

TRIBUTE

# MICHAEL THE REBEL

APURBA JAHANGIR

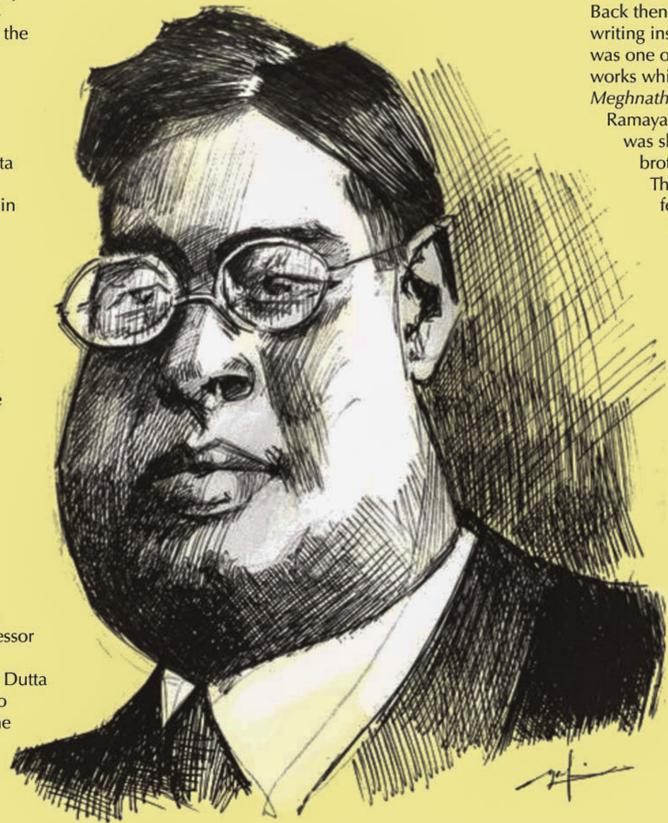
Around the middle of the 18th century, the influence of the intellectual awakening of Bengal was at its peak, questioning Bengal's existing orthodoxies, particularly women's rights, marriage, the dowry system, caste system, religion and other norms. At the same time, Swami Vivekananda was busy establishing the works of the Ramakrishna Mission. Over the summer and early autumn of 1864, he received an unusual letter from Versailles in France. The letter spoke of despair, hardship and even a tinge of terror saying, "I am going to a French jail and my poor wife must seek shelter in a charitable institution. You are the only friend who can rescue me."

The writer signed off as Michael M. Dutt. We fondly remember this writer, for his enormous contribution to Bengal literature, as Michael Madhusudan Dutta.

Born in 1824, Madhusudan Datta or simply known as either Madhusudan or Michael, is known for being a revolutionary poet. He is the first person to introduce sonnet poetry in Bengali literature, something which we all came across in our school textbooks.

Madhusudan pioneered what came to be called *Amitrakshar chhanda* (*Blank Verse*). Although his first love remained poetry, Dutta showed prodigious skill as a playwright as well. He was the first to write Bengali plays in the English style, segregating the play into acts and scenes. He was also the very first to have written satirical plays in Bengali – *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ron* and *Ekei Ki Boley Sabyota*. As the letter mentioned above, Madhusudan went through a lot of ups and downs from changing religion to facing extreme poverty. Fortunately, he channeled his miseries into producing some of the best works in Bengali literature.

Madhusudan was born and raised in the district of Jessore, into affluent, if not overly wealthy, circumstances. From a very early age Dutta was recognised by his teachers and professors as being a precocious child with a gift for literary expressions. He was very imaginative and an early exposure to European literature inspired him to emulate the English in taste, manners and intellect. Dutta's teacher, professor David Lester Richardson of Hindu College introduced him to Byron's poetry which got Dutta fully hooked to western literature. He was so influenced by European literature, that at one point, he began to despise Bengali traditional literature and became a somewhat rebel amidst the writers. Another reason for his revolt was the fact that he was also influenced



SKETCH: YAFIZ SIDDIQUI

by the thoughts and actions of the Young Bengal – a movement by a group of illustrious former students of the Hindu College against the atrocities, blind beliefs and customs they held as illogical, prevalent in the Hindu society of the 19th century Bengal. These two major influences made Dutta aspire to be an English poet, longing to travel to England to gain fame. When his father, concerned by these trends, arranged his marriage, he rebelled and converted to Christianity. In his own words he described, "Where man in all his truest glory lives, and nature's face is exquisitely sweet; for those fair climes I heave impatient sigh, there let me live and there let me die." This conversion however made him to leave Hindu College. Later on he was enrolled into the Bishop College where he continued his studies.

Madhusudan gained fame thanks to his writings. Back then, Bengal was following a traditional norm of writing inspired by the ancient texts. Dutta however was one of the firsts to break this barrier. One of his works which truly showed his rebel self was *Meghnathbodh Kabbo* – an epic based upon Ramayana. He wrote from a perspective where Ram was shown as the villain, and Ravan and his brother Meghnath were shown as the heroes. This shook all traditionalists but paved the way for Madhusudan to become a renaissance icon. *Meghnathbodh Kabbo* is also considered to be one of the first epics of modern Bangla literature.

Though Dutta lived a larger than life lifestyle, throughout his young days, his last years were quite hectic. Though he was the third Bangali to be called to the bar, his writings came somewhat to a stop after becoming a lawyer. Dutta faced extreme poverty in the last couple of years in his life, where he could not even provide for his family.

