

The Pioneer of Indian Renaissance
Iswarchandra Vidyasagar
An Evaluation

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Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist)

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Publisher's Note

On 26th September, 2011, on the occasion of 191st birth anniversary of great Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar a mass meeting was organized by AIDSO, AIDYO, AIMSS, KOMSOMOL and Pathikrit at Mahajati Sadan Auditorium, Kolkata. Comrade Provash Ghosh, General Secretary of our party, the SUCI (Communist) made a discussion on the noble life and unique character of Vidyasagar and the source of the greatness in his life. The discussion in a book form was first published in April, 2012 and now running its 11th edition.

The present book is the English rendering of Comrade Provash Ghosh's address in Bengali, which first came out in October 2014. This is the 5th edition of the book in English. If there is any inaccuracy or inadequacy in translation the responsibility lies with the publisher.

4 October, 2024
48, Lenin Sarani
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The Pioneer of Indian Renaissance

Iswarchandra Vidyasagar

An Evaluation

We have assembled here today to pay our respects to Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, an unforgettable character with an amazing personality in Indian history. You are aware that from the middle of the nineteenth century and Swadeshi movement till today, all have bowed their heads to this great man, and still do so, in reverence. You are also aware that he has been adorned with various attributes by many persons. Born of this reverence, the idea that has come to prevail for long in our country is that he is an ocean of kindness and compassion, a social reformer, a reformer of the education system, implementer of widow marriage and such other deeds. This is how he has been known to a large extent to the people of this country. However, do these attributes bear his true identity? Do these few attributes give a comprehensive understanding of the extraordinary qualities and characteristics an outstanding personality like him had possessed?

Memorable historical pronouncements of Michael Madhusudan, Ramendrasundar and Rabindranath in evaluating Vidyasagar

Many of you know — again some of you may not be aware — how deep a respect he was paid by other personalities in his time. Their realizations about Vidyasagar are memorable. The famous poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, in a letter, said about him —”The genius and wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman and the heart of a

Bengali mother”.^[1] Another famous statement of Madhusudan regarding Vidyasagar is: “The first modern man in this country”. But wherefrom springs the fountain of such profound wisdom, intense enterprise, modern thinking, finer emotions and higher values of Vidyasagar? How could he despite having been born in an orthodox Brahmin family of rural Bengal, become the ‘first modern man of this country’ and ‘acquire the energy of an Englishman’? Wherefrom did he derive this deep compassion for his countless countrymen. We will have to search for the answers to these questions.

Ramendra Sundar Tribedi, the eminent thinker of that era remarked about Vidyasagar – “In reality Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar is so great and we are so small – he is so upright and we are so crooked that taking his name may be deemed utmost impudence on our part...”.^[2] He further said — “There is a kind of instrument called microscope which shows magnified images of small objects; even though physics specifies the means of making large things appear small, we do not usually use any apparatus designed for that purpose. But the biography of Vidyasagar is, as it were, a device for making big things look small. Those who are hailed as very big in our country suddenly find themselves dwarfed the moment a copy of that book is held before their gaze...”.^[3] It can well be understood from what deep realization and reverence he had uttered these words. How could Vidyasagar attained such a height of greatness so much so as to outshine the greatness of other acclaimed personalities? The most significant and extremely valuable observation about him was by *viswa-kabi* (poet of the world) Rabindranath. He said: “The people in our country in a way could not but pay their respects to him; however by projecting the fame of his kindness and charity, they try to hide the noble aspect of Vidyasagar’s character by virtue of which he dauntlessly attacked the fortress of customs and traditions in our country. In other words, this is the greatest credential of Vidyasagar which is attempted to be

hidden by his countrymen by raising a screen".^[4] Rabindranath says: "Neither compassion, nor learning, but the crowning glory of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's character was invincible manhood and imperishable humanness".^[5] This observation by Rabindranath is immensely significant, highly appropriate and perfectly historical.

The source of his inspiration

However, the question remains about the source of Vidyasagar's such nobility of character, invincible manhood and imperishable humanness. Subsequently others who have spoken about him have made somewhat similar observations from different angularities. Later on a group of so-called Marxist pundits could see nothing more in Vidyasagar than a mere 'social reformer' or an 'education reformer'. Again these so-called Marxist pundits, having raised a debate if there had been any Renaissance at all in this country, thereby posed a question whether Vidyasagar could be called a character of the Renaissance and they even went to the extent of remarking that he suffered from 'class limitations and petty-bourgeois vacillations.' Before discussing these subjects, we will have to understand the source of his singular pursuit of knowledge as well as the inspiration behind the unique arduous and unflinching struggle of this noble character. The answer to this can be found in two historic statements by Vidyasagar: "How many have seen the unbearable suffering of the impoverished? How many have felt the writhing pain, the agony in their hearts."** He further said — "The true virtue and the most important task of a person is to attempt with utmost care and to the best of his ability to bring about the welfare of the country where he is born."** These two extraordinary deep realizations constitute the guiding principle in Vidyasagar's life and this was the source of his quest for truth and devotion in his life-long struggle.

Throughout history, in different ages, all great men and

pioneers of noble struggles who had appeared in different countries had carried the pain and sufferings of the oppressed of the period in their hearts; and then only they could illumine the road to the struggle for liberation of mankind in response to the necessity of a particular era. Comrade Shibdas Ghosh, the eminent Marxist thinker of this era, my teacher and the great leader of the emancipation struggle of the proletariat and worthy continuer of great men like Vidyasagar, had precisely expressed this in the following words: “Nobler is the feeling of heart that spurs on to revolutionary politics”.^[6] Such nobler feelings for the exploited and oppressed people always spur on the greatmen into this struggle. Hence we find that during the time of Vidyasagar, a section of the educated and influential were infatuated by wealth, position, status, name and fame, reveling in luxury and pleasures, whereas Vidyasagar was completely the opposite. He had to advance every inch by fighting against dire poverty. And even after attaining the peak of fame and social standing, he was never oblivious even for a single moment the woes and sufferings of the poor. Rather, to him they were his very own. That is why, deeply pained by the conduct of the elite of the society he said — “How many have seen the unbearable suffering of the impoverished; how many have felt the writhing pain of their heart!”**

Another great ideal which he not only adhered to himself throughout his life but also bequeathed to the posterity to follow is that the prime task and greatest virtue of life is not to crave for mere self-comfort and self-subservience or hanker for amassing wealth, but to strive for doing good to the people of one’s own country to the best of one’s ability. These two were his guiding principles, the source of inspiration of his accomplishments in the entire period of his struggling life.

The unique evaluation by Shibdas Ghosh

It must be remembered however that the struggle in the

right direction cannot be conducted only from a feeling of compassion for the poor or the desire of bringing about the welfare of the country unless the correct ideology is acquired in the search for truth, illumining the direction of struggle. In absence of correct outlook, ideology and the correct road, simply with noble qualities like deep feelings for the people, honesty, dedication and sacrifice the struggle will not only result in failure, but instead of bringing about the desired benefit it will cause harm.

Many important personalities in our country and outside have suffered this tragedy. However Vidyasagar was a unique exception to this. This became possible because he possessed a mind which intensely searched for truth and even though he was the son of a religious Brahmin family, well versed in the religious scriptures, he had succeeded through the medium of English language and literature in acquiring the then advanced ideas of science and knowledge of the West as a result of which he emerged as the towering pioneer in India in that era who tore the fetters of spiritualism and religious obscurantism and proclaimed the message of secular humanism in a resounding voice. So, the great Marxist thinker of this era, Comrade Shibdas Ghosh, in evaluating Vidyasagar said: "In our country, Renaissance movement is deemed to have started with Raja Rammohan Roy. He initiated the Renaissance movement in our country by religious reformation, through fusion of the bourgeois humanist concepts and moral values of the European Renaissance with the main theme of religion. As a result, the Renaissance movement of this country proceeded along the course of religious reformation. The emergence of Vidyasagar thereafter was a landmark in the Renaissance movement, because, in my opinion, it was he who, for the first time, brought about a break with its religious orientation. He, for the first time on our soil, tried utmost to develop the humanist movement, as far as it was possible in the then condition, on the firm foundation of science, history and logic

... Our countrymen regard Vidyasagar as a great man and do respect him greatly no doubt, but how many of them could really understand him?

Most of the people take him for an orthodox Brahmin from his outward appearance and traditional Brahmin dress. True, his dress and appearance made him look like a theologian and an orthodox Brahmin, but, in reality, he was a true humanist in the then social environment of our country. He wanted to bring about a rational integration of the Indian society with the scientific concepts of the West. So his firm opinion was: 'Teach the students English, teach them the 'logic' of Mill as it is not possible to make this crippled nation stand erect on its moral backbone through teaching Sanskrit. For the resurgence of this nation, our countrymen must be made conversant with the treasure-house of knowledge and science of the world. What is more, it is through the knowledge of English that our students and youth may be made acquainted with the history, logic and modern scientific ideas as well as with the materialist philosophy of Europe.' Therefore opposing Ballantyne's view, he said that as Sankhya and Vedanta were false systems of philosophy, so also was the philosophy of Berkeley of Europe...In order to be free from the influence of such erroneous philosophies, our people should get acquainted with the knowledge of science and the materialist philosophy of Europe. Then and then only our countrymen, knowing the material world meticulously, would be able to grasp truth and on the basis of that alone could they evolve a new philosophy of life and a new sense of values. That is why he was vehemently opposed to teaching such inane idealist philosophies".^[7] It is my considered opinion that such scientific evaluation of Vidyasagar has never been done before in India. It can well be understood that his intense compassion for the poor and oppressed and his endeavour to bring about the welfare of his country as the foremost task of his life along with the search for truth free from religious tutelage as a secular

humanist by following the path of science and logic resulted in Vidyasagar possessing such a great character. As a student of Shibdas Ghosh, based on the Marxist methodology and his historic evaluation of Vidyasagar, I shall try to speak to you about some aspects of this noble character to the best of my ability.

Again, since many of you may not be acquainted with the various facets of Vidyasagar's glorious character as well as some of his notable observations, I would like to read out some relevant portions from various books which I feel are important for you to know. First of all, I would like dwell on certain theoretical aspects which are necessary for correct evaluation of Vidyasagar. It might appear to be a bit stiff. But I hope you would bear with it.

How a particular idea and a great thinker emerges

I think that before going into the main discussion, it is necessary to clarify one point. First, whenever a genius or a great man emerges in a particular era in a particular country, does it happen all of a sudden or due to any divine cause? Does it happen without any cause-effect relationship governing it? As a student of Marxism, we do not think so, neither do science and history. History demonstrates that the emergence of any ideology, a particular idea, a genius, a great and noble personality or a historic individual occurs in the course of a particular stage of development of a society and country based on a social necessity, a social demand or a fervent urge of the society.

