

Vidyasagar: A Bridge Between the East and the West

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A word of French origin, 'renaissance', etymologically means 'rebirth' and it also indicates the great socio-cultural revival of Europe that commenced in the fourteenth century. This humanist movement encompassed new ideas for wholesome development in all aspects of life including the social, political, and educational changes that altered the human progress. In India, the modern age began with the advent of Raja Rammohan Roy in the eighteenth century. The impact of Western civilisation, the rise of political consciousness, and the change in society were highlighted. The excessive control by any religious institution was questioned and criticised. The evolution of vernaculars into great literary languages gained an unprecedented impetus. The scientific reasoning and revolution promoted by great thinkers and researchers expanded communication facilities. Thus the Renaissance in Europe affected and influenced other countries including India.

Contact with the Western world resulted in massive changes in the cultural, educational, social, political, and religious situation in India. This is generally regarded as the Indian Renaissance in the nineteenth century—a 'Renaissance' in a country under foreign domination. A synthesis between Indianisation and Westernisation brought about the Renaissance in the nineteenth-century India unlike the Renaissance in Europe where scientific revolution, individual freedom, and humanism were the dominant

characteristics. While secular humanism in the nineteenth-century Bengal was stimulated by Western contact, its most effective proponents were indigenous modernisers rather than Westernisers.

The Indian Renaissance was different in the context of the Indian race, milieu, and movement. As a result, nationalistic, reformistic, and revivalist thinking found its way into literature, which slowly turned itself into a movement spearheaded in different parts of India by renaissance leaders like Raja Rammohan Roy, the pioneer; Sri Ramakrishna; Swami Vivekananda; Mahadev Govind Ranade; Gopal Krishna Gokhale; the Young Bengal; and Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. The leaders of the Renaissance induced in people a desire for social reform, revival of India's ancient glory, heritage, and Indian consciousness.

Rammohan, regarded as the foremost pioneer of renaissance in India, tried to free religion from superstitions, bigotry, and other social evils to advance the social progress but within the framework of religion as he had accepted Vedanta as the supreme authority. Vidyasagar's rational scientific outlook marked further advancement of Indian Renaissance. 'It was more a nascence, a new birth or rejuvenescence, than renaissance, rebirth.'¹ If Rammohan was the foremost pioneer in social reforms, Vidyasagar was the supreme pioneer in the reforms of education.

Vidyasagar, a stalwart of the Indian cultural



Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

renaissance played a very important role as an educationist, litterateur, social reformer, and a good fighter who launched his campaigns for women's education, campaigns for widow marriage, campaigns against polygamy and Kulinism, campaigns against child marriage to emancipate the Hindu woman from her basic disabilities and traditionally imposed slavery. Women should be given education so that they could become conscious of their rights and fight for them as all people—women and men are equal in the eye of law. All had equal right to prosper in life. His friend and contemporary, Akshay Kumar Dutta, a thoroughgoing materialist, had done likewise, but if Akshay Dutta argued from the vantage point of the positivist ethic, Vidyasagar approached the problem as an indigenous moderniser.

The first concrete step towards founding an

educational institution exclusively for women was taken. Bethune, Law Member of the Governor-General's Council and President of the Council of Education, realised and emphasised the need for educated mothers and common belief in civilising mission of women. In the early nineteenth century, people were worried about the fact that by sending their daughters to school, they would not be available for domestic duties. Many people were also not comfortable sending their daughters out to public places. Amidst all such unfavourable circumstances, Bethune did not hesitate to invite Vidyasagar, an open-minded ardent supporter of female education to help him in this matter. Their efforts resulted in the foundation of Calcutta Female School in May 1849 with Bethune as President and Vidyasagar as Secretary. It was the first school of its kind in the whole of India.

