



## reflections

# How Do You Believe?

by A Maher

Most of our decisions are tracked on a framework which streams decision-making into something that is rational to us. Many would like to look upon this as religion. And since religion is, to an extent, acting as an invisible yardstick, it has guidelines or restrictions. So for the average "conservative", it would not accommodate experimenting or adaptation. Adaptation here implies not elongating the existing (or original) religious instructions and applying it to different, newer situations, an obvious example of which is *modernism*. This means you cannot modify your religious convictions to "make room" for say, a modernistic, fast lifestyle. You have to take a stand on either of those "extremities" - therefore, typically for Muslims, no partying around every week, "going out" and specially (centering Dhaka) maintaining a sermonized distance between the sexes.

How do you write about a philosophically abstract subject which has to do with the singularities of human faith? That's right. It should be dry, stretchy and dull. The very basis of how you believe what you believe, if you believe. Yes, and a bit confusing too. It started with three colleagues conversing on how they should put a value on the worth of their beliefs, in the different day to day spheres encountered in life. *Zaman bhai* (the one who brewed this hodgepodge) said,

"If I believed in something, could I scale it as 'believe' and 'do not believe' or can I place it somewhere between the two? Does a solid stand on a subject forbid me from treading within these extremities?" It hinted to be an indefinite answer, if not obscure. *Sonia*, whose initial outburst started the conversation, replied,

"No! We have to first analyse what we are taking a stand on; we cannot be blind believers."

Most of our decisions are tracked on a framework which streams decision-making into something that is rational to us. Many would like to look upon this as religion. And since religion is, to an extent, acting as an invisible yardstick, it has guidelines or restrictions. So for the average

"conservative", it would not accommodate experimenting or adaptation. Adaptation here implies not elongating the existing (or original) religious instructions and applying it to different, newer situations, an obvious example of which is *modernism*. This means you cannot modify your religious convictions to "make room" for say, a modernistic, fast lifestyle. You have to take a stand on either of those "extremities" - therefore, typically for Muslims, no partying around every week, "going out" and specially (centering Dhaka) maintaining a sermonized distance between the sexes.

*Sonia* is a young, energetic woman who keeps pace with the progressions of her society. She reads the magazines, is fashion-conscious and once a while takes a puff among her friends. The newspaper office she works in presents her with ample specimens to test her beliefs on. So when a appealing news item pops up she first analyzes its 'good' and 'bad' angles and fits it into her typical Muslim upbringing. But *Zaman bhai* asserts that you have to observe the instructions preached, and accepted, by society and the *Imams*. On this, you *approach and confront* the modernistic lifestyle. If

you wander along the two 'extremities' your conclusions are deceitful and do not hold, like the commitments of an adulterous man. How do we come out from all this without feeling like we are somehow in the wrong lane? As *Zaman bhai* would soften a bit,

"Maybe we can look upon the edicts preached and passed down the centuries since the birth of Islam. Specially the more recent ones, several decades old. One would think there are hundreds of 'variations' of *The Muslim*, yet each one would claim to conduct themselves from the same pinnacle of faith!"

So therein lies our salvation. While the more elderly hardened citizens are not all that prone to deviate from their present beliefs, the younger generation can easily be coerced into trusting dubious pathways, depicting Islam (or any religion for that matter). Perhaps the people responsible for this are the new league (no pun intended!) of 'holy' men waging their unending *jihads* against the world. The present trend of our catechists appears to be downright intimidation to the very soul of our faith. This religious exhortation (call it what you will) of fear serves little purpose, giving more psychological agony than divine tu-

ition to those who uncertainly follow it.

*Sonia* is undaunted by all these. She accepts that the present state of the new generation was meant to be; religion had already foreseen such advancements, be it for good or the degradation of a society. Today's *youth culture* in Bangladesh has reached conspicuous heights, she admits, but all these have their places in everyone's religious standards.

"It has to do with belief; everything that is in your heart (or mind). What it all boils down to is - physical actions alone cannot/will not prosecute us. How and why we do things is half of the religion." *Zaman bhai* at this point, mischievously changes his

stance.

"Well, you may have a point there. It could be.... No. That's too simple! We ourselves could be the only factor. It could all do with just us. We are always sinning, in some way or the other; if our sins affect others around us then we will be punished for it. But if we keep to ourselves and still keep sinning, we might just be left off. But wait, what is conscience?"

"Zaman bhai, please...."

"We have to explain the existence of conscience...."

## essay

# Modhusudan Dutt, the English Poet

by Sayeed Abubakar

RI Modhusudan Dutt, later the self-revised Michael Modhusudan Dutt (1824-1873), the first Bangali English poet, had three problems — problems I will say because, as he was a true poet, a born poet from top to toe, he was not cunning enough to come out of them, instead he had to surrender consciously to his emotions — firstly, he had fallen in love with the ladies who, unlike him, were not Bangali, not Indian, even not Hindu also; secondly, he had been nourishing a great fascination towards the English poets and their poetry from his very boyhood, especially Milton and Milton's epics had possessed his heart out and out, therefore he had been dreaming to be another Milton in English poetry; and thirdly, a great change, spiritual, came on him when he was first introduced with Christianity and realized the truth that he had been in darkness before being introduced with the English and their culture and religion. These three things should be kept in front if someone wants to understand the poet Modhusudan, the English Modhusudan and the Michael Modhusudan.

