

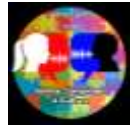
Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar: the Misunderstood Other

Barnali Pain

Last year in the month of May, the statue of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the icon of 19th century Bengal Renaissance was vandalized in his eponymous college during an insane clash between the two major political parties in Kolkata. Some fifty years back, the Naxalites too made Vidyasagar's statue their target to uproot ideologically the Bengali *bhadralok's* concept of Renaissance. The question is –Why Vidyasagar repeatedly?

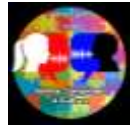
In 1967, oppressed and exploited peasants inspired by the Communist Movement raised their bow and arrows against the feudal landowners in Naxalbari. The movement spread in urban areas and Kolkata emerged as a major site of Naxalite activities. The Naxalite students stood against the prevailing education system as bourgeois and questioned the glory of the so-called Indian Nationalist Movement in general and the Bengal Renaissance, in particular. Despite all-pervasive violence, particularly in Kolkata and surrounding areas, Kolkata being prominent as the epicenter of insurrectional politics in the early postcolonial years, the Naxalite movement definitely generated an earnest hope for a structural change in the society.

Brutal State oppression and murderous attacks upon the activists by other major political parties – both right and left – resulted in the silent growth of many sympathizers who nurtured a soft corner for the revolutionary spirit of the Naxal youths. When they started throwing bombs at the schools and the colleges which they thought, spread the doctrines of the imperialists and their class enemies, these



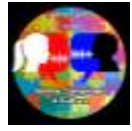
sympathizers were quite taken aback. Their activities remind us of 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus' (1970) in which Louis Althusser, the French Marxist philosopher observes that the school, religious institutions, media outlets, social and sports clubs and the family are Ideological State Apparatuses. All these, according to Althusser, represent the hidden agendas of the ruling class. The Naxalite activists opposed the Police and the Armed Forces as Repressive State Apparatus and the schools etc as Ideological State Apparatus.

As Dipesh Chakrabarty in his foreword to Asok Sen's *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and His Elusive Milestones* (1977) writes, "the citizens of Kolkata were stunned and shocked to encounter a student movement in 1970 that took the outrageous form of beheading public statues of many of their cultural heroes including the person at the centre of this book, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. A marble statue of Vidyasagar, carved in 1899 and installed in a park called College Square situated just behind a historic institution, The Sanskrit College, was found decapitated in June 1970 much to the consternation of residents of the city" (Sen xii). Dipesh Chakrabarty further adds that, "Vidyasagar's crime as explained in Naxalite publications – and I say this from my personal memory of those days – was that he had allegedly allowed the British to use the premises of the College to billet soldiers brought in to put down the heroic rebels of 1857 !" (ibid). This note of exclamation at the end of this statement made by Professor Chakrabarty needs to be substantiated. In accordance with the contemporary government documents of that time, the Sanskrit College building was appropriated for the accommodation of troops under the orders received from the military department. In this context, Vidyasagar even wanted to resign and he opposed the occupation of the



College campus by the said troops as it hampered the academic interest of the students. Hence, to hold Vidyasagar responsible for this governmental decision is not justified. Further, Vidyasagar was conspicuous by his absence in a gathering arranged by the eulogizing elites of Kolkata in honour of the victorious colonizers after the failed Uprising of 1857.

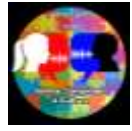
When, in recent times, two political parties representing State-power smashed the statue of Vidyasagar and gave way to an ugly space for lying, concoction, mutual allegation and propaganda, fifty years back, the Naxalites never acted for materializing cheap vote-seeking strategies and vested self-interests. This is because their movement was against the State machinery. They may have committed blunders but they were not hiding their motives. Whatever they did in 1970, they did not do so to please any all-powerful vote seeker in the name of student-politics. They were dreamers who could not find the effective path to live up to their dream. This looking back to what happened last year and fifty years back links Vidyasagar, whose title loomed larger than his original name to two different time periods. Let me repeat the question with a slight change which has been stated in the very beginning -- why attack Vidyasagar, of all persons now? Are we socially and culturally fit today, on the eve of the completion of Vidyasagar's bi-centenary to accommodate this man of consequence with our day to day reality? When two vote seeking political parties blame each other for smashing his statue to smithereens, they present it as a sinful act and therefore as a ploy for mutual allegation. While both camouflage innocence, there are apparent reasons to strengthen their own political image at the expense of the other. But there can be an equally strong reason for making Vidyasagar a target. Justice Markandey



