

200TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DUTT

Pramila: A Tradition Characterized

Though Michael Madhusudan Dutt could brag of his iconoclasm with respect to Rama and even had spoken derisively once of "faithless Seeta," he later declared himself more circumspect when it came to depicting female characters.

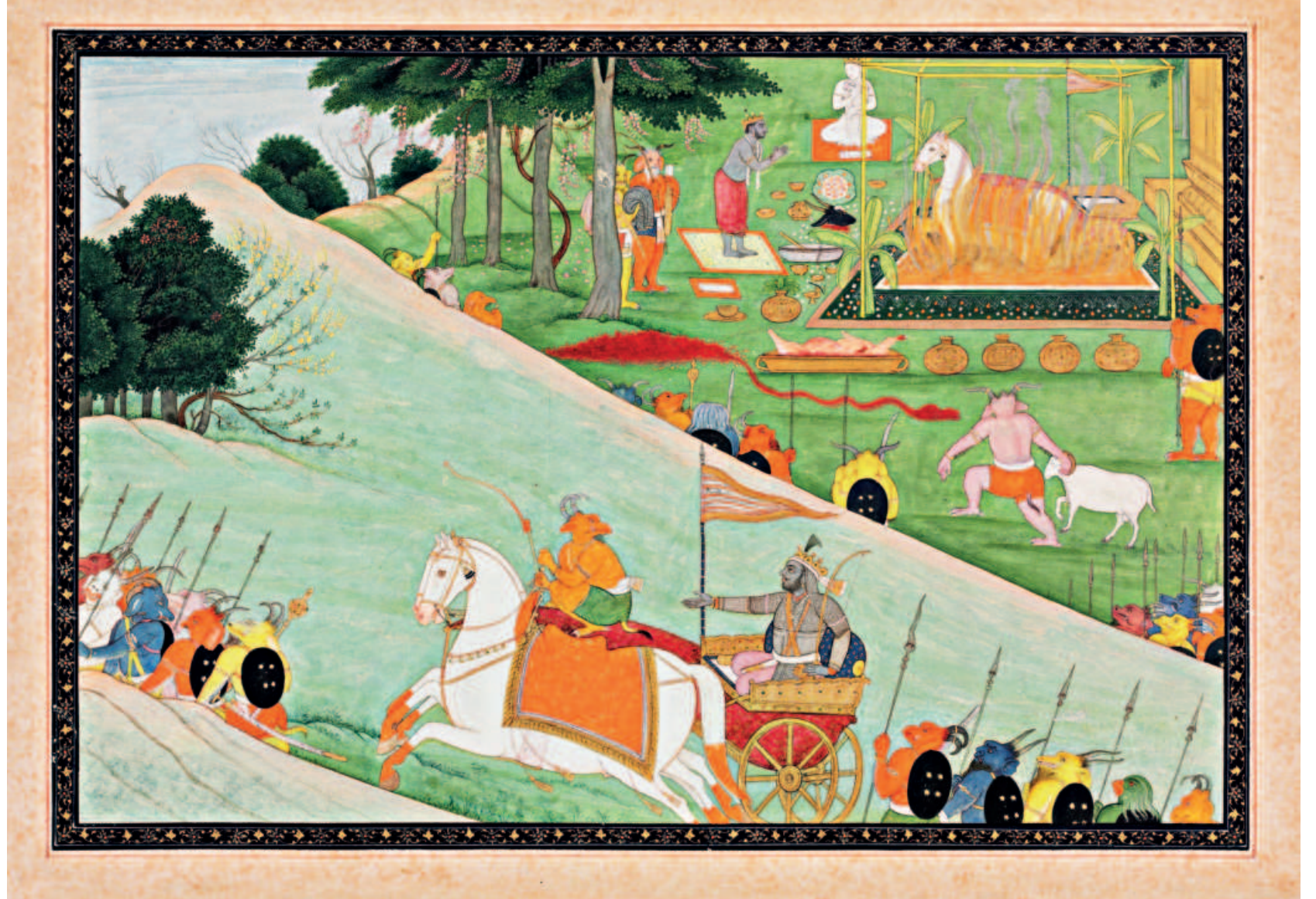
CLINTON B SEELY

"People here grumble and say that the heart of the Poet in Meghanada is with the Rakhasas. And that is the real truth. I despise Ram and his rabble; but the idea of Ravana, elevates and kindles my imagination; he was a grand fellow."

This oft quoted iconoclasm by Bengali poet and playwright Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) was made in a letter, in English, to a Bengali friend. The "here" of the letter refers to Calcutta; the cause of the grumbling—Dutt's narrative poem, *The Slaying of Meghanada* (*Meghanadavadha kavya*). Eighteen hundred sixty-one can be said to mark the beginning of Bangla literature's modern era, not because of Rabindranath Tagore, whose birth year it happened to be, but because in that year Dutt published his magnum opus, *The Slaying of Meghanada*. Well over a century later, Ashis Nandy, in a study of colonial mentality (*The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*) describes Dutt as "probably the person who most dramatically sought to redefine popular mythology to fit the changing values under colonialism . . ." Nandy cites as supporting evidence *The Slaying of Meghanada*.

