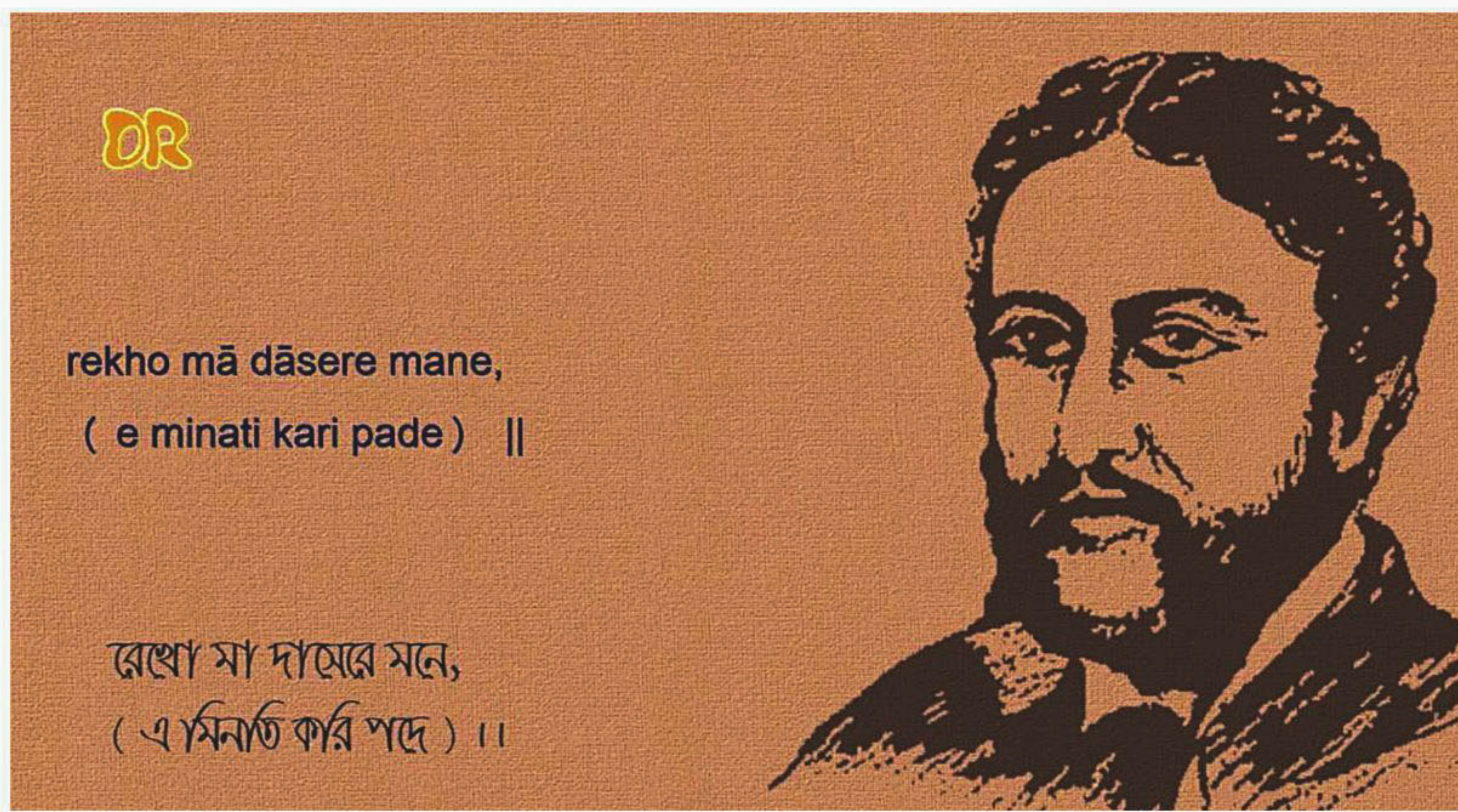


Tomb of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Sagardari, Jessore.



