

# Iswarchandra Vidyasagar on Education

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## Abstract :

*Iswarchandra Vidyasagar was one of the leading lights of the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he was truly secular in his life & works. He involved himself in a number of social and educational reform activities responding to the necessities of the time. Vidyasagar was the crusader for the rights of the women. He successfully led the movement for the rights of the widows to remarry. He also fought against the practices of polygamy and child marriage prevalent during the time. In matters of education, he was the first to introduce modern concepts of knowledge in the courses of the Sanskrit College. He also introduced various measures for giving the system of education in the Sanskrit College a modern look. Vidyasagar felt the necessity of spreading education in vernacular language and, therefore, took upon himself the responsibility of writing Bengali primers. In those primers, he tried to inculcate liberal values among the minds of the young learners. He also penned a number of books in Sanskrit and Bengali for the students of the higher classes. Vidyasagar took active interests in the spread of female education too. On his own initiative, he established forty girls' schools in the four districts of Bengal. In the later part of his life, he took the responsibility of the Metropolitan College (presently, Vidyasagar College) and turned this college, managed fully by the Indians only, as the largest college of Bengal. In this article, an attempt has been made to delineate some of the activities of Vidyasagar in the realm of education for which we are still remaining grateful to him.*

**Keywords:** Bengal Renaissance, Social Reforms, Educational Reforms, Secularism, Agnosticism, Liberalism, Conservatism, Revivalism, Fort William College, Hindu College, Sanskrit College, Metropolitan Institution, Widow Remarriage, Polygamy, Child Marriage.

## 1. Vidyasagar- The Renaissance Personality:

The bicentennial birth anniversary of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891; henceforth [Vidyasagar](#))<sup>1</sup> has just been concluded. We are so much grateful to this 'unique and towering personality of the Bengal renaissance' that even after two hundred years of his birth we can't forget his contributions in attempting to radically reform our age-old systems in the midst of meekest faith in changeability. He devoted whole-heartedly to the cause of widow remarriage. He also tried hard to stop polygamy, *Kulinism* (the practice of innumerable marriages of young girls by an upper caste Hindu Brahmin irrespective of his age) and child marriage. However, in his social reform endeavours he succeeded partially.

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<sup>1</sup>There have been a number of works on the life of Vidyasagar. To name a few authors: Mitra, Subal Chandra (1902); Roy, Ananta Kumar (1921); Tripathi, Amares (1974); Haldar, Gopal (1972); Sen, Asoke (1977); Mitra, Indra (1992); Omar, Badaruddin (1988); Hatcher, Brian (1996).

The widow-remarriage Act was promulgated in 1856 because of his unrelenting efforts. But he was unable to bring any substantive relief from the menace of polygamy and child marriage. His efforts, on the other, became largely successful relating to the sphere of education, particularly women's education. Vidyasagar almost singlehandedly tried to introduce a perfectly coherent system of education laying stress on the then higher Western thoughts and ideas. He tried to expand the reach of general education, established schools & colleges and took initiative in the spread of female education. He also took upon himself the responsibility of writing text books to address the problem of the paucity of such books. The primary and college level text books written by Vidyasagar remained very popular years after years among the students and teachers. The primers written by Vidyasagar played a vital role in forming the foundation of education of the time. He tried to disseminate the nobler thoughts of European renaissance through these textbooks. However, he was criticized vehemently for writing text books on the basis of 'materialist' outlook. Christian Missionary John Murdoch wrote in 1872 that Vidyasagar in his *Bodhodaya* (1851)<sup>2</sup> and *Barnaparichaya* Part I & II (1855)<sup>3</sup> tried to propagate 'rank materialism', 'atheistic morality' as well as 'low miserable morality' in the minds of the young learners. (Mitra, 1992:718-721)<sup>4</sup>. Murdoch recommended: "It is earnestly hoped that soon such books will be excluded from Mission Schools."

## 2. Agnosticism in the *Bodhodaya*:

However, it's our great fortune that the British policy makers rejected the report and the circulation of these two books continued generation after generation. For example, 106 editions of *Bodhodaya* were published up to 1890 since its first edition and from 1851 to 1857, fourteen thousand copies were printed. Similarly 152 editions of *Barnaparichaya* were published up to 1890 (De, 1976:85-86)<sup>5</sup>. Vidyasagar wrote *Bodhodaya* on the basis of *the Rudiments of Knowledge, or, Third book of Reading, for use in schools, and in private instruction* (1840) written by Chambers brothers. However, Vidyasagar avoided a wholesale translation of what had been written by the Chambers brothers. He accepted the essence of *Rudiments* but his *Bodhodaya* is not a verbatim representation of the original book. For example, *Rudiments* contained, at least, four page discussion on *Of God and the works of Creation*. But, in its initial editions, *Bodhodaya* contained just a small paragraph on God. However, since its *ninth edition* published in 1857, the book totally excluded discussion on God. The discussion in this edition started with *Matter*

