

## Performing Meghnadbhadh Kabya: Questioning Conventions and Challenging the Conventional

Tirthankar Sengupta

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dhola Mahavidyalaya and PhD Research Scholar,  
West Bengal State University

---

Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghnadbhadh Kabya* (1861) is unanimously considered as one of the most important texts of Bengali literary canon. Not only was it the work of an extraordinarily gifted poet (Bandyopadhyay 21)—a rebellious figure whose life was marred in controversies, it is also the most significant effort of writing an Epic in Bengali in modern times and is marked by a number of influences of Western literary traditions including the use of blank verse. However, most importantly, it is an oft discussed text because of the subversive and transgressive way in which it re-tells the story of a portion of the Ramayana, the oldest Indian epic.

One should remember that the seeds of Dutt's unconventional reading were always present in the Ramayana. Paul Innes marks how the conventional motif of "dharma" has a problematic treatment in the text:—"there are moments of narrative crisis at which Ram seems to act against 'dharma', emblemizing it as a concept that is open to interpretation" (Innes 62).

Thus, without really altering the story, Dutt simply focuses on the way Meghnad was unfairly killed by Laxman, and presents us with an alternative perspective on the entire text—one which valorizes the 'Rakshasas', generally accepted as the 'villains' of the tale, and arouses in the mind of the readers respect and pity for them. Consequently, this text is seen as an important document relating to the themes of power and politics, an exercise in seeing the conventional through alternative viewpoints. It is one of the most notable deconstructed readings of a canonized mythical text in the context of Indian culture.

However, this research paper shall discuss the use and re-interpretation of myth in *Meghnadbhadh Kabya*, with special focus on a theatrical performance of the text. In 1995, Goutam Halder, (then) one of the brightest young thespians of the renowned Bengali theatre group Nandikar ventured to bring this epic poem on stage by performing it as a play. Not only was it a novel effort which took up the challenge of dissolving conventional generic boundaries, it was considered a one-of-a-kind daring endeavour since he chose to enact the entire play all by himself, retaining the 'grand', 'mighty' ambience and seemingly hard to master language of Dutt's blank verse. The performance created quite a stir among the audience and critics alike; there was widespread appreciation with comparatively fewer responses of criticism, but almost everyone praised Halder for his stupendous enterprise. As early as in 1996, the performance was almost unanimously being recognized as a unique, one-of-a-kind theatrical attempt; a milestone in the history of modern Bengali theatre ("Pratikshan er Adda" 65). It is thus not surprising that when I got to know about this act and watched it in 2012, it had already ensured

a place for itself in the history of Bengali theatre. I've watched it multiple times ever since. Incredible as it may sound, the performance is now twenty three years old but Halder is still performing it in regular intervals and going strong. Thus, it shall only be fair to consider it as a cultural text worthy of critical attention and analysis by itself, not merely because it is an enactment of one of the most significant texts of Bengali literature.

No two performances of the same script are the same; making a critical analysis of a performative form like theatre tricky and complicated. It is especially tough in a place like India where there is serious dearth of critical material on performances—even the most popular, long-lasting and critically acclaimed ones. Researchers have to look for reviews in articles found in newspapers or magazines and occasional interviews of the actor(s), dramatist, director or a critic, mentioning or discussing the performance. The quality of most of these, from a critical and academic point of view, is rather ordinary. Often enough, a researcher aspiring to work on theatre is forced to shift focus towards the play-text, a literary document, than have enough scope or resources to concentrate on the performance. I've encountered all the above mentioned challenges and hindrances—but added to this is another unique problem, a rather bizarre one.

Though Halder was and has remained the actor (the only one if one ignores the chorus) and director of the performance, while at Nandikar this performance was stylistically guided and shaped Rudraprasad Sengupta and Swatilekha Sengupta—the senior-most members of the group. Certain sources allege that Halder was not given complete creative freedom (“Theatre Review”). In 2010, he broke away from Nandikar and formed his own group—Naye Natua. The popular perception goes that as the sole authority in the newly formed group, he could afford and dare to be even more fearless and experimental.