Just as in the era of Buddha, the emergence of Vidyasagar was not possible; so also in Vidyasagar's time the appearance of Buddha was not possible; and likewise the emergence of Einstein in the era of Jesus Christ or the emergence of the latter in the era of the former was not possible. Why it is not possible has been elaborated by Shibdas Ghosh, who explained that before the emergence of

a particular idea or a great thinker, the ingredients or the necessary material condition for such emergence arise first in the then social life. In the concrete material conditions of a particular era or in a particular phase of the ever changing social situation, it is through the contradictions between the human brain and its surroundings that an idea and a great thinker emerges. Hence, we too have to understand Vidyasagar in the perspective of his era. Secondly, another relevant point is to be mentioned here. Wielding science as a tool, we Marxists have come to understand that the base of any society is its economic system, and on this base develops its superstructure, i.e., ideology, ideas, ethics and morality, thoughts and perceptions, politics, social relations, organizations and others. In reality, it is not possible that a thought has come into being, an ideal has come into being, but that the indispensable and conducive material ingredients for it have not yet developed in the economic base. However, it is also not such that, to whatever extent the economic system has developed as a base, thoughts, ideas and conceptions will only develop to that extent in the superstructure; as if there is no relative freedom for the development of ideas. Shibdas Ghosh has shown that although the realm of thought and ideas grow on the basis of a given economic base, this is not a phenomenon of economic determinism. Many times it has been observed that the economic development is very backward, but ideas are advanced. On the other hand, it has also been observed that even though the economic development is very powerful; ideological leadership, ideas and conceptions equally powerful in accordance with it are yet to appear. Ideas and ideological leadership have a movement of their own and on this depends whether it will gain strength or not. This has to be understood properly. However, no idea or a leader and thinker can appear if the ingredients for their emergence, be it to a greater or lesser extent, are completely absent in that given economic

base. Again, according to Marxist approach, internal contradiction is the basic cause of any change, whereas external contradiction acts as the condition of that change. Any particular matter or any society exists with both internal and external contradictions, and change is determined by both of these contradictions. Even when the internal contradiction matures, change and development will not reach its proper culmination if the external contradiction is not conducive to it. Again in many instances, even though the internal contradiction does not mature, external contradiction plays a decisive role in accelerating it. This is the basic teaching of Marxism. Why do we have to discuss it? Because, the so called Marxists have raised a question.

**European Renaissance was not based on
Industrial revolution; it originated at the stage of
mercantile capital**

They argue that the Indian bourgeoisie did not appear at the time of Vidyasagar nor had there been any industrial revolution. Since Renaissance arises out of the very necessity of bringing about industrial revolution, how can it be said that Vidyasagar was a representative of the Indian Renaissance? Such has been their argument. This peculiar way of judgement stems from a scholastic approach to Marxism and hence is not based on its living understanding. First of all, it is not at all correct that emergence of Renaissance had been based on industrial revolution. In history, it is observed that the thoughts of Renaissance had sprouted before industrial revolution. In fact, it was the Renaissance which had prepared the ground for industrial revolution. We are not the first to say so. Great Engels, the worthy comrade-in-arms of great Marx in his historic treatise 'Dialectics of Nature' remarked in respect to the inception of European Renaissance that "...mighty epoch which we Germans term the Reformation...and which the French term the Renaissance and

the Italians the *Cinquecento*, It is the epoch which had its rise in the latter half of the fifteenth century. Royalty, with the support of the burghers of the towns broke the power of the feudal nobility and established the great monarchies, based essentially on nationality, within which the modern European nations and modern bourgeois society came to development”.^[8] In other words, in regard to Renaissance the burghers of the towns or merchants played a significant role based on mercantile capital. The small feudal powers were broken down by the large monarchies based on nationality, and within their bounds developed the European states and the bourgeois society. Moreover, did the condition for an industrial revolution to take place exist in the middle of the fifteenth century in Europe? At that time, industrial revolution was almost in an embryonic state, in the womb. Therefore, it can be seen that in Europe, in the stage of mercantile capital the towns developed as the centre for passage of commodities and the merchants therein allied themselves with the royalty and curbed the powers of the feudal lords, preparing the ground for the emergence of the modern bourgeois nations and the modern bourgeois society, at which juncture the inception of the Renaissance came about. And in this process industrial capital emerged. This is the opinion of Engels who was an authority on Marxism. As to who were these burghers who subsequently gave birth to the bourgeoisie is explained by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto: “From the serfs of the Middle Ages sprang the chartered burghers of the earliest towns. From these burgesses the elements of the bourgeoisie were developed”.^[9] In other words, the burghers of the then developing towns subsequently gave birth to industrial capital and these burghers caused the inception of the Renaissance. Industrial capital, in its stage of development held aloft the banner of this Renaissance with greater vigour. So, the so-called Marxists who hold the opinion that Renaissance cannot take place if

there is no industrial revolution, in the name of Marxist interpretation, contradicting what Marx and Engels had said.

Even though internal contradiction is the basic cause of change, sometimes external contradiction too plays a decisive role

I would like to mention another matter. Looking back at the history of Europe, you will observe that England, France and Germany made great contributions in the creation of humanist literature, which is the literature of the Renaissance. At that period, these countries were much advanced in respect to the development of industrial capital. Again, side by side, Russian literature, too, had advanced significantly. In the development of Russian literature, first Pushkin, and then Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Turgenev, Chekov, Tolstoy and others had made great contributions. During this period of flourishing of their literary works, Russian capitalism had hardly grown and industrial capital inside Russia was far from being well developed. Yet, Russia had succeeded in an amazing creation of world humanist literature. This was possible in backward Russia under the impact of the European countries much advanced in industrial revolution. It was thus due to the influence of external contradiction. Just think of the Russian socialist revolution. How far had capitalism advanced in Russia at the time of the socialist revolution there! What was the numerical position of industry and the working class in that country at that period? In regard to industrialization, Russia lagged far behind and there was dominance of feudalism in agriculture. Many of the European countries were far more advanced than Russia in this regard. But, the socialist revolution took place in such an industrially backward Russia and not in those countries. This became possible under the influence of already developed revolutionary thoughts about socialism and the working class movements in the industrially advanced European countries.

Also, the historic role played by great Lenin who in course of conducting intense ideological struggle against the so called Marxists of the Second International and Russia, enriched and developed Marxism to a new height, founded the Bolshevik Party as the genuine Marxist party on the Russian soil and concretely applied Marxism in the concrete situation of Russia during the First World War, was equally instrumental in accomplishing Russian revolution. So, those who only consider how much the internal contradiction has matured and deny the importance of external contradiction, suffer from a mechanical approach while analyzing a phenomenon. It is true that until and unless ingredients for change appear within the internal contradiction, external contradiction alone cannot bring about a change. However, in some instances, due to some definite reasons, external contradiction may succeed in accelerating the internal contradiction and thereby playing an important role in maturing it. Take China for example. Even though both capitalism and the working class were very weak there, anti-imperialist-anti feudal democratic revolution which was supposed to have been led by the bourgeoisie, took place under the leadership of the working class. This was possible owing to the influence of international communist movement in general and historical victory of Russian socialist revolution in particular.

In Vidyasagar's time, Britain had not yet reached the stage of imperialism

Now let us consider the era of Vidyasagar. At that time, India was under the rule of East India Company, or in other words, the rule of British mercantile capital. Upto a point of time in this country, there was the rule of British mercantile capital. Subsequently, after the Sepoy Mutiny, India came under the rule of British industrial capital. Imperialism, by which we mean the highest stage of capitalism marked by the distinctive feature of export of capital or finance capital, did

not appear during the time of Vidyasagar. In the writings of some authors, it is erroneously mentioned that during Vidyasagar's time, India was under British imperialist rule. This is not at all correct. As to the time of appearance of modern imperialism, Lenin pointed out that "The boom at the end of the nineteenth century and the crisis of 1900-03. Cartels become one of the foundations of the whole of economic life. Capitalism has been transformed into imperialism." [10] Therefore the inception of modern imperialism in Europe took place between 1900-1903. Vidyasagar had no opportunity to see this era of imperialism.

Conditions behind inception of Renaissance in our country

So, in the beginning there was the rule of British mercantile capital in this country, followed by the rule of British industrial capital. In Vidyasagar's time, Indian mercantile capital too was present. Long before British mercantile capital had dominated this country, Indian mercantile capital, just as in other countries, had been grown and had undergone significant expansion continually with trade, even outside the country. Though remaining under feudal rule, in the course of time as feudalism was weakened, the influence of this mercantile capital increased. In the meantime, the European merchants, particularly the British merchants through the East India Company began to extend their trade and commerce in this country. Between the mercantile capital of these two countries, in the interest of trade both co-operation and contradictions were there.

Again, Siraj-ud-daula, Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha imposed certain restrictions in trade and commerce on both native and foreign mercantile capital causing obstructions. Hence, in order to ensure the defeat of Nawab Siraj-ud-daula; Jagat Seth, Umichand and other traders of this country entered into an alliance with the East India Company

in the interest of trade and commerce. Subsequently, during the reign of Mirzafar, the next Nawab, the British mercantile capitalists managed to gain advantage over the Indian traders in respect to tax and other matters. It is for this reason, and in order to gain greater advantage than the East India Company, that Indian mercantile capital supported Mirkasem when he rebelled against Mirzafar. During the reign of Mirkasem they succeeded in securing this advantage. Finally, the East India Company removed Mirkasem from power, restored Mirzafar to the throne and prepared the ground to destroy Indian mercantile capital. Due to this, the advancement of Indian mercantile capital suffered a setback and was turned into comprador capital. Subsequently, a part of this comprador capital got transformed into rudiments of industrial capital. This process began some time before or at the time of the Sepoy Mutiny. That is to say, at that time in this country, on the one hand, there was dominance of foreign mercantile capital, while, on the other, Indian mercantile capital, though in a relatively weak and suppressed state, was still active. However, in agriculture it was feudal relations which still existed in this country, as had been the case during the European Renaissance.

On the other hand, English education was introduced in India by the British rulers for their administrative convenience. In these conditions, a handful of people who received English education in the newly growing towns of this country particularly Kolkata, the then capital of British India, were enlightened for the first time by the ideas of the European Renaissance. At that time the industrial capital of Europe had become strengthened and advancing rapidly it held aloft the banner of Renaissance and humanism. It was these thoughts of Renaissance that had influenced the mind of a section of educated people of this country. It is in this context that we have to understand Vidyasagar. Shibdas Ghosh, in his evaluation of Vidyasagar, said that Vidyasagar was the first

representative of secular humanism in India and a bold representative of the Renaissance. The analysis of Shibdas Ghosh is correct and in conformity with the tenets of Marxism. It is true that Raja Rammohan was the first to introduce the ideas of the European Renaissance in this country before Vidyasagar, and that he had given emphasis on English education in place of Sanskrit education. His role in this regard is historic. However he could not free himself completely from the influence of spiritualism and he reformed Hindu religion that led to the establishment of Brahma Samaj, just as Martin Luther in Germany had introduced the reformation of the Catholic system of Christianity and introduced Protestantism.

So, Rammohan's emergence in the history of the Renaissance movement of this country is like the early dawn – the darkness of the night waning, the sun not yet risen but the eastern horizon heralding its crimson appearance. And Vidyasagar is like a fiery red sunrise piercing the darkness of several thousand years.