Vidyasagar was working as the principal of the Sanskrit College. During his stay there, he was first appointed Assistant Inspector of Schools and later Special Inspector of Schools for the southern districts of Bengal. He realised that unless the women of the land were educated, it was impossible to emancipate and liberate them from the terrible burden of inequalities and injustice imposed on them by the oppressive Hindu society, blinded by false beliefs and derelict customs. He worked relentlessly and set up primary schools in the districts of Bengal including Hooghly, Burdwan, Midnapore, and Nadia. During the short period from November 1857 to May 1858, he set up as many as thirty-five such schools with an average total attendance of 1,300 girls. His above-mentioned positions gave him a big advantage here to do this job.

In order to promote education for girls, Vidyasagar made door to door calls, requesting parents to send their daughters to schools, encouraged landlords and other wealthy people to establish educational institutions. Within his

inspection zone, he founded many schools, several of which were for girls. His philanthropy was proverbial. He even advanced money from his own pocket to finance them. 'He advanced Rs. 3,439/- from his personal funds to expedite their opening.'² Between August 1855 and January 1856, he set up twenty model vernacular schools.

The University of Calcutta, founded in 1857, but open to women as late as 1878, gave them a big advantage. For example, Chandramukhi and Kadambini Bose, two Bengali girls, were the first women who passed the BA examination in 1882. In 1884, Chandramukhi again, was the first woman to pass the MA examination. Kadambini went on to study in a medical college. Vidyasagar made a personal gift to Chandramukhi, the first MA in Calcutta University, a copy of Cassell's *Illustrated Shakespeare*, signed by him and the endorsement in his own hand read as follows: 'Srimati Kumari Chandramukhi Basu, the first Bengali lady who has obtained the Master of Arts, of the Calcutta University, from her sincere well-wisher Isvara Chandra Sarma.'

Vidyasagar, the leading proponent of widow marriage in colonial India, particularly in his native Bengal, sought to transform society from within, urged his contemporaries to reject practices that caused countless women to suffer. His strategy involved firstly the creation of strong public opinion in favour of the removal of the bar to widow marriage. Secondly, he induced his parents to give their consent to his taking the initiative to launch the movement. Lastly, a rereading of Hindu scriptures alongside an emotional plea on behalf of widows resulted in the reimaging of Hindu laws and customs. A rich collection of Sanskrit texts available in the library of the Sanskrit College was of immense help, which enabled him to overcome the last hurdle—the most difficult. After a good deal of search, he came across a passage from shastras sanctioning

widow-marriage. A passage from *Parashara Samhita* prescribes remarriage of women under certain conditions that include widowhood. He erected the main structure of his thesis from a traditional text: '*Nashte mrite pravrajite klibe cha patite patau, panchasvapatsu narinam patiranyo vidhiyate*'; the authoritative treatises prescribe remarriage of a woman if her husband is missing, deceased, is determined to be impotent, has become a renunciant, or has been outcast.'³

Vidyasagar interpreted thus: 'On receiving no tidings of a husband, on his demise, on his turning an ascetic, on his being found impotent, or on his degradation—under any one of these calamities, it is canonical for women to take another husband.'⁴

During the *Kali-yuga*, the three injunctions regarding widows were provided by *Parashara*: marriage, celibacy, and immolation, of which, the custom of immolation had been abolished under law.⁵ Thus, widows have two options: marriage and celibacy. Either they should marry or adopt celibacy as they see fit. But the *Kali-yuga* is too difficult an age to permit widows to remain celibate. The injunction regarding marriage is for a woman who experiences one of the five dire situations already mentioned before. When any of such conditions occurs, remarriage is the only valid alternative for widows.