The poem—drawn from one of Hindu India's great epics, the *Ramayana*—begins with Ravana's lamenting over the death of son Virabahu, and concludes with the cremation of the greatest of his Raksasa sons, Meghanada. If the events are more or less the same in both the traditional epic and Dutt's tale, and if the characters behave in similar fashion, then where are the "new" values and how are they conveyed?

A brief look at the nature of the "grumbling," though nothing



As Rama and his armies battle their way across Lanka toward Ravana's palace, they learn that Ravana's son Meghanada is about to perform a sacrifice that will make him invincible. Fortunately, the god Brahma decrees that, if the sacrifice is interrupted, Meghanada will die. In the top of the painting, Meghanada sacrifices a white horse and a demon soldier drags forward an offering ram. Behind him, on an orange cloth, hovers the white figure of Sita, a phantom used to fool Hanuman. Meghanada himself stands on a mat performing the rituals. When Lakshmana and his army attack the demons, Meghanada interrupts his sacrifice to counterattack. In the bottom of the painting Meghanada charges forward in his chariot to meet his preordained death at Lakshmana's hands. Artist/maker unknown, Indian. Opaque and transparent watercolor and gold on paper. c. 1780-1790.

COURTESY: PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART.



Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824 – 1873)

"I must tell you, my dear fellow, that though, 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."

—Michael Madhusudan Dutt

specific to answer the question just posed, might help to highlight what seemed modern, too modern, to some. Jyotirindranath Tagore, one of Rabindranath's elder brothers, expressed it this way:

"The poet is at complete liberty to paint in more glowing colors all those characters who are depicted nobly in the original text; but what right does he have to debase those drawn in an elevated manner in the original work? The character of Rama is not the personal possession of one poet; it is the property of all of India; should we condone its being used and abused so? In particular, is it proper for a sensitive poet of this land to belittle in such a fashion Rama and Lakshmana—those deities worshiped from time immemorial—they who are in and of the heart of each and every Indian." (*Bharati*, Asvin 1289 BS [September 1882 CE])

From Jyotirindranath Tagore in the 19th century and Ashis Nandy, in the 20th, the focus of criticism has been upon the main characters, male in all cases: Rama, Lakshmana, Ravana, and Meghanada. What applies to the goose, however, is not, in this instance, so applicable to the gander. Pramila, by far the most prominent female character in Dutt's poem, is not completely new, though relatively obscure within Bangla literature.

She does not appear in the Bengali *Ramayana* by Krittivasa, nor in the Sanskrit *Ramayana* of Valmiki, for that matter. In Krittivasa's *Ramayana*, Meghanada is said to have not one but 9,000 wives, none of whom are named, however. With Pramila, Dutt had a somewhat tabula rasa upon which he could have painted any personality he liked. He could have her hold and demonstrate any values he chose. He could have her hold and demonstrate "the changing values under colonialism" of which Nandy writes. Pramila appears in the Bangla *Mahabharata* by Kasiram Das, in the "Asvamedha Parva," and, it is from that text that Dutt takes her name, plus her distinctive characteristics.

After the great Bharata war between the Pandavas and Kauravas wherein all Kauravas are killed, Yudhisthira, eldest of the Pandavas, is afflicted with remorse. He is counseled by Vyasa to perform a horse-sacrifice (*asvamedha*) as expiation for any possible sins he might have committed. In such a sacrifice, a horse is allowed to wander at will for a year throughout the world, but must be defended by an accompanying entourage. Those into whose realm the horse wandered were expected to acknowledge the sacrificer's suzerainty. At one point, the horse enters Pramila's queendom, a land inhabited solely by women warriors. Though initially possessive, Pramila agrees to relinquish the horse back to the Pandavas and requests Arjuna (also known as Partha) to wed her—which he consents to do following completion of the sacrifice.

Dutt drew upon this lightly sketched character (the Pramila episode occupies only two of the more than a thousand pages in one printed version of the Bangla *Mahabharata*) for his own Pramila and her accompanying warrior-women. I'll highlight only two passages from Dutt's poem, one showing the warrior woman, the other a faithful Hindu wife, by some standards very retrograde and not at all modern.

We first see Pramila in Canto I with Meghanada who, thinking Rama defeated, relaxes in a pleasure garden retreat. Informed of Rama's miraculous recovery, Meghanada prepares at once to go to the aid of his father, Ravana. Wife Pramila, behaving much like the epitome of a devoted Indian wife whose life is inextricably entwined with her husband's, implores him not to leave. When next we see Pramila, in Canto III, she is first compared to Radha, but then to her namesake from the *Mahabharata*.

As when the great foe-harassing charioteer Partha, following that sacrificial stallion, wandered to their queendom, those warrior-women dressed for battle eagerly, enraged by blasts from his conch shell Devadatta; just so all four directions resounded with the boom of war drums as those women strode out frenzied by the wine of valor,

unsheathing swords, twanging bowstrings, and brandishing their shields! (3.85-92)

And this intimidating semblance persists in Canto III as she and her entourage pass Rama's encampment and proceed to the walled city of Lanka.