Every performance evolves over time and it is normal that one which has been going on for more than two decades will have major and minor changes. Interestingly enough, there are some material in the form of reviews and discussions concerning the performance dating back to 1995 and 1996. But there is very little critical material on the recent performances and none that systematically studies the evolution of this performance or categorically notes the differences between the performances under Nandikar and while at Naye Natua. I've been compelled to undertake an innovative methodology of trusting the archived material to get a sense of the performance in the 1990s and bank upon the first hand experience of watching the performance in the recent past. I have watched it more than five times; the comments I make in this paper are categorically taken from my memories of two of those performances in Girish Mancha and the Victoria Memorial grounds (as part of the Kolkata Literary Meet), on 22<sup>nd</sup> August, 2012 and 25<sup>th</sup> January, 2018, respectively. The choice of these two performances is simply not due to the fact that these were the first and the latest instances of me seeing it; what matters more is that these were performances during different contexts and atmosphere—in space and time.

My paper does not deal too much with the textual intricacies and thus, for occasional textual references, I've stuck to the original Bengali text rather than search for an English translation. The book I use has an invaluable introduction and critical commentary by Sukumar Bandyopadhyay. Besides his own critical opinions, he also refers to and quotes a number of

important personalities including Michael himself commenting on his own work. However, he does not cite their sources; I have thus not been able to cite them though I have used them in the paper. Most of the critical comments on the play and the performance are in Bengali, I have translated or summarized them myself. Further, in my paper, I shall refer to Dutt's work as a "poem" and Halder's act as a "performance" or a "play", and use the term "text" to refer to both of them.

Since the use and interpretation of myth is the starting point of this research paper, I intend to begin by studying how Dutt adapts from the Ramayana. Parallely I shall analyze Goutam Halder's adaptation of Dutt's poem, and, by extension, the epic itself. I shall proceed to explore the generic complexities of each of the two texts discussed here; as to how Madhusudan's work displays features of both an epic and a tragedy and how Halder's attempt is almost an indefinable unique art form, fusing elements of several performative traditions. The element of 'style' shall be analyzed next and here I shall limit myself almost entirely to the theatrical performance and not the poem since the style of the poem has considerably less relation with the source-myth. Furthermore, the craft of Dutt in this poem (his use of blank verse, epic similes and among others) has already been extensively studied while Halder's play has not been critically analyzed enough.

I intend to proceed to investigate the continuing relevance of the two texts, focusing primarily on the socio-political significance—studying the impact created in late nineteenth century Bengal, India in the 1990s as well as the current times. I shall like to conclude exploring the possibility if a connection can be found between the myth and the two texts which appropriate it; as well as between the creator-artists themselves.

"I despise Ram and his rabbles", said Michael Madhusudan; this line is enough to suggest that when such a man adapts sections of the Ramayana, one is bound to get an unconventional alternative reading. Dutt's relation with the Indian epics is complex and fascinating. As a child he loved reading them; as an adult who became a "jolly Christian youth" who "could not care a pin's head for Hinduism", he loved the "grand mythology" of his ancestors which was "full poetry". He plainly asserted that, "a fellow with an inventive head can manufacture the most beautiful things out of it!" A common, extremely simplistic notion considers *Meghnadbadh Kabya* as a Christian convert's daring effort to deconstruct a "sacred" Hindu text. But there is much more to it. Indrashis Lahiri finds in the poem an echo of Milton (he calls Dutt's act as one of "creative plagiarism") —the tendency of subverting the impression and definition of good and evil as Milton had (consciously or unconsciously) done in *Paradise Lost* ("Pratikshan er Adda" 59). Indeed, Dutt mentions western literary traditions as his inspiring influence a number of times. However, he was confident of sticking to his Indian roots—it was his ambition to "engraft the exquisite graces of Greek mythology on" the Indian subject matter. Although he pledged to borrow as little as possible from Valmiki, he remained confident that no one could accuse his poem of being "un-Hindu in character". He said that he was not looking to borrow Greek stories; rather, he was trying to write, as a Greek poet would.

That he was successful is evident as the characters of *Meghnadbadh Kabya* are not European but Indian in spirit. The other distinguishable factor is their 'humanity'—not only the monstrous

Rakshasas but also Ram, Laxman and Sita are portrayed as ‘human beings’ and not as Gods. This, I would argue later, helps create an ambience of the tragic within the context of an epic.

A defining feature of the characterization of *Meghnadbadh Kabya* that has received unanimous agreement is the “masculinity” of Ravan and Meghnad and the “femininity” of Ram and Laxman. Ashis Nandi notes how Dutt turns the traditionally sacred figures of Rama and Laksmana into “weak-kneed, passive-aggressive, feminine villains” and the demons Ravan and his son Meghnad into “majestic, masculine, modern heroes” (Nandy 19). Even Rabindranath Tagore noted this as he commented that Dutt was attracted to and found pleasure in the majestic masculine strength of the rakshasas than in the cautious, god-fearing nature of Ram.