Vidyasagar's outlook was completely secular

A very important characteristic of Vidyasagar, which few people in this country are acquainted with is his secular humanist outlook free from spiritualism. This is a very important aspect of Vidyasagar's character but is very less discussed because of a well-knit conspiracy of the ruling capitalist class. These secular humanist outlook which was the most developed and progressive in that period served as the beacon in his lifelong struggle to seek truth. In the then social condition engulfed by religious superstitions and obscurantism, he forcefully opined that "The *Vedanta* and *Sankhya* are false systems of philosophy, is no more a matter of dispute".^[11] This bold assertion of his will be ever remembered in history. In a society encumbered in and blinded by age-old religious creeds and religious, how dedicated one had to be in the

search for truth and how deeply one had to be engaged in the arduous struggle to acquire knowledge about science and philosophy so as to arrive at such a decision. What boldness, courage and firm conviction one needed to have so as to be able to publicly express such thought is so difficult to realize even today! In our country however, practically nobody gave much importance to this amazing aspect of Vidyasagar's character in any discussion about him. A section of the intellectuals, though being aware of this aspect, have in a planned manner avoided to highlight it. Instead, they have been trying to narrow down his greatness by projecting him merely as 'the ocean of knowledge', 'the ocean of compassion', 'propagator of widow remarriage', 'social reformer', 'reformer of education' and such other attributes. As a result, the overwhelming majority of the people are not aware of this aspect. Vidyasagar himself did not write many books regarding his ideas and opinions running counter to religion. The reasons why he did not write much on this subject, at least what I have perceived from some of his statements — I will discuss later. He wrote a few sentences containing amazing ideas regarding his opinion about religion in protest against a recommendation by the British government on education. Had this necessity not appeared, history probably could never have known his completely secular outlook.

Vidyasagar was at that time the Principal of Sanskrit College in Kolkata. Mr. Ballantyne, the then Principal of Banaras College, was sent by the government to Sanskrit College in order to carry on an inspection and submit certain recommendations to the British government. Accordingly Mr. Ballantyne made some recommendations. One of the most significant among these was that the book on philosophy titled 'Inquiry' by Bishop Berkeley should be taught in Sanskrit College. Incidentally, Bishop Berkeley was an 'idealist' philosopher of the West. His views were — "The

table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it, but if I were out of my study, I should say, it existed”^[12]. In other words, the table ceased to exist once it went out of his sight. It meant that according to Berkley, the table was not a material object or matter having independent existence in objective reality. Its existence was only in the mental domain of the beholding individual. So, according to the philosophy of Berkeley, the material world, life, society – none has any objective existence. All that exist are ideas and sensations. When the book titled ‘Inquiry’ based on this philosophy was recommended to be taught, Vidyasagar opposed strongly. In protest he wrote: “For certain reasons, which it is needless to state here, we are obliged to continue the teachings of the *Vedanta* and *Sankhya* in the Sanskrit College. That *Vedanta* and *Sankhya* are false systems of philosophy is no more a matter of dispute. These systems, false as they are, command unbound reverence from the Hindus. Whilst teaching these in the Sanskrit course, we should oppose them by sound philosophy in the English course to counteract their influence. Bishop Berkeley’s ‘Inquiry’ which has arrived at similar or identical conclusions with the *Vedanta* or *Sankhya*, and which is no more considered in Europe as a sound system of philosophy, will not serve that purpose”.^[13] His opinion regarding this came to light only in the context of this letter, otherwise history would have had no opportunity to know what Vidyasagar had said against spiritualist philosophy. Apart from this, Ballantyne had remarked that in Sanskrit College both the Sanskrit and English system should be followed, to which Vidyasagar replied - “I believe, the danger that Dr. Ballantyne apprehends is not so inevitable in the case of an individual who has intelligently studied both English and Sanskrit literatures. Truth is truth, if properly perceived. To believe that ‘truth is double’ is but the effect of an imperfect perception of truth itself, the effect of which I am sure to see removed by the improved courses of studies we have

adopted at this institution.”^[14] It is crystal clear that while Ballantyne was in favour of including idealist philosophy and spiritualism as against materialistic philosophy of the West in the academic curricula, Vidyasagar emphasized on teaching materialistic philosophy. Another important observation was made by Vidyasagar. He said that there is no pluralism of truth. In regard to any question, in any domain or about any phenomenon, truth is only one. This is proved by science. And in this context, regarding the native pundits, Vidyasagar, well versed in religious scriptures, remarked: “...when in the way of discussion or in the course of conversation, any new truth introduced by European sciences is presented before them, they laugh and ridicule it. Lately a feeling is manifesting among the learned of this part of India, especially in Calcutta and its neighborhood, that when they hear of a scientific truth, the germs of which may be traced out in their shastras, instead of showing any regard for that truth they triumph and the superstitious regard for their own shastras is redoubled”.

^[15] From this also, it can be made out that in search for truth, he did not rely on the religious scriptures but considered scientific methodology and examination as the correct course. He also scathingly thrashed the pundits who sought to judge everything in the light of the writings in the religious scriptures. Regarding the bigotry of these native pundits he further remarked — “When Amru, the Arab General, the conqueror of Alexandria asked Omar what to do about the Alexandrian library, the Caliph replied, ‘The contents of those books are in conformity with the Quran or they are not. If they are, the Quran is sufficient without them; if they are not, they are pernicious. Let them therefore be destroyed.’ The bigotry of the learned of India, I am ashamed to state, is no less than that of the Arabian Caliph. They believe that their Shastras have all emanated from omniscient *Rishis* (sages) and therefore, they cannot but be infallible”.

^[16] (Regarding validity of the above Alexandrian incident there is difference of

opinion among the historians.) In this way, he renounced the age-old perception of considering our ancient sages as ‘omniscient’ and their *Shastras* (religious scriptures) as infallible.

In reply to above recommendation by Ballantyne what a historic submission had Vidyasagar made. From this reply the real Vidyasagar is revealed to us. Just think what a lofty rational, scientific and materialistic outlook he possessed at that time and what a truthful, dauntless, bold and gigantic character he had. In the context of the then period, it was indeed astonishing. Even today, how many people can think and speak like this?

Vidyasagar did not believe in god and existence of eternal soul

Vidyasagar neither believed in god or in after life, nor in any form of worship. When questions were raised, he usually countered these with various replies. He used to say: “What is the use of invoking god? When Genghis Khan started pillaging, he imprisoned many people; till finally there were almost a hundred thousand prisoners ... Then Genghis Khan ordered ‘...kill them all’... god must have seen this mass killing but nevertheless, he did not prevent any of this. So, even if he exists, I have no need for him”.^[17] He further said, “A ship named ‘John Lawrence’ sank and 800 persons died; so is the lord of the whole world crueller than us? What I cannot bring myself to do, how could he whose compassion is supreme does it; how was he able to drown and kill seven to eight hundred persons together? Is this the act of the master of the whole world?”^[18] Vidyasagar had gone to Kashi (now Varanasi) to meet his parents. There, the priests were accosting him to go to the temple. He proclaimed: ‘I do not believe in all this. My father is *Vishweshwar* (lord of the world), my mother is *Annapura* (giver of food) and I recognize none other.’^[19] He never visited a temple throughout

his life. His parents along with his grandmother tried to induce him to take a religious indoctrination. But he steadfastly refused though he deeply respected them. For him, scientific truth was above all, supreme. Not only did he spoke against religious tutelage, none had ever seen him indulging in any form of worship or observing any kind of religious rituals.

Shibnath Shastri, the eminent historian, recollects that a Christian priest was one day trying to convince him about theory of god in presence of others, when Vidyasagar interrupted him with the words — “Leave those young fellows, Sir, they have yet enough time to think of their salvation, come to us old rogues, who are about to depart this life”. Vidyasagar then started to put one after another question to the Christian preacher who finally became infuriated, and pointing at Vidyasagar proclaimed that he would be unable to secure a berth even in the hell. ^[20] There are so many incidents like this. He had made so many witty, humorous remarks on this subject. One day when Vidyasagar was sitting and chatting with others, two preachers and several gentlemen approached him and told him that a fierce dispute was raging in Bengal regarding the existence of god: as you are a learned person, please settle the issue. Vidyasagar told them that whether god exists or not, this question could never be answered by anybody; it could never be resolved. Thereafter, Vidyasagar told them a story in a humorous vein. Once a person had been apprehended and brought before Yamaraj (the god of death). Yamaraj asked him why he worshipped one particular god instead of another one. The person replied that one preacher had persuaded him to do so. Yamaraj ordered that he be caned several times and after that the person who had persuaded him be caned a few more times. Then, the person who had persuaded the former one was caned a few more times even and in this way one after another was caned. Finally, the last person who was caned confessed that Vidyasagar had persuaded him and so Yamaraj ordered that Vidyasagar be

given the total number of canings added together and then again be given some extra canings. Even after all this the anger of Yamaraj did not diminish and he ruled that Vidyasagar's offence was so great that he should be caned daily. [21] Vidyasagar used to talk about such things in this way with wit and humour. Another time he had asked Harananda Bhattacharya, his close friend, the father of Shibnath Shastri in a bantering manner — “Well Haran, I heard you have settled in Banaras; but have you learnt to smoke *ganja* (opium)?” Harananda Babu was taken aback and asked: ‘Why should I smoke *ganja*?’ Vidyasagar explained: “Suppose, you die in Banaras, then you become one with Lord *Shiva*. But *Shiva* is a notorious opium-smoker. So when *Nandi* and *Bhringi*, *Shiva*'s disciples, will offer you to smoke *ganja*, you will have to inhale hard; and if you do not habituate yourself beforehand, you may choke and die; then what will happen to your hankering for becoming one with Lord *Shiva*?” All who were present burst out laughing. In his valuable and informative book titled “*Karunasagar Vidyasagar*”, Indramitra has collected and presented various such anecdotes; Vidyasagar's views on different matters and opinions of others about Vidyasagar. I have obtained quite some information from this book.

To understand how much secular Vidyasagar was in his thoughts is reflected in his book titled ‘*Jibancharit*’, regarding which I would like to highlight some aspects. It should be noted that in this book there is no mention of any avatar, no mention of god anywhere, in sharp contrast to the convention prevalent in those days and even today. He has discussed the lives of scientists like Galileo, Copernicus, Newton; he has described how Duval, Jenkins and others had to struggle against abject poverty to continue their studies and became distinguished personalities; these tales he has put down so that children are inspired by these characters.

There is a remarkable incident concerning the book titled ‘*Bodhoday*’. After the first two editions of this book were

published, it was observed that neither had any mention of god in them. Severe criticism was levelled against it by a section of European missionaries at that time. John Murdoch, a missionary, was appointed by the then government to investigate the matter. Murdoch's report is very significant. He reported that "The book *Bodhoday* by Vidyasagar was based on the book '*Rudiments of Knowledge*', published by Messrs Chambers, but the section where god and soul had been discussed in the latter had been omitted in the former, ...and the explanation of the senses or sensations through sense organs which '*Bodhoday*' provided..., seems to teach rank materialism...". Murdoch remarked that "not only was the book prepared by a 'secularist', it was written to preach secularism."^[21] He further said: "Vidyasagar wrote that after death, the body is buried or cremated, but nowhere has he mentioned that the soul is eternal, because Vidyasagar did not believe in 'soul' and so nowhere did he mention 'worship of god'," ^[22] etc. Murdoch commented: "The author is described as the 'well known Hindu reformer'. But this is no proof to the contrary, his reforms are purely social, so far as the writer (Murdoch) is aware, he has kept himself entirely aloof from the Brahmo Samaj movement or any Hindu religion reform movement. He is a social reformer". He further said: "As in England, Robert Owen and Saint Simon is secular, so also is Vidyasagar. ...". He concluded that "this book should be excluded from the schools". ^[23] This report was submitted by John Murdoch to the government. Thereafter, the publication of *Bodhoday* was almost stopped under the instructions from the government. So being compelled by the circumstances and on the advice of his admirers, Vidyasagar in the third edition of *Bodhoday* added a chapter on 'god' which was written in very cursory and unintelligible manner. Even then he began the book with matter and not with 'god'. In other words, matter was first discussed, followed by the discussion on 'god'. In this way, he barely managed to silence his critics

so that the book could be published.