<sup>2</sup>[bn.wikisource.org/wiki/পাতা:বোধোদয়.djvu/৬](http://bn.wikisource.org/wiki/পাতা:বোধোদয়.djvu/৬)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.boierthikana.com/static/pdf/Barnaparichay.pdf>  
<http://dSPACE.wbpublibnet.gov.in:8080/jspui/handle/10689/15626>

<sup>4</sup> Mitra, Indra (1992). *Karunasagar Vidyasagar* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Ananda

<sup>5</sup> De, Amalendu (1976). 'Publication of Text Books in Bengali: A Movement for Child Education in Nineteenth Century Bengal' in Bhattacharya, R (Ed). *David Hare Bicentenary Volume 1975-76*. Calcutta: R N Dey. Stable URL: [http://dSPACE.wbpublibnet.gov.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10689/13475/5/Chapter%2012-17\\_72-120p.pdf](http://dSPACE.wbpublibnet.gov.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10689/13475/5/Chapter%2012-17_72-120p.pdf) accessed on November 15, 2020

instead of any reference to *God* (Bhattacharyya,2020:15-23<sup>6</sup>; and Sangbartak,2020:656-661)<sup>7</sup>. This proves Vidyasagar's growing inclination towards agnosticism, may be because of his growing friendship with a great rationalist and agnostic Akhhaykumar Datta. However, the idea of God came back in the hundredth or later edition of *Bodhodaya* for reasons not yet known.

### 3. The Historical Context:

As a true humanist and renaissance personality, Vidyasagar strived for the establishment of the rights of the women and their emancipation from the feudal bondages and patriarchy. With his agnostic philosophical outlook, secular humanist value, his strength of character, personality and unyielding sense of individualism, Vidyasagar can be placed alongside the giants of the European renaissance movement. He can easily be compared with the personalities like Voltaire or Diderot- — the champions of secular humanist values of European renaissance (Mukhopadhyay,2011:34)<sup>8</sup>. His lack of interest in practices of religion, his denunciation of the *Vedanta* and *Sankhya* as "false systems of philosophy", his strong condemnation of the greed for money among the Sanskrit Pundits of the orthodox brand and his satires directed at their shallow learning and dishonesty of intellect, his rational-human appreciation of the needs of change in Hindu society, and last but not least in importance, his stubbornness in matching practice in full conformity with his committed profession indicate with certainty that Iswarchandra was a radical thinker in the humanist tradition (Bhattacharyya,K.S,1986:211)<sup>9</sup>.

The East India Company came to India with their mercantile interest during the time of Mughal rule in India. Gradually, the Company became the ruler of the country. When the Company came to India with a mercantile character, it had homogeneity of interest, in a limited sphere, with the native mercantile capitalism. This homogeneity of interests emanated from the desire of the both to abolish feudalism existing in India at the time. They felt that without the destruction of feudalism in India, their market interest would not be fulfilled. However, their real purposes were not the same. There were conflicts too. The Company rule clearly demonstrated far more aggressive character than its mercantile counterpart. In this connection Karl Marx observed-

*We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinction of caste and slavery, ... England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindusthan, was actuated by vilest interest, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them...whatever may be the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about the revolution (Marx,1978:41)<sup>10</sup>.*

<sup>6</sup>Bhattacharyya, Ramkrishna (2020). 'VidyasagarerChurantaBastubadar Na-DharmiyaBhab' in Ghosh, Sourav Ranjan, Ed. *Sangbartak- Vidyasagar Spl Issue* (in Bengali). Kolkata

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*;

<sup>8</sup>Mukhopadhyay, Manik (2011). *MarxbadiDrishteVidyasagarer Jiban O Karmasadhana* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Pathikrit

<sup>9</sup>Bhattacharyya, K S (1986). *The Bengal Renaissance- Social and Political Thoughts*. New Delhi: Classical Publishing.

<sup>10</sup>Marx, Karl (1978). *On Colonialism*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

#### 4. The Liberalist Principles of Bengal Renaissance:

The homogeneity of interests in limited scale between these two mercantile capitalist groups constitutes the objective basis for the evolution of bold humanism in Rammohun (1774-1833), Derozio (1808-1831) & the members of the *Young Bengal* group, Vidyasagar, Akhhay kumar Datta (1820- 1886), Rajendralal Mitra (1822- 1891), Dwarakanath Vidyabhusan (1819- 1886), Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-1873) etc., just to name a few. In this phase of development of Indian nationalism, generally known as *Liberalist* phase, the leaders of the Bengal renaissance were not in any way disturbed because various parts of the Indian Territory had been passing into the hands of the British East India Company from the hands of the native rulers. Rather, they considered it as a blessing from 'heaven' because of the new enlightenment and educative knowledge came to the notice of the Indians through the British rule. The British rulers also introduced, though in a truncated way, the liberalized principles of social and political management. The Bengal renaissance leaders desired progress under the inspiration of certain principles of life and thought that marked spectacular development in Europe.