In choosing to remain faithful to the text, Goutam Halder’s adaptation had to follow the same line of deconstructing the Ramayana. The freedom of experimenting with gestures might have given him scope to reveal certain personal interpretations of the characters, but he couldn’t afford to be much different in ideology from Michael. However, as Dutt chose a specific portion of the oldest Indian epic, Halder too chooses for his script, certain sections (‘sargas’ or cantos) of Dutt’s work. While this issue of editing the text has been frowned upon by most critics, I see in it a sense of purpose. Halder’s selection of sections makes his performance-text focus exclusively upon the event of assassination of Meghnad. In ‘eliminating’ unnecessary digressions, I feel that he develops a certain dramatic tension around the episode, something that is vitally necessary for a script to be successfully performed as a play on stage.

While Michael’s acknowledgement of the western sources is well known, one often forgets that besides mentioning western poets, he also mentioned being indebted to western dramatists (“Pratikshan er Adda” 55). *Meghnadbadh Kabya* is a unique example that blends elements of the epic and tragedy as well as the elements of the Indian and the Western epics. Though written in Bengali, it does not have the conventional “nandi, stuti or mangalacharan” but proceeds directly to a more westernized invocation of goddess Saraswati. The poet’s pledge to sing his song in “bir-rasa” should have led to a purely heroic poem but critics agree that it is the “karuna-rasa” that dominates the poem—making it more tragic than heroic (Bandyopadhyay 23). If we look at two random critical statements on the poem even before Halder brought it onto the stage, we notice something crucial. Ashis Nandy refers to this poem as a ‘tragedy’; R. C. Dutt commented that this poem showed that Dutt belonged to a level of excellence “second only to Vyasa, Valmiki, Kalidas, Homer or Shakespeare”—the inclusion of a tragic dramatist amongst these epic poets proves my point. It is as if the comment involves the simultaneous praise of an epic poet and a tragic poet. This is not unusual for a man like Dutt who had clearly stated that he would not adhere to typical rules of Indian aesthetics set in a text like *Sahitya Darpana* by Viswanath Kabiraj. However, Dutt’s disregard for conventional generic limits should not be seen as only being a result of his naturally rebellious personality—what he was seeking indeed, was a freedom for the artist to experiment with forms (Bandyopadhyay 24).

This apparent paradoxical amalgamation of the epic and the tragic may be explained or understood by referring to the concepts of the “authentic” and the “literary epic” as opined by Abercrombie and noted by Bandyopadhyay. The “authentic” epic is a text which encompasses the history of a race or a nation rather than focus primarily on individuals. The poet merely narrates the tale his personality is generally absent; these poems are commonly ‘recited’ (thus,

performed). In contrast, a “literary” epic has a more limited and focused content; the personality of the poet/creator is distinctly tangible and these are meant to be ‘read’.

In *Meghnadbadh Kabya* we find an almost perfect balance of the authentic and the literary—it is a tale of the fate of the Lankans yet told through a distinct perspective of the poet Dutt. It is thus, both ‘readable’ as well as ‘recitable’; it is perfectly “performable” (Bandyopadhyay 30)—validating Halder’s attempt.

Halder and his co-actors at Nandikar had taken up this poem merely in order to memorize and recite it as part of an exercise to improve their pronunciation. But the theatricality of the poem fascinated them and they ventured towards performing it as a play. One can notice an interesting antithetical relationship at play here. Dutt was writing an epic in an Indian language and Indian topic using western aesthetic and technical devices. Halder performs this play within the predominantly west-influenced Proscenium theatrical set up but uses several tools of different indigenous performative forms. The influences of Kathakatha, Pandavani and Akhyan-Kabya are visible (“Pratikshan er Adda” 52). The aspects of ‘reading’, ‘hearing’ and ‘seeing’—each being the dominant form in different performative and literary genres combine in Halder’s work; his use of the ‘Kathak’ figure (the narrator) was widely praised. However, the ‘form’ of his performance has had the fair share of criticism. Dharani Ghosh, speaking from an extremely conservative point of view reminds one that a poem is “meant to be read” and not performed—Halder’s attempt is a basic “failure to respect an artis’s (Dutt’s) choice of form”. Whether or not this art form at all needed impersonation of individual characters has been another question that has been raised. Along with Shaoli Mitra’s *Nathabati Anathbat*, another solo performance based on a script on the Mahabharata, Halder might have fallen into the same trap of attempting something impossible. This performance has often been labeled as “an absurd project” (Dharani Ghosh) or a “too ambitious attempt” (“Of Classical Characters”). While it is true that an epic can never fully become a play, one must accept and appreciate the significance of this unique art-form; especially now that it has kept the audience interested for more than two decades.

