

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Credible data vital for road safety

Why is police data on road accidents and casualties still so unreliable?

THE World Bank, in a recent appraisal report prepared for financing a road safety project in Bangladesh, observed that unreliable and poor-quality data on road accidents, deaths and injuries impede road safety management in Bangladesh. The report also mentioned that our current system of recording and analysing data on road accidents is error-prone, cumbersome and time-consuming, and thus unfit for analysis and benchmarking. We should take these observations made by the World Bank seriously, especially given the alarming rise in road accidents across the country.

There are many reasons for the persistence of road accidents—including non-implementation of the road safety law, absence of proper traffic management, and the lack of accountability in the transport sector, to name a few. But a fair assessment of the danger we face is not possible without reliable data. Reportedly, while governments in developed countries rely mainly on police data on road accidents, in Bangladesh we can't really depend on such data since, as per World Bank, the data prepared by police is irregular and incomplete. These are not recorded following a consistent procedure either.

Whenever we want to check the numbers of crashes and fatalities on a year-on-year basis, we need to look at different sources rather than relying on police data, which is unfortunate. While police mainly record road accident data from the First Information Reports (FIRs) or General Dairies (GDs), road safety campaigners source their information from media reports. So, there is a significant gap in the numbers recorded by them. In both cases, many incidents remain unrecorded.

For example, the World Bank has compared the fatalities recorded by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the police from 2010 to 2015, and found 90 percent discrepancy between their data sets. While, according to police data, 2,463 people were killed in road accidents in 2016, the WHO estimate put the number at 24,954. Such a shockingly huge difference in numbers is concerning, because without the real numbers, the authorities cannot take informed decisions and make policies to improve road safety.

Therefore, to make our roads safer and remove the chaos in the transport sector, we need to make changes in every step of the process. Having proper data should be the first step. To ensure this, our police force should develop an effective system of recording and analysing the data. As people in the rural areas do not often report incidents of road accidents, they must be made aware to do so. In fact, the law must specify how and where to report the cases.

We think the World Bank has expressed some valid concerns here. The authorities should look into them and take necessary steps, so we can have authentic data and proper planning for better road safety management.

A hospital sans essential services

DSCC-run hospital in urgent need of overhaul

IT is unfortunate that an important hospital like the Dhaka Mahanagar General Hospital, one of the two hospitals run by the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), is struggling to provide essential services to the large number of patients who visit it every day. Based in Old Dhaka, the public hospital is a major destination for local healthcare seekers, and as such, is expected to be sufficiently staffed and equipped to handle the patient load with all sections functioning properly. But in reality, it has one-third of the beds missing and suffers from an acute shortage of doctors, nurses and general staff. The shortage of beds is due to its surgery department remaining closed for the past six years. Given how important a surgery department is in any hospital, one cannot help but wonder why a replacement could not be found in all these years.

According to our report, the 150-bed hospital is supposed to have 50 beds for medicine, 50 for gynaecology and 50 for surgery. After the closure of the surgery department in 2015, following the departure of its designated doctor, it is essentially a 100-bed facility now. Its ailment does not end here, however. It was declared a Covid-dedicated facility during the peak of the pandemic, and the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) had given some ICU beds in 2020 to meet the growing demand. But the facility could not utilise those beds because of a shortage of physicians and other required healthcare workers. At the moment, almost half of the doctors' posts in the hospital are vacant. This explains why patients seeking medical attention have to wait long hours before they can find a doctor.

It is quite surprising that, although the hospital authorities have reportedly sent several requisition letters to the higher authorities for necessary manpower for the ICUs and HDUs, they received no concrete reply till date. The hospital authorities admitted that because of the doctor and staff crisis, they were not able to deliver the services expected of them. It goes without saying that the urgency of having all the departments functioning with the required number of doctors and healthcare workers has become more prominent as the country goes through the third wave of the pandemic.

The sordid pictures coming from a major hospital like the Dhaka Mahanagar General Hospital, run with taxpayers' money, is not only unfortunate; it is totally unacceptable as well. We hope the relevant authorities will take all necessary measures to sufficiently equip the hospital and improve its services without further delay, so that patients can get necessary treatment in time.

198TH BIRTHDAY OF MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DATTA

Michael Madhusudan Datta: Resistance, Rebellion, Rupture



Dr Azfar Hussain is interim director of the graduate programme in social innovation and associate professor of integrative, religious, and cultural studies at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, U.S. He is also the vice-president of the U.S.-based Global Center for Advanced Studies (GCAS).

AZFAR HUSSAIN

I shall come out like a tremendous comet.

