalata Sen." Through this comparison, Jibanananda Das captures the central emotional experience of the poem — the feeling of being lost, exhausted, and directionless in the middle of a vast and indifferent world, and the extraordinary relief of finding a moment of beauty and peace.

The comparison begins with the image of a **helmsman whose rudder is broken**. As we have already noted, the helmsman is the person who steers the ship — the one responsible for its direction and safety. But when the rudder breaks, the helmsman loses all control. He is no longer steering — he is simply drifting. The ship goes wherever the waves and wind take it, far out in the open ocean, with no land in sight and no way to reach safety.

The poet compares himself to this helpless helmsman very deliberately. He too has been "drifting" — wandering through ten thousand years of history without a clear purpose or destination. He has sailed through the seas near Ceylon, drifted through the dark waters of the Malay Sea, passed through the great civilisations of ancient India — but all of this wandering has been without a fixed direction or a clear goal. Like the helmsman with the broken rudder, he has been at the mercy of time and fate, going wherever the current of history has taken him.

The comparison also emphasises the poet's **exhaustion and loneliness**. A sailor lost at sea is one of the most lonely figures imaginable — surrounded by vast, empty water on all sides, with no human company, no clear destination, and no certainty of survival. This loneliness mirrors the poet's own inner experience — despite being part of a vast historical world, he feels essentially alone, drifting through time without connection or purpose.

But the comparison does not end in despair. The lost helmsman suddenly sees the **green island of cinnamon** — a beautiful, fragrant vision of life and safety in the middle of the dangerous ocean. This sudden sight fills him with overwhelming relief and hope. In exactly the same way, the poet's encounter with Banalata Sen is a sudden, unexpected vision of beauty and peace in the middle of his long, exhausting journey. She is his island — the one safe, beautiful place in the vast ocean of time and history.

The comparison between the poet and the sailor/helmsman is therefore deeply meaningful on several levels. It captures the poet's exhaustion, his loneliness, his lack of direction, and his desperate need for a moment of beauty and rest. It also captures the sudden, unexpected quality of his encounter with Banalata Sen — just as the lost sailor does not expect to see the island, the poet does not expect to find such peace and beauty in the middle of his long journey. The comparison makes the emotional impact of meeting Banalata Sen feel vivid, concrete, and deeply human — because every reader can understand what it feels like to be lost and then, suddenly, to find something beautiful that makes everything worthwhile again.