*So long as this desire for modern changes kept the leaders of thought unmindful of the national consideration or at least so long as they considered national prestige not to be a principal issue in the Anglo-Indian collaboration and cooperation in the task of rebuilding Indian thought and society, they may be understood as belonging specifically to the liberalist phase of the nineteenth century reawakening (Bhattacharyya, K.S, 1986:24)<sup>11</sup>.*

In this liberalist phase, the renaissance in Bengal stressed the Universalist conception of man and society, the rationalist disposition to examine all aspects of life and thought, the repudiation of inscriptive authorities, a search for new authorities in cultural, social and intellectual spheres. It also infused an inducement in the individual to assert the claims of his newly awakened conscience and, finally, a humanist appreciation of man himself. In Vidyasagar, these thoughts of renaissance reached its culmination.

#### 5. Vidyasagar- the 'Living Legend':

Outwardly, in attire and appearance, an orthodox *Brahmanpundit*, Vidyasagar was a true secular humanist at heart. His life and activities, his character, marked by his indomitable sense of dignity and self-respect, his wide sympathy and kind-heartedness, his rational outlook- all bear testimony to the uncompromising secular humanist thought he represented. Crowning them all, however, was the integrity of his character, a perfect blend of words and deeds, thoughts and actions. Together these constitute his uniqueness and it would be no exaggeration to say Vidyasagar was the leading light of Indian renaissance (Mukhopadhyay, 1993:149)<sup>12</sup>. He used to

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<sup>11</sup>Bhattacharyya, K S (1986). *The Bengal Renaissance- Social and Political Thoughts*. New Delhi: Classical Publishing.

<sup>12</sup>Mukhopadhyay, Manik (1993). 'Vidyasagar: Leading Light of Indian Renaissance' in Mukhopadhyay, Manik (Editor in Chief). *The Golden Book of Vidyasagar-A Commemorative Volume*. Calcutta: All Bengal Vidyasagar Death Centenary Committee

live a very simple but dignified life. Michael Madhusudan Datta, another stalwart of Bengal renaissance and a contemporary of Vidyasagar, finds in him: *The genius and wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman and the heart of a Bengali mother*. For him, Vidyasagar was a *'splendid fellow; the first man among us...The greatest Bengali that ever lived'*. Rabindranath wrote in *Vidyasagar-Charita* that *'he led a solitary life in this land.....the crowning glory of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar's character was his invincible manhood and unperishable humanity...'* Mahatma Gandhi while lamenting the death of Vidyasagar wrote in 1905 while he was in South Africa: *'There have been few in this world like him.....Iswarchandra...stands in the hearts of the great and the small, the rich and the poor of Bengal. It will now be clear to us how Bengal provides an example for the other parts of India to follow'* (Gandhi,1961:65-68)<sup>13</sup>. Vidyasagar was so much appreciated by his fellow countrymen even during his life time that he almost became a *living legend*. Possibly, except the religious preachers, he was the first person whose photographs were seen hanging in common households of the then Bengal.

## 6. Vidyasagar- the Creator of Modern Bengali Alphabets:

Vidyasagar's contribution in the field of education deserves further consideration with reference to the primers and text books he had written for vernacular education. He dedicated all his genius and initiative to translation works and writing text books. Beginning from *BetalPanchabimsati* (1847), a text book for the students of Fort William College, Vidyasagar either *transliterated* or written a number of seminal books, some of which are, *Bangalaritihas* (1847), *Jibancharit* (1849), *Bodhodaya* (1851), *Rijupath- Part I and II* (1851-52), *Sakuntala* (1854), *Barnaparichaya* Part I & II (1855), *Kathamala* (1856), *Charitabali*(1856), *Sitar Banabas* (1860), *Sabdamanjari* (1864), *Bhrantibilas*(1869) and the likes. Vidyasagar did not believe in art for art's sake; as a practical man he understood very well the urgent needs of the students at the time. So even being a Principal of a college, he did not hesitate to write text books for the primary students. He was working as the Principal of Sanskrit College when *Barnaparichaya* was first drafted and published. Even then he could afford time to write primers in native language for the students of his country. He often used to prepare the draft of *Barnaparichaya* while travelling in palanquins to save time from his busy schedule. Generally, theoreticians or academicians avoid writing text books for the lower-level students as *'writing such primers may denigrate their stature'*. At the same time, they complain that good text books are rare in the country. But Vidyasagar is an exception to this. So, he took upon himself the responsibility of writing primers or text books for the students leaving behind so-called *'ego'*. There is no limit to the extent that Vidyasagar could extend himself in fulfilling his mission. There have been very few examples of

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<sup>13</sup>Gandhi, M K (1961). *The Collected Works, Vol. V (1905-06)*. Publications Dept, GOI

social reformers in the world who could do so much both in theory and practice (Guha,C.2020:35)<sup>14</sup>.