Vidyasagar published his first pamphlet in defence of widow marriage in January 1855. His comment on the passage was:

Thus it appears that Parasara prescribes three rules for a widow: marriage, observance of Brahmacharyya, and burning with the deceased husband. Among these, the custom of concremation has been abolished by order of the ruling authorities; only two ways, therefore, have now been left for the widows; they have the option of marrying or observing the Brahmacharyya. But in Kali Yuga, it has become extremely difficult for widows to pass their lives in the

observance of the Brahmacharyya; and it is for this reason that the philanthropic Parasar has, in the first instance, prescribed marriage. Be that as it may, what I wish to be clearly understood is—that as Parasar plainly prescribes marriage as one of the duties of women in the Kali Yuga under any one of the five above enumerated calamities, the marriage of widows in Kali Yuga is consonant with the Sastras.⁶

Child marriage and *Kulin* polygamy were interrelated. In the mainstream Hindu society, the *Kulin* elderly man took the full advantage of *Kulinism*—the system of restriction of inter-marriages within families of noble birth among the brahmanas. The prevailing custom of elderly *Kulin* brahmana polygamy allowed elderly men—even on their deathbeds—to marry teenage or prepubescent girls who would be left behind in their parental homes, occasionally visited by the *Kulin* in consideration of pecuniary gain, especially after their widowhood, to lead a deplorable life, replete with sufferings which included semi-starvation, hard domestic labour, and close restriction on their freedom to leave the house or be seen by strangers.

This intolerable situation forced such girls, the victims of their families' and society's ill-treatment, including rape-victims and unsupported mothers, to run away and turn to prostitution to support themselves. Thus, *Kulinism* contributed to the social malady of prostitution. In his tract on polygamy written in 1871, Vidyasagar gave a sophisticated analysis of women's subordination and highlighted its universal character. He called for legislation against unchecked polygamy, rampant, refined to the level of a gainful commerce when *Kulin* brahmanas would easily live in luxury on the spoils of their wretched in-laws. The second anti-polygamy tract came out in 1873. A number of petitions against polygamy, signed by Vidyasagar, Maharaja of Burdwan, and others were submitted. The *Hindoo Patriot* published

some anti-polygamy tracts by Shyamacharan Sarkar. The Government had contemplated legislation. The revolt of 1857 precluded such action, but polygamy among the Hindus was outmoded or abolished by law only after independence.

The time Vidyasagar lived was characterised by the gradual transition from the middle ages into modern social structures, a process of global effect started in Europe and triggered the social transformation in India at the end of eighteenth century. It is in this context that Vidyasagar can be justifiably called the bridge between tradition and modernity, between East and West.

Vidyasagar championed the cause of the oppressed, especially the upliftment of women in India and made relentless efforts to rid them of poverty, misery, and illiteracy. According to our Upanishads, it is the one universal soul, *paramatma*, that shows in millions of living beings or individual souls, *jivatma*. The One in all and all in the One—this is the knowledge of Atman. There is no duality, only God is revealed and realised. Vidyasagar's whole life is an epitome of such realisation. He was one with the poor, ailing, wretched, homeless, miserable people irrespective of caste, creed, cline, colour, and race. Hiranmay Banerjee thinks that Vidyasagar believed in the immanence of the spirit, and lived in spirit of the Upanishadic injunction of the three D's—*dama*, *dana*, and *daya*—self-control, charity, and compassion.⁷

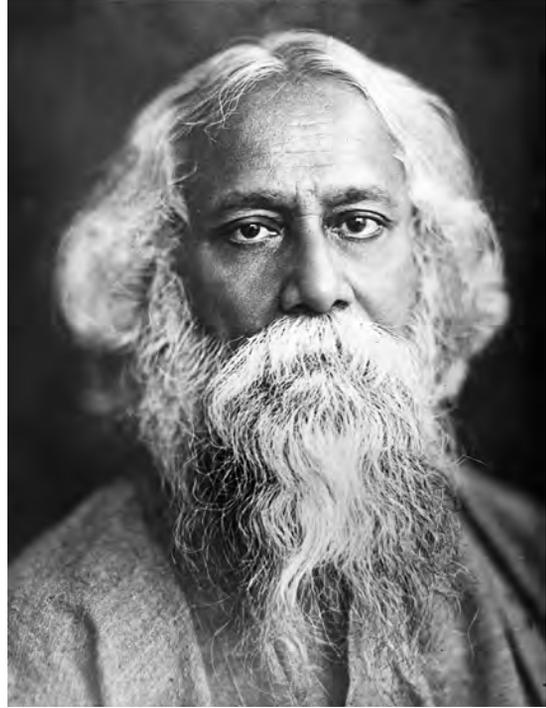
While Swamiji rose in an invocation to 'Sisters and Brothers of America,'⁸ there was a thundering, spontaneous, unstoppable applause, it was not a sudden outburst of the audience, but a transcendent cord was touched. One and all, the alien audience irrespective of caste, creed, cline, and credentials were swept off their feet by the universal force of oneness.