Vidyasagar had also written a small story about the life in an *ashram* (hermitage) and the ugly activities going on there. These have been going on for a long time and continue even now. If the religious fanatics come to hear of this story, they would begin to react violently even today. Vidyasagar depicts what goes on in these ashrams in the name of religion! One of the so-called ascetics of an ashram used to preach religion daily and discussed sin and piety. Many used to gather around and listen to him out of devoutness. He had a *sevadasi* (maiden serving him in the name of religion). She used to serve him in every possible way — surely you understand what is meant by that. One afternoon, the ascetic was discussing how a woman who had committed adultery would not only go to hell after her death; but how the envoy of Yamaraj (god of death) would whip her from behind and force her to embrace a tree having burning iron spear on it just as she had embraced another man apart from her husband. On that evening, the maiden finished all her work, came up to the door but was visibly reluctant to enter the room. On seeing this, the ascetic asked what the matter was; the maiden replied — ‘after what you have said, it is not proper for me to serve you in that fashion’. Then the ascetic laughed and said — ‘Have you gone mad? Is that tree now in the same condition as before? After being used repeatedly, the iron spear of that tree is so eroded, that there is no pain in embracing it now. Come inside and serve me without any fear’. After saying so, he dragged her inside by her hand.^[24] Just think in what intense ridicule he had lashed out at the *ashrams* created in the name of following religious practices. Nowadays, such obnoxious practices have become rampant.

In the last years of his life, Vidyasagar became very sick, suffering from a debilitating disease as a result of which he was bedridden. Many persons at that time suggested to him to take the name of ‘god’. He steadfastly refused. His eldest

daughter used to live with him and was devout in her religious practices. She was performing *hom*, the ceremony of lighting the ‘sacred’ fire, to ensure his recovery from protracted illness and entreated Vidyasagar to enter the room. He did not enter the room, but standing at the door step, he said: ‘Please don’t mind my child! Here I am. There is too much smoke and it is reaching here too’.^[25] The word, ‘too much smoke’, is suggestive; meaning there is nothing here but smoke. That was what he made her daughter understand.

You are aware that Ramakrishna had gone to visit Vidyasagar in his house to pay his respects. Ramakrishna too was a man of great character. Just note the rich tenor of their conversation that day. This incident and conversations were narrated by many. Ramakrishna had told Vidyasagar: “I have come to see the ‘ocean of knowledge’.” Vidyasagar in reply had said: “Most welcome, my good sir — you can take some salt water if it is of any use.” Ramkrishna had answered: “How will I be able to get pearls, unless I submerge myself in salt water, you are an ‘ocean of knowledge’, not of ignorance”.^[26] During this conversation, Ramkrishna remarked that, “...god gives strength to some, but not to everyone; some, he makes strong, others weak.” Vidyasagar had then asked: “Why does god provide strength to some and deny the same to others?” Ramakrishna had countered — “Otherwise, why would so many people accept your authority? You are kind, you are knowledgeable, that is why people esteem you more than they do others. Don’t you think so?”^[27] Vidyasagar answered with a smile of disbelief. This is because Vidyasagar did not believe in all these. Vidyasagar in his book titled ‘Jibancharit’ has shown how a common herdsman, working in someone’s house had struggled and succeeded in becoming distinguished. He knew that man acquires greatness through struggle. He did not believe in the idea that genius and ability was god gifted. Ramakrishna invited him to Dakshineswar, but did not directly request him to visit the temple of ‘Kali’. Because, he knew that

if he had mentioned a visit to the temple of 'Kali', Vidyasagar would have refused straightaway. He had cautiously invited Vidyasagar to visit Rashmani's* garden. Vidyasagar neither agreed, nor disagreed. Ramakrishna assumed that Vidyasagar would come, but even though it was so near, Vidyasagar did not visit Dakshineswar whereas in order to establish schools, he went to so many far-off places. Vidyasagar had managed to find a job for one of his friends suffering from poverty; and had to arrange so that his friend would be present on the following day. To ensure that, he one day walked all the way from Kolkata to Kalna where this friend lived. But even for the sake of formality, he did not respond to the request for visiting Dakshineswar. Because, to do anything that went against the truth he had imbibed based on reason was against his nature. It was also not his nature to give indulgence to falsehood under any pretext.

Vidyasagar was a non-believer, an agnostic. The period of Renaissance in Europe was the era of mechanical materialism. At that time, the views of Bacon, Hobbs, Locke, Spinoza, Lamerttrie and others were creating tidal waves of materialism in Europe in that period. Based on materialism, the agnosticism of Kant and the secular humanism of Feuerbach had appeared. Vidyasagar had very close links with these thoughts. Vidyasagar did not believe in any god or any omnipotent being; he had no faith in any form of worship or rites; but even then everyone in this country had deep respect for him. At that time a deep rooted belief prevailing in this country was that character does not develop and man cannot acquire greatness unless he believed in god or divinity. Even today, this belief persists very strongly. Ramakrishna knew that Vidyasagar had no belief in god, but even after knowing this, Ramakrishna was respectful to Vidyasagar. Vivekananda

* Rani Rashmani was a zaminder (feudal land owner), who allotted the land for Kali Temple at Dakshineswar on the eastern bank of river Ganga.

had said that there were two great men in his life; one was Ramakrishna and the other Vidyasagar who had influenced him most. Both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were powerful preachers of Hinduism. At that time, it became a matter of discussion far and near, even in the remote villages, that in Kolkata, there were many persons who were famous for their richness in terms of wealth. But there was only one man who was great in terms of nobility of character. So going to Kolkata meant visiting the famous temple of 'goddess Kali' in Kalighat and having a glimpse of great Vidyasagar. Even though he was an atheist, Vidyasagar had earned for himself such a position of respect. I have discussed this aspect in the beginning and for such a long time because this is the aspect of Vidyasagar has hardly been discussed in this country and highlighted. So most of the people are not aware of these facts. Hence, such a notable side of his illustrious life has virtually remained unknown.

Vidyasagar on introduction of modern science, knowledge and secular education

The education movement, which he started, was intimately linked to the secular humanist ideas and acts free from religious superstitions and bigotry. Many of you are aware that Vidyasagar had established many schools in both villages and towns. He had even gone to the extent of personally collecting funds to establish schools. Yet this was not merely to provide some opportunity for the students to study in schools and colleges. You will be surprised to know that Vidyasagar had learned English only at the age of twenty-two. Before that he only knew Sanskrit and Bengali. Maybe he had some scanty knowledge about English alphabets. While he was employed at Fort William College, one of his European admirers Mr. Marshall advised him to learn English. Then he studied English and thereafter coming in contact with English education, he discovered the treasure-house of Western science and

knowledge and immersed himself in this treasure-house, driven by an intense thirst for knowledge. No book belonging to the West and bearing the stamp of modern ideas and thoughts existed which did not find a place in his personal collection, including all the works of Newton. Again, he was well versed in all the religious scriptures of this country. Vidyasagar succeeded in assimilating the essence from the science and knowledge of the West, and merely at the age of about thirty-three came to the conclusion that ‘Vedas, Vedanta, Sankhya are false’. He introduced the study of modern English education in the Sanskrit College. He said that Sanskrit is to be studied only to that extent, which is necessary for the development of Bengali language — not more than that, and not merely to study Sanskrit scriptures. Hence, he gave the study of Sanskrit only that much importance which was necessary to develop Bengali language. He had contemplated that the student community in India, by learning English language would come in contact with the science and knowledge of the West; just as he had come in close touch with the ideas of modern sciences, as a result of which they would free themselves from the influence of spiritualism of *Vedas-Vedanta-Sankhya* and based on this only, they would advance with modern scientific ideas.

This was his only objective at that time. Otherwise, he would not have rushed from one village to another in pursuit of building schools and colleges. He said: “Wherever the light of modern European science has penetrated and to whatever extent it has penetrated, to that extent, the influence of the religious scriptures of this country has diminished there. Therefore the expanse of this education has to be increased”.^[27] You see, in his wisdom he realized that no good would come from simply carrying on debates whether religious scriptures are true or false, whether god exists or not, or by writing voluminous books in this fanatically religious society — debates and disputes only would continue. Instead of engaging

himself in these futile attempts, he chose the way in which he had been able to free himself from the erroneous ideas regarding the belief in 'god' and religion; and it is by following that road, that is, through the learning of English language and cultivation of modern knowledge and science of the West, that he wanted to free his country from all these false notions. And for this, he desired the introduction of modern secular education so that 'the influence of religious scriptures could be diminished'. It is for this reason that he opposed the inclusion of Berkeley's idealistic philosophy in the curriculum. He desired the spread of education for women, so that their awakening would take place in the light of modern science that could dispel their religious thinking and they could imbibe a sense of dignity, self respect and sense of their own rights and freedom. He had earnestly desired all these. To spread this education, he had worked tirelessly for months and years together, had gone to district after district, to one village after another, and succeeded in establishing schools, one after another, wherever he went.

He had succeeded in acquainting everybody with the Bengali alphabet through the books he had authored, namely 'Barnaparichay', 'Bodhoday', 'Kathamala' and others. He had also authored some literary works preparing the ground for modern literature. He had authored 'Byakaran Koumudi' in order to make the extremely difficult Sanskrit grammar easy to grasp. He said: "The study of mathematics in Sanskrit language is a very complex task and time consuming too. Let mathematics be taught through the English language, the task will be accomplished in half the time".^[28] Vidyasagar also remarked — "Education does not only mean learning reading, writing and arithmetic; it should provide comprehensive knowledge. Education in geography, geometry, literature, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, physiology, political economy, etc., is very much necessary. We want teachers who know both the Bengali and the English language, and at

the same time are free from religious prejudices". [29]

Before this, the British used to think that English could not be taught by anybody belonging to our country. He took up the challenge and made necessary arrangements so that in Metropolitan College, established by him, a Bengali teacher began to teach English. The authorities had initially debarred these students from sitting for L.A., B.A. examinations; so Vidyasagar fought for them and succeeded in realizing their demands; and they were finally allowed to sit for their examinations, as a result of which some of these students even stood first and second. So, the sole objective of his programme for expanding this education was to propagate and cultivate the concept of secular humanism free from religious prejudices — a concept which he believed in and whose spread and cultivation he desired in order to bring about the awakening of enlightened modern mind, liberated from religious superstition. He had understood the fact that by merely writing books or delivering speeches, religious faith or superstition would not be removed. It had to be done through the spread of modern scientific education, by lighting the torch of knowledge.