Katju has explained this act of vandalism as a revenge against the great man, for it was held by mistake that Vidyasagar, by opposing *Vedanta* and *Sankhya* philosophies and advocating Western Science and Philosophy stood against the Indian culture itself. Katju has clearly pointed out that Vidyasagar represented the cause of *Nyaya* and never wanted Indian culture to be replaced by Indian culture. (Markandey Katju, The Week, May 16, 2019)

Since everyone is familiar with Vidyasagar and even love to believe all the legendary stories associated with his name, I do not dare to venture upon the impossible task of excluding from his biography the apparently tell-tale stories of his genius. I believe that there must have been rooted reasons which have gone into the making of various memorable anecdotes related to the life of this polymath who was widely acclaimed for his strong will and truthfulness. Here, by using the word ‘making’, I do not imply concocting; I simply suggest that such stories are there and they are substantiated by the amazing journey of this one individual.

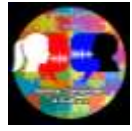
While walking all the way to Kolkata from his native village Birsingha in the Midnapore district with his father, Iswar Chandra as a boy of eight learnt the English numerals from the figures on the milestones. He hailed from a poor rural family of Brahmin *pandits*. He was enrolled into the Calcutta Government Sanskrit College in June 1829. From then began a splendid academic journey which was full of the struggle of a poor boy against the challenges of abject poverty on the one hand and the blessings of exceptional merit on the other. He studied at the Sanskrit College for twelve long years. Upon completion of his learning, Iswar Chandra was conferred the title ‘*Vidyasagar*’ by his College in the year 1840. A coarse *dhoti*, *chadar* and a pair of



slippers constituted his complete attire. He distinguished himself through his vast and in-depth learning of Sanskrit, Bengali, English and law. Vidyasagar won essay competitions one after the other. Not that he wanted to win in such competitions which he always did naturally, but his mind was always focused upon acquiring deeper knowledge. There was no place for cramming in his mode of learning.

In 1841, Vidyasagar on the basis of his extraordinary merit was selected as the head *pandit* of Fort William College under the Secretary Mr. G.T Marshall. Established in 1800, this College was meant to teach the white civilians Oriental culture, law, traditions and administration. Failure in vernacular examination sealed the fate of the examinees and they were bound to return to England without getting a second chance. That was why, when Mr. Marshall requested Vidyasagar to make the questions a bit simpler, he staunchly refused and wanted to quit. He did not surrender to the request of his English superior. The *sahib* accepted his stand and knowing his incomparable worth, did not try to remove him from his position. Remarkably, the native's worth was more important to the *sahib* than the fate of the English civilians.

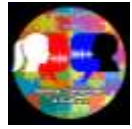
Foreign rule had made it imperative for vast number of people to be educated in English, to engage in occupations radically different from their class and caste identities, and to migrate to cities in the hope of securing English education and employment. At this point, Vidyasagar broke out of his orthodox Brahminical background and stood upright realizing the utility of English learning as an open window to modern scientific knowledge without which, he understood, his country could not progress. He advocated study of Western philosophies as propagated by David Hume and J.S Mill.



In a historical letter dated September 7, 1853, Vidyasagar wrote to the Secretary, Council of Education, Government of India – “It appears to me to be a hopeless task to conciliate the learned folk of India to the acceptance of the advanced sciences of Europe. They are a body of men whose long-standing prejudices are unshakable. Any idea when brought to their notice, either in the form of a new truth or in the form of expansion of known truths, they will not accept. It is but natural that they will obstinately adhere to their old prejudices. They believe that their *Shastras* have all emanated from omniscient *rishis* and therefore, they cannot but be infallible.”

In January 1851, Vidyasagar was appointed the Principal of Sanskrit College. He created history by recommending the admission of the so-called non-Brahmin students to the Sanskrit College. He dissented the assertion of the orthodox *pandits* who always were prejudiced against non-Brahmins. At the same time, he had to regret his inability to materialize his opposition to the rigorous caste system upheld by the regimented Brahminism of the *pandits* of Sanskrit College. It is not possible, we all know, to transform a system singlehandedly. That was also true for a genius like Vidyasagar.

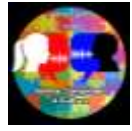
The word ‘nepotism’ was outside the dictionary of Vidyasagar’s life. A man of strict principles, he and Reverend Robinson together had to examine the specimen of each text book before approving them on behalf of the School Book Society and Vernacular Literature Society. This kind of practice is without doubt essential for the approval of text books at all levels and this strictly academic area is never meant to be trespassed upon by politically motivated persons or agendas. In contrast, politicians nowadays often locate qualified people who will endorse and promote the vested interests of



those in power without questions. That is why it is not uncommon to encounter pieces in the present text books which challenge the academic pedigree.

