

Vidyasagar and Religion

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Religion is based on faith in divinity that shapes our destiny. The concept of divinity varies from person to person giving rise to different kind of religions in the world. For a right-thinking person his work is God. That's why it is said that 'Work is Worship'. Bengal had the long tradition of social reformation and religious transformation in the [Nineteenth-Century](#)¹. Raja Rammohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Sri Ramkishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore were in the vanguard of social, religious and literary movements that ushered in Bengal which attracted the attention of the whole of India. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar became the most determined social reformer after Rammohun Roy, 'a scholar and a controversialist of eminence, an intellectual gladiator whom no adversary could overawe or overcome in argument'.

Bengal has given birth to a few people endowed with genius. Vidyasagar was one of them. His courageous attitude, secular mentality, contribution to Bengali prose literature, use of punctuation mark in Bengali literature, introduction of universal education and women education in particular, stopping of child-marriage and polygamy contributed a lot to the socio-economic and cultural development of the contemporary India and Bengal in particular. After two hundred years of his birth Vidyasagar could be regarded as a modern man.

The socio-economic and political scenario of today's world particularly of the Indian Sub-continent is greatly influenced by religion. Different social forces are using religion as their bread and butter. Different stalwarts/ legendary personalities have defined religion differently, still the political forces and upheavals are using religion for their personal gain. Keshab Chandra Sen, a social reformer who tried to mix Christian theology with Hindu religion, very rightly pointed out the universality of each religion that depicts its own culture. Rabindranath Tagore in his book 'Religion of Man' actually stressed upon the need of fundamental faith in humanity and its divine source.

[Fred W. Clothey](#)², Emeritus Professor of Religious studies, University of Pittsburgh in his book 'Religion in India' very rightly opined," As for religion, it is alive and very visible in India today.

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¹ Wikipedia. Bengali Renaissance – https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengali_Renaissance

² Clothey, Fred W. *Religion in India*

Despite predictions by social scientists that forces of modernization, globalization, secularization, and economic development would consign religion to India's trash bin, in fact the reverse has been true: not only is religion alive, it has been resurgent in many corners of the subcontinent. In fact, it may be not so much despite these kinds of currents, but because of them that religion is resurgent. To be sure, many Indians have become 'secularized' and are interested in attaining 'material' prosperity even while the number of technologically and scientifically trained people on the subcontinent has mushroomed. Yet scholars and even casual observers have noted that prosperous people are not necessarily irreligious and that scientists are often engaged in the building of temples and the rethinking of religion, especially in the Indian diaspora". Although it is unfortunate but it is true".

In the early ninetieth century when our entire country had been starving from hunger, poverty, illiteracy, malice etc. some social reformers under the leadership of Raja Ram Mohan Roy came forward to fight against those evils. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was one of those few worthy fellows who sacrificed his entire life to alleviate different kinds of evils of the society, what is generally called as Renaissance.

Iswar Chandra was one of the greatest humans that India gave birth. There are numerous writings available on Vidyasagar, the purpose of this article is to make a search for Iswar Chandra's perception of religion. He believed in *Gita's* message, 'For us there is only the trying / The rest is not our business'.

He was born in an orthodox Brahmin family. Naturally it was expected that he would involve himself in the traditional practice of worship. As a student of Sanskrit College, he had vast knowledge of Hindu Shastras, naturally he knew properly what was what. He never tried to preach anyone about God, soul etc. because he never believed in all those things. Professor [Amallesh Tripathi](#)³ wrote, "Outwardly he never made a fuss about the Brahmin's rituals and caste-rites. He regarded image worship as irrational and did not allow it at his own home".

On hearing the news of sinking of Steamer (Sir John Lawrence) in 1887 in which hundreds of passengers of different ages and different religions had died, Vidyasagar was very much grief-stricken. He commented, like anything and finally questioned the very existence of God. He opined if there is any one like almighty, how it was become possible to drown so many people of different places of different countries. When Mahendranath Gupta wanted to know about God, Vidyasagar told that there was no way to know him, rather all of us should try for the welfare of the whole world. We did not have any theory of religion. The argument and debate on this aspect was eternal and will continue so long the mankind would exist. Vidyasagar, on different

³ Tripathi, Amallesh. *Vidyasagar The Traditional Moderniser*

occasions categorically commented not to waste our time and energy debating on this issue. We can see numerous satirical comments of Vidyasagar about God.