Knowing fully the phonetic systems of Sanskrit and Bengali, Vidyasagar realized that the Bengali alphabet should be released from the total domination of Sanskrit phonology in order to ensure for the Bengali language its proper jurisdiction. He invented a suitable method of learning the alphabet with full justice to Bengali speech habit (Karan,1993:208)<sup>15</sup>. He made a complete and scientific alphabetical system in Bengali in keeping with Bengali phonetics. He also improved upon the scripts of the Bengali alphabets for smoother writing in this language. Thus, Vidyasagar disallowed the Sanskrit alphabet to remain intact in Bengali and reduced the number of vowels from 16 to 12, by discarding two unused ones and sending two to the group of consonants in virtue of its true pronunciation. Similarly he introduced new consonants in conformity with the patterns of Bengali pronunciation, different from the Sanskrit and other Indian languages and brought the number of consonants to 40. His intelligence and foresight urged him to introduce a new method for learning the Bengali alphabet. So, following the principles of children's language teaching, the first part of the *Barnaparichaya* taught only the simple words without conjunctions, which were given in the second part.

### 7. Revivalist's effort to belittle Vidyasagar:

Vidyasagar's efforts in writing textbooks elicited large scale reverence. Vidyasagar was not a man of literature for he did not desire to be so. 'Definitely he did have the ability to create literary works, but he diverted it to writing textbooks' (Bandyopadhyay,1993:169)<sup>16</sup>. For this, some of his contemporaries tried to belittle his contributions branding him a textbook writer. Bankimchandra neglected the contributions of Vidyasagar in creating elegant Bengali language and polished prose style. In an issue of 1871 of the journal *Calcutta Review*, Bankimchandra did not hesitate to write: 'If successful translations from other languages constitute any claim to a high place as an author, we admit them in Vidyasagar's case; and if the compilation of very good primers for infants can in any way strengthen his claim, his claim is strong. But we deny that either translating or primer-making evinces a high order of a genius; and beyond translating and primer-making Vidyasagar has done nothing'. Not only content with this, Bankim continued: 'The scenes are well chosen, and the expulsion of the supernatural element gives them a more realistic tone, but Vidyasagar is not free from the tautology and bombast which always disfigure

<sup>14</sup>Guha, Chinmoy (2020). 'Vidyasagar: Anubad O BhasarNirman' in Sengupta, Suman, Ed. *Desh- Vidyasagar Spl Issue*. Kolkata: Ananda

<sup>15</sup>Karan, Sudhir Kumar (1993). 'Vidyasagar: A Teacher and a Reformer of the Bengali Language and Literature' in Mukhopadhyay, Manik (Editor in Chief). *The Golden Book of Vidyasagar-A Commemorative Volume*. Calcutta: All Bengal Vidyasagar Death Centenary Committee.

<sup>16</sup>Bandyopadhyay, Asit (1993). 'Vidyasagar and Bengali Prose' in Mukhopadhyay, Manik (Editor in Chief). *The Golden Book of Vidyasagar-A Commemorative Volume*. Calcutta: All Bengal Vidyasagar Death Centenary Committee.

the writers of the school to which he belongs'. However, it appears, Bankim failed to realise that writing books of worth for children was no less great than creating literary works just for art's sake. 'Vidyasagar had put reins to his literary aspirations only to employ all his love and affection for child education- this is a rare feat, magnanimous, as it appears, history of education in this soil' (Bandyopadhyay,1993:170)<sup>17</sup>.

Vivekananda also treaded the path of Bankim in this respect. In 1897, Vivekananda told his friend Priyanath that there was not a single *suitable* text books for the *young boys*. Priyanath responded by saying that Vidyasagar has written number of books for them. To this Vivekananda remarked: Simple utterances like 'God is shapeless consciousness', 'Gopal is a very good boy' - would do no work. This would do bad rather than good (Mitra,1992:530)<sup>18</sup>. 'No one uttered such derogatory comments on Vidyasagar's writings', so commented Indra Mitra *alias* Arabinda Guha. Vivekananda further attacked the educational philosophy Vidyasagar and Akhhaykumar tried to initiate: 'People are taught to be totally devoid of respect and faith. The *Gita* would be declared as *interpolated*, the *Vedas* would be termed as the songs of cultivators'. As a Hindu revivalist Vivekananda could in no way support Vidyasagar's secular philosophy. Hence, these kind of allegations have been leveled against the liberalists (Chaudhury,2020:316)<sup>19</sup>. Such was the influence of Hindu revivalism that even Tilak, the great Indian leader, also opposed the establishment and dissemination of female education. *Bangabasi* was the most popular newspaper of the time. That paper in its issue dated May 29, 1886 criticized *Barnaparichaya*. *Jibancharithas* also been criticized because it contained only the life sketches of European legends. AmritalalBasu who even though came in contact with Vidyasagar propagated against women education through drama directed by him. In this way, through every channel, the followers of 'neo-Hinduism' started attacking the educational ideas of Vidyasagar (Moitra,1973:136-142)<sup>20</sup>.