A poet needs, according to one critic, three loves which help him to be a real poet: love for woman-kind, love for motherland and love for God; of course, these loves should be from the core of his heart. Modhusudan had these three loves in his possession which prove that the Goddess of poetry was thoroughly in his favour: she wanted to see him only as a great poet, nothing else, so though he was surrounded by poverty, wants, grief, diseases and death, he was always rich in poetry we see.

I have said before that Modhusudan had fallen in love with the non-Bangali ladies. Especially, as mentioned before, Modhusudan had a great fascination towards the English life, so when he had the chance to get *Rebeka Mactavis* as his dream's wife, he became very much emotional and excited. While in Madras, Modhusudan married *Rebeka Mactavis*, the student of Orphan Asylum. He narrated his feeling in a letter written to *Gour Das* in brief:

"Mrs D is of English parentage. Her father was an indigo-planter of this presidency; I have great trouble in getting her. Her friends as you may imagine, were very much against the match."

At last he celebrated his victory this way:

"I now begin to look about me very much like a commander of a barque, just having dropped his anchors in a comparatively safe place, after a fearful gale."

His relation with *Rebeka* lasted not more than one month. He was not happy with her, no doubt. *Henrieta*, his dream's lady, who was with him at the end of her life, came hurriedly as a heavenly reward I will say, to take the place of *Rebeka* in Modhusudan's life. Modhusudan felt happy and proud of having her which is revealed in one of his letters written to *Gour Das*, in which he said, "I have a fine English wife and four children." About *Rebeka*, Modhusudan used the words "of English parentage" and about *Henrieta* "a fine English wife". From this it is obvious like the daylight that Modhusudan liked the English most, in every sphere of life. His mind is clear in another letter where he says: "I wish to leave my children behind, ... and I want them to be thoroughly Europeanised." His love for English life and England is revealed in one of his English poems:

I sigh for Albion's distant shore,  
Its valleys green, its mountains high;  
Tho' friends, relations, I have none  
In that far clime, yet, oh! I sigh  
To cross the vast Atlantic wave  
For glory, or a nameless grave!

My father, mother, sister, all  
Do love me and I love them too.  
Yet oft the tear-drops rush and fall  
From my sad eyes like winter's dew.  
And, oh! I sigh for Albion's stand  
As if she were my native-land.

When we study Modhusudan's English poetry, we notice in some of his poems a heart-rending cry, a heart-touching madness for a lady, unknown, unmentioned. Having gone through his love-poems it has been apparent to me that his mind did not get pleasure in only one lady. Instead his mind was travelling from one lady to another, though it's true that in *Henrieta* he at last found out his peace and destination.

In his "To a Lady" we notice his madness towards a lady whom he is trying to invoke to be his love by various arguments:

Oh! That thou wert as fair within  
As thy angelic outward is.  
Then, of what value hast thou been,  
In this earth, a perfect bliss!  
Lady! tho' beautiful thou art,  
Tho' Nature hath given thee ev'ry grace

Yet, oh! how cruel is thy heart,  
Thou are deaf to the voice of distress.

His love for his beloved who has rejected him is revealed in another short piece namely "To Another Lady": Oh! deign to give a thought on me.

When these sad lines do meet thine eye.

Think then on him who oft for thee,  
Sweet one! doth unregarded sigh!

This sigh and cry come back again and again in Modhusudan's love poems. From the above mentioned poem another thing is obvious to us that when Modhusudan says, "When these sad lines do meet thine eye"; here, of course, we have the scope to mean that this lady is someone unlike Bangali, who will read his poem composed in English.

His obsession with love is revealed in another poem where he says:

My thoughts, my dreams, are all of thee,  
Though absent still thou seemest near;

Thine image everywhere I see  
Thy voice in every gale I hear.

Modhusudan found peace in woman. This woman might be his *Henrieta* or someone else, that's not a matter. This happiness we notice in one of his poems:

"Oh happiness! Oh where thou art?"  
Exclaim'd I with an aching heart:  
A voice instant replied to me,  
"In her's the true felicity.  
If any there be in the earth."

Then give me what I seek and sought.

Refuse sweet one! refuse it not!  
For Oh! I know, I know in thee  
"There is the true felicity,  
If any there be in the earth."

T' embrace thee and to share thy kiss,

Is surely th' most perfect bliss;  
Who can deny, sweet this to be  
"The true — the real felicity  
If there be any in this earth!"

This love for the ladies, the English ladies, of course, made Modhusudan love the English life and culture and made him write his poems in English first.

