

Michael Madhusudan Datta

Datta, Michael Madhusudan,
Born January 25, 1824, Sagardari, Bengal -- died June 29, 1873, Calcutta.
Poet and dramatist of modern Bengali literature.

--Saurabh Nath

Michael Madhusudan Dutt, or simply Madhusudan Datta as he was known before his conversion to Christianity, was the son of a successful Calcutta lawyer. He is important for his contributions to Bengali poetry. Madhusudan experimented ceaselessly with diction and verse forms, and it was he who introduced amitrakshara, a form of blank verse with varied caesuras, and many other original lyric styles. Madhusudan opened a new era in Bengali poetry.

The life of Madhusudan Datta was a turbulent one. He faced poverty, maltreatment and misunderstanding. Although he was a genius of a high order, he was an erratic personality. Madhusudan is a typical example of one of Bengal's intellectual elite caught between tradition and modernity. His early conversion to Christianity is indicative of his cross-cultural condition in life.

Madhusudan's early schooling was in Bengali and Persian. In 1837 he entered Hindu College where most of his education was in English. He remained at Hindu College until age 19 when he converted to Christianity in spite of the stiffest opposition from family, friends and community. Madhusudan was one of the most brilliant students of his class and perhaps the best English scholar of his college. At first Madhusudan's literary career was directed towards English literature. Later he wrote in Bengali. In 1848 he moved to Madras where he worked as an English teacher. There he published his best and longest poem in English, *The Captive Ladie* along with other English works. The reception of his English writing was lukewarm. In 1856 after the death of his father he returned to Calcutta where he began to write Bengali poetry. He remained in Calcutta until 1862 where he married a European woman, Henrietta and moved to Europe to prepare for the Bar. When he returned to Calcutta in 1866 he became a lawyer.

His principal Bengali works, written mostly between 1858 and 1862, include a number of dramas written in prose, long narrative poems, and many lyrics. His most important prose drama, *Sarmishtha* (1858), is based on an episode in Sanskrit from the Mahabharata. It was well received. His poetical works include the *Tilottama-sambhava* (1860), a narrative poem on the story of Sunda and Upasunda; the *Meghanada-vadha* (1861), an epic on the Ramayana theme; *Vrajangana* (1861), a cycle of lyrics on the Radha-Krishna theme; and *Birangana* (1862), a set of 21 epistolary poems on the model of Ovid's *Heroides*. Though he was a Christian and deeply versed in English literature he never severed his link with Bengali. In particular his poetic genius continued to be deeply impressed by the Radha-Krishna stories.