In 1853, a free school was founded by Vidyasagar in Birsingha – his native village in the Midnapore district. He also founded a night school for the children of the laboring/ cultivating class. Gradually he opened 35 schools in South Bengal and bore their expenditure, all by himself. In 1855, he was appointed the Special Inspector of Schools for the districts of Hooghly, Burdwan, Midnapore and Nadia. Apart from doing his duty with utmost innovative care, he never failed to carry enough money with him to extend financial help to any needy person on his way to the day's destination. This natural philanthropic spirit has always been rare in human history and for Vidyasagar, it was his self-chosen daily routine.

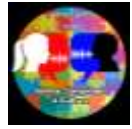
W.G Young, the first Director of Public Instruction, on one occasion insisted Vidyasagar to change his reports as the Inspector of Schools in the favor of the Government. Vidyasagar did not. He had repeated collisions with Mr. Young on grounds of right and wrong. While opening a number of modern schools for the girls in the district, Vidyasagar initially did not seek sanction form the Government. When the Government of India decided not to aid these schools any further, Vidyasagar ran them all by himself, but his continuous conflict with Mr. Young started telling upon his health, and in November 1858, he retired from the paid public service at the age of thirty-eight. He decided to do away with a public service that fetched him Rupees five hundred per month, which was quite a large amount for those times. Vidyasagar was a man ahead of his time and for him nothing was more valuable than his self-respect.



Such a scholar of the highest order, with his foresight and knowledge of the ground reality wrote *Barnaparichay* in two parts in 1855 to enable the children learn the vowels and consonants of the Bengali alphabet. It was, however, a fundamental recasting of Chamber's *First and Second Books of Reading*. The English and Christian God was replaced by Vidyasagar with a secular equivalent – the Bengali parents. *Barnaparichay*, even now, is the household name for any family which wants to teach the beginner Bengali alphabets. It set a benchmark for a popular and a morally sound educational text.

In a text book like *Bodhodaya* (Dawn of Understanding), Vidyasagar proved the necessity of child-centric education. He acknowledged that the original sourcebook of *Bodhodaya* had been the *Rudiments of Knowledge* by William and Robert Chambers. *Bodhodaya* translates Chamber's *Rudiments* and naturalizes the principles of Science as applied to the physical, material and social world. It teaches the child to get hardened against every crisis. Vidyasagar was exclusive as a Sanskrit scholar with a vast knowledge of Bengali and English language. The primer writing project can be relevantly contextualized in the Anglicist -Vernacularist- Sanskritist triad, each animating and enriching the other.

After his retirement from public service, Vidyasagar started the Sanskrit Press Depository in connection with the Sanskrit Press which he had already established. The Depository was honestly and intelligently used for selling books which were printed in the Sanskrit Press. Though he was making profit, but the money needed for his charity was much more than the profit he made from the Sanskrit Press Depository. At great

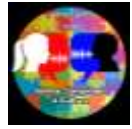


personal sacrifice, he whole heartedly assisted Michael Madhusudan Dutta to repay his huge loans repeatedly, but could never change the latter's habits.

The new Bengali middle-class was drawn to English education. Elementary education in Bengal could not progress in the given situation. Bengal became the province where educational contrasts were most marked and notable. Vidyasagar's initiative as an educationist suffered obstacles from this cultural crisis. When expertise in agriculture, trade and business was importantly required to suit the ground reality, the new English education had its different aim to impart knowledge from Western Science and Philosophy.

It is a matter of endless wonder that a scholar and an academic administrator like Vidyasagar not only wrote against child-marriage and polygamy but stood strong to fight for the rights of the widows of the society he knew. In 1850, he published 'Evils of Child Marriage' in *Sarva-Shubhakari Patrika* and in 1870, he published his first tract in opposition to high-caste polygamy. In between, in 1855, the books I & II of Hindu Widow Marriage were published. He addressed the issue of widow marriage wholeheartedly. He insisted upon the word 'marriage' and not 'remarriage'. Whenever his contribution to the lives of the widows in discussed, people repeatedly refer to the term 'remarriage'. This reflects the basic difference between Vidyasagar's gaze and the social gaze. People staunchly criticized him when he got his first short article on Widow marriage published in *Tattvabodhini Patrika* in January 1855.

