Nineteenth-century Bengal became a witness to a tremendous upheaval that billowed across and shook the life of the then Bengali society. The upheaval was the result of English education which had introduced the Bengali society with European culture and civilisation. The impact was far-reaching. It resulted into an awakening of Bengal, and especially of the then Hindu Bengalis. It purged them of their dross and lethargy, of their mental stagnation, and gave them encouragement and strength of mind, inspired them to be inquisitive of their own “self” and existence.

The English came to India initially with lust for relentless plundering. But having established their colony, they had to take some minimum developmental measures for its retaining and smooth governance. This worked wonders for the native Bengalis. The feudal system of production and economy that had been running in a village-oriented Bengal started slowly crumbling down and along with it the social stagnation. There came an inside-out change in Indian caste-based educational system and cultural ways. With gradual improvement in transport and communication, people started enjoying their release from marooned seclusion. Their heart and mind pulsated with the indomitable spirit of life and a keen sense of reason. Confidence sprouted in them and gradually blossomed into conviction about themselves. They became conscious of their latent energy and the prospects associated therewith, and felt a strong urge to express themselves.
Rediscovery of tradition in general and epic legacy in particular

In any society, it is generally the elite who respond to the call of the forward march of time, and, gleaning from their own dreams and imagination, create a whole new world accordant of their own laid mould. Nineteenth-century Bengali society aspired to express themselves and create their own new world through the medium of literature, especially epic poetry. Nineteenth-century Bengali epic poetry, too, is a unique reflection of the evolving consciousness of the age. In fact, it is the most successful and time-nurtured artistic articulation expressing intense longing of the Bengali society for self-discovery, keen vitality pulsating with life, acute anxiety, unbounded thirst for beauty, deep anguish calling for re-crowning of national glory, and soaring effort towards trans-historical unification of diverse time-zones.

An epic poet, in order to express in language the deep and unfathomable aspirations of the age, explores the depths of national consciousness for the submerged glory. The poet looks into the past for inspiration and legacy. Thus, in order to create the novel, the poet rediscovers and revives past tradition. The poets of nineteenth-century Bengal, too, endeavoured to the said purpose. With different degrees of success, Michael Madhusudan Datta, Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay and Nabeenchandra Sen tried to recapture in their epic poetry the ancient Indian glory of tradition in general and epic legacy in particular. They, however, were not self-inspired in the task. Before them, Western scholars such as William Jones, H. T. Colebrook, H. H. Wilson, James Princep, Maximall had thrown fresh light on Indian classical literature, linguistic practices, grammar, and then on Purana-s, Itihasa-s, Upanishad-s, etc. This had created a hitherto unfelt consciousness about ancient India.
Conception of new ethos in the beginning of modernity in Bengal

With the onset of modernity in Bengal there occurred conception of new ethos in the nineteenth-century Bengali mind. In Calcutta a feeling of “nationalism” (in the European sense) took birth among the enlightened section of the Hindu society who had an opportunity for cultivating novel ideas and outlooks in new-founded educational institutions. Despite dwelling in continual social constraints and harassments, they aspired for a feeling and vision of sovereignty through their creation of artistic excellence and grandeur of epic poetry.

However, the effect of new ethos was not altogether positive or stabilising. The initial response of the English-educated youths of Bengal – whom we know as Young Bengal – towards Indian legacy of customs, socio-cultural and religio-ethical codes, was one of utter loathing and rejection. ‘Our conscience is satisfied, we are right … A people can never be reformed without noise and confusion; the absurd prejudices of the Hindus can never be eradicated without violent persecution against the reformers.’ (The Enquirer). They looked upon themselves as crusaders against superstitions and prejudices. Ironically they themselves were prejudiced against whatever was old and Indian.

Fortunately enough, the second generation of the enlightened elite ‘sobered themselves down’ in their ‘literary habits’. They, who were all English-educated natives, were not ‘denationalised by imbibing English thoughts and communing with English feelings’. In their sober habits, they were ‘now the zealous advocates of Bengali’ (“The Young Bengal Vindicated” by Krishnadas Paul. 1856. 13 – 14).

In 1864, Michael Madhusudan Datta expressed himself in the same vein and gave a clarion call of homecoming:
Crosscurrents of Indian and Western tradition

The radiance, the new turns every other moment, and the constant ebb and flow of the rolling waves of occidentalisation in Bengal, – in the beginning of the nineteenth century – demand our attention. Western education and culture caused the severing of ties of the enlightened Bengalis from the society at large. But, amusingly enough, they were led on to and prodded along the way back home by assertions and studies by the Western scholars who were interested in and inquisitive of India and its age-old culture¹.

Indeed, extreme occidentalisation and search for ancient Indian tradition and glory were the two opposing currents which were dominant during the first half of the nineteenth century. The subtle seeds sowed then unobserved, sprouted into buds during the second half of the century. The opposing tendencies in synthesis produced a modern Bengali literature that featured an eagerness for revival through “prakritisation”. In the light of new consciousness, from the legacy flowing in the subtle and deep inspiration of the ever-transforming national “self”, in the engrossing conflict of acceptance and rejection, there arose the symbolic
structure of novel creativity – a structure at once conforming to its own age and committed to creative impulse and zeal.

But, in a country under foreign rule, intellectual minds frequently put themselves under leash. Such intellectuals never think of a freedom of spirit which is complete and unhindered. It would be interesting to quote historian Susobhan Sarkar and note what he thinks of Bengal awakening in the nineteenth century: ‘The correct concept in our case is not synthesis but the interpenetration of opposites. This has indeed happened again and again. What we encounter in so many minds is compromise, coexistence of logically opposed ideas, eclectic combination of diverse ideals, the clash of opposites.’ (72).

Therefore, nineteenth-century Bengali intellectuals, and epic poets, in spite of their dedication to reconstruction of tradition in the conscious and subconscious inspiration of the feeling of national glory could not possibly rise above their historical predicament. Michael Madhusudan Datta alone, perhaps, stood out as a colossus exception.