

Michael Madhusudan's Loyalty towards Christianity

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Abstract

Michael Madhusudan Datta, widely considered to be one of the greatest poets in Bengali literature and the father of the Bengali sonnet had a tremendous influence of Christianity, both in his life as well as in his poetry. In this paper, we have attempted to analyze this influence in the light of his poems, letters and sonnets. We have also emphasized on the probable facts that had lead Madhusudan to become Michael.

Keywords: Michael Madhusudan Datta; Christianity; Baptism; Hinduism.

Introduction

“Friend Raj! I can tell you with certainty that I will appear like a huge....” [1]. These lines were written by Michael Madhusudan to his friend Raj Narayan Basu about himself. Though he was lost in the abyss of eternity after mesmerizing every one with his sparkling personality, even after so many years we, the readers of Bengali literature cannot forget his mind-blowing personality and his surprising appearance in this world.

Brief Background: On 25th January, 1824, Madhusudan Datta was born to Raj Narayan Basu and Jahnnabi Devi in the family of Ram Nidhi Datta [2]. At that time Madhusudan Datta grew up in the Datta family of Jashore flowing the aristocratic and luxurious life style of Bangladesh. Even from his childhood Madhusudan showed his talent in poetry, story and other creative writings.

When Madhusudan was seven years old, his father began to practice in the Bar in Calcutta. In his childhood Madhusudan started his education in a village school. But later he grew up in Calcutta. Though he was taught by a Mullah in the village, he continued his studies in Hindu College in Calcutta [1]. In spite of his studies in Hindu College, where from such mysterious features came into his character?

Even during his early days in Hindu College, he was influenced by the ideals of Derozio. The then Principal of Hindu College Richardson was inspirational in Madhusudan's career. From then onwards Madhusudan used to express his two motos of life- to be a great poet and to go to England.

Michael Madhusudan Datta neither suddenly took to Christianity nor he was influenced by any other. It was predecided because he had neither any low opinion about Hindu religion. But now we will try to research how Madhusudan got attached to Christian religion. But we cannot certainly say that Madhusudan became a Christian due to his will. Thus the fact deserves to be discussed in details.

No likeness towards literature, Hindu College played a pivotal role in the formation of his personality. Throughout his life Madhusudan was against the traditional customs. Before joining the Christianity, Madhusudan had not done anything significant or mysterious but in his own style he was no less than a protestant. However, his growing up in the family and patronization did help him to be a dictator.

During his days in the Hindu College Madhusudan got deeply attached with English literature when he started to write, Prof. Richard-son encouraged him and being inspired by him, Madhusudan used to send poetry for English papers of England [1]. He firmly believed that staying in India he could compose good poems but to earn the status of a real poet, he would have to go to England. And that was the reason behind his intensive desire for going to England.

Byron had a great impact on Madhusudan's poem. Besides he was deeply fascinated by the writings of Wordsworth, Spencer, Keats and Moore as well. Young Madhusudan could not resist himself from following the life style of Byron. During 1840, his parents were trying to arrange the marriage of Madhusudan. From the very beginning, Madhusudan seemed to be in love with the ideals of his favourite poet Byron. Even Madhusudan once said, "For the sake of poetry I can even part with my parents" [1].

When Madhusudan's parents presented the proposal of marriage before him, he was not at all ready for it. Till date we have not found his opinion about women in any of his composition. In his poetry, he has mentioned only one feature of his dream-girl-she was a blue-eyed lady. But he could not find it in Indian soil, it was in England. None of his favourite poet had arrange marriage but almost everybody had love marriage after a close relation with their lovers. Thus he was in a big trouble. His marriage was arranged by his parents and it could not be changed but he had a different idea in his mind. He thought if he could go to the missionaries and become a Christian, he could kill two birds at a single shot. Firstly his marriage would be automatically broken. Secondly, if he became a Christian, he would be assisted by the Christian society as well as the English officials [1].

Later on we will find out the real reasons behind Madhusudan's accepting Christianity or his Europe trip leaving behind great eminence as a poet.

Once Madhusudan was heard to praise Islam religion. But Madhusudan had not any interest in their rituals. On the other hand, when he was thinking about European civilization, about the superstitions of Hinduism, many questions would arise in his mind about the customs and society of Hinduism. Moreover his favourite teachers as well as D. L. Roy were all Christians. That's why the liberalism and rationality of European Christians used to attract him greatly. For this he started to discuss with the Christian missionaries secretly and with very good planning.

Most Significant Causes: Among the many reasons behind Madhusudan's changing his religion, the following three may be considered as most significant:-

Firstly, Madhusudan's parents selected a girl belonging to the Zaminder family for him. He was strongly against this and to avoid this controversial marriage he had become Christian.

Secondly, he was firmly determined to go to England. At that time travelling across sea would mean loss of nationality. Moreover, for an Indian to go to England was a tough and rare incident. But thinking that accepting Christianity would help him in his Europe trip, Madhusudan gave up his own religion. Even if he went to England, there would not be any doubt about his becoming a great poet. Again he would get assistance from Christian society and the English officials if he

became a Christian. At the same time he noticed that if a well-established and well-known Indian became a Christian, the missionaries would consider it as an example.