## 8. Vidyasagarin Teaching:

Nowhere was Vidyasagar's secular humanist thoughts more clearly revealed than in his views on education. Vidyasagar had taken over the elements of a scientific culture that were latent and half-formed in Rammohun. It was he who gave them clear shape and added muscles. In this battle against metaphysics, he too dug his battle posts in the same Baconian soil. The philosophy envisioned by him was scientific on two counts: first, to see life and nature as they were, without taking recourse to any metaphysical cobweb; second, to develop the theoretical capability of

<sup>17</sup>Ibid; (Ref-16)

<sup>18</sup>Mitra, Indra (1992). *Karunasagar Vidyasagar* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Ananda

<sup>19</sup>Chaudhury, Kanishka (2020). 'SamparkerSandhane: Vidyasagar, Ramkrishna O Vivekananda' in Ghosh, Sourav Ranjan, Ed. *Sangbartak- Vidyasagar Spl Issue* (in Bengali). Kolkata.

<sup>20</sup>Moitra, Sureshchandra (1973). 'BanglarNabyaHindubad O Iswarchandra Vidyasagar' in Chakraborty, Haripada, Ed. *Vidyasagar Saranika* (in Bengali). North Bengal University.

dealing with facts, without caring for their compatibility with religious texts (Lahiri;2020;-12)<sup>21</sup>. Vidyasagar's journey in the teaching profession started in December 1841 when, at the age of only 21, he was appointed as Head Pandit of the Bengali Department of the Fort William College at a salary of fifty rupees per month. However, his thirst for learning did not end only with Sanskrit or Bengali. He started learning English and Hindi privately for gaining mastery over these languages and for assimilating the higher and nobler ideas of renaissance of Europe. This was a painstaking process but Vidyasagar never dithered from this. A man who would be writing a new history for his countrymen in no way could bypass this process of learning. Commenting on the great significance of Vidyasagar's joining the Fort William College in 1841, Romesh Ch. Dutt, the great economic historian who had the opportunity to come in direct contact with Vidyasagar since 1871, writes-

*The appointment had great influence on his life, as it led him to take up the study of the English language, of which he had learnt very little before. It was an eventful period of Vidyasagar's life; and he came in daily contact with some of the best Englishmen in Calcutta, and some of the greatest Indian workers of the day (Dutt,-1902:-2013- Reprint:xxii)<sup>22</sup>.*

## 9. Vidyasagar's late entry into the English Learning:

It's our misfortune that Vidyasagar had to wait for, at least, up to the age of 21 in getting opportunity to learn English language. He was admitted to Sanskrit College (1824) on June 1, 1829. He studied there for long 12 years 5 months and successfully obtained the title of 'Vidyasagar' in 1841. But, the English classes in the Sanskrit College were stopped in 1835. It was started again in 1853 when Vidyasagar was the principal of that college. (Samanta,-2012:-58,-408)<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, Vidyasagar effectively missed the opportunity to learn English while he was a student in the college. Further, though both the Hindu College (1817) and the Sanskrit College were situated in the same campus beside the *Gol Dighi* (presently, College Square), '...strict precautions were taken to prevent the scholars, the once born and the twice born, from coming too closely into contact with each other' (*Presidency College Register*, 1927; quoted in Sengupta,-2016:-38)<sup>24</sup>. There were three *separate* buildings- the middle two-storied building was for Sanskrit College and the other two single-storied buildings in two extremes meant for Hindu College students. Iron railings were built around the buildings to stop inter-mixing of students of two colleges. The students of Hindu College, in contrast, had the opportunity to learn English from the junior classes. The number of students admitted to the college increased manifold for

<sup>21</sup>Lahiri Ashish (n.d.). 'Akshay Kumar Datta, Vidyasagar and Bengali Rationalism' [https://www.academia.edu/2373531/akshay\\_kumar\\_datta\\_vidyasagar\\_and\\_bengali\\_rationalism](https://www.academia.edu/2373531/akshay_kumar_datta_vidyasagar_and_bengali_rationalism) accessed on November 15, 2020

<sup>22</sup>Dutt, Romesh Chunder (1902, Reprint 2013). 'Introduction' in Mitra, Subal Chandra. *Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar*. Kolkata: Parul.

<sup>23</sup>Samanta, Amiya Kumar (2012). *Vidyasagar* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Progress.

