CHAPTER 3
THE EPIC CONTINUUM AND BEYOND

The present chapter makes a brief attempt to chart the continuity of Indian epic tradition from Valmiki and Vyasa onwards through the secondary epics of later ages, its dormancy in the medieval period (1300 – 1860), and then its rediscovery in nineteenth-century Bengal, its flowering in novel hue and conception in the hands of nineteenth-century poets of Bengal, and thus, its journey of continuity beyond.

The glorious confluence-like contribution of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in the national culture of Bharatavarsha, has confirmed for them an undisputedly prominent position in the universe of Indian as well as world epic. Their influential presence in the soul of Bharata through many ages has rendered them such stature as might invite for them the title of being the encyclopedia of Bharateeya (Indian) culture. Rabindranath made a significant comment in this regard:

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are not epics merely, they are history too; history not of incidents, since such histories depend on a timeframe – but the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the eternal history of Bharatavarsha. How other histories have changed across ages, but this history has not altered in the least. The history that records the sadhana, the worshipful dedication and the determination of Bharatavarsha, is enshrined forever in these two majestic edifices of poetry [translation mine] (“Ramayana”. Prachin Sahitya. 1933).

Though the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are grouped together as
spontaneous epics, they have great and fundamental differences of characteristics. Despite doubtless acceptance of the poetic value of the Mahabharata, it may be said that its identity as poetry is overshadowed by other encyclopedic identities. Hence, it had been called the fifth Veda, sometimes Adi Purana (the first Purana) and, at other times, Itivritta (chronicle), Akhyana (narrative), Itihasa (history), Sanghita (school of philosophy), etc. But when we consider the Ramayana, the poetic value comes first; for us, therefore, Valmiki is adikavi (the first poet) and his Ramayana is adikavya (the first poem).

The Ramayana is divided into seven kanda-s: each kanda is spread over several sarga-s. As an outcome of the poet’s artistic excellence and imaginative faculty the unit of division is known as “sarga”. Keeping ‘Sargabandhah mahakavyah’ in mind we may assert that one of the fundamental features of Indian epic construction is its division into sarga-s. Before the Ramayana, such practice of division into sarga-s could not be found in the corpus of Indian literature. It may be mentioned here, the “Rk Veda” consists of ten mandala-s (or eight ashtaka-s) with each mandala containing some sukta-s or sets of mantra-s. Thus, the Ramayana, with its poetic value and brilliance, has always been incomparable and glorious in the Indian mind. Its affect is discernible on the creative genius of the country in various ages, its proof being present in the literary epics of India as well.

On the other hand, the Mahabharata by its title itself evokes of a vast horizon of experience accumulated over ages by the indestructible Indian soul, an experience that seeks to find the meaning of human life in all its profundity. The essence of the Mahabharata is expressed in the first chapter of the poem: Mahabharata is the corpus of Bharata itself; it is truth and nectar of immortality (1/1/201). The constancy of the Mahabharata, its inherent message is: there is nothing greater than humanity (12/288/20). Efforts of determining the magnitude of human value had been reflected in the various epics of the world; but nowhere
else could the effort succeed so much or blossom as full as in the Mahabharata.

Bharateeya Alankara Sastra (Indian rhetorical studies) revered the poetical symmetry of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. As source texts of the national culture of India, the two poems remained as inexhaustible mine of inspiration for the creative poets over the ages. For the purpose of practising and emulating epic subjects and craftsmanship, poets like Ashvaghosha, Kalidasa, Bharavi, Bhatti or others recurrently took their resort to the two archetypes of Indian poetry: though their outputs could stand no place beside the two towering poetic edifices. Nevertheless, poets in different ages tried to recapture the essence of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata according to the consciousness of contemporary time and its socio-political ethos, economic stability or otherwise, etc.

From 6th century B.C. onwards and up to 1st century B.C. the response and reaction of the then developing Shada Darshan (six schools of Hindu philosophy, namely Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Sankhya, Yoga, Vedanta, and Mimangsa) to different religious sects like Ajeevika, Buddhist, Jain, and Lokayata made the interim centuries rich in contemplation and creativity. The vital pulse of life of various sects with cultural diversity beat against the evolving Indian consciousness. But creation in the sphere of epic poetry or Sanskrit tradition continued unabated throughout.

In the 1st century A.D. Ashwaghosha adopted the same Sanskrit as tradition of creativity and medium for his poetic compositions that centred round the life of Buddha. He did not think of Pali as a suitable substitute for Sanskrit, though Pali was the language for Buddhist texts. He must have felt the necessity of re-creating or reconstructing the Sanskrit epic tradition in the light of his age and milieu.

Since objective of epic is expansion, the stress of Indian rhetorical studies in the discussion of the characteristics of epic has always been on the abundance
or extravagance of elements. The epic experience and realisation are spread along diverse directions and they seek after variety of life. The aim of an epic composition is the vastness and diversity of life. This epic grandeur of vastness is discernible in Ashwaghosha’s *Buddhacharita* since the poet endeavoured to open unto us the summit of glory that Buddha in his unique and rare life could achieve. He tried to reflect this great expansiveness through portrayal of Buddha’s divine life in minute details, the initiation whereof was from the account of Buddha’s birth and then its progressive spread through the other episodes that followed. The poet portrayed Siddhartha’s diverse roles and progression of altered feelings in the face of experiences of the protagonist’s residing in palatial splendour, affluent atmosphere, in self-immersed loneliness, in street, in forest, amidst kith and kin, in a family of wife and son, in the realisation acquired from the sights of palsy, disease and death. In the process of gradual unraveling, we witness Siddhartha’s restlessness, feeling of renunciation, forsaking of family ties, exemplariness of abandoning wealth, becoming a renunciate, unceasing search on the path of self-discovery, bodhi-prapti after long testing walks along difficult paths, fierce soulful struggle against confusion and illusion, final glorious establishment in the vow of charity for all the world. Thus, epic expansiveness and depth are not rare in the *Buddhacharita*.

Since Ashwaghosha’s subject-matter was a life of the grand scale, his artistic applications are all determined by the central motif (*kathavastu*). One of the chief features of *mahakavya* or epic, that it should draw from history and that it should depict the life of some great persona, is distinctly present in the *Buddhacharita*. The poem is chiefly permeated with shanta-rasa: shringara-rasa was not given much scope in it. That Ashwaghosha was alive to the efficacies of construction is evident in his use of diverse rhythm and cadence, his application of similes, and his creation of effusive melody (*dhwani-madhurva*). As a poet in the tradition of unifying Indian culture, he – a foremost composer of Buddhist
literature – assimilated without scruple Sanskrit poetic legacy. It was through the Buddhist poet that a neo-classical poetic style which was polished and suitable for the elite of the new age came to be initiated.

The most famous creation of Ashwaghosha, the *Buddhacharita*, consists of seventeen sarga-s. His second epic, the *Soundarananda*, spreads over eighteen sarga-s. The subject-matter of the second poem, too, is the life of Buddha, and with that the reluctant initiation of Nanda, Buddha’s half-brother, into Buddhism. But, Ashwaghosha the religious propagandist took the upper hand over Ashwaghosha the poet in this poem. As a result, two-third of the poem – from the seventh to the eighteenth sarga – is taken up by Buddha’s life and the salient features and guidelines of Buddhism. The first six sarga-s are comparatively more poetically flavoured; they describe the scenic beauty of the city of Kapilavastu, births of Gautama and Nanda, Nanda’s over-attachment to his wife Sundaree, Nanda’s adoption of Buddhism, Sundaree’s laments for her converted husband, etc.

The three centuries after Ashwaghosha do not avail us of any epic creations. Even if there were productions, they have not come down to us. Therefore, we assign the place of succession to Kalidasa. Kalidasa, one of the greater of the greatest poets of India, did not leave behind any personally revealing account in writing. However, from historical analysis and opinion of Haraprasad Shastri, A. C. Chatterjee, A. B. Keath, etc., or from poetical utterance of Dundi in his “Avanteesundareekatha”, or from Aihole stone-script (634 A.D.) during Emperor Pulakeshee II, it may be safely concluded that Kalidasa must have lived between 3rd and 6th Century A.D.

A. B. Keath opines that Kalidasa was the court poet of Emperor Chandragupta II of the Gupta dynasty, and that he spent the greater part of his life in the city of Ujjwayinee. Keath further opines that Kalidasa composed the epic
Kumarasambhav on the occasion of the birth of Kumaragupta, son of Chandragupta II; the prosperity and atmosphere of glorious splendour reflected in Kalidasa’s poetical works are indicative of outstanding glory of the Gupta era.

Both the *Kumarasambhav* and the *Raghuvarsham* – Kalidasa’s two epics – are considered as the finest among the literary epics of India. The poet found the source of the title of the first poem, perhaps, in the Adi Kanda of *Ramayana*. The central theme of the poem is the birth of Kartika as son of Uma and Maheshwara for protecting the cowering gods against the atrocities of the demon Taraka.

Shiva, intolerably anguished at separation from deceased Satee, was immersed in deep meditation in the solitude of the Himalayas. Uma’s birth at Himachal-bhavan was necessarily for attracting Shiva to matters of the moving world. She grew up day by day to be a lustrous beauty. She had inherent dedicated attraction to Shiva. Escorted by her companions, she visited every day the austere spot of meditation with a sense of surrender and service to Shiva. Indra, the lord of gods, became suspicious and afraid of Shiva’s intense meditation. Kamadev was sent to attract him towards Uma. In order to perturb Shiva erotically, Kamadev shot at him his floral shaft. But this pertness of his turned disastrous for him as Shiva’s third eye opened and let out a fire that burnt him to ashes. Thus, symbolically, Shiva’s condensed spiritual fire turned to ashes the depravity of physical intoxication. Shiva left the place at once; shamed in her failed beauty. Parvatee (Uma) went back home. Then, there came a gradual transformation in Uma. She became a seeker who was determined to do penance and make herself worthy of Shiva. When she successfully completed the most difficult of penances in self-sanctification, Shiva came to her doorstep and eventually became her suitor. Intervention of the saptarshi (the seven great sages) sealed the marriage between Uma and Shiva. The entire universe, the three worlds – heaven, hell, and earth – came alive in festivity on the occasion of their union; and Kamadev was revived back to life.
The story of the **Kumarasambhay** transcends barriers of time and space because of its inherent symbolic import. The poem rises to the highest level of excellence in reconstructing the Valmikian epic tradition. Moreover, there may be discovered some resemblances with Ashwaghosha’s **Buddhacharita**.

The other epic of Kalidasa, the **Raghubhavangsham**, is famous as his greatest artistic creation. The poem which spreads over nineteen sarga-s, closely follows the central storyline of Valmiki’s **Ramayana**. But, even then Kalidasas’s originality and independent artistry are markedly present in it.

The contemporary or subsequent popularity of the **Raghubhavangsham** is evident from as many as forty commentaries written on it. Though Kalidasa’s inspiration was Valmiki’s **Ramayana**, he followed the ever-abiding tradition of the Purana-s. This was reflected in the catalogue of kings he presented in the poem which differs in chronology from that found in the **Ramayana**.

A discussion or analysis of the **Raghubhavangsham** is always pleasurable and satisfying. With his spontaneity and dexterous handling, Kalidasa sometimes expanded his descriptive material and sometimes contracted it. He took one entire sarga to describe Rama’s boyhood; again, in the very next sarga, he incorporated the entire story of the **Ramayana**. The first part of the poem has Rama as the protagonist along with Dasharatha and Kusha as secondary characters. The last two sarga-s mention some kings who are not that famous; the poet mentioned Agnivarna as the last ruler in the line of kings in his poem.