—Michael Madhusudan Datta

MICHAEL Madhusudan Datta (1824-1873) is widely regarded as the first modern Bangla poet. Well before Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), Madhusudan is even reckoned as the first rebel poet in Bangla literature, although he is by no means a revolutionary like Nazrul. A relentless experimenter with both indigenous and Western poetic forms—and a veritable polyglot with a command over not only Bangla and English, but also Sanskrit, Persian, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, German, and Italian—Madhusudan introduced the sonnet in Bangla poetry, while he is also considered the first modern playwright and the first successful writer of a tragedy in Bangla. Best known for his *magnum opus* called "*Meghnadbadh Kabya*" (The Poem of the Slaying of Meghnad)—the first Bangla literary epic that inaugurates a rupture with all preceding poetic and metrical traditions while introducing the famous *amritrakshar chhanda* (unrhymed meter) that blasts open the continuum of the traditional *payar* cadences and couplets—Michael Madhusudan Datta exemplarily enacts the dialectics of tensions and transactions between colonial modernity and indigeneity.

In fact, Madhusudan's entire *oeuvre*—produced in the 19th-century colonial Bengal—encompasses and yet creatively ranges beyond the three stages of anticolonial struggle that the Caribbean revolutionary Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) spells out in his major work called "*The Wretched of the Earth*" (1961): assimilation, self-discovery, and rebellion. And Madhusudan's own rebellion—including his uncritical assimilationist approaches, his mimetic modes, and even his colonial mindset that one encounters in his early life—can all be seen in aesthetic, architectonic, in even metrical, and, of course, political terms. Now, before I dwell on the character and content of Madhusudan's literary and political rebellion, let me trace a few significant trajectories of his life and work.

Michael Madhusudan Datta was born on January 25, 1824 (1230 by the Bengali calendar), in the village of Sagard(n)ri—located by the Kapotaksha River—in the district of Jashore in present-day Bangladesh. He deeply loved his village and the river of his childhood, both of which continued to figure in his *oeuvre*. They also appeared in the very epitaph Madhusudan wrote for himself, thereby underlining his identity while also attesting to his rootedness. His father Rainarayan Datta was a lawyer by profession. And Madhusudan's mother Jahnnabi Devi was well-versed in ancient epics and Hindu mythologies. He was their only living child. Madhusudan went to a primary school in Sagard(n)ri. During his childhood, he enjoyed the stories of the two ancient Sanskrit epics—the "*Ramayana*" and the "*Mahabharata*"—that his mother used to tell him. She also entertained her son with the stories from Mukundaram's "*Chandimangal*" (1590) and Bharatchandra Roy's "*Annada Mangal*" (1732)—the great verse narratives that were produced in precolonial Bengal.

Those stories his mother had told him remained with Madhusudan in profound ways—ones that would later come to inform and inflect his literary productions at more levels than one. In 1832, Madhusudan's entire family moved from their village to Kolkata (then known as Calcutta), where he attended the famous Hindu College (now Presidency College)—the best college at the time—an institution where Madhusudan studied Latin, Greek and English languages and literatures. And, indeed, that college played a crucial role in Westernising Madhusudan. True, he was then heavily under the spell of not only the Western literary canon and classics as such, but also the Western way of living. Madhusudan rejected Hinduism and converted to Christianity. This angered his father, who eventually disowned Madhusudan.

It was also during that period that Madhusudan fully devoted himself to writing poetry in English. In 1849, he published his first book called "*The Captive Ladie*"—consisting of a tale in two cantos and a verse narrative—a poetic production that surely evinced Madhusudan's command of English and even his artistry and poetic sensibility. But that work did not prove to be a success by any means. The Anglo-Indian educationist JED Bethune went to the extent of suggesting that Madhusudan should

"employ his time to better advantage than writing English poetry" and that he should do well to write in his mother tongue.

Probably the most well-known stories of Madhusudan's life are that of his gargantuan ambition to become a great poet in the English language and that of his eventual glorious return to his mother tongue, although this return does not simply come to mean an

significant rewriting of the ancient Sanskrit epic "*Ramayana*." This tradition of rebellious rewriting is also seen in so-called "postcolonial" literature—say, from the Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire to the Dominican British novelist Jean Rhys to another Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, to mention but a few. Now, in Madhusudan's epic, to put it bluntly, Ram—who is otherwise considered the supreme being in many Hindu traditions—is not the real protagonist, but the *Rakshasa* monarch Ravana is. In fact, Madhusudan's epic decidedly zeroes in on the slaying of Meghnad, Ravana's eldest son. In Madhusudan's hands, Ravana—customarily and religiously demonised in dominant Hindu narratives—morphs into a real and even powerful human being, one who is capable of grieving, while Ram is depicted not as a god, but as an average human being with his frailties and even aberrations.