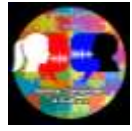
Vidyasagar made his fight for widow marriage substantiated by various Hindu texts and scriptures. As Brian A. Hatcher writes, "his historically informed reading of Hindu



practice allows him to skewer the kind of hypocrisy that placed blind allegiance to social norms of conduct” (Hatcher 46). Because Vidyasagar tirelessly referred to and cited *Manusmriti*, *Vishnumriti*, *Parasharasamhita*, Yagnavalkya, Vashishtha and Baudhayana, many allege his fight as a proponent of widow marriage as Brahminical. Here, it is to be noted that the intellectual community in colonial India functioned within the parameters of bourgeois liberal ideology. Vidyasagar did not dare to venture upon a possible tradition outside the scriptures.

This is an instance of misunderstanding the spirit of Vidyasagar’s fight for widow marriage, for he only wanted to get the widows emancipated from the cruel miseries of widowhood. He believed that all these religious citations could only win him a legalized platform to authenticate his demand for widow marriage. In fact, he used these ancient texts as his proper armaments against the rooted custom of conservative Hindu society. As K.N Panikker in the chapter entitled ‘Formation of Cultural Consciousness’ in his book *Colonialism, Culture and Resistance* writes, “Social practices deriving their strength from religion, it was realized, could be abolished mainly through an intervention which had the backing of religion. In other words, religion could be used to fight what religion itself had brought into existence. (Panikker 35).

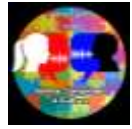
The strategy of Vidyasagar succeeded on July 26, 1856 when Hindu widow marriage was legalized as Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act, 1856. This act proved the exceptional mettle of Vidyasagar. Michael Madhusudan found in Vidyasagar the genius and wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman, and the heart of Bengali mother. Though the act was passed and widow marriage got legalized, the popular sentiment continued to strongly oppose such marriages. Whenever Vidyasagar came out of his



house, many people started taunting him and made faces. Continuous scheming and conspiracies went on to throw this 'wicked *pandit*' in deep trouble. While some widow marriages were sponsored by the Brahma Samaj, Vidyasagar himself had to bear the expenses for many other marriages. The donation required was huge and the supply was far less than the demand, but Vidyasagar singlehandedly strove his best and repaid all his debts within his lifetime.

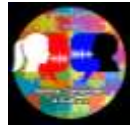
The combination of his commitment, rational mind and benevolent spirit fell short for the united strength of social custom. People were prejudiced against the women from time immemorial. Even a child widow had to suffer from an immense range of abstinence. The widows all over the society were treated only as sex objects and fated sufferers. Vidyasagar remained the most misunderstood man who could not make his contemporaries realize the importance of women's emancipation through such marriage. That is why, Asok Sen describes him as a "bona fide individual in a stage of mala fide modernization" (Sen 187).

Recent confrontations at the Sabarimala temple have shown us the power of Brahminical Hinduism. When the political leaders and ministers will justify their oratory on the completion of the bicentenary of Vidyasagar, should we or can we expect a single drop of veracity in those loud utterances? We have either misunderstood him, or have failed to proceed in accordance with his truthfulness. He has gradually been sidelined overtly when *Ramdhanu* (Rainbow) was replaced by *Rongdhanu* (Colour-bow). Bengali language has been de-Sanskritized in a culture that showcases mediocrity, rote learning and contradicts Vidyasagar's spirited contribution to the development of Bengali prose.



Living in a post-truth world and seeing myself being eaten up each day from within by a severely aggressive society in which the people in power seem to dictate one and all spheres of expertise, sometimes I wonder what would happen if Vidyasagar, the secular humanist were born as our contemporary now. Instead of being acclaimed as a social reformer and educationist, he should have rotten by now with all probability, as a stupid whistleblower. In these times, social reforms, if any, are channelized through political agenda only. Vidyasagar was born in 1820 and grew to be a social misfit in the positive sense of the term. If he were born in the postcolonial era, we would have got no chance perhaps to know him across the board. Lies are ruling us now. To illustrate how, let me site one example --- We celebrate the 15th day of August with pomp and grandeur, but never ever mention that the Transfer of Power happened at the expense of the Partition of India in 1947. The largest ever human migration was recorded when our country was divided into India and Pakistan. Today, the two nations regularly get involved in bitter clashes – over a billion people still live in the shadow of Partition. When the politicians now demand the Citizenship Amendment Bill and NRC in a constitutionally ‘secular’, multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, we can understand the strategy of destroying harmony on communal ground.

