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Title	<i>Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-1873): a young Bengali poet's exam script washes up on Albion's distant shore</i>
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Presenter(s)	Alex Riddiford and Anshuman Mondal
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Dr. Riddiford: Thank you. I'm informed that this is the exam script and if you can see there's, Michael Datta's signature is there. The manuscript discussed here is an examination script written at a missionary college in Calcutta in June 1847 by a young Bengali - a convert to Christianity from Hinduism who would later go on to become one of Bengal's most prominent poets.

Michael Madhusudan Datta became one of the leading lights of the so-called Bengal Renaissance, composing his most celebrated work the Bengali epic 'Meghnadh Badh Kabya' in 1861. He was an extraordinary man even by the extraordinary standards of 19th century Calcutta. His marriage to a white woman while living in Madras in the 1850s is itself quite remarkable. Even more so his separation from her and his subsequent relationship with another white woman, with whom he spent the rest of his life.

In 1866 he became one of the first Indians to qualify as a barrister, having travelled to London and joined Gray's Inn to achieve this goal. And before he even left for London he had made a great name for himself in Calcutta as a Bengali poet and playwright, recasting episodes from Hindu mythology in the western classical mould. His Meghnadh Badh Kabya for example, takes an episode from the Sanskrit Ramayana and reorganises it according to the structures and narrative devices of Homer's Iliad.

Signs of Madhusudan's individuality and iconoclasm emerged early in his life. In his late teens in February 1843 he converted to Christianity for a variety of reasons. One of which was to escape a marriage to a Hindu girl which his father had begun to arrange. His conversion isolated him from Hindu community but also brought him into close contact with the British community of Calcutta.

His conversion meant he had to leave Hindu college, a school which taught English Literature and Natural Philosophy to the sons of wealthy Hindus. Here Madhusudan had already learned perfect English and had conceived poetic ambitions, penning his first poems in English whilst studying at the college.

In 1844 he resumed his studies at Bishop's College, Calcutta – a small missionary college typically accommodating 25 students, founded by the Society for the Propagation of Gospels. It was at this college that Madhusudan added Latin and Greek, and perhaps even Hebrew to his already excellent English. And it was here that in June 1847 he wrote the New Testament examination script which we have before us today.

The presence of the examination script in the USPG United Society for the Propagation of Gospels collection in Oxford's Rhodes House tells a story of the relationship between the colonial missionary college and its English sponsors. While Bishop's College offered a most rigorous Christian education to all of its students, whether Indian, English or Anglo-Indian, teaching them the bible and Christian doctrine as well as the Greek or Roman classics. Nonetheless there were rumours in England that the students were not mastering the core Christian knowledge necessary for a career as a missionary or a school teacher.

In response to these rumours Reverend Street, Principal of the college sent to a colleague in Oxford a batch of recent New Testament examination scripts, written by the students which, in his view, demonstrated that their knowledge of the bible was quite adequate. This manuscript then attests not only to the Christian education of a prominent Bengali poet but also to the colonial dynamics of mid 19th century missionary activity in British India.

For a student of Madhusudan's life and works this manuscript is obviously of the greatest interest. Offering as it does a unique insight in to the early education and character of a scholarly and controversial artist. Indeed there is perhaps something a little ironic in the timing of the manuscript's arrival in England. Madhusudan's English juvenilia, romantic poems written in the early 1840s before he had enrolled at Bishop's College, and which were on the whole pretty awful, speak to an ardent desire to travel to England. One of his earliest poems begins, "I sigh for Albion's distant shore. . ." and ends, "I sigh for Albion's strand as if she were my native land."

Madhusudan's western education had engendered in him not only a love of English culture, and here we should recall that ideologies of Indian nationalism did not fully emerge until the 1870s, but also a sense of belonging more fully to the culture of the colonialists than to his own colonial culture.

Indeed one of Madhusudan's further reasons for converting to Christianity, though later his faith would become more sincere, was seemingly to further his chances of travelling to England. In the context of Madhusudan's longer standing yearning to travel to England, there is something a little ironic in discovering that a manuscript written in his hand, should have completed the journey 15 years before the man himself finally managed it. One wonders whether Madhusudan himself knew that this little token of his scholarly effort had reached Albion's distant shore so long before he himself completed the journey in 1862.

In the examination script itself written when he was just 23 years old, we see glimpses of the fierce individuality and intellectual posturing which came to define the man and his literary erg. For example, at the beginning of his answered question nine, part of which asks for the original Greek for a passage of St. John's Gospel, Chapter 13, Verse 10, the student Madhusudan states in parenthesis:

(As I cannot remember the words as they are in the Greek text, I refrain from translating these sentences in my own way. This may seem more flippant than intended but it is certainly indicative of a certain attitude. A New Testament examination is arguably not the place to boast that one could translate, if one so wished a King James' Bible back in to one's own biblical Greek prose).

In various other parts of the examination script the brevity of Madhusudan's answers is quite scandalous. Along with Madhusudan's script and some copies of the question paper, the archive holds scripts written by some of his fellow students. Compared with these scripts Madhusudan's answers seem almost lackadaisical. And whereas some other students could quote from the New Testament chapter and verse, Madhusudan's recall seems rather patchy.