Thirdly, Madhusudan was once believed to have a soft corner for Devaki, the second daughter of reverend Krishna Mohan Banerjee and an extremely beautiful and intelligent girl. As Krishna Mohan was a priest, it might have been a reason for Madhusudan's becoming a Christian. Moreover, he might have thought that, Krishna Mohan's recommendation would smoothen his path for foreign tour. But it is a fact that thinking about religion would never have occupied any significant place in Madhusudan's mind [3].

Madhusudan began to think what he could do about as a Christian or what benefit he could derive as a Christian. On the other hand, to the Christian missionaries, it was a challenging task to make a renown student of Hindu college and the son of a prominent lawyer of Calcutta, a Christian. Without delaying, Madhusudan was christened in the Old Church amidst tight security on 9th February, 1843 [1].

The most obvious reason of Madhu to become Michael was to avoid the marriage arranged by his parents and also to go to London, no doubt. And almost all his biographers agreed about it. But none pointed out if there was also a strong call from his heart. About his baptism, Michael himself wrote that there was a kind of superstition as well as his own sins. Moreover he said, "So far Michael was in darkness, now he has found the light of reason" [1]. Again we can see that many years later, he composed another poem about Baptism where he wrote about the holiness of Michael becoming a christian. It is not that soon after his Baptism, Michael became religious minded. But it is true that soon a sense of eagerness grew in him about Christianity. He started attaining Christian morals and once he even wanted to become a missionary to preach Christianity.

Once Michael, with no interest in so called religion, the same Michael started preaching about sins again and again and purification of souls or about the glory of the west. Thus it cannot be ignored that he had some influence of Christianity. Six years after his Baptism, Michael composed a long poem, "Visions of the past" [1, 3] and in this poem he described how Adam and Eve were punished and how they were plunged in the darkness with the appearance of evil and then afterwards how they returned back to light with the glistening light of blessings. The heaven that he drew in his dream had no connection with Hinduism. It is notable that he got it from the Christian tradition of John Milton. We saw that in the year 1850 when his wife Rebeka went on a trip to the North with their daughter Bertha, he composed a sonnet which reflected how deep his faith was in Christianity.

If Madhusudan wanted to avoid his marriage and go to England by becoming Christian, he could have done it even staying with his family. Perhaps he got no benefit from his Baptism apart from breaking his arranged marriage. But the Professors of Bishop's College, Widney Withers and Alfred Street said, "he has not only strengthened his faith in Christianity but was specifically attached with the religion" [1]. Moreover it can also be noted that instead of his own religion, so deeply merged in superstition, Madhusudan considered Christianity to be superior but he was not ready to sacrifice his own individual freedom. On the other hand once he became a Christian, the doors of Hindu college were closed for ever. The college authority also declared, "No student is allowed to meet them without permission. Because no one will be allowed to study in this college who changed his religion as it will only encourage other students to change their religion".

During this period of crisis, Mr. Thomas Smith gave Madhusudan shelter. It is believed that in 1844, during his stay in Smith's house, a change came into the mind of Madhusudan. Once he was quite careless about religion. But after his Baptism and more importantly owing to his attachment with Smith, Madhusudan was soon attracted towards Christianity. In

this moment of crisis, he gripped Christianity as a means of solace. He started to say that after his study in Bishop College, he would become a missionary.

On 9th November, 1844 Madhusudan got admitted in Bishop College and revealed that he wanted to be a student of theology of religion [1]. Bishop's college was purely a religious institution, established to preach Christianity outside England and it became a training center for clergyman. During his study in Christian college, Madhusudan came close to various linguistic literatures. Thus his Baptism and study in Bishop's college turned out to be a blessing in flourishing Madhusudan's literary qualities.

Madhusudan's father Raj Narayan bore his educational expenses in Bishop's college for three years but there was clash and misunderstanding in the family due to his change of religion. Conflicts arose regarding these expenses and heiress. Infact this encouraged Madhu to become a missionary, many times, leaving his study. In 1845 he made an attempt to become a missionary. Again in 1846 he made another attempt. This is known from Professor Street's writings, "Apart from his attraction towards Christianity, there was another reason for his intention to be a missionary. The main reason was his conflict with his father." Once Madhu was at a loss to decide whether to take money from his father or not. In spite of all these Ray Narayan wanted to bring Madhu back to his family. But this only made Madhusudan's devotion towards Christianity more strong. He now publically announced that he would become a missionary [3].

Michael Madhusudan's great attraction towards Christianity might be his craze for going to England or to avoid the marriage arranged by his parents. About Madhusudan's baptism a book namely "Madhusudan's Conversion" written by Rev. W. Morton was published in 1843, where the details of his conversion of religion were given. But at present the book is very rare [3]. Once a certain Shastri, sitting near Sri Ramkrishna, asked Michael Madhusudan the reasons for adopting Christianity, Madhu replied that he changed religion for bread.

Conclusion

Whatever religion a man belongs to, he should get liberty in his religious views. When Madhusudan became a Christian, he had a long discussion with Sri Krishna Mohan Banerjee, about the ethics of religion and firmly said that he believed in Christ, the Saviour, and he had gone to the Heaven. He further said, "I am dying for getting the blessings of the generous and that He had sent Christ to wean all the sins. I fully believe this"[3].

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