From Philosophical point of view Shri Binoy Ghosh was of firm conviction that Vidyasagar was nothing but a Materialist. Vidyasagar basically aligned to Western intellectual opinion rather than eastern spiritual one. Amales Tripathi very rightly pointed out, 'In blending the spiritual-contemplative ideal of the East with the intellectual-active ideal of the West, Vivekananda was paying homage not only to his Guru but also to Vidyasagar'. Professor Tripathy also told "If he had any religion, it was the religion of humanity, more akin to that of Comte and Mill than that of the firmly theistic Gita."⁴ Actually, Vidyasagar did not have any interest on religion, rather he considered humanism as the religion. Whenever people face any crisis, in most of the cases, they used to take shelter of God for its remedies which was quite unlike in case of Vidyasagar.

It was argued by several people that Vidyasagar used to write 'Srihari Saranang' at the top of letters, so he could not be an Atheist. Vidyasagar himself clarified it by saying if there is any existence of God, he would not bite us. Shibnath Shastri very rightly pointed out that Vidyasagar did never give much importance to religion. According to Shambhu Chandra Vidyaratna, Vidyasagar opined "There is no way to know about religion in the present state of affairs of man and it was not necessary also". Vidyasagar always considered religion and God as his personal matters, it has no connection with his activities in the outside world. Vidyasagar was neither a theist nor an atheist, better we can use the term agnostic to glorify him. In his book 'Bodhoday'⁵, Vidyasagar wrote "God does not have life, nor it is lifeless, it is not a plant, it is only consciousness like amorphous". 'Bodhoday' created hue and cry in the contemporary India, even among the Missionaries. Professor Sankariprasad Basu⁶ very rightly pointed out that Vidyasagar always hated narrowness and communalism in the name of religion.

Here lied the basic difference between Ram Mohan and Vidyasagar. Ram Mohan wanted political and social upliftment through religious reforms, whereas Vidyasagar perceived that upliftment could only possible through social reforms.

Vidyasagar became a legendary figure during his life time. Naturally like others Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, an Indian Hindu mystic and religious leader went to meet him personally. During their discussions Vidyasagar showed little interest about religion. Still Ramakrishna invited him to visit Dakshineswar. But Vidyasagar did not feel the necessity to visit Daksineswar because of obvious reasons. With utter anger and anguish Ramakrishna told Sri- Ma, Why Vidyasagar did not speak the truth. He said that he would come to Dakshineswar but did not come.

⁴ Tripathi, Amales. *Vidyasagar The Traditional Moderniser*

⁵ Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. *Bodhoday*. <http://bengalichildrensbook.in/Bodhoday.php>

⁶ Basu, Sankariprosad. *Rasasagar Vidyasagar*.

Akshay Kumar Dutta learnt about Brahma Dharma from Debendranath Thakur and accepted Brahma Dharma in 1843 and became the Secretary of 'Tatwabodhini Patrika'⁷ established by Debendranath. Vidyasagar was also associated with 'Tatwabodhini Patrika'. Binoy Ghosh very rightly observed that both of them came in contact with 'Tatwabodhini Patrika' with the primary aim of involving into literature, science and social reforms rather than acquiring knowledge of religion and spiritualism. In spite of adopting Brahmodharma Akshay kumar was out an out a materialist and science-minded.

In 1864 Vidyasagar wrote a Bengali Dictionary named "Shabdamanjuri". Here he gave a definition of Religion. Professor Shyamaprasad Basu⁸ in his Book 'Vidyasagar Ek Adhunik Manus' clarified the above definition and wrote that Vidyasagar linked traditional religion with unworldly faith and prayer. Religion is the symbol of good and evil before Vidyasagar and he worshipped it throughout his life.

Rabindranath Tagore very rightly described Vidyasagar as, "One wonders how God, in the process of producing forty million Bengalis, produced a man".

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⁷ Wikipedia. Tattwabodhini Patrika – https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tattwabodhini_Patrika

⁸ Basu, Shyamaprasad. *Vidyasagar Ek Adhunik Manus*