Despite this attitude he appears to have done well in the exam. His script was awarded 145, perhaps 145 out of 200, which when compared with the 190 achieved by William Nichols and the 94 of Henry Cockie, placed Madhusudan's respectively, respectably near the middle of his cohort.

In this context it is significant that overall, that is including all of the subjects in which the students of the college were examined that year, Madhusudan in fact came third out of 25. In a dispatch

written by Reverend Street, the principal he was singled out for comment as a fine Latin and Greek scholar, and as the best native student in the college.

Contemporary syllabuses of the college which are also fetched up in the USPG archive at Rhodes House, demonstrate that the colleges' curriculum was dominated as much by the Roman-Greco classics as by theological subjects. Therefore Madhusudan's relative performance, poor performance in the New Testament examination indicates that his performance in the classics examinations must have been very good indeed.

We may see an indication of Madhusudan's predilection for classical over theological subjects even in this New Testament examination script. The student seems to take more care over accentuating, his accenting his Greek, sorry, correctly than in answering the theology questions fully. This facility for classical languages and literature is highly significant for a student of Madhusudan's later Bengali *[erg 0:09:16]*. In his classical education at Bishops College we see the intellectual training which underpinned his subtle and independent receptions of Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Heroides* amongst other western classical texts.

One should perhaps not read too much into Madhusudan's performance in the New Testament examination, but it does seem to point towards a half-hearted enthusiasm for the subject. We may note that by June 1847, Madhusudan had decided that his training at the college would not lead as he had hoped to a trip to England. But had instead committed to going to Madras to take up an appointment as a school teacher.

By the end of his life he had turned his back almost entirely on the Christian community of Calcutta. And indeed it had turned its back on him, largely because of his unconventional lifestyle. He lived in sin with Henrietta White and their children and had by then developed a morbid addiction to alcohol. It is possible then, that in this New Testament examination script early evidence of his attitude towards Christianity. We see the beginnings of a dissatisfaction or at least an intellectual boredom with his adopted religion.

Reverend Street's assessment of Madhusudan contained in a dispatch to a missionary colleague, also now in the Rhodes House archive, was that "He was obedient, honourable, moral and I believe religious." The words "I believe" added as an afterthought in superscript seem to highlight at a niggling doubt as to Madhusudan's religious convictions. Further more Madhusudan had refused to be provided for by the college as a foundationer on the basis that he would have to wear native clothes, like the other Indian students in the college.

Even at this early stage his adoption of western habits and even clothes, a distinguishing feature of a man in later life, had already become an inalienable part of his character.

Both Street and the Bishop of Madras could not help feeling that it was a case of a coat and allowances in one scale, against the missionary calling in the other. Whatever the true status of Madhusudan's Christian faith in 1847, he certainly turned his missionary college education to purposes that the church authorities could not have foreseen.

After a spell working as a school teacher and newspaper editor in Madras, he returned to Calcutta in the late 1850s where he embarked on a career as a Bengali poet and playwright. In his Bengali *erg*, he drew heavily on the classical education that he received at Bishop's College, and on which he had continued to build auto didactically ever since. These poems and plays aggrandise Hindu culture, in part through the use of western classical tropes and display and promote proto nationalist sentiments.

Reverend Street could have hardly foreseen that this would be the consequence of the education he was offering to the young Madhusudan. Furthermore, when Madhusudan did finally travel to England to train as a barrister, this too was made possible by the education he received at Bishop's College.

In the mid 19th century the bar, like most other important English institutions of the time, was accessible only to those with a decent classical education. Thus, while Madhusudan's conversion

to Christianity did not lead directly as he had hoped to a sojourn in England, the classical education that he received at Bishop's College upon converting to Christianity did indeed lead to such a journey.

If Madhusudan's education at Bishop's College enabled him ultimately to come to England as he had so long desired, it is interesting to chart his journey here in the 1860s against that of the examination script in the 1840s. While the examination script travelled from Calcutta to Oxford, Madhusudan would later take the alternative route from Calcutta to London. Indeed Madhusudan did not visit Oxford himself during his stay in England. These two journeys represented two lines of colonial communication: one evangelical and educational; the other secular, professional and political.

Much of the impetus behind missionary activity in India came from elements within Oxford and Cambridge. And the missionary schools like Bishop's College aspired to create educational institutions in their image. Indeed, soon after being founded Bishop's College, Calcutta was endowed in 1821 with a copy of every book then in print at the University Press's of both Oxford and Cambridge.

By the 1860s however, Madhusudan had turned away from the evangelism and education, and aspired to the professional and secular values of a career at the bar. And so instead of following the path taken by his examination script two decades earlier, it was more naturally to London than to Oxford that he should travel.

The manuscript of Madhusudan's New Testament examination script is a fascinating document in many ways. Not least for the insight it offers in to a formative moment in this great Bengali poet's education. Just as importantly this document attests to the relationship between Indian missionary colleges and their English sponsors in the mid 19th century, indicating a pathway of communication between Calcutta and Oxford. And suggesting the sorts of tensions which subtended the relationship between the colonies and the metropolis.

But above all perhaps, this manuscript represents an ironical moment of contact between Oxford and an Indian poet, who at that time still yearned in vain to make the journey to England himself.

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