In this regard, another matter is also significant. Vidyasagar, in the schools established by him, had stopped corporal punishment on the students, even braving the opposition of the teachers. For, the development of the students and their eagerness to study are hindered by this. He had also instructed that if a student was unable to answer a question in the class, the teacher concerned should not ask another co-student the same question, because this may injure the self-esteem of the first student. In respect to these questions also, he had, in this way, created new examples. It is particularly worth mentioning what he told one Purnababu in Lucknow, regarding what was actually going on in the education system of this country under British rule, in the name of education. Purnababu asked Vidyasagar why all the students who had passed out from L.A., B.A., M.A. courses write 'I has' instead

of the correct expression 'I have'. Vidyasagar scornfully stated a hard truth: "From our boys, we take tuition fees, 'pankha'* fees, examination fees; then we open the door of the mill and tell them that here there are teachers, there are chairs, benches and books; pens, inkpots, ink, pencils – all these are here; and then we put them in the mill and turn the key. After some time, they come out 'prepared' by the mill — some passing out second class, some pass entrance exams, some pass out as L.A., B.A., M.A. etc., but all of them write 'I has', as the product of the same mould".^[30] Note his scorn for the British ruled education system which in reality has become thousand times worse at present in India. Vidyasagar, however, did not merely want to reform the then prevailing education system in a conventional way. In order to introduce an education system and syllabus based on secular humanism and science to create new man in a new age, he desired and fought throughout his life to bring about a revolutionary change of the religious education, dominated and controlled, on the one hand, by ancient scriptures and the British-ruled education system which produced mere office-clerks and bureaucrats on the other. So, it can be seen that Vidyasagar earnestly desired a revolutionary change in the education system, and it is for this reason that he should not be called just a reformer of education. Because, reform means merely outward or cursory change while retaining the essence.

The historic contribution of Vidyasagar in the development of Bengali prose

Rabindranath made a beautiful observance about Vidyasagar. He said "Vidyasagar was the first true artist of the Bengali language in the real sense. The Bengali prose literature had originated before his emergence, but it was he who first innovated its artistic...simple, beautiful and organized style...

* Pamkha means fan

Vidyasagar classified, arranged, refined and reined in the unruly mass of Bengali language with great competence, thereby imparting to it easy fluency and effectiveness.”^[31] Rabindranath further said — “If the people of this country accept that I have accomplished something in the field of literature, I will definitely have to admit that the door to this literature was opened by none other than Vidyasagar”.^[32] He said — “*Jal pare, pata nare*” (Water falling, leaves moving) — from this rhyme by the great pioneer poet, I came to learn rhythm, cadence and resonance”.^[33] Here lies the greatness of Rabindranath. Had Bankimchandra been able to appreciate Vidyasagar in this vein, he would have carved out for himself a different place in history. When Vidyasagar took an initiative in the development of modern Bengali prose, did he do so merely as a linguist? No, it is not so. Prose developed from poetry in Europe due to a definite necessity, at a given stage in history. Renaissance gave birth to newer ideas, newer discoveries and inventions, newer expressions; to an all-encompassing advancement of thinking, a rational mind, expressions of comprehensive thinking; and for this a well disciplined and integrated newer form of language was necessary which was not possible through poetry. That is why we find that in ages past knowledge and science came through the medium of poetry, and it is only after reaching a certain stage, i.e., in the period of Renaissance that prose was born in the womb of poetry.

In this respect too, Vidyasagar has a historic contribution in the development of Bengali prose. It was to develop secular humanist ideas and a rational mind in this country that acted as motivation behind his tireless effort to develop Bengali prose and to create prose literature. And for this, even though he knew about the wayward lifestyle and extravagance of Michael Madhusudhan Dutta, a social outcast held in contempt, he loved Madhusudhan deeply. He had come to recognize the real Madhusudhan, a literary genius. So many times did Vidyasagar himself run into debts in order to come to the

rescue of this glittering literary jewel, who played such a powerful role in the development of Bengali literature! Even so, he finally failed to save Madhusudhan and for this he had expressed his grief time and again. After Michael's death, when a group of persons approached Vidyasagar for his approval in the consecration of Michael's bust, he lamented and told them — "I am not interested in preserving the bones of someone whose life I have failed to preserve despite all my efforts".^[34]

Regarding who would be able to author genuine Bengali literature, he provided a definite guideline saying - "Those who would be unable to procure the ingredients from the European mines of knowledge and express them in thoughtful and lucid Bengali language would not succeed in creating this literature."^[35] So, only those who would succeed in procuring the ingredients from the European mines of knowledge would be able to create this literature.

The movement to abolish child marriage

The next question that I want to discuss is his struggle to introduce widow remarriage and the movement to abolish child marriage and polygamy. These movements too were conducted by him, being guided by the same outlook. Here, I will now read out some extracts from the writings of Vidyasagar. Those who have read these know from what agony, what depth of feeling, what compassionate mind and outlook, he had written these. Again, many might not have had the opportunity to study these. Child marriages were very common at that time in this country, however, even now many such marriages take place. In this context, he said — "Due to the marriage taking place in childhood, the couple is never able to taste the bliss of marriage from mutual bond of love; suffering occurs as marital relations of love are thwarted at every step in daily family life, and children born out of such an unpleasant relationship are likely to be narrow minded. Such a married couple, in an

effort to entertain each other constantly tends to indulge in amorous talk, artificially clever and artful dialogues, the practice of the art of consummation and so on as a result of which they become adroit in skillful deliberations regarding these matters. Therefore, they suffer enormous hindrance since their childhood and being denied the essence of life, which is the wealth of knowledge, they become human beings merely in form and cannot be reckoned as a genuine human being”.^[36] Please take note how modern and realist was Vidyasagar in his thought, even in that era. He had said that married life without love and affection is never happy, the attainment of which is impossible in childhood. Moreover, he had said that a married life without love is not only full of sorrow, but also a child born out of wedlock in this marriage suffers impairment of its development. Again, in this tender age, a deep absorption regarding physical relations in married life causes severe damage to studies, as a result of which, being denied of real education, such children become human beings only in form, but in essence they do not grow up to be genuine human beings. Just note, how much emphasis he placed on proper education in order to develop great human qualities.

In that age Vidyasagar cautioned about the consequences of such loveless married life: “Unification of minds are the basis of love. Attainment of that unity depends on factors like age, condition, beauty, qualities and character, appearance and disposition, etc. The child couples in our country do not come to know of each others’ character; they hardly get any respite to understand their desires; they have no conceptual inkling about their true condition, let alone a semblance of understanding of each other’s character through proper acquaintance and conversation, they haven’t even looked at each other even once. Trusting only the trickery and futile promises of an indifferent and garrulous matchmaker the parents make the selection according to their wish; this acting as an edict on both the male and female child, and in effect

erects an insurmountable barrier between happiness and sorrow. It is for this reason only that in the relation between married couples in our country a genuine bond of love, free and frank, is almost never observed; rather the husband acts like a master, while the wife becomes almost a domestic maid in their daily family life".^[37] He has discussed here, what damage takes place, if there is marriage at too young an age. How very modern and humane was Vidyasagar in his ideas in that era to observe that unity of mind is the basis of love; also that before being acquainted with each other or able to judge each other's qualities; being married only by the decision of the matchmaker and the parents; having failed to evolve mutual love and dignity; the husband turns out to be like a 'master' and the wife like a 'domestic maid' and thus they spend their lives. What a pathetic and cruel picture of marriage in the then feudal society he has painted, whose influence still remains substantially in the present capitalist society. It may further be observed that even in those days of religious conservatism, Vidyasagar stood against the prevalent practice of forcing marriage on young boys and girls by their guardians. Instead, he emphasized on the love marriage based on pre-marital mutual acquaintance between the boy and the girl and their mutual appraisal as well as appreciation of each other's qualities. How advanced he was in modern and democratic thinking.

Why did Vidyasagar, a disbeliever himself, utilized religious scriptures in the struggle to introduce widow remarriage?

You are aware how much Vidyasagar had to struggle at that time against the entire Hindu society in his effort to introduce widow remarriage. Even though a disbeliever in religion, he utilized the religious scriptures in this struggle. He understood that introduction of widow remarriage in this country was not possible by persuasion through reasoning and

enacting law only. So, whatever changes were to be accomplished, had to be done through persuasion based on interpretation of the religious scriptures. I am reading out Vidyasagar's own explanation in this context, as a group of so-called Marxists, due to their ignorance have erroneously criticized him in this matter. Some of them have even raised a question why he took refuge behind the interpretation of religious scriptures in support of widow remarriage when he had opposed them in the first place. We need not answer this as mentioning his opinion in this regard would be sufficient. He said: "If you ascertain widow remarriage as bounden duty based on logic, people of this country will never accept it as their dutifulness. If it is ascertained as bounden duty in the religious scriptures, only then they will accept it, obey it and accordingly follow it. In these matters, the religious scriptures act as the most important evidence and any deed approved by the scriptures are accepted in all respects as dutifulness. Therefore it is essential to determine at first whether widow remarriage is an act approved by religious scriptures or against the religious scriptures." [38] It can well be understood from this remark, how stark a realist Vidyasagar was. It can well be understood from this remark, how stark a realist Vidyasagar was.

To prove that widow remarriage was approved by the scriptures Vidyasagar had searched them thoroughly and painstakingly, day and night for a long time. He had to spend so much time to study these that he went practically almost without food and sleep for many days. He found that the scriptures contained four 'Sanhitas' (compilations or codes of law)— 'Manusanhita' for 'Satyayuga', 'Goutamsanhita' for 'Tretayuga', 'Sankarsanhita' for 'Dwaparyuga' and 'Parasharsanhita' for 'Kaliyuga'. After a thorough study of all these, he found that the edict of widow remarriage was present in 'Parasharsanhita'. When he raised the question of widow remarriage, pundits and the elite became infuriated and raised

a hue and cry that it was against the scriptures. In the assembly at the royal palace in Sobhabazar, Kolkata, where all the well-known, influential pundits had gathered from all over the country, Vidyasagar showed the evidence in ‘Parasharsanhita’ and proved beyond doubt that the scriptures contained the edict in favour of widow remarriage.

Then for want of anything better to say in the name of scriptures and their interpretations being defeated, the religious pundits finally argued that widow remarriage could not be allowed due to *lokachar*, i.e. the prevailing custom. Those who were shouting themselves hoarse in the name of scriptures, or religious injunctions, now left these aside and took refuge behind the prevailing custom ! Being cornered, they had no other alternative. In reply what Vidyasagar said brings tears to our eyes, when we read it with a compassionate mind. He said: “You think, with the demise of their husbands, womenfolk turn into lifeless statues; they no longer feel the stings of sorrow, the pangs of pain; the powerful carnal desires are uprooted at once. That this injunction of yours is totally wrong, one can see from so many instances at every step. Think, how due to this inadvertence, what poisonous fruit it breeds in the family life. What a matter of deep sorrow! A country whose men have no compassion, no virtues, no sense of justice and injustice, no distinction between good and evil, no judiciousness, whose prime task and sole virtue is to comply with religious injunctions and customs; may the unfortunate womenfolk not get born in that country”.^[39] He had further said: “Those who are so unfortunate as to become widows at a very tender age suffer intolerable pain throughout their lives, and since there is no custom or practice of widow remarriage, the tide of adultery and foeticide is growing stronger day by day, and this, I think, will be admitted by any person having eyes and ears”.^[40] With what a deep anguish, he had uttered these words out of his humanitarian and democratic outlook,

drawing the attention of everybody to this heart rending cruelty and real crisis. Yet, for a long time, these were going on in this country in the name of religion and custom.