The **Raghubhavangsham**, like the **Kumarasambhay**, exhibits influence of Ashwaghosha. Sanskrit literature had always been a liberal horizon where a poet borrowed freely from his predecessors. Kalidasa, too, took his inspiration from Valmiki and Ashwaghosha. In course of time, when Kalidasa had become a venerable figure in the epic tradition, later poets as well did not hesitate to look upon him as the lighthouse. Thus, we find a continuous tradition from Valmiki to
Ashwaghosha, from Ashwaghosha to Kalidasa, and from Kalidasa to Bhatta (Vanabhatta?).

Epic poetry reached the pinnacle of excellence in the magical artistry of Kalidasa’s rare talent. Though the epic legacy passed on unhindered in the following centuries, gradually there occurred considerable changes of form and characteristics. The works of poets like Bharavi, Magha, Bhatti, and Shreeharsha tended in every way to follow the tenets prescribed in the Indian rhetorical studies. Their poetry exhibit a preference for outward gloss and variety of form and excessive grandiloquence instead of greatness of subject under description or subtlety of imagination.

Bharavi, Magha and Shreeharsha took their materials from the Mahabharata, and Bhatti from the Ramayana. Besides them we find Kumarakadera who also took the Ramayana as his source text. Each of them produced only one epic. Among them, Bharavi, the writer of the Kiratarjuneeya, may be considered the greatest.

Like Kalidasa, Bharavi, too, had not mentioned anything about himself. But, unlike Kalidasa’s, Bharavi’s age of creation is not debatable to that extent. After considering historical evidences, we may fairly go with A. B. Keith’s opinion that Bharavi composed his epic about 550 A.D. Or, perhaps, we can go a little further to conclude that he may have composed it in the last decades of the sixth century.

An eighteen sarga long epic, the Kiratarjuneeya took its subject and story from both “Arjunabhiyamana” and “Kirataparva” of the “Vana” Parva in Mahabharata. While remaining faithful to the story of the Mahabharata, Bharavi could instill originality in some cases. Vyasa’s details were not followed in toto; the poet rather searched for independent ways of expression.
The *Kiratarjuneeya*, however, is an ideal example of such Indian literary epics as revel in gorgeous exhibition of formalistic excellences, verbose style and an ever-present tendency of treating each sloka as unitary sparks of the poetic flair.

Nevertheless – within his shortcomings – Bharavi could shine bright and, after Kalidasa, became the rightfully acclaimed poet in the Sanskrit epic tradition. Bharavi’s importance is proved from the fact that later on Magha in his *Shishupalavadh* consciously followed Bharavi in many ways.

An analysis of the *Kiratarjuneeya* would invariably draw our attention to Bharavi’s consciousness about what ideal poetic language is or should be. Besides that, the poet’s use of similes also reflects his accomplishment. At times he could excel even in producing unadorned yet touching expressions in the poem. Still, he was a poet representative of a stagnant society who never felt any urge for reflecting the contemporary social milieu or for pointing its shortcomings: his dependence on royal patronage did not allow him for revolutionary departures. Inevitably, the stream of epic, too, became loaded with erudition and exhibitionism.

Kumaradasa, who composed the *Janakeeharana*, is one of the poets belonging to such period of Sanskrit epic. Critics, however, are divided about in opinion of his age of appearance. One anecdote places him as friend and contemporary of Kalidasa. By that, Kumaradasa may be considered belonging to the last part of the 4th century. But instances of Kalidasa’s influence in his poetic text suggest that he must have found Kalidasa’s poetic style as one already famous and well-established to have followed it so closely. Therefore, he probably was distanced from Kalidasa at least by a considerable number of decades: and, by that, he may have lived in the 5th century.

The *Janakeeharana* consists of twenty sarga-s. It is composed on the Ramayana story. Its reception and popularity are evident from a sloka from
“Suktimuktavalee”: of all poetic works written on the narrative of Rama and Ravana, the Raghuvangsham is the greatest in excellence; next comes the Janakeeharana.

Composed by Bhartrihari or Bhatti (a Prakrit form of “Bhartri”), the Ravanavadh or Bhatti-Kavya is divided into twenty-two sarga-s. The sarga-s are again, grouped under four kanda-s. namely, “Prakeerna”, “Prasanna”, “Alankara” and “Tinganta”. Like Kumaradasa’s Janakeeharana, Bhatti-Kavya too derives from the story of Ramayana. The principal incidents occurring from Rama’s birth to vanquishing and ending Ravana, then his return home to Ayodhya from Lanka and his coronation to the throne have been described in course of twenty-two sarga-s. Bhatti, however, did not choose in the main the telling of Ramayana story; instead, he intended to couple with the story his teachings on Sanskrit grammar and rhetoric. This tradition started by Bhatti quickly spread and became established in Sanskrit literature. Many others in later ages tried variously to follow Bhatti’s line and teach canons and theories through their poetry.

Critical examinations have revealed that though Bhatti used difficult, cacophonic and rare or far-fetched words in order to explain laws of grammar, his poem does not lack evidences of simplicity of expression, transparency of language and exquisiteness of feeling. While remaining dedicated to propagation of grammar rules through poetry, he yet was not unmindful of his primary duty of narration or tale-spinning. Readers have to remember that it is the torch of grammar that would bring to light the inherent beauty of Bhatti-Kavya.

Composer of the Shishupalavadh, Magha had been laden with numerous statements of eulogy. He had been bracketed together with Kalidasa, though quite unworthily perhaps. Some even had placed him unthinkably above Kalidasa in excellence. Such assessment was an obvious reflection of a decadent society that hardly had any taste for appreciation of novelty or subtle imagination in poetry. It
was the time of 7th century when decadence and ennui had started eroding all spheres of socio-political life. The central monarchy by then had grown weak: consequently there was emergence of small states. This resulted into mental narrowness, seclusion and stagnation in social life. Magha’s appearance, too, was at such a critical period, probably in the first half of the 7th century.

The *Shishupalavadh* consists of twenty sarga-s. There are as many as 1625 sloka-s in them. Though the subject-matter was taken from the *Mahabharata*, the poet showed considerable freedom in recasting the story afresh in some cases. An account of Shishupala’s rebirths may be seen in the *Mahabharata*; but, since avatar cult of Vishnu has a firmer establishment in the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagawat Purana, we find there the accounts of Shishupala’s previous two lives as well. The accounts of the Purana-s point out that Hiranyakashipu of Satya era, Ravana of Treta era and Shishupala of Dwapara era are in fact the same person. Magha adopted the explanation of the Purana-s. In other matters and details of incidents, he, however, followed the *Mahabharata* more closely, though with some small variations. While remaining faithful to the story of Krishna and Shishupala as found in the “Sabha Parva” of *Mahabharata*, he took resort to independent imagination. For instance, presence of Satyaki as Krishna’s relation and companion in the sixteenth sarga was the poet’s creation. Though the long political conversation between Balaram and Uddhav in the second sarga reminds of Bharavi, what redeems it and credits Magha is the dramatic element added to it. But, on the whole, whether the poem could add any novelty to the tradition of Sanskrit literary epic is a debatable issue.

Convention is followed almost everywhere in the *Shishupalavadh*. Mantrana in the first and the second sarga-s; march out of troops and description of the city of Dwaraka in the third; description of Raivatak in the fourth; description of soldiers and related paraphernalia in the fifth; description of season in the sixth; forest revelries in the seventh; amorous water-sport in the eighth;
description of dusk in the ninth; copulative description in the tenth; description of
dawn in the eleventh; description of Krishna and his troops crossing the Yamuna
in the twelfth; conference between Yadava-s and Pandava-s and description of the
conference hall in the thirteenth; etc.

Influence of Bharavi’s Kiratarjuneeya may be felt in various descriptions of
the poem. Nevertheless. Magha could exhibit in many places his own expertise of
construction. In the dictum of 9th century rhetorician Anandavardhana. and
choosing from his typified divisions of imitation in literature – namely,
alekhyaprakhya, prativimbatulya. and tulyadehivath. and the third among them
being the grandest – Magha’s Shishupalavadh in comparison with Bharavi’s
Kiratarjuneeya. may be considered as an example of tulyadehivath imitation.

Many poets of average talent tried their hands in the conventions of Indian
literary epic. though their works are not of much creative worth. Among them.
Buddhaghosha composed the Padyachudamani, a ten-sarga long poem based on
the life of Buddha. Kalhan had mentioned of ‘Mentha Jainik Kavi’ who. probably.
lived in Kashmir in the second half of the 6th century: he wrote the
Hayagreevavadh. Another Kashmiri poet of the 7th century, namely Bhaumaka.
composed the Ravanarjuneeya Kavya. Zealous exhibition of rhetorical expertise
gradually led to the formation of satirical poetic tradition which may. perhaps. be
considered as an offshoot of the literary epic. The Haravijaya of Ratnakar (9th
century). Abhinanda’s Ramacharita (9th?). Shiva Goswami’s Kapfanaabhyuday
(9th). Mankha’s Shreckanthacharita (12th). the Ramcharita of Sandhyakar Nandi
(11th). etc. – which took their dull life breath in prevalent decadent atmosphere –
grew rigid with artificiality all over their length. Composed for the entertainment
of the aristocracy. such pseudo-epics were almost entirely divorced from cultural
consciousness.

Besides the aforementioned poets. some more endeavoured to write epics:
Harichandra wrote the Dharmasharmabhyuday in the 9th century; in the tenth, Vadiraj wrote the Yashodhara-Charita (10th century); the Bharatamanjaree and the Ramayanamanjaree were written by Kshemendra (11th century); Lolimbaraj composed the Harivilas (11th century); Vagbhatta wrote the Neminirvana in the 12th century; Bhavadevasuri the Parshwanathacharita (13th century); Amarchandra the Balabharata (13th century); Devaprabhasuri the Pandavacharitra (13th century); Krishnananda the Sahridayananda (15th century); Shubhachandra the Pandavapurana (16th century); etc.

As minister to the Kashmiri king Harsha in the last part of the 11th century, and as the court poet under Jayasingha’s reign in the second part of the 12th, Kalhan gathered an enormous experience on Kashmir; with that experience he mingled elements of secular tradition to set out on his famous book the Rajataranginee in 1149. Spread over eight taranga-s (waves), the poetic work is a fruitful combination of critical insight and social consciousness.

In the beginning of the 11th century, the Kashmiri poet Bilhan wrote an eighteen-sarga long historical poem, the Vikramanka-Devacharita. Under the patronage of Cahlukya King of Kalyan, sixth Vikramaditya Tribhuvanmalla, the poet described war and marriage of the royal dynasty. He was gifted with commendable poetic power. Though he was careful about historical facts, the carefulness did not enchain his poetic imagination. His language glowed with simplicity and effectiveness, and ought to appear a rare exception in such days of rhetorical dominance.

In the mid-11th century Padmagupta wrote the Navasahasanka Charita, an eighteen-sarga long poetic work composed in the historical context. He was also known as ‘Parimala-Kalidasa’. Munjara or Navasahasanka, the kashmiri king of Paramar, was his chief patron. The subject-matter of the work is marriage of Shashiprabha, daughter of the King of Naga-s, with the King of Sindhu. History
was inundated with the unchecked flow of imagination in the poem: the fact
renders the logic of calling the poem historical as something doubtful.

A famous grammarian and Jain teacher and contemporary of Padmagupta.
Hemachandra wrote the *Kumarapalcharita*. Out of the twenty-eight sarga-s of the
poem, twenty are composed of Sanskrit and eight of Prakrit. The subject-matter of
the work is establishment of Kumarapala’s reign in Gujarat. The use of two
languages has given rise to the poem being called otherwise as
“Dwyashrayakavya”.

Vakapatiraj composed the *Gaudavaha* in Maharashtrian Prakrit sometime
in the beginning period of the 8th century. The poem describes how his patron
Yashovarma, King of Kanauj, defeated the King of Gaud.

Besides, some more historical epics were written that do not possess much
of poetic value. Among them mention may be made of Someshwar Dutt’s
Keertikoumudee. Arisingha’s Sukritasankeertana. Ramchandra Soori’s
Vasantavilas. Shankuk’s Bhuvanabhyuday. Jalhan’s Somapalavilas. Gangadevec’s
Mathura-vijay. Jayanak’s Prithvirajvijay. and Naychandra Soori’s epic Hammeer.