Vidyasagar's love for humanity—the poor, the lowly, and the wretched was of the same order.

Vidyasagar lived the tenets of the Bhagavadgita. All creatures, all human beings, mean or noble, high or low, the sinner or the saint were all equal to Vidyasagar as beloved as they are beloved to God. Here we should remember a verse from the Gita: 'The enlightened person should not create disturbance in the beliefs of the ignorant, who are attached to work. Working, while oneself remaining diligent, one should make them do all the duties.'⁹

Human beings are selfish; they do not want others to come up to the same level of their knowledge, for the fear of losing their own privilege and prestige over others. But the wise person should engage the ignorant in the right work and gradually bring them up. This powerful idea from Indian scriptures undoubtedly applied to Vidyasagar who was very deeply moved by the plight of the poor and the helpless. Inside a rock-like stubborn shell was hid a tender mother's heart that gave his nature a gracious divinity. 'He proved himself a great broad-minded educationist of the age of renaissance by admitting to the college all, irrespective of caste, and by offering the secret key to mastering grammar broke the hereditary monopoly of it by the priest-pandit class.'¹⁰

Vidyasagar's argument is based not on an appeal to shastra, but upon a reasoned examination of the created order. He combined the arguments of a humanist with the *shastric* erudition of a pandit. He made a plea to the hearts and minds of his fellow Bengalis and to the conscience of the British Government. It was appropriate and expedient to appeal to more universal notions of virtue and righteousness. Vidyasagar resorts to shastras only to gain confidence of an ignorant public who would never accept a reform based only on rationalistic approach. Apathetic to religion, he never attacked religion or religious rites. Vidyasagar's reformist writings suggest that his real foe is not *shastric* Hinduism



Rabindranath Tagore

but the aberrations of dharma or religion imposed on ignorant people by traditional authorities. To legitimise his revolutionary programme of widow marriage, he never hesitated to collect sanction from traditional shastras. His reform tracts testify respect for the shastras from where he searched out the necessary sanctions for his reform campaigns.

According to Rabindranath Tagore, Vidyasagar was a universalist and humanist, whose religion was humanism. To him, a person was a person, be the person a Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or Brahmo. He was a true secular humanist. His central teaching is that the only important shastras are those inscribed on every human heart. Here, we should remember the meeting between Sri Ramakrishna, the spiritual master who believed all religions to be true as different paths to the one ultimate truth, and Vidyasagar, the rationalist, a man of renaissance, who guided by science and reason believed in doing good to

humanity based on the truth of human life. 'He was never a nationalist, but always a rationalist.'¹¹

If we discuss the logic of Vidyasagar's worldview in terms of rationalism and humanism, we must trace its roots both to the modernist thought originating in Europe and to the central categories of Brahmanical ideology. 'Vidyasagar was Bengal's most learned Sanskrit scholar, but also her most successful social reformer; he was an ardent rationalist, but spent most of his time justifying that rationalism from Hindu texts; and he considered himself a good Hindu—dressed, ate, and acted accordingly—yet was known to be a dedicated humanist and a professed atheist' (47).