January 25 will mark the 192nd Birth Anniversary of Michael Madhusudan Dutta. It is because of Dutta, that Bangla poetry took a 'rebellious' turn in the 1800s. Even Rabindranath had credited him to be a true pioneer of Bengal's modern poetry. On June 26 1873, Madhusudan's wife, Henrietta, had passed away. After hearing this news, Madhusudan is said to have recited a passage from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to his dear friend Bysack, to express his deepest conviction of life. He quoted, "Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player." Three days later Dutta, at the age of 49, died in that same hospital. ■

EXPERIENCE



The archway at the entrance of Jorasanko Thakurbari allyway.



View from our hotel room in Kolkata.

## THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME: 100 MEMBER YOUTH DELEGATION

(PART V)

NAZIBA BASHER

We had to fly to Kolkata at dawn, so early that most of us arrived at the airport with eyes half-shut. By the time we reached, had lunch and settled into our hotel rooms, it was already late afternoon. Sarzina, my roommate, by then, had fallen quite ill suffering from a stuffy nose and coughs so she decided to rest. As Sarzina lay down to nap, I walked about the room and looked out the window. There she was-Kolkata. There was something familiar about her and her ways. It was like being home before going home.

Considering everyone's exhaustion, we took the rest of the day off. And by day off, I mean we shopped. After Sarzina awoke, we got together with the rest of the 'addabaa' gang that consisted of Banglavisian journalist S M Tanbir Alam, team leader Mohiuddin Fayaz, Ariq Anam Khan, channel 24 sports journalist Sadman Sakeeb, co-ordinator Kallyan Kanti Das, Sarzina and I. Minus Ariq, the rest of us set out on the streets of Kolkata to get the shopping done. New Market was where it began, and New Market was where it ended. Ranging from saris, to jewellery, to sportswear, luggage and more- everything was right there. The haggling was immense and unimaginable, almost miraculous in some instances. Once I was done, while everyone continued to look for the perfect shade of something, I looked for the perfect Gollappa stand.

It went on until it was time for the shops to shut down. A five minute walk from there, we headed back to our hotel! After all the shopping and dinner, we rushed to each others' rooms to show what we all had bought. Anik's sherwani for his brother's wedding, the watch I bought for my father, Sarzina and her

fascination for *kurtis*- we shared all of it with each other like best friends after a dose of retail therapy. We ended the night with our final 'adda' reminiscing about the best memories we had made with each other throughout the trip. Our team leader's incessant whistle-blowing topped the list of what we would miss the most. There were jokes about how the whistle should be encased and put in a museum. Laughter and gossip was followed by resting ourselves for our final day in India.

After visiting the historic grounds at the Eden Gardens where all the greatest cricketers ever played, and then breathing in the cooling air of the River Ganges, there was only one site left for us to visit on the last day- Jorasanko Thakurbari- the home of Rabindranath Tagore. As we walked down the ally leading towards the establishment, after passing under the archway that had the name beautifully inscribed, the very air smelled like history. We stepped onto the premise- barefoot- and instantly heard the tunes of Rabindranath play in every room. Being a dancer, I went into a state of solitary absorption. I walked down the halls, explored the rooms, not knowing that I was already swaying and breaking into mudras as I did so. Soon, there was a small crowd of people watching me as I stared at the Esraj in Rabi Thakur's collection of instruments and kept dancing unknowingly. I swayed from room to room until I paused in the very room where Kabi Guru passed away. It was cold and the air hung a little heavier. I stared at the fire placed in his memory for a while, and then turned left to see the poem 'Parting Words' formed on a wall. Upon finishing, I took a deep breath and felt a tear or two roll down my cheek.

I solemnly walked downstairs to the big backyard with a cement stage. You could instantly imagine the kind of gracious evenings that were once spent here- with melodies, rhythms, and poetic words.

All too soon, we headed back to our hotel for last minute packing before we



The historic cricketing grounds of Eden Gardens.

flew back to our homeland. The whole ordeal- assembling at the lobby, the bus ride to the airport, the plane journey back home- was spent in sombre silence. We didn't know what to say to each other. That we would miss everyone and every minute we spent with each other over the past week was a given. What next?

At the airport, the joy of being back was overpowered by the sadness of leaving one another. "No more early morning wake-up calls," one said. "No more hearing you sing in the shower," said another. We parted with tears and 'we will see each other again', somehow knowing that the daily grind of life back home would slim the chances. Heartbreak was everywhere and it was palpable. 100 Members, of 100 kinds, from 100 different backgrounds, doing 100 different things-- a melting pot of talents ranging from dancers, to singers, doctors, engineers, sportsmen, RJs, actors and everything you can think of, each having become all too familiar.

Since I came back, I have done dance shows, become a dance director for a cinema, been awarded employee of the year. RJ Sarzina has been promoted to Station Manager at Radio Foorti, Ariq has left for his Master's at the London Film School, Anik has been playing exceptional cricket, league after league, Saad and his team have become local footballing champions, and everyone else has become busy achieving the best of life. But every now and then, a simple hello from one of us to the other hits us with a pang of nostalgia of eight unforgettable days, of how we had the opportunity to build up a historic friendship between two great nations, of how we represented our motherland, of jokes, of laughter and of love. We can only hope and pray to give back what we have gotten, to carry on the legacy of being one of the cherished members of Bangladesh's 100 Member Youth Delegation 2016, a life-changing experience. ■



PHOTO: STAR FILE

## 6 NUMBERS

Six people were killed and 35 others injured as a bus plunged into a roadside ditch at Zimlatali on Dhaka-Chittagong highway in Daudkandi upazila in Comilla on Saturday. Identities of the deceased could not be confirmed yet. The Comilla-bound bus coming from Dimla upazila in Nilphamari district fell into a roadside ditch in the area as the driver of the bus lost control over the steering around 5:00am, leaving five people dead on the spot, said Officer-in charge of Daudkandi Highway Police Station Abdul Awal.

SOURCE: THE DAILY STAR REPORT