Apart from this, we should remember another of his historic pronouncement. Even though he did not come into contact with Marxism and in spite of having no idea about it, he amazingly revealed a truth acknowledged by history and Marxism and stated: “Women are relatively weaker and due to faulty social regulation, quite subservient to men”.^[41] That woman is subjugated to man; that this is not absolute and eternal; that this happened due to wrong social regulation — to realize this truth in that era and to speak out like this – just think, what a wise and extraordinary mind it manifests. In a later period, it was alone Saratchandra, who boldly championed this stand. Even today, how many people could realize that subordination of women to men is not eternally destined? At a particular stage of social development, following emergence of private ownership, the society became class-divided. On the one side was the oppressor class or the ruling class while on the other side was the oppressed or the ruled class. It was after this advent of class division that women were made subjugated to men through formulation of social regulation using religion as an injunction. At the same time, it was instilled in the social psyche that the virtue of women was to remain subjugated to men. Even today, in the name of religion, it is being sought to impress that ‘to a virtuous wife, husband is her god’ and ‘women are servitors of men’.

The criticism of the ‘Marxist’ pundits lacks Marxist outlook

Some of the so-called Marxist intellectuals in this country have levelled some criticism against Vidyasagar, in which there is not an iota of Marxist way of analysis. I have already mentioned before that I am placing my opinion as I have

understood Vidyasagar from the teachings and correct Marxist outlook provided by Comrade Shibdas Ghosh. Among those intellectuals, the name of Sri Benoy Ghosh is most noteworthy. He had, at one time conducted research on Vidyasagar, collected information and had discussed the subject. These discussions were published in a book titled — ‘*Vidyasagar O Bangali Samaj*’ (Vidyasagar and Bengali society). At a later time he added a chapter titled — ‘*limitations, failures and inconsistencies of Vidyasagar*’ in the conclusion of this book. Before him, guided by the same outlook, the notable intellectual Sri Gopal Halder and subsequently others have also placed their opinions almost in the same vein. Among these intellectuals, since the opinions of Sri Benoy Ghosh is most powerful, I will be mentioning those in my discussions. On the one hand, he says about Vidyasagar: “That he was a non-believer cannot be said, but there is no doubt that he was a monotheist and that his religious belief and his spiritual belief was very much personal in nature”.^[42] That is to say, according to the opinion of Benoy Ghosh, Vidyasagar was a believer in the existence of ‘god’ and ‘one god’ at that, and his belief was of a personal nature. The surprising thing is that in the same chapter, he has given a completely opposite opinion. He writes: “The most surprising inconsistency in Vidyasagar’s character can be observed through the main philosophical outlook of his life. There was no change in his antagonistic attitude to religion and spiritualistic philosophy up to the last days of his life, in spite of old age and failure. In respect to his philosophical outlook and conviction, Vidyasagar cannot be called anything but materialist”.^[43] How could the same person in the same chapter identify Vidyasagar as a believer in ‘god’ and a ‘materialist’ simultaneously? This is truly astonishing. It may be possible for ‘Marxist pundits’ like them alone to write in this way!

In another place, he has written: “It was his desire to bring about a synthesis between the knowledge of the West

with that of the East”.[44] This is also incorrect. He did not desire, rather opposed the synthesis of the knowledge of the two countries. He wanted, not the study of Indian philosophy as such, rather the study of Sanskrit language only in order to develop Bengali and the other languages of this country along with the cultivation of science and philosophy of the West.

Vidyasagar’s opinion about ‘mass education’ and other plans by the British Government has been misinterpreted

It has been alleged against him that he had opposed the mass education scheme contemplated by the Indian government in order to confine education to the upper classes. This is not at all correct. Vidyasagar had said: “...the government should, in my humble opinion confine itself to the education ...on a comprehensive scale, ...mere reading and writing and a little of arithmetic, should not comprise the whole of this education.”[45] In other words, he wanted to ensure that by curbing the scope of receiving higher education and cultivation of knowledge in the name of mass education, there ought not be creation of a bunch of sub-standard half-educated people. Actually, it is the curtailment of whatever little scope was there in the country for this comprehensive education by reduction in budget that he objected to and to the introduction, in its place of only ‘reading’, ‘writing’ and ‘arithmetic’ in the name of mass education. His earnest desire was that at first a group of students, by acquiring the advanced science and knowledge of Europe would free themselves from the narrowness of religious bigotry and tradition to become true man; thereafter they themselves would be able to take on the responsibility to spread education and succeed in liberating the country from darkness. Meanwhile, he had observed that the many schools he had established in one village after another after being promised financial aid by the government, had to be finally closed down

as the aid did not arrive, as the government pleaded financial crisis. His apprehension that the same thing would happen in this case was not unfounded. For, subsequently, this actually happened. Regarding this question, let me narrate to you Vidyasagar's opinion verbatim: "To educate the whole people is certainly desirable". Then he says: "...It may be remarked that notwithstanding the high state of civilization in England, the masses there are no better than their brethren in this country on the point of education".^[46] Hence, he had clearly shown that the Indian government, which was talking big while trying to introduce mass education scheme in this country, though being far more advanced in their country had failed to introduce this education even there. Hence, not only would the mass education scheme not be introduced in this country, but instead, whatever minuscule scope existed for higher education that would also cease. Then he remarked: "...but should mass education be the contemplation of government, then it must make provision for giving education free of all charges". After this, he said: "...it seems almost impracticable in the present circumstances of the country...the government should, in my humble opinion, confine itself to the education...on a comprehensive scale...mere reading and writing and a little of arithmetic, should not comprise the whole of this education. Geography, History, Biography, Arithmetic, Geometry, Natural Philosophy, Moral Philosophy, Political Economy and Physiology should be taught to render it complete...By educating one boy in a proper style the government does more towards the real education of the people, than by teaching a hundred children mere reading, writing and a little arithmetic."^[47] How can it be said after this that Vidyasagar wanted education only for the wealthy and therefore opposed mass education!

It has also been alleged that having a casteist mind, he opposed the admission of anyone other than Brahmins and Vaidyas (two so called upper caste people as per social

stratification among the Hindus) in the Sanskrit College. This is also incorrect. His desire was whatever little scope there was to cultivate science and knowledge of the West — that should remain unimpeded because after acquiring such education, it is this section of students who would act as a force in the battle against religious thoughts, religious fanaticism and the caste system of the society. However, at that time, some students who attended these studies belonged to wealthy, upper caste and very orthodox families. If opportunity for admission was given to students of all castes these families would have stopped sending their sons to study, as a result of which the imparting of such limited education would also stop, as the poor students of the lower strata would not be able to avail of this scope due to their economic backwardness. So, with this compulsion, he had no other alternative but to accept this even against his own desire. He expressed his opinion regarding this: “I see no objection to the admission of other castes than the Brahmans and Vaidyas, or in other words, different orders of Sudras in the Sanskrit College. But as a measure of expediency, I would suggest that at present Kayasthas only be admitted”.^[48] Please note that here also he had placed his ideas transparently and said that ‘as a measure of expediency ... at present’, the other lower castes except Kayasthas should not be admitted, meaning that though not at present, it can be achieved in future after the present situation changes. Therefore, it is clear that he had no superstitions in this matter. He had given this opinion only in the interest of the then education. Nevertheless without taking into consideration any of this, some intellectuals have levelled irrelevant allegations against him. The intellect of these intellectuals must be really admired!

They have raised this allegation that when Miss Carpenter, appointed by the British government, took the initiative to establish ‘Women’s Normal School’ in order to train women as teachers belonging to our country, Vidyasagar

did not co-operate. According to them, this is a self contradiction in Vidyasagar in his ideas regarding education. In reality, there was no self-contradiction. He had observed and realized the hard reality that no native married woman, widow or unmarried woman would be available to take the training to become a woman teacher. So he remarked: "...if the social prejudice of my countrymen did not offer an insuperable bar I would have been the first to second the proposition."^[49] In reality this was what had happened. No students could be found to attend 'Women's Normal School' established by the British government. To find the manifestation of self-contradiction in these ideas of Vidyasagar is nothing but farfetched imagination.

They have also raised the allegation that in the last years of his life, the opinion he held on the question of a Bill enacted by the then legislative council relating to the 'Age of consent on the part of females to sexual intercourse' had flaws and inconsistencies. It is not true that he opposed this Act, rather he argued in favour of the necessity of its implementation and remarked: "I feel that it is a crime on the part of a man to consummate the marriage before a woman's first menstrual period..."^[50] Again, he sounded the caution likewise and said: "It is my opinion that this legislation should be enacted only after placing a proper safeguard for child-wives and in such a way that it does not come into conflict with any religious practice".^[51] You yourselves are the best judge on how and in what way any 'inconsistency' may be found in his ideas through this opinion. When he started his struggle to introduce widow remarriage, at that time even he had mentioned that the superstitious countrymen could not be made to accept this only by logic or enacting legislations unless it could be proved that widow remarriage was approved by the scriptures. That is why he searched out *slokas* from '*Parasarsanhita*' and made good use of it, though the pundits so well versed in the scriptures failed to

counter it, as mentioned earlier; in the end they took refuge behind ‘customs’ to confuse the people. Taking lesson from this bitter experience, he recommended that the legislation should be enacted in such a way that it cannot come into conflict with religious practice; otherwise the superstitious people of the country would in no way accept it. Where is the inconsistency in this? As a realist, he had moved with this outlook from the very beginning, while on the other hand, through the introduction of secular education, he had taken the initiative to free the people from the influence of spiritualist and religious ideas and rear them as rational and scientific-minded individuals. I cannot but say that the intellect of Shri Benoy Ghosh has failed to grasp this.