In this decadent ebb of epic poetry, we find Shreesharsha who, perhaps,
stands out worthy of special attention. He wrote his epic *Naishadheeyacharita*
towards the end of the 12th century. There are about 2800 sloka-s in the twenty-
two sarga-s of the poem. Barring the aforementioned Haravijaya and Ramacharita.
the *Naishadheeyacharita* is the longest poem in the tradition of Indian literary epic.

Shreesharsha. who was well versed in the Shastra-s. composed his complex
and erudite poem – in fact a deepti-kavya – basing it on the Nala-Upakhyana of
Mahabharata and according to the tendencies and taste of contemporary social
environment. In order to express schematic techniques. he assimilated the
linguistic legacy of his predecessors. In the poem, we notice application of the
Sanskrit language in the most unknown or thitherto unfamiliar ways and expressions: none except him used verbs so much seeped in sarcasm, irony, or ambiguity. In some of his expressions he was not only truly unique but modern too. However, equally true is the fact that verbosity and excessiveness of gorgeous word-play, most of the times, overwhelmed his poetry. Evidently, Shreeharsha did not compose for the populace. His steadfast statement was: that he had purposely created complexities in some places of his work so as to ensure that rascals of vaunted pedantry did not come to read his work playfully (22.152). His outlook as an artist is manifest in his further made statement: that his poetry does not limit itself to showering nectar alone, but routs opponents with sharp logical arguments (22.153).

Though Shreeharsha drew his story from the narrative about King Nala in the Mahabharata, he took but a part of it only. The poem ended by weaving a tale of marriage and union between Nala and Damayantee: the poet did not intend to include in the tale the disaster that harrowed the conjugal life of the regal couple as found in the Mahabharata. His objective behind so doing, probably, was avoidance of contemporary harsh reality that might have been evoked through depiction of sorrow and suffering; he at best endeavoured to portray a happy and colourful picture that would easily conform to the taste of his aristocratic patrons.

Despite Shreeharsha’s conformity to the in-vogue taste in his poetic composition, we find there – in connection with various episodic details – a passing evanescent shadow of contemporary social life. The juxtaposition of various elements of antiquity with fragmented glimpses of contemporary reality has made the poem engrossing indeed. But, on the whole, the work could not transcend the tendencies of the age that preferred pedantry and stereotyped entertainment to poetic insight or depth of thought. It served only to continue the aridity that had set in the tradition of literary epic. The tradition, the stream, as though lost itself in the arid sand of stagnant life that characterised the medieval
period in India. The tradition had to wait until the 19th century when it found a revival in the poems of Bengali poets of the then English-educated intelligentsia – poets such as Rangalal Bandyopadhyay (1826 – 1886), Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824 – 1873), Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay (1838 – 1903), and Nabeenchandra Sen (1847 – 1909).

Madhusudan and rediscovery of Indian epic tradition

The epic works of Madhusudan tried to express in language the deep and unfathomable aspirations of the age: tried to look into the past for inspiration and legacy. Madhusudan, in order to create the novel, the uncreated, tried to rediscover and revive past tradition. His task and efforts associated therewith were not self-inspired alone. William Jones’ sincere efforts to discover the golden age of India, and his founding of the Asiatick Society, must have made an indelible mark on the consciousness of the then Bengali intelligentsia. By degrees. Western scholars such as H. T. Colebrook, H. H. Wilson, James Princep, Maxmullar, etc. had thrown fresh light on Indian Classical literature, linguistic practices, grammar, Purana-s, Itihasa-s, Upanishad-s, archaeology, etc. This had created a thitherto unfelt consciousness about ancient India. Madhusudan, thus, found a prolific field to till and harvest poetic crops that had nourished on the saps of ancient founts and reservoirs.

The heaving conflict and protestant air that characterised the Bengali society in the first half of the nineteenth century had its effect in the literary field, too. upon which the heavy pall of medievalism had so far elongated its dark stay. Theo-dependence had been the centre of medieval sensibility: but now as an inevitable outcome of the consciousness of the age. anthropocentrism evolved. Rangalal Bandyopadhyay’s Padminee Upakhyan (1858) brought the first change in outlook. Since reality in the nineteenth-century colonial social setting was not stabilising, his imagination sought for the idealised and found it in the pages of the
past. He therefore chose Rajputana as the backdrop of his story that tried to idealise woman from a perspective altogether different from the then Bengal – a putrid quagmire, for women, of stagnant festering conventions such as satidaha, child marriage, etc. His contribution, thus, was extending and placing Bengali literature beyond the geographical limits of Bengal, in an all-Indian context. Historical setting and patriotism, instead of shallow tale of love, became his subject-matter. Tod’s *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* fitly became the basis of fulfilling the national dream.

The forward march of time must have stirred Rangalal’s poetic sensibility to some extent; it must have prodded him towards searching for new poetic moulds for expression of that sensibility. He, therefore, selected his materials from the famed authors of the occident: Thomas Moore, Shakespeare, Byron, Scott, and such others. Besides, his poetry exhibits a passing shadow of Indian rhetorical tenets of composition and of Indian epics of art. On the first, he may have been aware of a total schema of historical epic along with its conventions of character portrayal and techniques of description. On the second, mention may be made of Padmagupta’s *Navasahasankacharita*, Kalhan’s *Rajtarangine*, Jayanak’s *Prithvirajyijay*, Billhan’s *Vikramankadevacharita*, Someshwardev’s *Keertikoumudee*, Naychandra Soori’s *Hammceer*.

Readings of literary histories of the world show that during the dawning of national literature there invariably occurs a tendency of assimilating diverse influences. Rangalal, in this regard, was the first in Bengali literature. But he could not surmount the age-old barriers of barren poetic conventions that had been prevalent since medieval time. It was left for Madhusudan to accomplish that incomplete task of Rangalal.

In his first epic poem, the *Tilottamaasambhav* (1861), Madhusudan invented the verse form uniquely suitable for epic composition. In the next, the
During his days of self-imposed exile in Madras, when he was busy with his English poetic creations such as the Captive Ladie (1849) and the Visions of the Past (1848), he realised the need for a return to his mother tongue and to native sensibility and environment. In a letter dated 14 February 1849, to Gour Dass, he expressed concern over his losing touch of his mother tongue (Ghosh, Ajit Kr. et al (Eds.), Madhusudan Rachanabali, Letter no. 36, 291). In another letter to Gour Dass, dated 18 August 1849, he charted his busy schedule of perseverance with acquisition of knowledge of various languages and classic literatures thereof with which to ‘embellish’ his mother tongue (Letter no. 42, 297). Even his Captive Ladie shows some initiative for a return to the age-old Indian milieu of the Purana-s and Sanskrit epics. His comeback to Calcutta precipitated this tendency into his creative field of dramas and epic poems.

The return to Indian milieu and language that started with his play Sharmishtha (1859), expanded noticeably in the Tilottamaasambhav. In a conversational debate with Jatindra Mohan Thakur as to whether a verse form like the English blank verse was possible in Bengali, Madhusudan strongly asserted his affirmation; but Jatindra Mohan was of the opposite view. Upon bet the zealous poet launched on a new kind of poetic composition that had no end rhyme but internal ones for word music and that had run on lines for creating the impression of a poetic stream flowing unabated. Over a few months’ time his Tilottamaasambhav materialised. This means that he did not have a definite artistic plan or inspiration behind the creation; successfully meeting the challenge of materialising a Bengali blank verse was the chief impetus. A subject was presented enfolded in that novel verse form; but the subject in itself did not count much for him to start with. What is, however, noteworthy here, he did not find in Meghanaadvadh (1861), he succeeded in transcending the experimentation in verse form of the first and creating a new epic that was nourished by the evolving consciousness of the age as well as the age-old Sanskrit epic tradition.
the prevalent conventional Bengali literature, the form suited to the subject chosen for expressing his intense and deep anxiousness of a poetic heart for creating the novel. The medieval Theo-dependent Mangal Kavya-s or linear narratives fell seriously short of being suitable for expressing freshly discovered human glory and the new-age meditation on boundless beauty. Since Madhusudan’s poetic sensibility had been built on the elements of classicism, he sought, following his own nature, to express his poetic heart in a neo-classical form of the epical. The Tilottamaasambhav was as it were the first sapling that promised of sublime towering plant-life bearing newer blossoms and sprouting about to come. It ushered in, in employing a new poetic form for expressing a new subject, the revival of the ancient Sanskrit epic tradition and, with that, determined, perhaps, the final divorce of the spirit of the age from medievalism.

It is of great significance that at the crossroad between medievalism and truly modern outlook to life, Madhusudan thought inevitable the construction of a novel form. Despite sudden impulse being at the root of the creation of his Tilottamaasambhav, he must have felt, right at inception, his foresight awakened; he must have realised the majestic possibilities of the neo-classical form he had created. He was therefore prepared to develop it to full expansion and maturity in his future works.

A poet and critical thinker like Madhusudan knew well that poetry is not mere collation of words; he felt how a poet’s transforming imagination – that engaged in the search and sublime meditation of beauty – could create out of nothing a new poetic edifice. He had nurtured, since childhood perhaps, an intense desire of becoming an epic poet. The time was now ripe, with his comeback from self-chosen exile working as the catalyst for making him bathed and aired in the favourable dynamic native tradition, for his latent epic talent to sprout.

Madhusudan showed to the reader of Bengali literature that form was no
mere subservience for the subject-matter, that form had its own independent glory and aesthetic significance. We might say that Madhusudan’s *amitrakshar*, a form for the epic measure, has its own independent aesthetic significance and glory. George Santayana draws our attention to the ‘beauty of form’ in poetry: ‘Beauty of form is what specifically appeals to an aesthetic nature ... The aesthetic dignity of the form ... tells us the kind of beauty we are to expect.’ (The *Sense of Beauty*, pp. 96 – 115). We are reminded of Longinus and his treatise “On the sublime”. The treatise speaks, along with other matters, of the grandeur that results from an elevated style of language and sublime form and also indicates that the said resultant grandeur compliments the grandeur that sublimity of subject-matter begets. Longinus, however, was not clear enough in distinguishing between sublimity of diction (phrasis) and that of figures (schemata).

The *Tilottamaasambhav* in fact brought forth this suggestion of a deeper trans-subject essence of feeling. Through the Purana story of quarrel and death of Sunda and Upasunda, Madhusudan perhaps wished to suggest that *Tilottamaa* who had been created as the paragon of beauty with carefully chosen diverse elements of the cosmos, could never be acquired for carnal enjoyment; that raw lust always vanquished itself only. However much the bestial forces quarrel for the enjoyment of ideal beauty, grossness of mind or sensuality never reaches to it. It is so because, ideal beauty is the reward of extraordinary poetic endeavour, the adorable paragon for the creative genius and poets. That Madhusudan could come to such a sublime realisation in his apprentice period for the epic discipline is of paramount significance. It supports Haraprasad Shastri’s opinion that with the *Tilottamaasambhav* commences modern Bengali literature.

When Madhusudan finally accomplished his greatest poetic work in life, the epic poem *Meghnaadvadh*, he had revived in it the Indian epic tradition with consummate skill and like a true artist of a new age who accepts and rejects elements of past poetic and literary constructs as befits the structure of the new
In the words of Tapodhir Bhattacharjee, in the Meghanaadvadh we find the greatest artistic example of how much beset with self-contradictions the renaissance spirit of quest of life can be. Two parallel tendencies – creative novel interpretation of the Indian tradition on the one hand, and on the other, assimilation of the vibrant Occidental culture – could have been an insurmountable crisis for an ordinary poetic soul, but not so for Madhusudan who could accept the challenge and then variably embellish his mother tongue [translation mine] (Punarnirman 115).