The legendary Bengali thespian Girish Ghosh had presented a theatre production based on this poem in 1877 where couple of actors played multiple roles. Although Goutam’s project was not the first time that the Bengali stage saw a solo actor playing all roles, the stylistic aspects, are nonetheless unique. He comes clad in white against a pitch black background, the ‘chadar’ is his only prop which he masterfully utilizes to impersonate different characters. The shift between the central kathak (narrator) figure, “reviving the genre of bardic oral delivery” (“Of Classical Characters”) and the various characters is incredibly swift and the audience has generally been left engaged and mesmerized for the two hours of the act. His energy is tremendous. It was seen as one of the instances where “acting” as a concept acquires new and different dimensions. A review commented:—“There are theatres, and there are different theatres”, going on to call this performance a rare example of that “different theatre” (“Theatre Review”). Sankha Ghosh saw in this performance a perfect fusion of “narration, description and dialogues” into “one totality” (Brochure Nandikar). He felt it to be a rare way of making *Meghnadbadh Kabya* relevant to contemporary society.

However, there have been several criticisms too. These include his typical mannerism of diction (something that has been an issue of constant discussion over the years and regarding most of Halder's roles as an actor). Some felt that his portrayal of characters in general and the female ones in particular seemed too simplistic and clichéd—and it was hard to separate one character from another. (“Pratikshan er Adda” 57) The portrayal of Maya as a woman has attracted criticism from critics like Jayati Basu as well as support from critics like Sekhar Samaddar (“Pratikshan er Adda” 59).

Music and the chorus have a crucial role in this performance with Swatilekha Sengupta's arrangement being praised by almost everybody. However several critics found Halder's decision to sing the songs himself an unwise one—the tremendous physical strain of the performance was seriously hampering the quality of his singing. Having read about the Nandikar phase of the performance in reports and seen the performance in the Naye-Natua phase, I can report that in the last few years, Halder takes significant vocal support from the chorus with regards to the songs.

However, there are two more significant criticisms of Halder; firstly that his decision to direct himself was unfair since it was virtually impossible for him to ‘see’, impartially ‘judge’ or ‘guide’ himself (“Of Classical Characters”). This has crystallized into an even greater ethical and ideological issue. Jayati Basu questioned the idea of choosing a text like this, with multiple characters of multiple genders, for a solo performance. She also felt that a venture of solo-performance in theatre is little more than exhibitionism and self glorification; and is harmful for group theatre movement (“Pratikshan er Adda” 62)!

A text like *Meghnadbadh Kabya* has survived and thrived over ages both due to its form and its content. While the attempt at writing an epic in Bengali in the nineteenth century using the blank verse remains the most notable aspects of the form, the longevity of the text's content is certainly got to do with its political implications. Not only does the text embody a subversion of the notion and nature of good and evil, it is a distinctly anti-colonial, political document written during a crucial phase in the history of the nation. *Meghnadbadh Kabya* reveals that Dutt's basic perception of the Ram-Ravana battle in the Ramayana was to see it as a tale showing an island being attacked by a foreign army. The freedom and existence of the invaded nation is at stake. The king, while fighting to defend his land, loses his sons, grandsons and other relatives at war, but does not give up. He is determined to live only a life of freedom (Bandyopadhyay 22). Though this analogy does not stand valid if one considers various different episodes of the source-epic, the parallel with the British invasion of India is too obvious to be missed. Interestingly, one can observe how the Ram-Ravana conflict, seen down the ages as a battle between the Aryans and non-Aryans, that is, two factions of Indian races, was utilized to portray a symbol of India being invaded by a foreign power.

An extremely complex paradox of sorts emerges here. While he lived, it was not uncommon for Madhusudan to see some people viewing him as an “anti-national” figure—as the heretic Christian convert who challenged the sanctity of one of the two “National” Epics. Ironically, a post-colonial reading of the same text can make it the account of a nation's struggle against invaders, glorifying the pride and self-esteem of the race. In the most recent contemporary context though, we seem to have receded from the realm of symbolic implications, with

mythological figures, their portrayal and treatment, inviting severe scrutiny and extreme reactions in itself. Ranjit Singha, as early as in 1996, had marked Goutam's audacity of critiquing and satirizing the hallowed figure of Ram. The relevance, of both the performance and the comment, is even more acute and alarming today.