<sup>24</sup>Sengupta, Prasad (2016). *Hindu College*. Kolkata: Signet Press



this opportunity of learning English. (Sripantha,-1976:-61-62)<sup>25</sup>. The term 'Hindu' was associated with the college; but a glance at the syllabus of the college shows that since its inception the college used to impart 'fully secular education'. Derozio joined the service in the Hindu College in 1826 as a *fourth* teacher at the age of 17. He worked there only up to April 1831 before he was forced to tender his resignation and he breathed his last in December 26, 1831. Within this short span of time, Derozio could transmit the lofty rational ideas of renaissance in the minds of some of his students who later came to be known as *Derozians* or *Young Bengal* members. His premature death bereft his followers from his teachings but even then Derozio made an indelible print in the young minds. He inspired them with modern way of looking at life. Where from Derozio got this education at such a tender age? This was possible because he was admitted at the age of six in 1815 in the *Dharmatala Academy* founded by Scottish David Drummond. Derozio, in his own confessions, stated that he acquired 'teachings in humanity' and 'could free himself from sectarian values' while studying in this Academy. (Cited by Mukhopadhyay.A,-2013:-9)<sup>26</sup>. So, what Derozio could learn from the age of six and could ventilate even when he was fifteen through his writings, Vidyasagar had to wait for more than long 21 years of his life. Derozio in his ballad *Fakir of Janghira* (1828) upheld the idea of widow remarriage which became legalised because of Vidyasagar as late as 1856. It's just a *conjecture* that if Vidyasagar would have the opportunity to come in contact with the teachings as imparted in the Hindu College where his father refused to admit him, the story of Bengal renaissance could have been written differently. However, we are not saying that Vidyasagar had no contact with liberal thoughts during his college days. He became the member of the *Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge* when it was founded in 1838 under the leadership of the Derozians. His name could be found in the *Society's* members' list as Iswarchandra Bandyopadhyay. But until 1841 he had very little opportunity to grasp the essence of liberal principles as upheld in European renaissance.

## 10. Vidyasagar and the Sanskrit College:

Vidyasagar was appointed the Assistant Secretary of the Sanskrit College, his *Alma matter*, on August 6, 1846. By then Vidyasagar had acquired sufficient mastery over English and assimilated finer values of European renaissance. Since then, he devoted himself to the cause of modern education based on science and rationality. Just after joining the Sanskrit College, with great enthusiasm he drew up a programme for educational reform. He submitted a report ('Notes on the Sanskrit College') in September 19, 1846 to the College Secretary Rasamay Datta with proposals for better methods of teaching. The purpose of the *Notes* was to develop through the

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<sup>25</sup>Sripantha (1976). 'College Boy' in Bhattacharya, R (Ed). *David Hare Bicentenary Volume 1975-76*. Calcutta: R N Dey. Stable URL [http://dSPACE.wbpublibnet.gov.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10689/13475/10/Chapter%202\\_10-15\\_58-105p.pdf](http://dSPACE.wbpublibnet.gov.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10689/13475/10/Chapter%202_10-15_58-105p.pdf) accessed on November 15, 2020

<sup>26</sup>Mukhopadhyay, Ashok (2013). *Derozio: Aksay Dutta* (in Bengali). Kolkata, Anis Sanskriti Parishad.

combination of high-grade Sanskrit and English knowledge such a body of men who would be able to affect a harmony between Western science and civilization and Bengali language. But Datta denied taking any steps regarding these proposals and, disgusted, Vidyasagar resigned from the Sanskrit College.

He was brought back to Sanskrit College on 5 December 1850 – this time with full power. Soon, by January 22, 1851 he became the Principal. He was now apparently in full command and all set to launch a sweeping educational reform. In December 1850 he submitted a plan for radical educational reform. Its basic elements were: the study of mathematics, *smriti*, and Logic (*nyaya*) had to be modernised along rationalistic lines; modern Western mathematics had to be introduced instead of ancient Indian mathematics and astronomy; English must be made compulsory. Finally, he hoped: ‘Should the Council be pleased to adopt these suggestions.....the college will become... A nursery of improved vernacular literature and of teachers thoroughly qualified to disseminate that literature amongst the masses of their fellow- countrymen.’ He submitted another ‘Notes on Sanscrit College’, a bit modified from that of 1850s, on April 12, 1852. Vidyasagar further stated in his letter written on September 7, 1853 to Dr Mouat on Ballantyne’s Report on the Sanskrit College: ‘That *Vedanta* and *Sankhya* are false systems of Philosophy is no more a matter of dispute.....whilst teaching these in the Sanskrit course, we should oppose them by sound Philosophy in the English course to counteract their influence (Ghosh,-1957:-5)<sup>27</sup>.