Madhusudan could accept the challenge for novel creation through revival of the traditional. The Indian epic tradition that started with Valmiki and Vyasa and then continued through the literary epics of Ashwaghosha and Kalidasa in the first place, and then those of Bharavi, Magha, Bhatti, Shreeharsha, etc. in different eras, provided before the nineteenth-century Bengali poet a wide field which had always been liberal and spacious enough for reconstruction. His response to them shaped in many ways the composition of his epic poems.

**Madhusudan’s response to the great epics and secondary epics:**

Madhusudan’s response to the great epics (i.e. the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) and the secondary epics (i.e. those of Ashwaghosha, Kalidasa, Bharavi, Magha, Bhatti, Shreeharsha, etc.) of Indian Sanskrit epic tradition was creative and reconstructive. He never followed them mechanically; he rather made use of the epic tradition to best suit his needs for epics of a new and altogether different age. His response was reflected in selection of story, use of similes, metaphors and epithets, or construction of verse lines, mould of characters, situations, etc.

Madhusudan’s creative response to the two great epics of Valmiki and
Vyasa is at once discernible in both the Tilottamaasambhav and the Meghanaadvadh. The first takes its story from the Mahabharata, “Adi Parva”. Chapters 209 – 212. The second takes the story in part from the Ramayana but mostly weaves on its own; Krittivasa’s Bengali Ramayana also helped him a good deal in the making of the story.

a) Madhusudan’s response in the Tilottamaasambhav:

The story of Sunda and Upasunda, two demon brothers, has been depicted in the Mahabharata: defeat of gods in the hands of the two brothers and their banishment from Heaven; loss of glorious resplendence of Heaven due to the brothers’ atrocities; creation of phenomenally and exceptionally beautiful Tilottamaa as per Brahma’s instructions: quarrel of the demon brothers over her possession and their fall. This small-scale story is the subsistence for the Tilottamaasambhav.

But Madhusudan did not adopt the context of this Indian story. In the Mahabharata, Narada related this story to the Pandavas with a view to making them realise the importance of forming and following certain rules regarding their conjugal lives with their one and single wife Draupadi. lest, like the two demon brothers, they quarreled over one woman and brought, like the demons again, disaster on themselves. Madhusudan’s poem did not as much need the context of the Pandavas. For him loss of Heaven by the gods was the core of his sparse narrative. He, nevertheless, retained, in his own way, the role of Narada. We find Narada, in the final canto of the poem, alighting amidst Indra’s celestial army in the forest of Kamya and then relating to them the story of the mystery as to why Sunda and Upasunda were fallible only to a brotherly quarrel between themselves (96 – 155).

Moreover, the Sunda-Upasunda episode trudges along in a narrative manner in the Mahabharata; but Madhusudan added dramatic suspense to the story of the demon brothers in his poem. The banished gods headed by Indra went to
Brahma and told him of their plight; to that almighty Brahma provided an evasive clue that in consideration of the demon brothers’ invincibility in war, brotherly quarrel was the only means for their downfall:

Sunda Upasundasur daiva-balee balee,
Kathor tapasyaphale ajeya jagate.
Ki amar kiva nara samara durvar
Donhe! Bhratribhed bhinna anya path nahi
Nivarite e danavadwaye. (Canto 111. 161 – 166)

As the gods pondered over possible means for bringing about the expected rift between the brothers, there occurred an ethereal announcement that instructed them of assigning Vishwakarma the task of creating a maiden of unparalleled beauty (III. 333 – 334). When Vishwakarma had created Tilottamaa, there was a second announcement that her irresistible sight of gorgeousness would dazzle the demons’ senses with lust and would cause their rift and fall (III. 636 – 637). Subsequently the role of Narada comes in lifting the veil from the one single vulnerable spot in the invincibility of Sunda and Upasunda: here Narada’s narration closely follows the narration in Mahabharata; even his assurance to Indra that very soon the wicked brothers would be destroyed, is truly as found in Vyasa’s epic (IV. 129 – 163).

Tilottamaa came across Sunda and Upasunda in the usurped pleasure bower of the gods, which now belonged to the usurper demon brothers: Ananga shot floral shafts at the demons to oppress them with uncontrollable lust. Their quarrel and fight over Tilottamaa’s possession and their death, etc. (470 – 477; 486 – 496) are all described closely after the Mahabharata – except a few variances by the poet in use of simile. After the funeral of the deceased brothers, Indra told Tilottamaa to go to Suryaloka and reside there forever, invisible to mortal sight (619 – 621). In the Mahabharata, Brahma himself instructed Tilottamaa in this
regard and assigned for her a path invisible to mortal sight.

Madhusudan’s response to the secondary epics of Sanskrit tradition is also discernible in the *Tilottamaasambhav*. Kalidasa in particular is a manifest influence in the poem. In the words of Tapodhir Bhattacharjee, it is not only the title ‘*Tilottamaasambhav*’ that is derived from Kalidasa’s ‘*Kumarasambhav*’. the influence of the *Kumarasambhav* on the *Tilottamaasambhav* persists even in poetic construction: Kalidasa’s poem, too, exhibits an absence of a round story: the semblance or suggestiveness of story that breathes through the poem is subtle, covert and incomplete [translation mine] (*Purnarirman* 102).

Kalidasa, unlike ordinary poets, did not wish to present a regular story with a beginning, middle and an end: he rather desired to convey poetically a deeper philosophical perception to the reader. He illuminated eternal truth in the poem with a Purana story only as its basis or receptacle: preparations for the birth of ‘*Kumara*’ (*Kartika*) are depicted only up to the eighth sarga: the poet’s essential point gets home quite well within that. Nineteenth-century poet Madhusudan, too, did not present a detailed Purana story. His poetic imagination was nourished in the consciousness of the age: he, therefore, tried to illuminate a deeper significance of beauty in his poem: in all probability, it was not his desire to describe in detail Sunda and Upasunda’s demise. Whatever the reason behind *Tilottamaas*’s creation, she was unattainable for crude sensual gratification – this philosophical truth Madhusudan endeavoured to establish in the poem. Herein we feel the profound connection that exists between the *Kumarasambhav* and the *Tilottamaasambhav*. (102 – 103)

Madhusudan, like Kalidasa, gave a description of the Himalayas at the beginning of the work. Though the agony of Indra, banished from Heaven, was secondary, and brewing of the *amittrakshar* primary, yet, out of an intimate inspiration of the spirit of the age, it became a palpable truth to the poet. Tapodhir Bhattacharjee
further says, the Indra of Kalidasa’s poem, blessed luxuriously as he was in the sensual company of apsara-s, could never have felt such agony: the experience of Kalidasa’s society of the Gupta Era, crowned with material affluence, look unlikely to have such realisation of adversity. But Madhusudan’s sensitive mind was ever awake to the pain of un-attainment, of variance between desire and means. The feeling of exile in his own land was an inevitable truth of his unsettled decentred life. Madhusudan’s Indra, exiled from Heaven, therefore, was lonely, despondent, and ponderous, exhausted out of agony. [Translation mine] (Punarnirman 104) Madhusudan, thus, not only followed Kalidasa, he departed from him as well in the light of his contemporary age.

In Canto I of the Tilottamaasambhay, Madhusudan followed the famous description of out of season spring as found in the third sarga of the Kumarasambhay, and described the happy transformation of Nature in the wake of Shachi’s arrival in the Dhavala Shikhara to bolster up Indra’s drooping spirit.

Valmiki and Kalidasa principally influenced Madhusudan’s poetic language and elements of expression. In Sanskrit epics, description creates the context for an incident, though post-Kalidasa epics saw excessive descriptions that weighed down flow of the story. Madhusudan, too, fulfilled the purpose of context through various descriptive details. When Indra and Shachi set out on their aerial sojourn to exalted Brahmaloka in the second canto of the poem, the poet took the opportunity to describe the various celestial regions – Chandraloka, Suryaloka, etc. – and thus reflected his deep knowledge of the tradition of the Purana-s. This knowledge was significant in shaping his poetry.

In this connection, Tapodhir Bhattacharjee cites Thomas Mann’s words from the essay “Friend and Future”: ‘Certainly when a writer has acquired the habit of regarding life as mythical and typical, there comes a curious heightening of his artistic temper, a new refreshment to his perceiving and shaping powers.
which otherwise occurs much later in life.’ (Tapodhir, Punarnirman, 105)

The above quoted remark perhaps explains why Madhusudan was able to mature so rapidly in his transition from the Tilottamaasambhav to the Meghanaadvadh.

Thus we find Madhusudan describing the celestial regions after the tradition of the Purana-s. Again, he described Brahmaloka after the same tradition. It is built up as the ultimate wish-fulfilling centre that provided anything at one’s mere wish of it. However, in all these descriptions, the poet mingled influences of European epics as well. Especially Virgil and Dante played their influential role in this regard.

After Madhusudan’s description of Brahmaloka, Indra and his celestial peers went before Brahma who hinted at the necessity of producing a rift between the two demon brothers. In the Mahabharata, Brahma gave Sunda and Upasunda the boon of infallibility except to each other (1. 208. 14 – 25). Moreover, Brahma himself instructed Tilottamaa to allure the brothers so much that they would engage in fighting with each other (1. 210. 20 – 21). Thus, we realise that Madhusudan arranged and cast his story with some differences in the Tilottamaasambhav.

The divine intervention in the form of ethereal heralding that occurs next in order to accelerate the sloth movement of the story is a device very common in both Sanskrit epics and Homer. Madhusudan, nevertheless, adopted the device as an archetype, without being much troubled by its religious implication or import.

In describing Pavana’s flight toward Vishwakarma’s palatial abode situated at the North Pole Madhusudan created word pictures of Chandraloka, Suryaloka, Yamaloka, etc. The Puranic atmosphere became condensed thus on a general level. In imagining Vishwakarma’s abode to be situated at the mountainous region
of North Pole Madhusudan subtly followed two influences: one is that of Puranic fictional geography; the other is Tasso. Another noticeable point is that, three important poets of Sanskrit epics of art – Kalidasa, Bharavi, and Magha – imagined mountainous region as the abode of gods, yaksha-s and Kinnara-s.

In Canto IV, Madhusudan personified the Vindhya. Sanskrit epics abound in such personifications. Several images in Kalidasa, Bharavi and Magha are built up through personifying various objects of nature. The vibrant presence of the Himalayas in Kalidasa’s Kumarasambhav is a well known experience of reading. In Bharavi’s Kiratarjuneeya, the Himalayas as though molded itself after Shiva’s hallowed physical body. In Magha’s Shishupalavadh, the Raivatak appeared in the form of Krishna and Shiva.

The splendour of royal court of Sunda and Upasunda, too, has been described after the tradition of Sanskrit epics.

In the same canto, when Sunda and Upasunda came upon Tilottamaa and beheld her from a distance, they had a visual sensation of seeing flames illuminating the entire bower:

Ujjwal e van bujhi davagnishikhate
Aji, … (450 – 451)

Their impression was seeing a forest fire as though. Just as all things get burnt up in fire, so would the two demons in the dazzling fire of Tilottamaa’s beauty: perhaps, this is what Madhusudan intended to hint to the reader? The moment the demons came near Tilottamaa they were ruffled and intoxicated with Kamadev’s shafts. Evidently, the poet here moved his story to a desired conclusion along a general line of the Purana-s and the particular line of the Kumarasambhav.

As already mentioned, Tilottamaa found her seat in Suryaloka, away and beyond the reach of ordinary sight, debased lustfulness and grossness. She became
for the poet the idolised conception of beauty of the new age. But her abode also indicated that the poet’s conception of beauty was yet to find a mould or standard and perfected receptacle of epic grandeur and loftiness.