Vidyasagar appreciated the limitations of direct communications when confronted by deep-seated prejudices and pervasive habits as did Kierkegaard, his Danish contemporary, whose job was as difficult as Vidyasagar's. If anyone claims to be a better Christian than his country-people, they would turn his enthusiasm into fanaticism. But Kierkegaard says, one must proceed by an indirect method, as he explains: 'If it is an illusion that all are Christians—and if there is anything to be done about it, it must be done indirectly, not by one who vociferously proclaims himself an extraordinary Christian, but by one who, better instructed, is ready to declare that he is not a Christian at all. That is, one must approach from behind the person who is under an illusion.'¹²

Vidyasagar had a fine sense of irony as did Kierkegaard. He used his sense of irony for the purpose of communicating what it means to be an authentic individual—in his case a brahmana. Vidyasagar's greatness stems from his attempt to challenge 'orthodox' views of what it means to be a brahmana. Vidyasagar was successful in communicating his authenticity to others.

With the opening of the window of Western

culture and education, a strong wind of change started fast stirring the Indian cultural and intellectual climate. Vidyasagar, a towering personality of the Indian renaissance, wanted to connect the traditional Indian culture and modern European science in order to promote a cultural fusion containing the wealth of both the traditions. He was one of the leaders of the nineteenth-century Indian awakening, who were willing to accept Western culture and education only to the extent that they would help grow a modern life in India on an indigenous basis. Instead of being a theoretician on modernity to which Vidyasagar's approach was pragmatic and realistic, he was a practitioner of modern scientific education, he remained a man of action, and laboured hard in the concrete sphere of activity.

Vidyasagar's search for modernity was based on rationalism and dynamism. An apostle of positive dynamism, he was more interested in laying a new ground rather than destroying the old one. Vidyasagar devoted himself to the cause of modern education based on science and rationality. Rationalism made him apathetic to religion but brought him nearer to Western education and culture. Traditional education, based on indigenous ideas, was not enough to hatch a modern mind. He favoured modern Western education that had broken away from an uncritical, unthinking reverence for tradition.

Appointed as the principal of the Sanskrit College (1850–3), he realised that the vehicle of English language, alongwith Western science and philosophy, had introduced the Indian society to advanced modern thoughts, rationalism, and the concepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity. He favoured English and Bengali languages as a medium of education alongside Sanskrit. Not only Bengali—but the other Indian languages like Hindi, Tamil, and so on must be the media of modern education. He

wanted the students to know all the different Indian philosophical systems as well as European philosophy, and encouraged them to compare ancient Indian philosophy with modern European philosophy in order to have a better understanding and evaluation of ancient Indian philosophy. Students of the Sanskrit College should 'understand both the learned of India and the learned of Europe, and to interpret between the two ... by showing that European science recognises all those elementary truths that had been reached by Hindu speculation.'¹³

He offered students a wide range of books and subjects including *Logic* by Mill, *History of the English Revolution* by Guizot—a historian, who probably considered theocratic dominations as the cause of immobility in the moral life of the Asians, including the Hindus—Smith's *History of the French Revolution*, Johnston's *Atlas*, Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, Euclidean Geometry, and so on. Promotion of business in publishing and insurance made him quite unlike others of his own society as 'he had a good head for business and was perhaps the most successful publisher of his time.'¹⁴

He tried to implement a closer contact with the modern, progressive ideas of the West in his personal and professional life. He was taking his English lessons from his friend Durgacharan Banerjee. He made extensive study of Western philosophy and history, and recommended inclusion of English literature and philosophy in the courses offered at Sanskrit College. In habits, he was an Englishman but in lifestyle and dress, he was very much a traditional Hindu.

He discarded erroneous beliefs of Indian customs, preferred European science wherever appropriate, but he did not blindly accept everything European just by its virtue of being a Western concept. Vidyasagar 'never confused modernization with Westernization' (10).



Dr James Robert Ballantyne (1813–1864)

In September 1853 Vidyasagar had to defend his syllabus against criticisms made by Ballantyne, principal of Benaras Government Sanskrit College who wanted less of Mill's *Logic* that Vidyasagar wanted to teach. Mill advocated a blend of individual liberty with social responsibility and morality, emphasising that 'there is a need of a great increase of disinterested exertion to promote the good of others.'¹⁵ Vidyasagar himself was impersonal and social in all his work and Mill's views were remarkably close to him. On the other hand, Dr James Robert Ballantyne, a British orientalist, who superintended the reorganisation of the government Sanskrit college at Benares, wanted the inclusion of Bishop Berkeley's *Inquiry* and the introduction of a commentary written by Ballantyne, which emphasised the alleged similarities between the classic text of European philosophical idealism and Vedanta and Sankhya, the two main pillars of Hindu philosophy, which Vidyasagar openly denounced.