Unlike the passage above, *The Slaying of Meghanada* concludes with a most beautiful, emotion-filled scene, but one that must be considered problematic for somebody who would see Dutt's text as "redefin[ing] popular mythology to fit the changing values under colonialism." That final scene depicts the cremation of Meghanada and the immolation of his devoted widow Pramila:

They reached the seashore whereat Raksasas quickly built a proper pyre; bearers brought sweet-scented sandalwood and ghee in quantities. With sacred Mandakini water, those Raksasas washed carefully the corpse, then dressed it in fine silken garments, and placed it on the pyre; solemnly, their purohit recited mantras. Having bathed her body in that sacred place of pilgrimage, the ocean, the most chaste of faithful wives, that pretty Pramila, divested herself of ornaments and jewels, bestowing them to all those present. With obeisance to her revered elders, that one of honeyed speech addressed the group of Daitya maids saying sweetly—"O companions, after all this time my life today comes to an end in this arena of the living."

That purest wife then mounted the pyre (as though onto a floral throne!) and sat with peace of mind at her husband's feet, a garland of full-blown blossoms wrapped around her chignon.

To Agni, god of fire, Trisuli sadly ordered—"Sanctify them by your touch, you who are most pure, and bring at once to this auspicious home that Raksasa and wife."

In the form of lightning streaks, Agni ran to earth! Then and there the pyre burst ablaze. All, startled, looked upon that fiery chariot; there on a seat of gold within that chariot sat the warrior, vanquisher of Vasava, in celestial form! On his left, pretty Pramila whose splendor of unending youth shone from her graceful figure and on whose honeyed lips, a smile of everlasting joy! (9.383-429)

Though Dutt could brag of his iconoclasm with respect to Rama and even had spoken derisively once of "faithless Seeta," he later declared himself more circumspect when it came to depicting female characters. In another letter to another person, again written in English, he stated:

And here, I must make a few remarks on the disadvantages we, "Indian Bards", labour under, with reference to Female characters:—

The position of European females, both dramatically as well as socially, are [sic] very different. I would shock the audience if I were to introduce a female (a virtuous one) discoursing with a man, unless that man be her husband, brother or father. This describes a circle around me, beyond the boundary line of which I cannot step.

Dutt proved true to his latter word in *The Slaying of Meghanada*. Sita speaks only to Sarama, wife of Vibhisana. Pramila speaks to no one but other women and her husband. As Pramila's entourage passes by Rama's forces on their way to Lanka's walled city, it was Nrimundamalini the maid-servant, not virtuous Pramila, who converses with Hanuman and Rama.

Despite the presence of the cremation scene in *The Slaying of Meghanada*, no one would argue with any real conviction that Dutt supported suttee for Hindu women, which had been outlawed by the British in 1829. Himself a progressive, Dutt, as a college student and prior to his conversion to Christianity, had written in 1842 a prize-winning essay,

artist: "what right does he [the poet] have to debase those drawn in an elevated manner in the original work?" As other scholars have pointed out, Dutt was not the first poet to impugn Rama's righteousness and his divinity. Both Kamban's Tamil *Ramayana* and the Jaina tradition's *Ramayana* treat Ravana with far more sympathy than is found in what might be called the pan-Indian *Ramayana* of Valmiki. Moreover, the Jainas view Rama not as a god but as a mortal man. Furthermore, rebellion against tradition's authority is a long and established tradition in South Asia, perhaps best exemplified by the medieval bhakti poets—rebellious against orthodoxy and the priestly caste. Dutt was no doubt rebellious, whether more rebellious than his medieval predecessors is, I suppose, a matter of opinion. At one point Dutt proclaimed to a friend:

"I must tell you, my dear fellow, that though, 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."

Considering this irreverence, it is quite astounding how much of the flavor of the traditional Hindu epic Dutt retained, particularly in his female characters. In utter defiance of the "changing values under colonialism" (values that Dutt and other educated Bengalis no doubt held), he lets Pramila become a suttee. Not only that, he glorifies the act itself, making it the final scene of this first poem of Bangla literature's modern period. There may have been in his mind that boundary line, of which he spoke, beyond which he could not step.

The new values under colonialism might be characterized by Dutt's Ravana and Rama. His Pramila represents the older values—in some ways, the more timeless values—personified. Pramila is, indeed, a tradition—the nineteenth-century Hindu Bengali tradition—characterized.

Postscript: My collection of essays, *Barisal and Beyond*, containing further material on Michael Madhusudan Datta, is to be republished by University Press Limited (UPL) in 2024, the two-hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth.

Clinton B Seely is an emeritus professor of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, USA.



"On the importance of educating Hindu Females." In keeping with progressive Bengalis of his day, Michael Madhusudan Dutt was most certainly no apologist for widow burning. It was Dutt, however, who chose to insert prominently a scene of suttee in his "modern" rendition of the tale of Rama and Ravana.

Let me return to the observation cited above by Jyotirindranath Tagore. Jyotirindranath circumscribed the limits of individual creativity for an