Allegations and evaluations by Shri Benoy Ghosh and his like concerning Vidyasagar are completely against Marxism

I have to mention with deep regret that Benoybabu and his like, being guided by the ideas of the so-called communist parties of our country, which had deviated from Marxism, have committed grave injustice, in the name of evaluating this noble character. He has remarked about Vidyasagar — “Not that he was always attracted to the progressive ideas expounded in various meetings and assemblies. Had it been so, then he would have been closely associated with ‘Sadharan Gyanoparjika Sabha’ (Association for Attainment of Knowledge), ‘Suhrid Samiti’ (Association of Well wishers) and Brahmo and Christian organizations, and many other organizations standing for social reformation. But his uncompromising, strong individualism stood in the way as the chief obstacle in establishing this relation.”^[52] Not pausing here, Binoy Ghosh has further alleged that “A character with a sense of such self dominating attitude, stubborn and obstinate; having such extreme impressions regarding good and bad; with such a character, it is not possible to conduct any collective

establishment, institution or any assembly or association”.^[53] We have no idea, from where Binoy Ghosh has gathered such information. Rather, it can be observed that at that time, there was neither any progressive movement nor any noble deed with which Vidyasagar was not directly or indirectly related. However, due to ideological reasons, naturally, he did not associate himself with any assembly where religious discussions used to take place or any organization for social reformation based on religion. Throughout his life, in his family or outside, on questions of ideology and ethics, he did never compromise anywhere even an iota, and never gave any indulgence to injustice. To whatever institution he was attached, if any injustice appeared there, he used to sever all relations with it. He was very much strict about this. Should this be characterized as stubbornness and obstinacy? On the contrary, it ought to be recognized as a great quality. Not seeking self-importance, but at all times, in all respects, he always attempted to establish the supremacy of justice and truth. Instead of respectfully recalling these noble virtues, Benoybabu and his likes have discovered in the character of Vidyasagar ‘dominating attitude’, ‘self-importance’, ‘obstinacy’ and ‘stubbornness’. What a bizarre Marxist analysis! This bizarre Marxist knowledge becomes more prominent when Benoy Ghosh remarks about Vidyasagar that “In the last days of his life, he was like an exile, living in the darkness of frustration and melancholy”.^[54]

To prove that Vidyasagar had spent the last days of his life, ‘in the darkness of frustration and melancholy’, Binoy Ghosh in his over-eagerness has referred to the closing parts of a letter written by Vidyasagar quite out of context and omitting the main part: “If I had known before, how worthless and without substance were the people of my country, I would never had intervened in the matter of widow remarriage. At that time, the way everybody encouraged me, I became emboldened and set about this task, otherwise I would have

confined myself to the extent of publicizing marriage and the legislation. By believing the words of persons whom I thought to be patriotic, honest, able and magnanimous, I am completely ruined. Leave aside financial help, nobody even remembers to enquire about the matter”.^[56] I am now reading out the first part of the letter, its main section, which Benoybabu has omitted. There Vidyasagar had written: “You are very much aware that I have not taken your promissory bond for my own necessity. I took it to meet the expenses of widow remarriage. It is not only from you, but from others too, that I have taken promissory bond. I have taken all these, after being assured by the persons who are in support of widow remarriage, that they would aid me financially and with that aid I would easily be able to repay all my debts. But the majority of them have now become averse to keeping their promises of aid. The expenses in this matter are going up day by day, while the income is continuously being squeezed. So, I am in a perilous situation. Had those persons fulfilled their promises, I would not have suffered such a deep crisis. Many had promised such aid, some on a monthly basis, some at one time and some in both ways. Among them, some are giving certain excuses; some even without any excuse have stopped giving aid. Like others, you yourself signed a promissory bond to provide financial aid at a time and on a monthly basis.

At one time you paid only half of the full promised amount and still have not paid the remaining amount, and you have also stopped the monthly payments for some time. ... Anyway, I am unable to return your promissory bond in time of your necessity and for this I am deeply regretful”.^[57] After reading this letter, does it appear that Vidyasagar had spent the last days of his life, like an exile, in the darkness of frustration and melancholy? This letter was written by Vidyasagar in deep pain to Durgacharan Bandyopadhyay, his friend, from whom he had loaned money through a promissory bond and who was repeatedly pressing Vidyasagar to return the bond. After

reading this letter, it can easily be understood what a huge amount of debt he had accrued and being pressed repeatedly by the creditors for repayment, he became upset and with pain and hurt feelings, he wrote this letter to such a friend, who himself had signed a promissory bond for financial help in favour of widow remarriage, but after paying only a small part of the promised amount had stopped payment and was pressing Vidyasagar to return the promissory bond.

Before this, Vidyasagar had accumulated huge debts in order to help Michael Madhusudhan and had to repay these subsequently with great effort. He had to spend huge amounts of money also to carry out the ceremonies of widow remarriage. Since almost all these marriages took place without the approval of the bridegroom's family and as many of the brides' family suffered from poverty, he had to bear the expenses of these ceremonies. He had also taken huge loans on the basis of promised financial aid by those who supported this movement. However, situation became perilous when many of these persons did not provide the assured help. Things came to such a pass that, when Vidyasagar was away from Calcutta, a few of his friends, in order to clear him of all debts had appealed for help in an advertisement in the newspapers without his knowledge. On hearing this, Vidyasagar became so angry that he addressed the people through the newspapers and his words are very significant and instructive. I am now telling you what he said. He said — "...I do not care what people may think or say of me individually, but if I observe, in spite of honest intention behind some one's effort, my principle is compromised, then I feel very sad. Had those, who appealed for public donation by giving advertisement, confined their efforts to that of a widow remarriage fund instead of mentioning my debts, I would not have perhaps felt the necessity to protest so strongly against this initiative, I cannot have even the remotest idea of appealing to the public, in order to meet my personal liabilities. Nevertheless, I have been linked personally

to this advertisement in such a way, I am compelled to protest it strongly, and request those gentlemen who have initiated it to desist from these efforts.”^[58] It is clear from his words that he was very much upset and irritated, when he came to know that instead of helping the widow remarriage fund, for which he had run into debts, they had taken the initiative to clear him personally of all debts. From these words of his, another noble aspect of his life comes to the fore. He did not care if anyone said anything targeting him individually nor did he take into cognizance any abuse or derogatory remark hurled upon him. But he felt hurt and also protested vehemently if his ideology was attacked or maligned. That means ideology was supreme to him. His individual reputation or defamation mattered nothing to him. What a high standard he set up for being followed by others! Before this, he had never asked for anything from anyone for himself nor did ever accept any donations from any of his admirers, even the wealthy persons, businessmen, zamindars or kings for his own need.

Vidyasagar had faced tremendous resistance on this path from reactionary religious fanatics and bigots clinging to feudal ideas; even among those who had supported him in the beginning, many had backed out subsequently and did not provide financial aid despite their earlier assurances. Ramaprasad Roy, the son of Raja Rammohan Roy, a friend of Vidyasagar, had promised to attend a ceremony of widow remarriage, but at the last moment told Vidyasagar — “I am with you, but I will not be able to attend the ceremony”.^[59] An infuriated Vidyasagar, pointing to Rammohan’s portrait hanging on the wall, said — “Take that portrait down, you have no right to keep it”.^[60] On the question of introduction of widow remarriage and abolition of polygamy, even a section of the educated yet conservative elite not only opposed him, but went to the extent of making acrimonious remarks about him. For instance, Bankimchandra, his junior for whom he had great affection, then a rising litterateur, wrote in his novel

Bishbriksha (The Poison Tree): “There is someone named Ishwar Vidyasagar, said to be a big ‘pundit’ who lives in Calcutta — he has published a book supporting widow remarriage. If he, who organizes widow remarriage is a pundit, then whom to call a fool?”^[61] Bankim Chandra had also made satirical remarks in ‘Bangadarshan’ (a Bengali magazine brought out at that time) about Vidyasagar’s opinion on the question of polygamy. Naturally, these caused pain in him. He also suffered more agony when he came to know that in some places the widows were the victims of humiliation and insult by their husbands after marriage; and in some other instances they had abandoned their wives being pressurized by the family and had married again, again in some cases they had done so on their own. On the other hand, a good number of people whom he had helped while they were in peril irrespective of whether they were known or unknown to him, spoke ill of him later. On one occasion, on hearing that someone was vilifying him, he had said regretfully that ‘Tarry a while and let me think; why is he vilifying me? I do not remember having helped him ever.’^[62] How much pain he had to suffer from ungrateful people to talk in this vein! When he was severely hurt by such attacks and vilifications, then only he in a reply to his friend Durgadas Bandyopadhyay, made the aforesaid comments. But Benoy Ghosh and his likes have drawn such a conclusion by referring to just a part of the said letter in an isolated manner without taking into account the context. Their intelligence and power of judgment are indeed par excellence! What all these have been other than a futile attempt to paint such a great personality in bad light. What else can I say! You may like to ponder over it.

Despite all this, ‘frustration and melancholy’ could not in the least touch this noble character. This I can state firmly. To the last day of his life he had struggled tirelessly to uphold his ideas and objectives, even though serious disease had frequently interrupted his work in the last years of his life.

Those persons whose endeavours in beneficial activities foundered on the resistance at that time, and feeling frustrated when they told Vidyasagar about it, his reply to them is worth mentioning. Durgamohan Das, a lawyer in Calcutta High Court, had taken the initiative for the remarriage of his stepmother who was a child-widow, and on being unsuccessful in his first attempt because of strong resistance, he had written a letter to Vidyasagar, expressing his frustration. Vidyasagar's reply to him has become an invaluable treasure. He wrote: "...Those persons having honest and praiseworthy intentions are rare in number while there are thousands and thousands of persons to create hindrance and obstruction in any auspicious or noble work. ...in this condition, to try and to be able to succeed to whatever extent possible should be considered fortunate. Even if this issue has been interrupted, my respect and appreciation for you is still as great as it would have been if it had come to a successful conclusion."^[63] When another person wanted to back out a noble task due to deep frustration both out of various scandals and hindrances, Vidyasagar had admonished him and explained: "When executing an honest task, unless being able to ignore slanders and untoward talk by the people, it is very much wrong to tread this path. People have reviled me from time to time by speaking such dirty words even to the extent that I have provided shelter to young widows in my house since I was a characterless person."^[64] When a person, who even after reaching the fag end of his life can extol such a view; can it be said about him that 'he had spent the last days of his life like an exile in the darkness of frustration and melancholy?'

From the experience of his entire life, a life full of intense struggle, he had, at the twilight of his life, pronounced a historical education by saying: "Long time will be required for the emancipation of this country. The cultivation and harvesting of men with old habits and instincts should be stopped, the seven layers of thick soil should be removed and after that if

cultivation of new men can be accomplished, then only will it be beneficial to the country”.^[65] In other words, the instincts and habits which have developed among the people for a long period, from the ‘education’ provided by religious scriptures and feudal obscurantist ideas — this ‘cultivation’, that is, the then prevailing system of education has to be stopped first. Then ‘the seven layers of thick soil’ have to be removed, in other words, the filth that had accumulated within the various sections of the society from the impact of that ‘education’ has to be cleaned. It is only then that ‘cultivation of new people’, in other words, introduction of scientific, rational, secular humanist system of education has to be introduced. A long time would be needed to complete this task, and as long as it would not get done, the country too would not be saved.