Modhusudan's third problem was his religious faith, his spirituality. On 9th February 1843 Archdeacon Dally converted him to Christianity in the old Mission Church. Reverend Krishnamohon Banerjee, to whom Modhusudan first revealed his desire of becoming a Christian, says:

"He called upon one day and introduced himself to me as a religious inquirer almost persuaded to be a Christian. After two or three interviews and a great deal of conversation, I was impressed with the belief that his desire of becoming a Christian was scarcely greater than his desire of a

voyage to England."

But Modhusudan's mind is clear in his "Hymn," a poem composed on 9th February 1843, the very day he was baptized. The whole poem is:

Long sunk in superstition's night,  
By sin and Satan driven,  
I saw not, cared not for the light  
That leads the blind to Heaven.

I sat in darkness, Reason's eye  
Was shut, was closed in me;  
I hastened to Eternity  
O'er Error's dreadful seal

But now, at length thy grace, O,  
Lord!

Bids all around me shine:  
I drink thy sweet, thy precious word,

I kneel before thy shrine!

I've broken Affection's tenderest ties

For my blest savior's sake:  
All, all I love beneath the skies,  
Lord! I for Thee forsake!

Few words and lines are very much important here, such as "Long Sunk in superstition's night", "I sat in darkness", a "reason's eye was shut", "Error's dreadful seal" and "I've broken Affection's tenderest ties". Modhusudan says that he was in superstition's night, he was in darkness, he was in Error's dreadful sea and that his reason's eye was shut; means that the so-called Eternal Hinduism gave him nothing but darkness and ignorance. He says "I've broken affection's tenderest ties"; this very speech proves that his love for his Lord, for the Jesus Christ was beyond any suspicion.

True that Modhusudan composed his famous epic "Meghnadbad Kabya" taking the episode from "The Ramayana." But if one goes through the mentioned epic minutely, he will see that unlike Valmiki, instead of taking Rama as the hero of his epic, he has chosen Meghnad, the son of Ravana who had kidnapped Sheeta, the wife of Rama. It is one kind of revolt against the Hinduism, no doubt. To him Ravana is not a demon as believed by the Hindus, but a lovely father, a patriotic king of Lanka. Modhusudan, only Modhusudan could tell this way, for he was not a Hindu then, he was an English in mind, a thorough Bangali Christian in thought. These three problems, discussed above, are the major causes which made him delay to come back to his motherland and mother tongue.

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## poem

### Rabindranath Tagore's The Flute

a translation by Fazlul Alam

A room with grilled window  
in a two storey house  
just by the alley called  
Kinu Goalar Galli.  
Damp walls, plaster crumbling  
stained with leaking water.  
A picture of the fortune bringer god Ganesh  
on a coarse piece of Markin cloth  
is stuck on the door.  
Another creature lives in this room  
on the same rent,  
it's a lizard.  
Our difference is only  
that it is never short of food.

I get twenty five taka  
as a junior clerk in a merchant office.  
I have one meal at Dutt's  
upon tutoring his son.  
I go to the Shealdah station,  
spend the evening there,  
saving on the costs of lights.  
Engines shunt,  
whistles blow,  
porters call.  
The clock strikes half past ten.  
I return to my room  
and submit myself to the  
solitude, silence and darkness.

My aunt lived in a village by  
the river Dhaleswari —  
A marriage was arranged between  
the daughter of her younger brother-in-law  
and this poor me.  
A propitious hour was found,  
and I ran away  
when the hour was proven to be right.  
She was saved,  
I remained as I was.  
She did not come to me,  
but she is in and out of my mind at all hours,  
wearing a Dhakai Saari, Sidoor on her forehead.

Now's the monsoon.  
Tram costs go up,  
my pay gets cut at times.  
Rubbish piles up and gets rotten  
at various corners of the alley  
with mango skins, jackfruit pulps,  
fish gills, dead kitten, and what not.

My umbrella looks like  
the fined pay with many holes.  
My office dress  
like the mind of Gopikanta Gosai, the devotee  
is always soaked.

Monsoon darkness enters my damp room  
and lies lifeless and numb like a trapped animal!  
I feel that I am strapped all around  
with a half-dead world day and night.

Kanto Babu lives in the corner house -  
flirting with carefully arranged long hair,  
large eyes, and  
amateur mood.

He is hooked to playing a cornet.  
Sometimes his music ascends  
on the foul air of this alley -  
in the morning twilight  
sometimes in the afternoon  
as light and shadow play.

Suddenly in the evening,  
the tune Sindhu Baroa goes to crescendo,  
the whole sky gets ringing  
with eternal pangs of separation.

Just then, it becomes immediately clear  
that this alley is a non-existence,  
like the untenable ravings of a drunkard.  
Like a flash, a news arrives that  
there's no difference  
between Haripad, the clerk  
and Akbar, the emperor.

My tattered umbrella and the emperor's parasol  
join together and follow the pensive tune of the flute  
towards the same heaven.

This music is true  
in the unending twilight  
where  
the river Dhaleswari flows,  
with dark shadows of Tamal trees on the bank -  
and where in the yard  
she awaits  
wearing a Dhakai Saree, Sidoor on her forehead.

The poem has been rendered into a film by the translator.