DR  
 rekho mā dāserē mane,  
 ( e minati kari pade ) ||

রেক্ষো মা দাসেরে মনে,  
 ( এ মিনতি করি পদে ) ||

# MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DUTT A BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE

KAISER HAQ

We celebrate Michael Madhusudan Dutt's birthday on 25 January, but we cannot be certain that this is absolutely accurate, just as we are not 100 percent sure that Shakespeare was born on 23 April. We are sure about the years, though. In Dutt's case it was 1824. And in the case of both Shakespeare and Dutt we can confidently affirm their genius. Shakespeare remains unsurpassed; Dutt has to yield the palm to Rabindranath; but do we have to pursue the comparison beyond a point? Dutt as an epic poet has no equal in Bengali; and his grand fusion of Western Romanticism and Eastern themes is the first great achievement of the *soi disant* Renaissance in Bengal.

More than any Bengali writer of the last couple of centuries, Dutt is a figure of legend and myth. I do not know about the younger generations, but mine (I was born in 1950) grew up listening to fascinating stories about his life and times and remarkable abilities. One was a cautionary tale that my father enjoyed telling. Dutt was superlatively talented, and mastered English so thoroughly that he could dream of composing verses that would rival the great poets in the language. This was not an ambition that India's British rulers could countenance, much less encourage; and so the Englishmen he knew poured cold water on his efforts. His youthful production, *The Captive Ladie* (1849), remained his only book of English poems. My father would round off the story with the pronouncement that since Michael could not succeed as a poet in English no one else in the subcontinent could. I wonder if the warning had the effect of a dare and got me into writing poetry in English. Whether it did or not, I am sure if I then followed Dutt into switching to our shared mother tongue no epic or sonnet cycle would emerge – not even if I tried to emulate his lifestyle.

That is another well-known aspect of the Madhusudan legend – his notoriously extravagant and dissolute ways. 'I shall die as I have lived.' – Oscar Wilde's aperçu would apply to Dutt just as well. This trait in Dutt's personality turned him into a favourite subject of rather sensational compositions. Gopa Majumdar, translator of Ghulam Murshid's magisterial biography of Dutt, comments that Dutt's 'life was so intriguing to many writers that some had written plays based on it. On one occasion, Madhusudan appeared as a character in a novel set in the mid-nineteenth century. ... His problem with alcohol, in particular, was highlighted by all, for it provided both drama and entertainment.' I have witnessed one example of this sort of dramatisation of Dutt's life – a jatra play that was televised on Dhaka TV. It was amusing, and terribly sad.

How could dissolute living and the creation of literary masterpieces go hand in hand? It is a paradox, no doubt, but not an uncommon one. Dutt was a spendthrift who drank too much, but that is only half the story. He was also the most erudite man of his milieu; William Radice rightly describes him as a 'scholar poet'. The erudition was imbibed not through alcohol, but through systematic study. 'Here is my routine,' Dutt wrote to his friend Gour Dass in 1849, '6-8 Hebrew, 8-12 School, 12-2 Greek, 2-5 Telegu and Sanskrit, 5-7 Latin, 7-10 English.' Even if we make allowances for some exaggeration, the range of his literary interests is staggering; and so is the creative drive behind his compositions.

If we consider the formal education that Dutt received, we find a similar range of exposure to world literature. He came to



Residence of Micheal Madhusudhan Dutt in Khidirpur, Kolkata, India



The street where M Dutt used to live in Versailles, France

Calcutta with his mother at the age of nine to join his father, who had set up a legal practice as a pleader. At the Hindu College, where he first studied, the literature curriculum was in the hands of the Principal D. L. Richardson, a retired Army Captain and a poet, who had succeeded Henry Louis Vivien Derozio, guru of Young Bengal, when the latter had been sacked on the charge that he was instilling atheism in his students. Derozio's interests were both literary and philosophical, and his disciples were encouraged to read thinkers like John Locke, Hume and Thomas Paine, and to engage with ideas of social reform. DLR, as Richardson was referred to by his students, was focused on literature and avoided contentious social or philosophical issues. Dutt was DLR's disciple and developed into a literary man with no time to think of social reform.

At Macaulay's urging, DLR edited a two-volume anthology running to a total of 1635 pages, titled *Selections from the British Poets* (1840). It contained selections from Chaucer

down to the present, including two contemporary Indian poets, Derozio and Kashiprasad Ghosh. The canonisation of the Indian poets indicates that not all Englishmen believed that one could write poetry of quality only in the mother tongue. The anthology had five complete Shakespeare plays and selections from a sixth; long sections from Milton; and English translations of selections from Homer, Virgil, Dante, Tasso, Goethe and other European poets. There were biographical and critical comments on the poets, and an Introduction that made Dutt exclaim, 'If only I could write such an Introduction!' In its critique of utilitarianism and philistinism, and its insistence on the humanising role of poetry, it seems to anticipate the highly influential ideas of Matthew Arnold. Such were the ideas that inspired Dutt.

