

150th Anniversary of 'Meghnadbadh Kabya'

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MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DATTA (1824-1873) wrote "Meghnadbadh Kabya" in 1861 in two volumes. It is a heroic-tragic epic in nine cantos (division of long poem) composed in blank verse. He introduced his two innovations in Bengali poetry—blank verse and sonnet, both ultimately struck firm roots in Bengali literature. He took three days and two nights from the famous war-epic "The Ramayana" (The Tale of Ram) by Valmiki as the theme. *The Meghnadbadh Kabya* (The Slaying of Meghnad) is an icon of manly heroism of a man of flesh and blood and not of a figure framed in divine delusion. Madhusudan was a maverick, he declared war against divine myths, he established manly humanistic values. He removed the mythical figure of divine Ram and replaced him by Ravana—a man of flesh and blood in *Meghnadbadh Kabya*. He himself commented :

"I despise Ram and his rabble ; but the idea of Ravana elevates and kindles my imagination ; he was a grand fellow."

The poet speaks in the epic on reason, logic and rationality and the whole nation speaks through the poet. The epic is imbued with the spirit of humanism initiated by the European Renaissance (1500-1700 AD).

WESTERN INFLUENCE

"Meghnadbadh Kabya" (1861) composed at a time when the Indian Renaissance started with the movement of Rammohan Roy (1774-1833) against 'Satidaha' (widow burning with dead husband), propagation of widow re-marriage by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) and the proclamation of Henry Louis Vivian 'Derozio's (1809-1831) testing everything "at the bar of reason". The *kabya* is an expression of intellectual dynamism, humanistic intuitions and radical thinking during the 19th century Indian Renaissance following the pattern of European Renaissance (1500-1700 AD).

Madhusudan is popularly known as the "Milton of India". In fact, he was influenced by John Milton (1608-1674) (whose Sat an God's grand adversary is paralleled in Madhusudan's elevation of Ravana as a tragic hero), and with its narrative content based on the Ramayana and the vocabulary of Sanskritic Bengali it was and remains unique in its combination of Madhusudan's mastery of the western classics as well as of the Sanskritic epic. Incidentally, Milton's "Paradise Lost" (1667) is the story of the fall of mankind and the hope of ultimate redemption.

The "Kabya" is comparable to the epic poem—"Shahanama" (1010) by the Persian poet Firdousi (C AD. 940-1020), "Divina Commedia" (C 1300-1321) by the Italian poet Alighieri

Dante (1265-1321)—the greatest poem of the Middle Ages, and “Lusidas”—the epic by the Portuguese poet Luis Vaz de Camoens (1524-1580).

HINDU REACTION

First edition of the *kabya* was published in two volumes : the first volume (upto page 131 was published on Jan 4, 1861 and the second volume (pages 104) published later in the same year. It was his most radical and important composition—an epic on the “Ramayana” theme in which “Divine Ram” and his younger brother “Laksmana” become the villains and “Ravana” of human flesh and blood the hero. This assessment of Ram and Laksmana hurt the sentiments of orthodox Hindus ; it was natural. Madhusudan was not apologetic about it ; in a letter to his friend—Rajnarayan Basu he wrote :

“.... as a jolly christian youth, I don’t care a pin’s head for Hinduism. I love the grand mythology of our ancestors. It is full of poetry. A fellow with an inventive head can manufacture the most beautiful things out of it.

“.... It is my ambition to engraft the exquisite graces of the Greek mythology on our own. I mean to give the free scope to my inventing power (such as they are) and to borrow as little as I can from Valmiki. Do not let this startle you. You shan’t have to complain again of the un-Hindu character of the poem.”....

(Madhusudan Datta : Sahitya-Sadhana : ‘Natyakar Madhusudan’, Khetra Gupta, Madhusadan Rachanabali, Sahitya Sangsad, Calcutta 1977, p 28-64)

Vidyasagar also criticized India’s ancient philosophy and according to him it lacks reason and logic ; it is too spiritual ; it is too theological.

This debate about the great epic is continuing for the last 100 years. It is not a translation of Indrajit’s tragic death in the Ramayana. It is a completely new, original, independent and innovative epic. But orthodox Hindus were not religious fundamentalists or fanatics. They only had or have a different perception. They never disrespected Madhusudan. On the death of Madhusudan on Sunday, June 29, 1873 at 2 PM, even conservative Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (1838-1894)—“Emperor of Bengali Literature”, wrote a long flamboyant obituary in his “Bangadarshan” (Bhadra, 1280 Bangabdha, p 209-210, AD 1873)

“..... If a traditionalist pro-European asks you : who are great Bengalis? We will say : Among the prophets Sri Chaitanya, among the philosophers Raghunath, and among the poets—Joydev and Sri Madhu-sudan.... raise the national flag—insert the name of ‘Sri Madhusudan’ on it.... Bengal in mourning—in tears for the great poet of Bengal.”

Both orthodox and unorthodox Bengalees accept Madhusudan as the torch bearer of Indian intellect. The bridge he built in Bengali literature between the East and the West, especially in his great epic—“Meghnadbadh Kabya” (1861) and also in other works of his more than 150 years ago is well established today in all its glare and glory. □□□