Despite its limitations as an experimental work in the epic genre, the Tilottamaasambhav could draw our attention to the creative application of cultural and aesthetic tradition: Madhusudan never was mechanical in following the rich legacy of Indian epics and Purana-s; he assimilated their elements with the warmth of his creative flair into his poetic sensibility and vision [translation mine] (Tapodhir. Punarnirman. 113 – 114). This resulted into a quick maturing of his abilities required for handling of the epic. Consequently, the Tilottamaasambhav was followed by the Meghnaadvadh.

b) Madhusudan’s response in the Meghnaadvadh:

Madhusudan chiefly depended on the Ramayana story to compose his Meghnaadvadh. However, though dealing with a Purana story, he looked at life standing on an altogether new footing of nineteenth-century Bengal and India at large. In order to serve his poetic purpose, he transformed the elements of Purana. The transformation consisted in description and narration of incidents, in introducing characters not mentioned in the Purana story, in describing gods and goddesses, and in creating anew the characters from Purana. He brought in, for suitability purpose, various nuances from the Mahabharata and several Purana-s even. Moreover, Greek mythology played its worth considering part in the poet’s scheme of things. He combined the Indian or Oriental artistic ideology that he received from his readings of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Purana-s, and other Sanskrit literary texts, with his occident-imbued poetic imagination to produce the Meghnaadvadh. It would be, therefore, interesting to consider his response to the great epics and secondary epics of Sanskrit tradition as reflected in the poem. However, his responsive reconstructions are so numerous that an analysis of all of
them would be too vast a topic for the scope of the present chapter. Consequently, the chapter would touch upon the major points and areas of poetic responsiveness.

Madhusudan’s central theme in the Meghnaadvadadh is Meghnaada’s death in Lakshmana’s hands which is found in the Ramayana as one among several other episodes. Valmiki did not intend to render it as an incident especially significant or hallowed. But Madhusudan saw in it the possibility of novel poetic success and therefore made it the central incident that would go into making the story of his poem.

Among the nine cantos of the Meghnaadvadadh, the sixth contains Meghnaada’s death and the seventh Ravana’s going to battle and mortally wounding Lakshmana with shaktishel. These two cantos take the poet, perhaps, nearest to the Ramayana and its story: the rest of the cantos chiefly derive from his imaginative responses to diverse Indian and Western influences and their transformation through that flair of imagination.

The episode of Meghnaada’s death – though constructed after the Ramayana story – had to be reshaped and altered in many respects to best suit Madhusudan’s poetic purpose. Krittivasa’s Ramayana differs from Valmiki’s in several matters. Madhusudan followed Valmiki or Krittivasa as and when required or he differed from them both.

The central incident of Madhusudan’s epic is assassination of Meghnaada in the hands of Lakshmana who entered the Nikumbhila oblation temple by remaining invisible by Mayadevee’s grace. But Meghnaada did not die in a closed-door confinement without opportunity for fighting in the Ramayana. After Makaraksha’s death in battle against Rama, an angry Ravana ordered Meghnaada to go to battle and kill Rama and Lakshmana. Meghnaada, following the instruction, killed and wounded numerous monkey warriors and went back to Lanka to employ an ingenious trick. He created a “maya-Seeta”, set it in his
chariot and came back to warfront; then he sliced it into two in front of Hanumana. The sight perplexed all from Rama’s army. Taking advantage of their perplexity. Meghanaada quickly returned to Lanka for performing tantric sacrificial rites at Nikumbhila’s cavernous grotto and beneath a banyan tree: successful completion of the sacrifice would empower him with invisibility and aid him with a magical chariot – invisible, again – and thus render him near-invincible for Rama and Lakshmana. Vibheeshana realised his intentions. With Rama’s consent he, therefore, took Lakshmana and several stalwart monkey warriors to the outside of Meghanaada’s sacrificial site guarded by demon sentries. In order to prevent fruition of Meghanaada’s tantric rites. Lakshmana and others started a fierce fight there against the sentries guarding the vicinity of Nikumbhila. Heavy death toll of the demons forced Meghanaada to come out of Nikumbhila for defence and redress. In a fierce fight against Lakshmana he lost his charioteer and the chariot as well. He hurried back to Lanka and returned on a new splendidly built chariot and resumed fighting. Indra and other gods, rishis, gandharvas, and many others, came to the front to protect Lakshmana. In the end, Lakshmana shot aindrastra to behead Meghanaada and bring about his fall.

The afore-cited detail of the Valmikian episode would help us see Madhusudan’s points of departure from the Ramayana and his retaining source elements of description or dialogue.

Lakshmana’s normal visible entry with Vibheeshana and surrounded by numerous monkey soldiers into Lanka as found in the “Yuddha Kanda” of Valmiki’s text (85, 35 – 36), was recast with several changes in the Meghanaadvadh. We see

Praval mayar baley pashila nagare
Veerdway... (VI. 309 – 310)

Vibheeshana showed the way forward. Lakshmana went inside Lanka unnoticed
by the demon sentries who even could not hear the grating sound of the gate opening. The two heroes ambled along watching all around the sparkling splendour of the city. It was only when Lakshmana entered the oblation temple that his sword clang in its sheath, arrows clattered in their quiver, and the temple trembled with the heavy weight of his feet (VI. 415 – 417). The cavernous grotto of the Ramayana became an elaborately laid temple for Meghanaada to sit in for his meditative worship.

It was dawn. Madhusudan’s description of Meghanaada wearing silk robe, immersed in silent worship amidst flowers, incense, etc., and picturing him as solitary Shiva lost in trance (VI. 410 – 411) certainly express the reverence of the poetic heart for the ‘noble fellow’. Moreover, the poet equated him with mihir (the sun), and Garuda (the lord of all birds in Purana) to firmly establish that noble glory (439 & 499). On the contrary, the poet continually equated Lakshmana with kali (the baneful affect of the Kali era), rahu (the Puranic character who repeatedly swallows the sun and the moon out of an eternal grudge), sarpa (serpent), vyaghra (tiger), etc. This change of scale, tilting it from Lakshmana to Meghanaada, is part of Madhusudan’s poetic vision and his creative reconstruction of the Ramayana story. In that process, it is evident, he adopted elements of Purana in a new perspective.

Meghanaada, a true hero of the poet, also felt a chill, realising an unthinkable enemy intrusion into such well-guarded and bolted temple. But he could rise above his initial unnerving shock. Lakshmana’s refusing him an opportunity for fetching weapons from adjacent storage incited his temper. But he improvised for his missing weapons with his pooja equipment which he threw so powerfully at Lakshmana that the stroke rendered the enemy unconscious. He, however, failed to wrench away weapons from the stupefied enemy, and so, felt divine disfavour at work.
When he came to know of Vibheeshana’s presence and supportive role for Lakshmana’s entry into the temple, he was filled with contempt for the uncle’s treacherous act. But his address to his uncle was a mixture of respect and contempt (VI. 522 – 525). Madhusudan, here, had literally translated into Bengali from Valmiki’s Sanskrit epic (“Yuddha Kanda”. 87. 15). Vibheeshana defended his stance by pointing the finger back to Ravana’s grievous faults (VI. 572 – 73) that had forced him to leave his home-side. In the Ramayana, too, similar reasons were highlighted for Ravana’s loss of prosperity and life (“Yuddha Kanda”. 87. 22 – 93). Even then Meghanaada did not approve of Vibheeshana’s changing sides:

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Shastre baley, gunavan jadi
Parajan, gunaheen swajan, tathapi
Nirgun swajan shreyah, parah parah sada (VI. 585 – 587)
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The above-quoted lines, too, take the reader back to Valmiki:

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Gunavan va parajanah swajano nirgunopi va .
Nirgunah swajanah shreyan yah parah para eva sah ..
(“Yuddha Kanda”)
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Numerous such instances of Madhusudan’s response to Valmiki may be cited: instances where he either departed from the Ramayana or adopted its elements suitably to his own poetic structure.

Madhusudan’s description of Meghanaada’s final moments before death adorn him in full human glory as the dying hero remembered and paid his last homage to his parents, as he thought of his love and ‘ever-new joy’ Pramila, his wife. Even before dying, he expressed his scathing contempt for and his conviction in Ravana’s imminent revenge over Lakshmana. The poet’s psychological insight into the heartfelt aggrieved sentiments of a dying hero – who had been attacked when unarmed – marks him as modern and distinct from Valmiki and Krittivasa. In depicting the sorrowful restless involvement of the
world of nature in Meghanaada’s dying fall, the poet as though completed his preparations for glorifying the death of his ‘noble fellow’ (VI. 625 – 629). The death no more remained as one of several others as found in the Ramayana, but attained an epic expansion in the consciousness of the poet as well as the reader. Once again, the poet resorted to Valmiki’s verse (“Yuddha Kanda”. 91. 86) to describe the dead hero (VI. 668 – 670). His Meghanaadvadh, thus, becomes a unique poem in the amalgamation of epical language and description with modern poetic imagination.

Ravana’s decision to go to the warfront, in Canto VII of the Meghanaadvadh, was to avenge the unthinkable death of his son. Earlier, when from Veerabhadra he had got the news of Meghanaada’s death in an unjust, or a travesty of, war, he had fallen senseless like a lion pierced with an arrow. In the Ramayana, too, Ravana fell unconscious at the news of his son’s death. Later his sorrow turned into resolve for revenge. His emboldening words to the demon army that he would be on that day invincible even to Indra who would not dare come near him, are perhaps one of the sources for his counterpart’s in the Meghanaadvadh. But then the nineteenth-century poet took his own way. Unlike Valmiki’s, Madhusudan’s Ravana did not at once fall upon Seeta with a weapon to mangle her. His vengeance is subtler in its essence and expression. To take revenge upon the son’s assassin was his sole resolve. Madhusudan, therefore, depicted him as letting Rama go alive by refusing a fight with him. In the Ramayana we witness a fierce fight between Rama and Ravana before the episode of Shaktishel. But Madhusudan’s Ravana addressed Rama thus:

Na chahi tomare
Aji. hey vaideheenath. E bhavamandale
Ar ek din tumi jivo nirapade.
Kotha se anuj tava kapat samaree
Pamara? Maribo tare… (VII. 643 – 647)
His address echoes of intense hatred and steady determination. We are reminded that in the Mahabharata Karna, after the death of his son Vrishasen, similarly, searched for Arjun, the slayer of his son, and disregarded fighting with Yudhishthir, Nakul, and Sahadev.

Madhusudan’s fresh treatment of the Shaktishel episode of Valmiki’s epic rendered it all the more important in the poem’s context. Ravana’s march to the battlefield with a growing deafening sound of his deadly demon train following behind ricking up thick dust that almost blocked the sight rocked the entirety of Lanka and its environs:

Chalichhe pratap agey jagat kanpaye;
Pashchate shabada chale shravan badhiri;
Chalichhe paraga parey drishtipath rodhi
Ghana ghanakarroope: talichhe saghane
Swarnalanka! – … (VII. 443 – 447)

Kalidasa in his Raghuvangsham described Raghu’s march for conquest of the East / Orient:

Prataapogre tatah shabda paraagastadanantaram
Yayau pashchaadrathaadeeti chatuhskandheva saa chamuh (4. 30)

That Madhusudan pictured Ravana’s army marching the way Raghu’s army had done is an indicator of his creative response to his greatest predecessor in Sanskrit epic of art. It also indicates the poet’s altered outlook in portraying the demon king as glorified as Raghu himself.

Madhusudan brought in the Puranic concept of avatars (incarnations) of Vishnu in his poem. In the Purana-s there are descriptions of ten avatars of Vishnu. Though the poet mentioned only four of them (VII. 413 – 420), he indicated of the others in ‘taraila bahu moorti dhari’ in relation to mother earth
having been saved in the past by Vishnu.