While Halder's performance doesn't undo any of the above implications, it also does not add anything much to the political implications of the text. On the one hand, it fails to depict the issue of higher and more complicated politics (beyond Ram and Ravana), between the Gods and the Demons and even within the Gods themselves. On the other hand, it does not do enough to try and connect the text with certain tendencies in contemporary politics. Almost all critics see it as a major lack in the performance. While defenders of Goutam suggest that remaining faithful and sticking to Dutt's text does not allow him to do much alteration, critics like Suman Mukhopadhyay state that he could have hinted at contemporary issues by intelligently using his gestures, even within the confines of the original text.

The urban India of the 1990s was experiencing major socio-economic and political changes, (rise of the extremists/right wing and neo-liberal economy) much in the same manner of the times of Michael himself. In the brochure to the performance, Rudraprasad Sengupta, the guiding force behind Nandikar, had hinted at a possible contemporary significance though the connection was not explicitly political. Both in the brochure as well as during a short address before each show, he stated the performance to be an important cultural effort at a time of rampant multinational consumerism. Whatever may be the extent of the socio-political significance, the cultural impact of the performance was undeniably supreme—Sekhar Samaddar called it a “massive jump/leap” at a time when Bengali theatre was threatening to get stuck (“Pratikshan er Adda” 55).

After three decades where they primarily performed Indian adaptations of foreign plays, Nandikar saw this project a kind of “homecoming”, a “return to the roots”—of both language and cultural and theatrical traditions. The performance is also a tribute to Dutt himself—a remembrance of significance. Whether the remembrance and the return to the roots contribute significantly to a relevance in the contemporary times, has been a matter of debate ever since. Perhaps the longevity of the performance owes itself to the novelty of form and an incredible interest to witness Halder's stupefying ability to be at the top of his art for so long. But surely, the interest in the performance could not have lasted this long until and unless it found a way to remain constantly relevant or able to capture things extremely basic, lying at the heart of human existence.

Both Michael Madhusudan Dutt's poem and Goutam Halder's performance of it share certain uncanny connection with the myth it uses and deconstructs. A change in focus and an altered perspective opens up enormous possibilities of re-interpretation. At the centre of the tale lies a valiant hero who is unfairly defeated by a corrupt majoritarian system. His tale embodies a personal tragedy of parents who lose a son, and a wife who loses her husband. His fate also binds itself with that of his race and state—in truly epic proportions. Both Dutt and Halder's creations and the engagement it has with their lives and legacies show the same pattern. Their creations are exercises in individualism—of not only rebellious human beings who fight to win the right to disagree (even in their arts) but also of artists who opine for space to experiment

with forms, (even in the ways they live). Individually and together, they remain inspiring examples to those who dare to question conventions and challenge the conventional.

#### **WORKS CITED:**

##### **Primary Sources:**

Dutt, Michael Madhusudan. *Meghnadbadh Kabya*. Ed. Sukumar Bandopadhyay. 18<sup>th</sup> Ed. Kolkata: Modern Book Agency Private Limited, 2010. Print.

*Meghnadbadh Kabya*. By Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Dir. Goutam Halder. Girish Mancha, Kolkata. 22 Aug. 2012. Performance.

*Meghnadbadh Kabya*. By Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Dir. Goutam Halder. Victoria Memorial grounds, Kolkata. 25 Jan. 2018. Performance.

##### **Secondary Sources:**

###### **Books**

Innes, Paul. *Epic*. New York: Routledge, 2013. Print.

Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

###### **Articles in newspapers and magazines:**

Ghosh, Dharani. "The Not So Epic Theatre". *The Statesman* 24 Nov. 1995. Print.

Singha, Ranajit. "Nandikar er Meghnadbadh Kabya". *Pratikshan*. November 1996. Print.

"Of Classical Characters". *The Telegraph* 29 Nov. 1995. Print.

"Pratikshan er Adda: Nandikar er Meghnadbadh Kabya". *Pratikshan*. August 1996. Print.

###### **Brochures:**

Nandikar. *Meghnadbadh Kabya*. 1995. Print.

Naye Natua. *Meghnadbadh Kabya*. N.p. n.d. Print.

###### **Web pages:**

Theatre Review: *Meghnadbadh Kabya*. <http://www.artnewsnviews.com/view-article.php?article=theatre-review&iid=11&articleid=106> . 28 July 2018. Web.