There was a need to bridge the growing gap between the traditional pundits and the Westernised educated intelligentsia, not through some kind of eclectic compromise, which roughly had been Ballantyne's advice, but by a determined effort to transform and get beyond both poles, which Vidyasagar did, broadening the social basis of the intelligentsia as a whole.

Around 1855–6, excellent relations with many high British officials in Bengal, from Lieutenant-Governor Halliday downwards, helped Vidyasagar to develop links with a number of prominent zamindars including Joykrishna Mukhopadhyay of Uttarpara, who made an effort to establish both English and vernacular schools in the areas under his control. 'He transformed the ritualistic corpus of Sanskrit learning into an updated and rational scheme of Sanskrit education. He re-introduced English, which the Bentinck administration had dropped in 1835, and introduced Bengali, the living language of the people.'¹⁶

Vidyasagar, a major figure by the mid-1850s among the literati, both traditional and new, formed an alliance with Brahma Samaj like Akshay Kumar Dutta, active in Brahma-led *Tattwabodhini Sabha* and *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, was a pioneer artist of the Bengali language and brought deft creative expression into Bengali prose under whose able superintendence, the Bengali language became the elegant vehicle of scientific and other information. A great teacher of Bengali language, beginning from first lesson in alphabet to advanced literature, Vidyasagar introduced a new method for acquiring knowledge of the language.

Vidyasagar was an inspiration to many in other states where the social atmosphere was similar to that of Bengal. Jyotirao Phule (1827–90), pioneer in the field of education for women in Maharashtra, took active interest in the remarriage of Hindu widows. Vishnu Parasuram

Pandit (1827–76), translated the book on the remarriage of Hindu widows. M G Ranade, a great advocate of the widow remarriage in the Hindu Society, set up the 'Widow Remarriage Association' in 1861.

Swami Akhandananda mentioned the name of Jhandu Bhatji, a great admirer of Vidyasagar, who used to hear the biography of Vidyasagar at Shankarji Sheth's house regularly. 'Whenever he heard an instance of Vidyasagar's munificence, he would burst into tears.'¹⁷ Ramanna Soni Modasa, the translator of Vidyasagar's books, and Kalarthi Mukul, the biographer of Vidyasagar, both from Gujarat, were Vidyasagar's devotees. Raja Ramanna (1925–2004), the noted Indian physicist, resident of Bangalore, wrote in a letter dated 11 January 1990 that Mr B Venkatachar, one of his close relatives, learnt Bengali from Vidyasagar by exchanging postcards.

In his autobiography, Veeresalingam from Andhra Pradesh, mentioned the name of Vidyasagar, the pioneer of movement for redressal of miseries of women in society. In the meeting of the Indian Social Reform, Ranade acclaimed Veeresalingam as Vidyasagar of the South India, who, with his two friends, formed the 'Widow Remarriage Association' in 1880.¹⁸

M V Venkatarao of Tamilnadu was another biographer of Vidyasagar. His work was published from Madras by Palaniyappa Brothers. Phakiramohan Senapati of Orissa, described in his autobiographical book, how Vidyasagar, a great inspiration, rejuvenated a dejected person to start writing in his own language.

Bharatendu Harishchandra, the famous Hindi poet, who was a friend and admirer of Vidyasagar, wrote a Hindi poem on Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar was awarded the title of the 'Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire' (CIE) in 1880 and nominated an honorary fellow by the Punjab University in 1886.