In the first canto as well we may trace Madhusudan’s responsiveness to Sanskrit epic tradition. His description of Ravana’s royal court in many respects coalesces with Valmiki’s description that spoke of gemmed columns and arched gateways, etc. When Ravana came to know of Veerabahu’s death in battle against Rama, he initially felt lost as to who he should send next to continue the battle of defence against belligerent enemy. But then he recovered himself and decided himself to send as general to take the attack back to the enemy. His determination could picture only one of himself and his arch enemy Rama surviving the duel:

\[
\text{Aravan aram va habey bhava aji (1, 417)}
\]

The above construction is comparable to Valmiki’s

\[
\text{Araavanamaraamang va jagat drakshyatha vaanaraah}
\]

\[\text{("Yuddha Kanda, 100. 48")}\]

We may also look at Kalidasa’s

\[
\text{Araavanamaraamang va jagaddyoti nishchitah}
\]

\[\text{(the Raghuvangsham, 12, 83)}\]

Murala performed the role of messenger between Varunee and Lakshmee. Madhusudan probably found her in Bhavabhuti’s Uttararamacharita:

\[
\text{Tatah pravishati nadeeswayah Tamasaa Muralaa cha (Sarga 3)}
\]

He described Murala’s emergence from underwater thus:

\[
\text{jatha uthaye chatula}
\]
\[
\text{Sapharee, dekhate dhanee rajah-kanti chhata}
\]
\[
\text{Vibhrama vibhabasure… (1, 485 – 487)}
\]
The description reminds us of an expression in Kalidasa’s *Meghadootam*:

Chatul sapharodwartanaprekshitaani

(“Poorvamegha”. 41)

The description of Lakshmee ‘kamala asane / Basen kamalamoyee Keshav vaasanaa / Lankapurey’ (I. 488 – 490) is also according to Puranic allusion. Lakshmee was installed in Lanka, but her seat there no more firm and stable. Her dialogue reflects clear influence of Valmiki. Her utterance ‘prati grihe kande / Putraheena mata. dooti. patiheena satec’ (I. 545 – 546) alludes to the Valmikian expression ‘Mama putro mama bhraataa mama bhartaa raney hatah. / Ityesha shruyate shabdo raakshaseenaang kuley kuley’ (6. 94. 22).

In the beginning of the *Meghanaadvadh*, the poet clearly stated that Meghanaada’s death would be the subject-matter of the poem. But within the scope of the first 595 lines of the poem there is no mention of Meghanaada. It is Lakshmee who brought Meghanaada to the scene of Lanka. His arrival at Lanka coincided with Ravana’s preparations for the battleground. Madhusudan took this as an opportunity for reconstructing from Valmiki what Meghanaada would say to Ravana. His Meghanaada opined that as long as he a warrior son was present, the father needed never go to battlefield (I. 745 – 750). In the *Ramayana*, we see Meghanaada trying to raise Ravana out of despondency as the latter wept helplessly at the agony of repeated loss in battle and bereavement of near and dear ones: that Ravana was the king of the demon race; that as long as Indrajit was alive he (Ravana) should not sink into sorrow; that that day all would witness his (Indrajit Meghanaada’s) heroism: that he promised to send Rama and Lakshmana that very day to death with his piercing shafts (6. 76. 4 – 7).

But Madhusudan’s Meghanaada was in no way like Valmiki’s that had mastery over the art of illusion and magical invisibility. He on the contrary expressed his wonder at Rama and Lakshmana’s magical return to life after he had
killed them in battle (I. 729 – 730). His individual prowess was his sole source of heroism. This indicates Madhusudan’s humanistic essence of characterisation.

In the second canto of his poem, Madhusudan followed Homer for story or incident. Hera’s visit to Mount Ida – as found in the fourteenth book of the Iliad – became the source of Ambika’s visit to Yogasana peak. But in that also the poet endeavoured to lend his episode ‘as thorough a Hindu air as possible’. He started the canto, therefore, in a way as would streamline his endeavour greatly. He extracted various details from Sanskrit epics and Purana-s in a manner that would lend his creation the desired Indian-ness. One such element is the description at the outset of Canto II. of the coming of dusk that reminds us of Sanskrit epics that frequently resort to such descriptions. Next, Lakshmee’s visit to Indra in Heaven was meant to warn him against Meghanaada’s invincibility. Her words about the hero’s conditioned immutability (II. 64 – 69) echo Valmiki’s text (6. 7. 19; 7. 25. 10; and 7. 30. 7. 16 – 17).

Another major influence in the canto is Kalidasa. Taking clue from the Madanabhasma episode in the third sarga of Kalidasa’s Kumarasambhav, Madhusudan forwarded his own poetic statement. He nevertheless modified in some cases the details of the episode. However, in the modifications as well Kalidasa’s influence is markedly present. Some may be mentioned for instance: lines 321 – 326 of the canto are a parallel to 3. 71 – 72 of the Kumarasambhav; again, lines 350 – 352 of the canto a parallel to line 86. Uttarmeega. the Meghadootam and also to verse 26. Act 5. the Abhijnan-Shakuntalam.

Canto III of the Meghanaadvadh presents Pramila in a clear perspective. In Valmiki’s Ramayana, however, there is no such character as she and with such a name. In characterising her, the poet depended on Homer and Tasso as well as on Indian traditional elements. He brought in Puranic concepts to empower and energise his dream creation of a modern woman in the perspective of nineteenth-
century Bengali consciousness. It is part of Puranic tradition to depict a particular character as having been born as an *angsha* (spark of energy) of some divinity. Thus, among the words of Parvatee

```
Mama angshe janma dhare Pramila roopasee
Vijaye; haribo tejh kali tar ami.
Ravichchhavi karasparshe ujjwal je mani
Abhaheen hoy se lo. diva-avasane;
Temni nistejaah kali karibo vamare. (III, 600 – 604)
```

we once more become conscious of Madhusudan’s dedicated response to Indian tradition. In the pervading Puranic atmosphere of the interpolated sections of the Aadi Kanda of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, we find various monkey children born as *angsha*-s of different divinities (1. 17, 1 – 8).

Madhusudan may have taken the name “Pramila” from Kashiram Dasha’s *Mahabharata* in Bengali. Besides name, however, there is very little that the poet took from Kashiram. He may have followed the character of Sulochana, wife of Meghanaada, as found in Buddha Reddy’s popular “Ranganatha Ramayana” (1230) in Telugu. That he studied Telugu language and literature during his Madras days is a fact we come to know of from one of his letters, dated 18-08-1849.

Pramila riding on a black she-horse named Badava was a sight that provided Madhusudan opportunity for comparison between his heroine and Puranic deific characters such as Durga the slayer of Mahishasura, Shachi the consort of Indra and who rides the white elephant named Airavat, and Roma (Lakshmee) who is seated on Garuda. In order to describe her irresistible onward movement that desired fulfillment in her union with her husband, the poet derived elements from the world of simile as found in Sanskrit epics. For instance, the lines
Jatha vayusakha saha davanalagati
Durvar. chalila satec patir uddeshe (III. 160 – 161)

remind us of an expression in Kalidasa’s Raghuvarangham: ‘Vibhavaasuh
saarathineva vaayunaa ghanavyapaayena gabhastimaaniva’ (3. 37).

The meeting between Hanuman and Nrimundamalinee, Pramila’s
companion and attendant, is curious. She is seen going to Rama’s camp, spear in
hand, walking through innumerable enemy soldiers. The context of the
“Markandeya Purana” must have been present in the subconscious of the poet’s
mind. The use of the name Nrimundamalinee (a name attributed to goddess
Kaalee) and the descriptions of her mien, manners or activities amply imply to that
effect.

Since Madhusudan’s heart was with the ‘Rakshasas’, and since he did
‘despise Rama and his rabble’
he transformed Valmiki’s Rama almost entirely
and made him into a beggar-mentality badly dependent on divine favours and yet
not assured of success, nor confident of his own monkey army. The poet showed
that Rama thought of his monkey soldiers and generals as mere tame deers that
were susceptible before an attack from lionhearted Meghanaada or from Pramila
the lioness (III. 439 – 440). In the Mahabharata, too, similar lion-deer duality may
be seen: ‘Nivartishyanti santrastaah singhang kshudraa mrigaa yathaa’ (6. 19. 90).

Madhusudan gave a glimpse of his poetic power in describing Pramila’s
entry into the city of Lanka. Valmiki, in order to describe Rama, wrote: ‘Shriyaa
viruruche Raamo nakshatraitava chndramaah’ (6. 130. 36). Madhusudan placed the
Valmikian description in a new context to describe his heroine (III. 384 – 385).
The citizens of Lanka came running to watch Pramila and her amazons marching
into the city. To describe this, the poet wrote ‘Jatha agnishikha dekhi patanga
avalce / Dhaay rangey charidike atla dhaiya / Pourajan’ (508 – 510) and thus
reconstructed the famous simile from Sanskrit epic legacy:
Abhipetumahaaverageah patangaa ivapaakam’ (the Ramayana, 5, 42, 27) and again, ‘Patangavad bahnimukhang vivikshuh’ (the Kumarasambhav. 3, 64).

Canto IV stands out as an oasis that quenches our thirst for relief from the wide epical expanse of the Meghanaadvadh. The poet starts the canto with obvious supplication to Valmiki and his legacy. Therefore, both in Seeta’s characterisation and in creating an atmosphere befitting to the archetype of woman who is the paragon of love, he was devotedly and creatively responsive to the great as well as secondary epic legacies of Sanskrit literature.

Madhusudan, before bringing in Secta, however, followed the Indian rhetorical tenet of compulsory description of city of the protagonist – Ravana’s festive Lanka in this case – and used it (IV. 21 – 45) as a contrastive background to set off an anguished Seeta more distinctly. Seeta looked as though the personification of lovelorn (separation from husband) state: ‘Ekakeee shokakula ashoke kanane / Kanden Raghava-banchha andhar-kutire / Neerave’ (IV. 46 – 48). Valmiki, too, saw in Seeta similar pangs of separation: ‘Shokena mahataa grastaa Maithilee Janakaatmajaa / Na sharma labhate bheeruh paashabaddhaa mrigee yathaa’ (the Ramayana, 3, 56, 35).

Canto IV of the Meghanaadvadh brings to us Secta’s recountal of her happy days with husband in the forest of Panchavatee, her abduction by Ravana, and her vision of future in an unconscious state, etc. As an atmospheric prerequisite for such an account Madhusudan described the world of nature inside Ashoke Kanan that as though stirred in every leaf and rind with Seeta’s grief:

Swanichhe paban, dure rahia rahia
Uchchhase bilapi jatha! Larichhe bishade
Marmariya patakul! Bosechhe arabe
Shakhe pakhi! Rashi rashi kusum porechhc
Tarumule, jeno taru. tapi manostape.
Pheliachhe khuli saj! Dure probahini.
Uchcha bichi-rabe kandi. cholichee sagare.
Kohite barishe jeno e duhkha kahini! (IV. 56 – 63)

Not only is human emotion projected on nature, but distinction between animate and inanimate also obliterated. This comprehensive or holistic ken Madhusudan received as an artistic legacy from Valmiki and Kalidasa. In Valmiki’s Ramayana we find such humanisation of objects of nature: for instance, in 2. 45. 30 – 31: 3. 52. 34 – 36; or 3. 60. 6. Kalidasa, too, reconstructed Valmiki’s legacy: for instance, in the Vikramorvasheeya, lovelorn Pururava found it difficult to distinguish between animate and inanimate, and thought at the sight of a river that it was his restless beloved who had taken the form of the river: in the Abhijnanashakuntalam, when Shakuntala was about to depart, the doe let fall from its mouth the bunch of kusha grass, the peahen stopped its dance, the creeper as if shed tears through shedding dry leaves; in the Raghuvangsham, the poet wrote something similar to express the grief of Seeta’s banishment (14. 51. 69). Thus, in the afore-extracted passage of Madhusudan, we feel an unbroken continuum of Sanskrit epic legacy.