Dutt's days at the Hindu College ended with his sudden conversion to Christianity in 1843, after which he had to move to Bishop's

College. Radice comments that 'Madhusudan converted mainly, it seems, to evade a traditional marriage to a child-bride that his parents wished to arrange.' Dutt's father continued to support him for several years before cutting him off. Dutt moved to Madras to look for employment, became a schoolteacher, and married Rebecca Thompson, daughter of an English gunner in the Horse Artillery and an Indo-Briton mother, by whom he had four children. For reasons unknown, the marriage did not last, though it was never annulled. Dutt took up with Amelia Henrietta Sophia White, daughter of a colleague; she gave him three children and lived with him till her death.

Dutt worked in intense creative spurts, often finishing long works within an incredibly short time. *The Captive Ladie* was finished in about three weeks. While in Madras he also published a lecture, 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu,' which causes some embarrassment to his admirers. It argues that Hindu society is riddled with superstition, a victim of institutions that curb mankind's innate desire for freedom, and that 'it is the Solemn mission of the Anglo-Saxon to renovate, to regenerate, to civilise, or in one word, to Christianise the Hindu.' The lecture should be seen in relation to Dutt's entire life and work, and not in isolation.

After the death of Dutt's father Dutt returned to Calcutta in 1856 and got a clerical post in the Police Court. The next six years were the most productive period of his life. His creative renewal began with a commissioned English translation of Ramnarayan Tarkaratna's Bengali version of a Sanskrit play. While doing the job he realised he could write better plays if he wanted. He got hold of a few Sanskrit and Bengali books on drama, and in a week produced the opening scenes of his first Bengali play, *Sermista*. The entire play did not take longer than three weeks. He was a self-conscious artist, aware of his debt to Western

writers, and well able to defend the absorption of such influences. He wrote to Gour Dass: 'there will, in all likelihood, be something of a foreign air about my drama; but if the language be not ungrammatical, if the thoughts be just and glowing, the plot interesting, the characters well maintained, what care you if there be a foreign air about the thing? Do you dislike Moore's poetry because it is full of Orientalism?' The last sentence is significant. It shows that Dutt was aware of the two-way traffic in influence that was taking place in the world. The influence of East on West has been brilliantly studied by Raymond Schwab in *oriental Renaissance*. In this context 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu' should be seen as an acknowledgment of the influence travelling from West to East, rather than a championing of imperialism.

Dutt's great works came one by one, with seeming effortlessness: *Tillotomasambhab Kabya*, *Brajangana Kabya*, *Krishnakumari Natak*, *Meghnadbadh Kabya*. In 1862 he sailed for England to study at the Bar. He moved to Versailles to save expenses, and on the occasion of Dante's birth tercentenary sent a sonnet to the Italian King, together with a note in English, and his own French translation of the sonnet. He returned to Calcutta in 1867 and began his law practice, but no matter how much he earned, he always spent more. His health too went into rapid decline, and both he and Henrietta died in 1873, within three months of each other.

Dutt's works continue to impress readers, though one suspects their numbers are



dwindling this post-literate age. For Anglophone readers he is now available in good translations by Clinton Seely and William Radice. For many Anglophone readers his letters will have an abiding interest. They reveal a sharp, Romantic, liberal mind, above the narrow prejudices that were common among his contemporaries. To take a couple of examples: he wrote an English play titled *Rizia, Empress of Inde*. Ghulam Murshid comments: 'No other Bengali writer had thought of using a Muslim source in their writing.' Dutt wanted to write a Bengali play on the Muslim Queen: 'After this, we must look to "Rizia" – ... The prejudice against Moslem names must be given up.' But the prejudice he expected in his audience deterred him from the venture. In another letter Dutt comments that the death of Imam Hussain at Karbala would be a great subject for a tragedy. Dutt has a valuable lesson to teach us today.

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