Now influenced and inspired by Shakespeare's versions of both humanism and anti-humanism—exemplified in that famous "*Hamlet*" passage starting with "What a piece of a work is a man!"—Madhusudan surely and epically stages his own humanist and even insurrectionary sensibility that enables us to question, distrust, disobey, resist, rethink, even recreate. Indeed, in more senses than one, Madhusudan's epic is nonconformist, and, by extension, antifeudal and anticolonial—the first epic that fiercely mobilises the liberationist and emancipatory impulses in the era of high colonialism, while unsettling the existing order of things and thoughts. And Madhusudan's deep, active intertextuality that cross-fertilises Homer-Virgil-Dante-Shakespeare-Milton with the ancient Sanskrit epics is not politically neutral either; it means that making connections across geographic, linguistic, literary, and textual boundaries amounts to combating the colonially sanctioned and spatially imprisoned modes of becoming and being in the world.

True, Madhusudan and his works were always supported by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), and, later, even by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), one who even ardently advocated the need for inscribing Madhusudan's name on the so-called "national flag" of India. But, as my own reading of "*Meghnadbadh Kabya*" reveals, Madhusudan never endorsed the kind of communally motivated, Hindu-centric Bengali nationalism Bankim promotes. But Bankim deeply admired Madhusudan not because of his rebellion, but because of his genius. Later, even Rabindranath Tagore, Pramatha Chaudhuri, and Buddhadev Bose—all



Michael Madhusudan Datta (January 25, 1824-June 29, 1873)

PHOTO: COLLECTED

orthodox, indigenist rejection or negation of English and European literatures as such—literatures on which he, however, continued to draw in most creative ways, attesting to an unprecedented literary internationalism in colonial India.

Madhusudan did not live a long life. He died when he was only 49. And the actual period of his literary productions in Bangla spanned about seven years—indeed a brief period during which he, however, produced five substantial volumes of



In more senses than one, Madhusudan's epic is non-conformist, and, by extension, antifeudal and anticolonial—the first epic that fiercely mobilises the liberationist and emancipatory impulses in the era of high colonialism, while unsettling the existing order of things and thoughts.

poems in almost headlong succession: "*Tilottomasambhab Kabya*" (1860), "*Meghnadbadh Kabya*" (1861), "*Brojangana Kabya*" (1861), "*Beerangana Kabya*" (1862), and "*Chaturdashpadee Kabitabolee*" (1866). According to one authoritative account, between 1858 and 1862, Madhusudan published five plays, three narrative poems, and a volume of lyrics encompassing the variations on the Radha-Krishna theme. During the same period, Madhusudan also translated three plays from Bangla to English; among them was Dinbandhu Mitra's famous play called "*Nil Darpan*."

Let me now return to "*Meghnadbadh Kabya*"—Madhusudan's epic poem in nine cantos—which is a trailblazing intervention in the domain of Bangla poetry. Its staggering amplitude, its breathtaking intertextuality, its sonorous music coupled with the everydayness of the prosaic language that it poetically mediates, its polysemous vectors and valences, its relentless metaphorical imagination and its novel metrical adventures, and, above all, its reversal of hegemonically structured epistemologies and ontologies—including the Hinduism-sanctioned hierarchies—call for an extended discussion. But, owing to space constraints, I can only touch on a few aspects of Madhusudan's epic here.

To begin with, "*Meghnadbadh Kabya*" is a politically and aesthetically

of whose anti-epical positions and characteristic lyrical proclivities are well-known—denigrated "*Meghnadbadh Kabya*", although, later, it was only Rabindranath who revised his position vis-a-vis Madhusudan's epic while moving in the direction of commending "*Meghnadbadh's*" thematic and stylistic innovativeness and élan.

Madhusudan's social farces—"*Buro Shaliker Ghare Ron*" (1860) and "*Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata*" (1860)—are also unprecedented, groundbreaking interventions in the history of Bangla literature—works that significantly foreground the questions of justice and rebellion as well as the woman question with full force, although Madhusudan was not a feminist *stricto sensu*. But Madhusudan later wrote some brilliant plays, decisively focused as they are on the woman question, such as "*Sermista*" (1859) and "*Krishnakumari*" (1860)—plays that also mobilise emancipatory impulses, even if Madhusudan couldn't transcend his own male and class limitations in the final instance.

In this short piece, I could only scratch the surface of Madhusudan's work. But reinventing his work at the contemporary conjuncture amounts to reconceptualising the political value of an aesthetic that can enable us to stage our resistances to all forms and forces of colonisation and dehumanisation—direct and indirect—to say the least.