In Canto V of the Meghanaadvadh, Madhusudan took his narrative outside Valmiki’s purview once again. But then also his transforming poetic ken could retain its glance cast on the Sanskrit epic tradition. One example, perhaps, would suffice in this regard. The basic purpose of the canto is to groom and enable Lakshmana become eligible for such onus as killing an almost invincible adversary like Meghanaada. Madhusudan’s Lakshmana had to prove that he was of no ordinary courage and prowess. Outside the temple of Chandi, he saw Mahadeva, trident in hand, hindering his way forward. But he accepted the challenge undaunted:
nishkashiya tejaskar asi
Raghuja-aja-angaja, vikhyata bhuvane,
Tahar tanay das namey tava padey.
Chandrchood! Chhado path, poojibo Chandire.
Praveshe kanane, nahey deha rann dasey’ (V. 212 – 217)

What is noteworthy here is that in the sixth chapter of the “Souptik Parva” of the Mahabharata, Mahadeva was the door-keeper or guard outside Pandavas’ camp: and Ashwatthama had to satisfy him for obtaining permission for an entry there. The way Shiva became favourable for Ashwatthama to kill the five helpless sleeping sons of the Pandavas, was a pointer toward the ethical standpoint of the deities. Madhusudan had to imagine a parallel situation in his poem since he too wished to depict the unethical stance of deities against the demon race of Lanka.

Mandodaree is a character that Madhusudan sketched briefly but with broad brushstrokes. Her personality and position of significance in the world of Ravana’s Lanka as depicted by the poet is aptly expressed in the lines ‘Tara-kireetinee nishisadrishee aapani / Rakkhas-kula-Eesharee’ (V. 454 – 455). The lines have a suggestive aura that alludes to a famous Sanskrit poetic convention from the Ramayana: ‘Raatrih shashaankoditasamya vayaktraa taaraaganonmeelita chaarunetraa / Jyotsnaa shuklapraavaranaa vibhaati / Naareeva shubhraang shuka sangbritaanggec’ (4. 30. 46).

Cantos VI and VII describe, as already discussed, the main event of the poem and the retaliatory action to it. Canto VIII – that sends Rama in Mayadeeves company, to Pretapuree to receive Dasharatha’s instructions for Lakshmana’s new lease of life – primarily derives from Madhusudan’s avid readings of Western epics, though he may have in part followed some details from the “Vishnu Purana”. One more thing is worth considering here. In some
interpolated sarga-s of Valmiki’s *Ramayana* (118 – 121) that relate to Seta’s *agnipariksha* (i.e. test in fire), gods like Brahma, Shiva, Indra, Varuna, Yama, Kubera, appeared and declared Seeta’s purity and celibacy. Shiva then told Rama (in Sarga 120) that his late father Dasharatha had come in an aircraft to this mortal world; that he and Lakshmana should pay him their respect. The father, clad in a clear white robe and resplendent of his own astral body, accepted his sons’ *pranama* and engaged in conversation with them. Finally, he blessed his daughter-in-law Seeta, and then went back to his Heavenly seat. Madhusudan may have taken his poetic and reconstructive clue from the interpolation and then flowered it according to Virgil’s and Dante’s texts, with a suitable blend of the “Swargarohana Parva” of the *Mahabharata* (where the Pandavas tried to ascend to Heaven in physical body and Yudhishtir alone succeeded in doing so but only after he had had a momentary glimpse of the tortures of Hell) and varied elements of the “Vishnu Purana” to produce the corpus of Canto VIII.

Canto IX of the *Meghanaadvadha* describes the funeral of Meghanaada and mourning by the demon citizens of Lanka headed by Ravana. The demon king saw all his dreams come to nothingness at his son’s death and Pramila’s decision for sacrificing herself at Meghanaada’s funeral pyre. His inexpressible grief found some outlet in his sombre utterances: in 378 – 387 and 390 – 400. Here again Madhusudan extracted from what Valmiki’s Ravana expressed after Indrajit Meghanaada’s death (the *Ramayana*, 6, 92, 4 – 33). The poet, moreover, took resort to Puranic tradition in assigning for Meghanaada and Pramila an eternal seat of blissfulness in Shivaloka (422 – 430).

The *Meghanaadvadha* ends with construction of Meghanaada’s memorial on the spot of his cremation after it had been washed clean in water of the Ganges and return of the mourning procession of demons after their customary post-funeral bath in the sea, to the city of Lanka. The use of such details as the water of the Ganges – considered sacred and healing by the Indians – and the custom of post-
funerary bath reiterate Madhusudan’s consciousness of Indian traditions and beliefs and their promise of befitting employment in poetic purposes such as his were in the Meghanaadvadh.

c) Madhusudan’s response in the Veeraanganaa:

Madhusudan composed eleven epistles in the Veeraanganaa (1862). In a dateless letter to Raj Narain he wrote: ‘I have been scribbling the thing to be called … [Veeraanganaa] i.e. Heroic Epistles from the most noted Pauranic women to their lovers or Lords”. He clearly alluded to the Puranic background of his heroines. The epistles are: (1) Shakuntala to Dushmanta, (2) Tara to Som, (3) Rukmini to Dwarakanath, (4) Kekayee to Dasharatha, (5) Surpanakha to Lakshmana, (6) Draupadee to Arjun, (7) Bhanumatee to Duryodhan, (8) Duhshala to Jayadrath, (9) Jahnavee to Shantanu, (10) Urvashee to Pururava, and (11) Jana to Neeladhwaj.

Though the poet clearly referred to their Puranic origin, the heroines, nevertheless, may be classified into women from Sanskrit epics and Purana-s. Among the eleven epistles, six (1st, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th and 11th) derive from the story of the Mahabharata, two (4th and 5th) are based on the Ramayana story and three (2nd, 3rd and 10th) on the stories of various other Purana-s. Thus, we note Madhusudan’s fundamental response in the Veeraanganaa to the great Sanskrit epics.

One structural response that Madhusudan carried on from the preceding poetic works – the Tilottamaasambhay and the Meghanaadvadh – to his Veeraanganaa is dividing the work into sarga-s. Each epistle is called a sarga: therefore the work extends up to eleven sarga-s or cantos. We have seen at the beginning of the present chapter that the concept of sarga originated in the Ramayana. Sarga, in later ages, came to be regarded, especially by Indian rhetoricians, as an indispensable unit of division of an epic composition.
Madhusudan’s *Veeranangana Kavya* in its structural response to Valmiki’s poem elevated itself to the level of the epical, despite its individual units of epistles remaining distinct. In the words of Tapodhir Bhattacharjee, the poem is ‘a distant descendent of the epic genre’ and that the epic Muse ‘continued to smile upon’ the poet when he attempted ‘a creative reinterpretation’ of Ovid’s Heroic Epistles ‘in terms of famous Puranic and epic heroines’ (*Indian Epic Tradition* 333).

An attempt at briefly ascertaining Madhusudan’s response to the Sanskrit poetic tradition in the first epistle from Shakuntala to Dushmanta would invariably take us to Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanashakuntalam*. Kalidasa took the story from the *Mahabharata*. But he poetically created it anew in the description of ashram and nature, in characterisation of the two familiars of Shakuntala – Anasooya and Priyamvada, in imagining the curse of sage Durvasa as reason behind Dushmanta’s forgetfulness and then rejection of Shakuntala.

Madhusudan definitely read the story of Shakuntala in the *Mahabharata*. Even if he read it in other Purana-s as well, he depended, while composing the epistle, chiefly on Kalidasa. Proof of his dependence may be seen reflected in plot construction, characterisation, and poetic expressions. He did not intend to present the whole story. He concentrated on shedding light on Shakuntala’s mental state under lovelorn circumstances. But within that limited scope may be traced shadows of many circumstances and poetic constructions from Kalidasa’s text. For instance, Kalidasa’s lovelorn Shakuntala, at the suggestion of her familiars, carved with her fingernails poetic lines on lotus-leaves (Act 3). Immediately after that, King Dushmanta came out from behind the tree where he had been hiding listening to all of their conversation. Remembering that incident Madhusudan’s Shakuntala wrote ‘bhabiya dekho, padey jadi maney. / Narendra; jathay basi premakutuhale / Likhilo kamaladaley geetika abhagec; – / Jathay sahasa tumi proveshi judale / Visham virahajwala!’ (1. 60 – 64).
Madhusudan, however, also differed from Kalidasa in characterising Shakuntala. Unlike Kalidasa’s, his Shakuntala was no longer lost in herself, but quite conscious of her own thoughts and of the gravity of Dushmanta’s unkind silence and non-communication with her (I. 38 – 45). Madhusudan’s nineteenth-century urban sensibility was filtered to some degree into Shakuntala’s thought process. She was well aware that she, devoid of wealth and social status or knowledge of aristocratic etiquette and polish, was nowhere near King Dushmanta, the lord of the world. This unequal love ever kept her heart tensed. In spite of that, his love made her feel pained when someone talked ill of him. Such conflicts of self would have never been possible in Kalidasa’s Shakuntala who was untutored in the ways of the mundane or urbane world. She was incomparable in beauty and innocence of the heart. Madhusudan, by lending her some iota of worldly awareness, rendered her much more real and pertaining to his own age.

The second epistle of Tara to Som is the most unique among the eleven. In all other epistles, he curiously followed the source of the Ramayana or the Mahabharata or Purana-s. at times adding to it his own new dimension. But he completely transformed the character of Tara as found in the Purana-s. Several Purana-s contain the story of Tara, wife of Vrihaspati: Vishnu Purana (Part 4. Chapter 6). Brahma Purana (Chapter 9), Matsya Purana (Chapter 23). and Brahmavaivarta Purana (“Prakriti Khanda”. Chapters 57 – 60, and “Srikrishna-Janma Khanda”. Chapters 80 – 81). In the Purana-s it is Som who abducted Tara against her wish and enjoyed her physical charms. In Madhusudan’s Veeraanganaa, it is Tara who was overcome with her desire for Som’s beauty and erotic love.

But, as Gargi Datta shows, Madhusudan may well have utilised the covert Puranic suggestions about the erotic appeal of Tara’s beauty. The description of Tara in the Purana-s does not conform to a motherly image. It rather evokes clear carnal appeal which she even enjoyed applying to Som. (Madhusudaner Rachanay
The writers and pundits of Purana tried to show that Som, instead of trying to win Tara’s heart, desired her youthful flesh alone: which is why his love only brought curse and disaster for him. Madhusudan, on the other hand, showed that Som’s arrival was enough to trigger off thitherto unfelt passions in Tara’s heart. No Platonic love, but fully palpable carnal love, therefore, stirred her emotion.

The third epistle, “Rukmini to Dwarakanath”, again, derives its story and heroine from Purana-s. We come across the story of Rukmini-harana in Vishnu Purana (Part 5. Chapter 26), Bhagawatam (10th skandha. Chapters 53 – 54), Harivangsha Vishnu Parvani (Chapters 59 – 61) and Brahma Purana (Chapter 199). Among them, Vishnu Purana is the oldest.

What attracted Madhusudan about the story is Rukmini’s attraction and complete dedication to Krishna who she had never seen in person. His chief inspiration was Bhagawatam wherein also Rukmini wrote one letter to Krishna containing seven sloka-s and sent through one Brahmin’s hand to Dwaraka. Rukmini of Bhagawatam mentioned of Shishupala as a “jackal”; Madhusudan’s Rukmini, too, considered Shishupala at least her doom. In Bhagavatam, she was ready to wait for Krishna life after life and to undergo perpetual fast and penance wasting her body until he took pity on her and accepted her as his wife. In the Veeraanganaa, however, she desired fulfillment of her wish in her present life itself.

Kekayee’s epistle to Dasharatha originates from the Ramayana story. Madhusudan, however, not only changed the heroine’s name from Kaikeyee to Kekayee, he transformed the youthful attractive Kaikeyee of the Ramayana into a wife in her late middle age. He, further, altered the import of Dasharatha’s past promises made to her. Valmiki’s Ramayana shows Dasharatha only binding himself to Kaikeyee by his promise of fulfilling her two wishes – whatever they be
— in future. In the Veeraanganaa, Madhusudan showed Kekayee complaining of breach of promise by Dasharatha in his decision for sanctioning Rama the title of Rex-ship since according to her version the king had already given her word for Bharata.