Side by side, he initiated some far-reaching changes in the system of administration in the college. From July 9, 1851 apart from the *Brahman* and *Vaidya* castes, students from *Kayastha* caste were permitted to take admission in the Sanskrit College. Vidyasagar felt that the ‘laxity of general discipline in the institution at present is notorious’ (Report, 1850). So he took steps to enforce discipline in the college. The irregularity of attendance of both the students and the teachers were prohibited; timely attendance was ensured; students were barred from leaving the classrooms whimsically; chaos and indiscipline inside the campus was stopped. Only Sunday was declared a holiday in the college since July 26, 1851; till then various auspicious days, according to Hindu religious rites and custom, had been observed as holidays. In this connection, Subal Chandra Mitra writes in 1902 –

*The Sanskrit College of those days (during 1840s- the present writer) was very different from what it is at the present time. Everything in the college was irregular. Neither the professors, nor the students, observed any regularity of time in attending and leaving the college. Most of the teachers, though not all of them, spent the first part of the day in sweet slumber, and lectured their pupils only in the latter part. ....Before Vidyasagar’s time, everybody acted according to his sweet will, but Vidyasagar prescribed a rule that*

<sup>27</sup>Ghosh, Binoy Kumar (1957). *Vidyasagar O BangaliSamaj* (in Bengali). Calcutta: Bengal Publishers.

*the permission of the Secretary must be obtained in every case. In short, Vidyasagar remodelled and regulated almost everything.....He devised a new system of conducting the examination..... He introduced Mathematics into the Belles- letter class. .... The rules and regulations instituted by him are still in force, display his keen intellect and thoughtfulness (Mitra,-2013;Reprint:101-102)<sup>28</sup>.*

### 11. Vidyasagar and Female Education:

Vidyasagar contributed all through his life for the upliftment of education in our country. *First*, he worked for introduction of education for the girls and personally established 40 girl schools from November 1857 to May 1858 in the rural areas of four districts of Bengal as the Special inspector of Schools for South Bengal. Altogether, 1370 girl students were admitted to those schools. Of them only five schools received government grants in aid. But, the initial expenses for the rest 35 female schools amounting to Rs. 3439.00 were borne by Vidyasagar personally which the government most reluctantly refunded him in December 1858. But, henceforth the government declined to take any financial responsibility for those schools (Samanta,-2012:39-41)<sup>29</sup>. Vidyasagar had to form *Nari Siksha Bhandar* (Female Education Fund) to support these schools. Some of the top bureaucrats of the government like Sir Cecil Beadon, Sir Bartle Frere, Sir William Grey and the education-loving people regularly donated to this fund. However, because of lack of government support most of these schools gradually stopped working. Vidyasagar became frustrated with the government's reluctant attitude towards expansion of education in general and education for girls in particular. 'Vidyasagar, the reformer of Sanskrit education in Calcutta, the founder of Vernacular education in the Central Districts of Bengal, the promoter of Female education, the earnest reformer and distinguished literary man.....felt himself unjustly treated; and in 1858, before he had reached his fortieth year, ..... severed his connection with the Government, and resigned his appointments, carrying a pay of Rs. 500 without a retiring pension or gratuity for all the work he had done' (Dutt,-1902:-2013 Reprint:-xxiv)<sup>30</sup>. Who else except Vidyasagar could have shown such courage and mental strength?

### 12. Vidyasagar and the Metropolitan College:

Romesh Chandra Dutt commented further, 'The field of Vidyasagar's labours and of his benevolent charities was widened after he had retired from service; and that he proved himself a greater man in retirement than in service.' A determined and undeterred Vidyasagar tried to build up native educational institutions of higher learning. He became the secretary of Calcutta Training School in 1861 which was founded in 1859 as an English school. It was renamed as the Metropolitan Institution in 1864 and Vidyasagar took the full responsibility of running this

<sup>28</sup>Mitra, Subal Chandra (2013 Reprint). *Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar*. Kolkata: Parul

<sup>29</sup>Samanta, Amiya Kumar (2012). *Vidyasagar* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Progress

<sup>30</sup>Dutt, Romesh Chunder (1902, Reprint 2013). 'Introduction' in Mitra, Subal Chandra. *Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar*. Kolkata: Parul