The name and fame of Vidyasagar knew no barriers of any country and travelled abroad. Michael Madhusudan Dutta was elated to find Vidyasagar, honoured in England and France. It is known to all that when Dutta was financially ruined in Versailles, France, Vidyasagar was literally his 'friend in need' who sent the required money to rid him of that wretched condition. In a letter, Dutta wrote: 'I have seen one or two of your works in a shop in Paris.'¹⁹ In another letter, Dutta also mentioned the name of the doctor, Goldstucker, a profound Sanskrit scholar who knew Vidyasagar by name and Dutta also mentioned the remarriage of widows.

Vidyasagar was made an honorary member of the Royal Asiatic Society, London in 1864. His books were translated into English and German. For example, *Sitar Bonobas*, translated into English by H Jane Harding, was published in London under the title, *The Exile of Sita*, which 'showed how Bengali had become a classic prose language, with all the flexibility, dignity, and grace requisite for the purpose of interpreting to the mass of the people the old life-history of the nation, and the new phase of thought introduced from the West.'²⁰ There was a brief review of about seventeen of his books in a magazine, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft*, published from Germany in 1865.

The German Oriental Society nominated Vidyasagar as its member in recognition of his contributions and presentation of his entire range of works—sixteen publications in twenty-two volumes, large and small, most of them written in Bengali—to the library of their Society. Vidyasagar's exemplary publications are: 1. *Barna Parichay*, acquaintance with alphabet, of 1855, a Bengali ABC book composed totally on the European model. 2. *Upakramanika*, an introduction to Sanskrit grammar, which Brockhaus, the reviewer, compared with the grammar

books of European languages. 3. *Shakuntala*—this novel-like famous drama has probably been inspired by Lamb's *Tales of Shakespeare*. 4. *Sitar Bonobas*. 5. *Bodhoday*, rudiments of knowledge, published in 1851. 6. *Kathamala* of 1856, a Bengali translation of sixty-eight



Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824–1873)

fables of Aesop. 7. *Jiban Charit* of 1849, translated into Bengali from Chambers Educational Course, contains eight biographies of famous European scholars including Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, Sir Isaac Newton, Sir William Jones, and so on from different spheres of knowledge. 8. *Charitabali* of 1856 contains nineteen short biographies of European scholars.

Jiban Charit and *Charitabali* use material from William and Robert Chambers' *Exemplary and Instructive Biography*, published from Edinburgh in 1846, to present brief life-histories of leading Western scientists. The concentration on scientists indicates Vidyasagar's rationalist preferences.²¹

'There is not a man of my age in northern India,' said Swamiji to Sister Nivedita, 'on whom his shadow has not fallen.'²² Swamiji was referring to the tremendous impact of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's personality on his contemporaries.²³ How was it possible for a man like Vidyasagar to exert such an influence on the growing generation? This question naturally and frequently crops up in our minds, as the world today has become very small and our life

is closely interlinked with global affairs. Global understanding including intercultural relations are now preconditions that enable humans to solve global problems by global co-operation.

Vidyasagar had such a vision of the next half-a-century. He was a bridge between oriental ethics or values and the Western work culture. With his forward-looking mind and far-seeing spirit, he watched the march of science in the modern world and realised that the old traditional scholarship was not going to be enough and that modern learning was the sole vehicle for spreading the light of the West in India. He combined the energy of the West with the values of the East. Such combination prompted him to make society free from the bondage of superstition.

He faced all problems from a practical standpoint, trying to take a position of scientific thinking while not interfering with the religious practices of a community. He wanted Indians to absorb the wholesome in the Western culture but never wanted them to be mindless imitators of the West. He admired the best in the Western culture without denationalising Indians, so that a rich and prosperous human society could come up in due course.

The Statesman wrote just after his death: ‘The venerable Pundit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar so well known as the leader of the Widow Marriage Movement in Bengal, is dead, and by his death the cause of Indian social reform has lost one of its most ardent advocates. ... There have been few of his countrymen who have more earnestly striven to make their example accord with their precepts.’²⁴

Notes and References

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4. Subal Chandra Mitra, *Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar: A Story of His Life and Work* (Calcutta: Sarat Chandra Mitra, 1902), 263.
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