Madhusudan’s Kekayee basically is a woman past her youth but not grown out of its charms and enjoyment. From underneath her clamour for her son’s rights lurk her unquenched desires, and her fear of losing forever the prospect, for a life of importance and enjoyment as the consort of Dasharatha.

Surpanakha’s epistle to Lakshmana, the fifth one in the poem, also derives its story from Valmiki’s Ramayana. But Madhusudan told the readers in the very preface to the epistle to remove from their mind the ugly giantess of Valmiki. He, nevertheless, retained her sensual nature, but added to it an urbane sophistication and polish resultant of her position as the dear sister of demon king Ravana. Her expression of her love for Lakshmana in the letter was unbolted and devoid of coyness. Her sole aim was enjoyment of carnal pleasures with her man who did not know or had not seen her. For attaining his love she was ready even to take the form of any other young lass who supposedly had captured his attention. She even mentioned of her affluent life as bait she thought strong enough to win over Lakshmana’s heart.

The sixth epistle, of Draupadee to Arjun, originates from Vyasa’s Mahabharata. But Madhusudan’s artistically fresh treatment rendered the heroine much more human in her wishes and woe of unfulfilled dreams. In fact, the sixth epistle is special for its transformation of a Puranic character into an emotion-tossed real woman. The poet may well have taken Vyasa’s clue as given in the “Mahaprasthan Parva” of Mahabharata: that Draupadee loved Arjun more than her other four husbands. Madhusudan’s heroine, too, loved Arjun truly. The duty of serving in love and bed four husbands other than Arjun, was to her a torturous
silent killing of her heart’s yearning for monogamous relation with Arjun alone. With that the poet added common womanly attribute of envy for her imagined adversaries like *apsara*-s in Heaven where her Dhananjay was then residing. In Ashwaghosha’s *Buddhacharita*, we find Yashodhara doubtful of Gautama’s actual reason for forsaking of family ties and suspicious of his possible involvement with *apsara*-s of Heaven (8. 64 – 65). In Kalidasa’s *Kumarasambhav*, too, we see Rati desirous of entering fire like an insect – the fire that had engulfed Madana – and taking her coveted place in her husband’s lap lest the Heavenly *apsara*-s allure him with their wile and tempting beauty (4. 20).

The seventh epistle, of Bhanumatee to Duryodhan, also, derives from the *Mahabharata*. What makes the epistle divergent from the source is Bhanumatee’s pointing unaltering finger at her husband’s faults. In that she is modern and outspoken; though, at the same time, she is deeply concerned over Duryodhan’s wellbeing. This is the reason she asked him to cease his unjust war against the Pandavas – war that would bring about his end and her widowhood only. She is different from Duhshala, the heroine in the next sarga of the poem, in her courage, breadth of outlook, and sagacity.

Duhshala’s epistle to Jayadrath is the eighth one in the *Veeraanganaa*. Like the previous epistle, it derives its story from the *Mahabharata*. Madhusudan perhaps succeeded in transforming her from a non-entity to a heroine in making her voice her concern for Jayadrath’s safety and their peaceful familial life away from the martial clangs and harrowing experiences of the Kurukshetra War.

The next epistle from Jahnavee to Shantanu is based on the story of Shantanu and Ganga (Jahnavee) found in the chapter titled “Sambhav” in the “Aadi Kanda” of *Mahabharata*. Madhusudan largely followed his source in composing the epistle. The narrative of *ashta-basu* contributed duly in that. But within that limited scope the poet could express Shantanu’s grief of separation
from his celestial wife.

The penultimate epistle in the Veeraanganaa is from Urvashee to Pururava. The story may be traced way back to the Rk Veda where its presence is latent. Besides, it occurs in the Shatapath Brahman and various Purana-s. Madhusudan, however, took the story from Kalidasa’s play Vikramorvashee. He adopted from the play features of Urvashee’s character, as well as her story of fascination for Pururava. Another point of commonality between Kalidasa and Madhusudan is that Kalidasa’s Urvashee too wrote one epistle on hoorja leaf to Pururava. Madhusudan aptly reconstructed his predecessor’s language of expressions for Urvashee – a language largely permeated with urbane polish and courtly sophistication.

The eleventh epistle is from Jana to Neeladhwa. Like many other epistles of the Veeraanganaa, it derives its story from the Mahabharata, but with a difference. The Mahabharata, from which the last epistle draws its story and heroine, was written in Bengali by Kashiram Das. Jana’s complain to and against her husband, king Neeladhwa, was about his unquestioning acceptance and entertainment of Arjuna, the slayer of their son Pravir, as royal guest, instead of avenging Pravir’s death. Her decision for suicide suggests her determination of ending a life bereft of her young lusty son. Her normal conjugal life with Neeladhwa was no longer possible after his capricious turning around and welcoming a slayer and an enemy of the state. Madhusudan’s artistic success in the epistle consists in making Jana heroic both in self expression and in firmness of decision.

Thus, we trace Madhusudan’s responsiveness to the Sanskrit legacy of Purana-s and epics in his Veeraanganaa that basically sprang out of the Ovidian structure of the epistolary but went on to become something more than a series of disjoint epistles, something of the epical.
Crystallisation of new poetic legacy in nineteenth-century Bengal both in the heroic as well as lyric mode:

With the glorious contribution of Madhusudan to Bengali literature in the second half of the nineteenth century (1859 onwards), there occurred a crystallisation of new poetic legacy in nineteenth-century Bengal both in the heroic as well as lyric mode. What Rangalal had endeavoured to introduce – the heroic age or the age of heroic poetry – into Bengali literature with his Padmini Upakhyan (1858), blossomed to the nearest possible perfection in Madhusudan’s hand. The latter’s Tilottamaasambhay. Meghanaadvadh and Veeraanganaa laid the maps for the upcoming Bengali epic poets like Hemchandra and Nabeenchandra.

Madhusudan’s success as an epic poet influenced even Rangalal who, like the former, composed all his longer works after the first one – the Padmini Upakhyan – around sarga-s: the Karmadevee (1862), the Shurasundaree (1868), and the Kancheekaverree (1879). However, individuality gradually turned inert in these works, and with that, even the influence of contemporary social consciousness became obscure. Consequently, his works lacked the soulful light of the epic genre as established by Madhusudan.

Hemchandra succeeded Madhusudan with his epic works such as Veerabahu Kavya (1864) and Vritrasanghar (1875 & 1877). But he was fundamentally different from his predecessor. A condensed international atmosphere breathed through Madhusudan’s epic works. The said atmosphere, however, was not that conducive to the satisfaction of nationalistic thoughts of the then middle-class Bengali intelligentsia. (The intelligentsia fell short of a proper understanding of the symbolic import of nationalism inherent in the heroic battle of the demon race in the Meghanaadvadh.) Hemchandra stood the test quite well in that regard. Coercing of Yavana-s in the Veerabahu Kavya and conquest over demons in the Vritrasanghar created ripples of excited approbation among the
Bengali reading intelligentsia.

Hemchandra in his turn adopted elements from the secondary epics of Sanskrit legacy. Mention may be made of Ashwaghosha’s *Buddhacharita*, Kalidasa’s *Raghuangsham*, Bharavi’s *Keeratarjuneeya*, Magha’s *Shishupalavadh*, Shrecharsha’s *Naishadheeyacharita*, etc.

Nabeenchandra, Hemchandra’s successor, wrote his epic trilogy the *Raivatak* (1887), the *Kurukshetra* (1893), and the *Prabhas* (1896) and recaptured in his own justified way the tradition of the great Sanskrit epics. But, he too, like Hemchandra, was hardly conscious of Madhusudan’s newfound legacy in its subtlety and indissoluble amalgamation of content and form of the epical grandeur. Nevertheless, both Hemchandra and Nabeenchandra kept to Madhusudan’s way of weaving the epic poem around sarga-s.

Besides them, several others of mediocre poetic talent tried their hands in the epic genre (1861 – 1900). What their efforts produced, however, were many minor or pseudo epics in Bengali and not more than that.

On the other hand, crystallisation of new nineteenth-century poetic legacy in the lyric mode as well was effected by Madhusudan’s contribution to the genre. His “*Atmavilaap*” (1861), “*Bangabhoornir Prati*” (1862), *Vrajaanganaa Kavya* (1861), *Chaturdashpadee Kavitavalee* (1866), etc. gave Bengali literature a wide variety of the lyrical medium. Moreover, though the *Veeraanganaa* does possess a unique epistolary epical strain, yet it nourishes both the lyrical and the epical aspects of Madhusudan’s *amiirakshar*.

Before Madhusudan, Bengali poetry had not known lyricism in its essence. Eeshwar Gupta (1812 – 1859), who may be considered as representative poet and Bengali literary figure of first half of the nineteenth century, wrote a kind of poetry, perhaps, far removed from *lyricism*. In the words of Arunkumar
Mukhopadhyay, satiric flourish, obscenity and extravagant play of words were his chief recourses [translation mine] (Unabingsha Shatabdir Bangla Geetikabya 31). His verse was devoid of music of the lyric: most of his poems were written as a momentary and instantaneous reaction to recent incidents: those were not emotionally surcharged modern inward-bent lyrics [translation mine] (31).

Eeshwar Gupta was not a poet of the modern age of Bengali literature. He rather stood in a transitional phase of Bengali literary history (1830 – 1860) – a transition finally made meaningful by Madhusudan’s meteoric but sure rise in the literary horizon. The rise precipitated into duel modes of epic as well as lyric poetry.

Besides his purely lyrical compositions, Madhusudan’s lyrical effusion is abundant even in the Meghnaadvadh. One instance would suffice here. His description of Seeta lovelorn and weeping in Ashoke Kanan and of nature stirring with her grief (Canto IV. 46 – 64) gives the reader a touch of the emotional in an all pervasive expression, and creates a melody that soughs of a lyrical fount. The poet himself was quite conscious of the inherent lyricism of his poetry. In a letter to Raj Narain Bose wherein he talked of his post-Meghanaada plans for creative writing, he mentioned of a ‘wide field of Romantic and Lyric poetry’ before him and even confessed, ‘I have a tendency in the Lyrical way’ (Ghosh. Ajit Kr. et al (Eds.). Letter no. 81. 328). His Vrjaanganaa together with “Bangabhoomir Prati” and “Atmavilaap” amply prove his feelings right.

In the opinion of Kshetra Gupta, Madhusudan’s “Atmavilaap” is romantic in its outpouring of the poet’s sorrowful lamentation for pain and loss at a time when he was poised on a comparative pecuniary stability and had already won acclaim as the best of the contemporary poets; “Bangabhoomir Prati” brought to Bengali poetry, a unique blend of patriotism and self-revelation [translation mine] (273).
Arunkumar Mukhopadhyay peruses the then literary history of Bengal thus: Rangalal’s *Padmini Upakhyan Kavya* (1858) inaugurated the romantic strain in Bengali poetry; in Madhusudan’s “Atmavilaap” (1861) and “Bangabhoomir Prati” (1862) along with his *Chaturdaspadee Kavitavalee* (1866) was first audible the introverted poetic tone; – romantic pathos, too, was initiated in them (47). He further peruses, BiharilaPs *Sangeetshatak* (1862) evoked for a hint of his self-idealised tone which the poet could then grasp clearly in the *Bangasundaree* (1870); thus his self modality evolved [translation mine] (47).

After Madhusudan, therefore, we find Biharilal Chakraborty (1835 – 1890), whose *Saradamangal Kavya* (1879) marked full establishment of the lyric tone in Bengali poetry. Biharilal’s lyrics are suffused with an inherent melody of soulful song that touches and warms the reader’s heart. In Rabindranath, next, came the best flowering of Bengali lyric.