institution since 1866 which he continued till his death. In running the affairs of this institution too Vidyasagar had to face stiff resistance. Calcutta University Syndicate refused to give permission to start BA courses in Metropolitan Institution in its meeting held on May 23, 1864. Undeterred, the Metropolitan Institution authorities applied again & again for granting affiliation to start FA and BA courses. The *Hindoo Patriot* reported on February 26, 1872: 'This is first attempt of independent native gentlemen applying to the Syndicate for the affiliation of their institution to the University, and when it is remembered that the eminent educationist Pundit Iswar Chunder Vidyasagar is the soul of the Metropolitan Institution, we may feel sanguine of success' (Guha,-1993:82)<sup>31</sup>. The Institution finally received the permission to act as an affiliate of Calcutta University up to the standard of the First Examination in Arts (FA) with effect from January 1, 1872. At the First Arts examination (present day HS exam) of 1874, Jogendracandra Basu, a Metropolitan student, stood second in order of merit. Everyone was amazed at the brilliant success of the Institution. Sutcliffe, the Principal of the Presidency College and Registrar of the Calcutta University admitted that 'the Pundit has done wonders'. The Metropolitan Institution became a *first-grade* college in 1879. Honours Course in BA (Graduate course in Arts) started in 1885 (Mukhopadhyay,-1993:414)<sup>32</sup>. The relentless efforts of Vidyasagar along with its native teachers started delivering excellent results. The then DPI stated in his report for 1885-86: 'The Metropolitan Institution with 556 pupils is now the largest College in Bengal...' (quoted in Guha,-1993:89)<sup>33</sup>. In January 1887, the Institution and College started functioning at their own building. Vidyasagar's unique leadership could take the college to an *enviable* height. Even without receiving any financial assistance from the government, Vidyasagar made the Metropolitan College a premier center of higher education. The great success of the Metropolitan Institution inspired a number of Bengal intelligentsia to establish private colleges in Calcutta: City College by Anandamohan Basu in 1881, Ripon College by Surendranath Banerjee in 1884 and Bangabasi College in 1887 by Girishchandra Basu, to name a few (Datta Bhowmick, 2020: 212)<sup>34</sup>. Vidyasagar took keen interests also in publishing periodicals like *Tattwabodhini Patrika* (1843) and *Somprakas* (1858) with a view to mobilise public opinion in favour of social reforms. Vidyasagar was a lifelong crusader for the spread of education and critical thinking. So even in 1890, with his fragile health, he revived the school at Birsingha under the new name after his mother, *BhagabatiVidyalaya*.

### 13. Why Vidyasagar is still so Revered?

<sup>31</sup>Guha, Arabinda, (1993). 'Vidyasagar and the Metropolitan Institution' in Mukhopadhyay, Manik (Editor in Chief). *The Golden Book of Vidyasagar-A Commemorative Volume*. Calcutta: All Bengal Vidyasagar Death Centenary Committee.

<sup>32</sup>Mukhopadhyay, Manik (1993). 'Vidyasagar: Leading Light of Indian Renaissance' in Mukhopadhyay, Manik (Editor in Chief). *The Golden Book of Vidyasagar-A Commemorative Volume*. Calcutta: All Bengal Vidyasagar Death Centenary Committee.

<sup>33</sup>Guha, Arabinda, (1993). 'Vidyasagar and the Metropolitan Institution' in Mukhopadhyay, Manik (Editor in Chief). *The Golden Book of Vidyasagar-A Commemorative Volume*. Calcutta: All Bengal Vidyasagar Death Centenary Committee.

<sup>34</sup>Datta Bhowmick, Gopa (2020). 'Sabal Karmabuddhi: Vidyasagarer Metropolitan College' in Ghosh, Sourav Ranjan, Ed. (2020). *Sangbartak- Vidyasagar Spl Issue* (in Bengali). Kolkata.

Vidyasagar realized that to free his fellow countrymen from religious bigotry, it was essential to disseminate among them the noble thoughts of the West developed in the wake of renaissance. One can't change the mindset of one's countrymen by simply denouncing orthodox Hinduism as had been undertaken by some including the Derozians. The change must come from within, from one's own mindset. Here lies the importance of imparting modern education based on democratic values and rationalism. Vidyasagar was the ablest of all the contemporaries to visualize and implement the modern system of education in Bengal. For this Vidyasagar, as noted earlier, wrote and published text books, tried to introduce vernacular and mass education. All these were put together to provide firm foundation for a new, modern, democratic mass education.

Vidyasagar was the most important of all the secular humanists of the time. In a sense, Vidyasagar was the boldest representative of the renaissance ideas, perhaps, unparalleled in the history of Indian renaissance. He set up a standard, a height in the realm of thinking and philosophy, an embodiment of uncompromising secular humanism, that remains the boldest and highest ever reached in our past. He set up an example of character that speaks of an ideal people long for. His was a unique towering personality who stood above all others like the Everest. He is not to be compared to any one; he is a '*class-by itself*'- a '*sui generis*'.

#### Acknowledgement:

The author would like to thank

1. **Prof. (Dr.) Dilip Kumar Mohanta**, Professor, Department of Philosophy, Calcutta University and Former Vice Chancellors, The Sanskrit College & University and The Kalyani University
2. **Sri Ashoke Mukhopadhyay**, Secretary, Centre for Studies in Science and Society (CESTUSS), Kolkata and a non-institutional Marxist researcher on Philosophy of Science and Society for suggesting a number of improvements on the first draft.

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