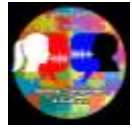
Adolf Hitler in his Nazi propaganda coined the term ‘big lie’. His idiom of life was never to admit a fault or wrong; never to accept blame; concentrate one enemy at a time; blame that enemy for everything that goes wrong; take advantage of every opportunity to raise a political whirlwind. Ironically, in the land of Vidyasagar, that is India in general and Bengal, in particular, we hear echoes of all such Hitlerite words in the functioning of the lawmakers. To add, there are alternative internet news



platforms. They specialize in spreading fake news. We, the stakeholders, live in an atmosphere of constant fear. We have been acculturated into believing that for our own safety, we must remain mere passive onlookers of high degree of partisan animosity, political polarization and ideological bias.

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries selected 'Post Truth' as the Word of the Year. The word signifies that objective facts are much less important than personal beliefs. It implies that power is preferred over truth. Globally, we are living in a time of liars and bull-shitters side by side. While liars are there to recognize the difference between truth and falsehood, the bull-shitters remain steadfast in their position even in the face of facts refuting their comments. Talking at length on post-truth culture in the context of the bicentenary celebrations of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar is meant to intensify the precarious state of mind of the people who still value honesty and love of independence in a world that worships fakeness if that is proved to be materially beneficial with immediate effect.

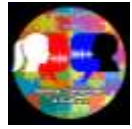
As it stands now, still the widows hardly get chance to marry and even in 2020, women are usually seen as targets of rape, domestic violence and social atrocities. In British India, Vidyasagar could not achieve much success as a social reformer but that his thoughts were held high are mainly clear from the two titles which were unquestionably conferred upon him – *Vidyasagar* and *Dayar Sagar* (the *Ocean of Learning* and the *Ocean of Kindness*). He worked relentlessly to better the lives of women. He definitely had his flaws. He could never organize the people of his society to sow the seeds of awareness among the girls, men and women.



The then available advice literature in vernacular never dared to question the old patriarchal dictates. All such conduct books were by nature strictly conformist. Vidyasagar, understanding the pulse of his contemporary time, was perhaps banking too much upon legalization. He failed to understand that in spite of laws, Sati happens; in spite of law, the widows do not want to get married out of social fears /shame and men hardly come forward to marry a widow. There were no healthy outlets for the girls and marriage was the only means of survival. In accordance with the deep rooted popular belief, a true wife was taken for granted to commit her youth, her honour, her wishes to the feet of her revered husband.

Hence, the woman had to suffer enormously in the absence of that godlike husband (*swami debata*). The widow was socially regarded as a useless object, a social burden. While Vidyasagar, with his open-mindedness advanced far ahead of others thinking marriage of widows as a second positive chance to lead a renewed life, the typically patriarchal society held that a devoted wife, like Savitri was bound to spend her widowhood forever and the dead husband must be the lifelong subject of her meditation. At the same time, in those days, Vidyasagar could not conjecture that “marriage” was not to be the necessary be-all and end all of a woman’s existence. Still the classified advertisements of Matrimonial columns of different dailies and the matrimonial sites propagate conservative and regressive ideals against women’s position in society.

Vidyasagar was a law-abiding person and he devoted himself selflessly to reach his goal. Though people put more emphasis on the negative outcome than the effort itself, what Charles Heimsath said holds true till date, “ The crusade for the emancipation of



Indian women became the first tenet of the social reform movement everywhere in India". (Heimsath 14)

What would happen today, I wonder, if Vidyasagar questioned most lawfully the continuous arrests of human rights activists who are trying to campaign against the pervasive ideology in India that leads to violent attacks on the Dalits and Muslims? As a teacher, would he not critique the misuse of counter-terrorism law in independent, democratic India? Vidyasagar has always represented truth, freedom of speech and dignity. When his statue is attacked, we all feel shocked. But then?

Last year the Jharkhand government named Karmatand block of Jamtara district as Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar block. The Karmatand block was Vidyasagar's *karmabhoomi* for eighteen long years. He lived with the hard-working Santhals at Karmatand, opened schools for them and ran a homoeopathy clinic all by himself for the medical treatment of the underprivileged people of that place. Karmatand gave him a breathing space – a respite from the backbiters, ungrateful flatterers and dependants, respite from the vilified atmosphere of a biased, ghettoized urban life. The mainstream hardly could digest his attitudes and views. His utmost all round dedication toward his self-chosen causes pushed him gradually to the margin. Even now he is an icon only on paper. This leads me to read his subject position as the Misunderstood Other.

After the demise of Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore wrote about him: "One wonders how God, in the process of producing forty million Bengalis, produced a man!" Leaving behind our inertia, will we be able ever to train ourselves to imbibe the lesson of Vidyasagar's relentless journey of life? We have long learned to garland his photos and



statues. But now it is time we educate ourselves to explore our mission and try all out to translate it into at least some amount of reality.

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