Benoybabu and his likes have concluded that ‘Vidyasagar was a failure in the social struggle’. Is it proper to make such a statement? At that time, the great and noble movement which he initiated has by its onward flow crossed the boundaries of that age and come across subsequent eras after that and is continuing even today. If his failure is determined by not gaining the support of the majority of the people in his lifetime, then Buddha, Hajrat Muhammad, Jesus Christ, Rousseau, Voltaire, Marx, Engels – all of them should be considered to be failures in history! In no era could the prevailing old society accept new ideas in the beginning, rather obstructed these in every way possible. This harsh truth of history cannot be considered as failures of those movements. Benoy Ghosh and his likes also discovered the cause of his imagined ‘failure’ as having limited himself to the field of struggle within his ‘own class’, in other words, the middle class and then again not within all sections of the middle class but only among the urbanized and educated middle class. First, as to the allegation that Vidyasagar’s field of work and struggle was limited only to towns; even his diehard opponents could never raise such an accusation; rather when a section of the urbanized and so-

called educated ‘babus’ were absorbed in various scholastic discourses about Brahma and such other theories, while another section was given to revel in luxury; it was Vidyasagar who used to carry the message of the movement of widow remarriage and the new system of education going on foot to remote villages one after another. Who else but the enlightened section of the middle class was there to carry on the movement at that period? The working class? Where was the working class at that time? The working class develops after the establishment of industry only! Then who else are Benoybabu and his likes speaking about? Are they speaking about the religiously bigoted peasantry sunk in feudal thoughts and ideas? Did such peasantry raise the lofty banner of Renaissance thoughts and democratic revolution in Europe? What does history say? History tells that in the stage of mercantile capital, it was the burghers of the towns, in other words, the enlightened section among those belonging to the towns who raised the banner of the nascent Renaissance thoughts. And later on, in the interest of development of industrial capital, the educated section belonging to the bourgeois class raised the banner of democratic revolution and freeing the serfs from religious tutelage rallied them in this revolution. Even those pioneers, who for the first time expounded the ideas of the working class revolution themselves, were sons and daughters of the enlightened upper or middle class by birth. It is for this reason that Lenin remarked — “According to their social status, the founders of modern socialism, Marx, Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia”.^[66] Therefore the evaluation of Vidyasagar by Benoybabu and his likes are nothing but a figment of imagination. As because they only practised distorted Marxism and remained confined within the middle class thought, culture and life style in the era of proletarian revolution, they only ended up in raising such childish logic with the vile intention to undermine such a noble character.

Erroneous interpretation of Vidyasagar's stand regarding Sepoy Mutiny

They have questioned Vidyasagar's silence on the issue of Sepoy mutiny. Of course, Vidyasagar had opposed the closure of Hindu College for the purpose of establishing army barracks there. These so-called Marxists have alleged — Why did he not support the Sepoy Mutiny? Was it due to the fear of the British rulers or was it due to loyalty to them? Those who have the least knowledge about the character of Vidyasagar knew very well that he did never hesitate to stand for truth fearlessly in any situation. When the important and respectable gentlemen of Calcutta, in their penchant for acquiring titles like 'Raja', 'Prince', 'Roybahadur' were engaged in contest with each other to prove their devotion and allegiance to the British Government, this erudite man, wearing simply sandals, a 'dhoti' and a wrapper was absorbed in his historic task, keeping himself far away from all such lures. Not to have any privileges; but only in the interest of spreading education in this country, and for introduction of widow remarriage, in an effort to end polygamy and child marriage sometimes he needed to approach some high government officials; but he did so with his head held high, and when necessity arose he had stood up boldly against government policy. Many of us are not aware that he did never attend the ceremonies to accept titles and medals given to him by the British government. Even when such medals or certificates conferring the titles were sent to him, he refused to accept those in utter disdain. So, to describe this Vidyasagar as fearful and faithful to the British government is nothing but sheer foolishness on the part of these intellectuals.

Then why did he neither lend support nor oppose Sepoy Mutiny? To understand this, the character of Sepoy Mutiny has to be discussed. These intellectuals say that Marx and Engels have ascertained that the 'Mutiny' was the 'first Indian

war of independence'. Is this true? I have gone through the book with this title meticulously, but nowhere did I find this evaluation about Sepoy Mutiny by Marx and Engels. They have called it 'revolt'. That 'revolt' and 'war of independence' are not one and the same can be understood even by common sense. However these intellectuals failed to understand this difference. At that time, did the industrial capital in India gain so much strength as to give birth to an Indian sense of nationhood or nationalism? Did the economic and political ingredients mature to that stage where these could develop? Did the rebel Sepoys reflect the desire for a sovereign Indian state or did they raise the slogan for it – a slogan which could only have been raised from the aspiration of the national capital? What was the main ingredient in this Sepoy Mutiny? It was mainly religious in character because a rumour had been spread that bullets contained ingredients of food material banned by both Hindus and Muslims. This injured the religious sentiments of both communities. And they even alleged that the introduction of widow remarriage was insulting to Hindu religion. Another reason for this mutiny was that the Sepoys were insulted and humiliated by English officers, and they were the victims of discrimination in wages. The representatives of feudal order, a section of 'Kings', 'Badshas', 'Nawabs' afraid of their waning powers attempted to use the Sepoy Mutiny in a bid to regain their supremacy. So, come whatever, it cannot be called the 'Indian war of independence' by any means. Marx, Engels too did not call it thus. A compilation of the reports containing remarks by Marx and Engels were published in book form in 1966 in the Soviet Union using above title during the revisionist leadership's rule.

Vidyasagar had expressed no opinion about this mutiny and so we have to comment on his role based on our inference on the anvil of rational analysis of circumstantial evidences and facts. It appears that he was unable to support it since the reason of its occurrence and the demands it

framed were mainly religious in nature and had it been victorious, it would have again brought back the reign of the medieval royalty as a result of which religious bigotry would have increased. Again, since the sepoys were humiliated and insulted by their British masters, he did not oppose the mutiny either, even though the renowned intellectuals of the then Bengal namely Maharshi Debendranath, Iswar Chandra Gupta, Jadunath Sarbadhikari, Durgadas Bandyopadhyay, Rajani Kanta Gupta and others opposed the mutiny. Vidyasagar, however, did not join their ranks.

Therefore, the analysis of Benoybabu and his likes bear no relation to the Marxist methodology of analysis. Needless to say, I am not blaming Benoybabu for it. He has authored the book titled 'Vidyasagar and Bengali Society' with honesty and painstaking effort. However the persons with whom he was connected, whom he considered as Marxists had erroneous outlook and misled him which led him to make such remarks and wrongly evaluate such a great man. The main reason of so much of degradation of the so called communists of this country has been their utter failure to grasp the kernel of Marxism. So, they only showed their ignorance and made blunders in properly evaluating a doyen of Indian Renaissance like Vidyasagar and his worthy successor Saratchandra. In order to develop ourselves as genuine communists and acquire higher communist values, we have to move forward in the finest continuity of the high standard of uncompromising humanist trend of the bygone period of Indian renaissance and of course by having a necessary break with it because of change of time and task.

Vidyasagar had set up a glorious example of what true self-respect is

I would now like to mention some aspects of rare and glorious qualities of Vidyasagar. These should be emulated by all of us, particularly by those who desire to acquire higher and

noble character. He has established a perfect example of genuine self respect. At all times did he hold his head high, not once even did he, for any reason whatsoever, lower himself to the slightest extent. At that time, in order to derive various privileges from the British rulers many persons in Calcutta used to fawn on them. Vidyasagar was just the opposite. During his tenure in Sanskrit College as the Principal, the way in which Vidyasagar had appropriately countered the insulting behaviour of Mr. Kerr, the then Principal of Hindu College, was well-known to almost all of us from our childhood days. However, how many of us have understood its true significance and taken lesson accordingly? To flatter the ruling clique in order to safeguard or gain employment or promotion; to swallow humiliation in order to obtain various advantages or privileges – all this can still be found in many so-called educated persons even today. But in that period in British ruled India, what boldness and courage had Vidyasagar exhibited by putting his feet with his slippers on up on the table in front of Mr. Kerr in reciprocation of the latter's extremely insulting behaviour! Mr. Kerr had previously behaved in the same manner with Vidyasagar in Hindu College. He could have, if he so desired, silently digested Mr. Kerr's behaviour or at best he could have complained to the higher authorities, but he did not take that course of action. Vidyasagar did not take this as a personal insult but considered it to be an insult to the Indian people whom the British rulers and masters frequently used to call 'uncivilized', while boasting that they were 'civilized'. So, in reply to the show-cause letter issued by Mr. Mouat, the secretary of the Education Commission, while appraising him of the entire incident, Vidyasagar, on behalf of the insulted Indian people practically lashed out at the British rulers by writing — "I thought that we were uncivilized, while the English were civilized and it is from the English that we should learn civilized behaviour. I thought that the manner in which I was welcomed by Mr. Kerr was the correct manner of welcome in

the civilized way. It is only for this reason that I have welcomed Mr. Kerr in the same way. If I have committed any offence by this, none other than Mr. Kerr himself is responsible for that offence.”^[67] It is with this intense spirit and vigour that he said Shivnath Shastri — “There is no such king in India, whom I cannot kick promptly on the nose with my slipper-clad-feet”.^[68]

When Rasamoy Dutta, the then Secretary of the Sanskrit College, even after promising Vidyasagar, the then Deputy Secretary, that he would forward his proposals to the higher authorities did not do so, Vidyasagar resigned in protest. At that time, he was suffering from acute financial crisis. Rasamoy Dutta asked an acquaintance of Vidyasagar: “How will he fare, now that he has left the job?”^[69] Having heard that, Vidyasagar’s firm answer was — ‘Vidyasagar will make do with selling potatoes and vegetables, he will make do by running a stationary shop, but Vidyasagar will never be in any employment which does not confer honour and dignity.’^[70]

On another occasion when the Indian Government disregarded his opinion and accepted the recommendations of Mr. Ballantyne in Sanskrit College, he left that college for good, notwithstanding the fact that he was running huge debts at that time. When one of his admirers, an Englishman, had expressed anxiety regarding this, he had replied: “I will take only rice with salt; I will manage by taking food once daily instead of twice; if necessary, I will take food on alternate days.”^[71] How many can give such an answer even today! As a mark of special honour, the then Indian Government had decided to nominate him for C.I.E. medal. Vidyasagar, after coming to know of it beforehand left Calcutta so that he would not have to receive the medal. The government too refused to give up. When he returned to Calcutta after a few days, the government sent an employee and an orderly with the medal. On observing that the government servants were waiting for tips, what Vidyasagar said in utter disregard for the medal was

remarkable. How many can repeat it even today? He said: “Let me tell you something which will be advantageous to both you and me. Take this medal and sell it to a tradesman in a shop. Whatever you get, share it between you two.”^[72] In the same way, he had refused other medals and titles. The Provincial Governor of Bengal was one of his admirers. One had to apply beforehand to seek an appointment with the Provincial Governor. However there was a special list known as ‘Private entry’ and those persons whose names were on this list could meet the Provincial Governor without prior application. Vidyasagar’s name was on this list. Vidyasagar objected to it, met the Provincial Governor, had his name removed from the list and said: “I should not avail myself of any advantage, which has been denied to the public.”^[73] At that time, to enter the Asiatic Society, European shoes had to be worn. When Vidyasagar went there, wearing native slippers, he was not allowed to enter at first and though immediately the authority recognizing him intervened and he was repeatedly requested to enter wearing his slippers, he refused. Regarding Vidyasagar’s habit of wearing slippers, Ramendrasundar Tribedi has expressed a valuable opinion: “It is not that he did not use any footwear other than slippers simply because he had a deep attachment to the latter. It is exactly on observing that we had started using boots by discarding the time honoured native slippers that Vidyasagar’s fondness for them had grown all the more. In fact, these slippers served as an expression of his self- respect and pride.”^[74] When the established section of the elite in Calcutta, adorned in costly native and foreign attire, amused themselves in revelries and raised a storm of pedantic discussions of theories, while their thinking and conduct was still enchained in religious superstition and conservativeness, Vidyasagar, wearing only a simple rural dhoti and wrapper used to carry the torch of the most advanced modern knowledge of the West. This is why Rabindranath with great respect said: “He

adorned himself in simple native garments but nevertheless he was able to accept Western knowledge with warm hospitality. ... He was youth incarnate and gained strength on being crowned by eternal youthfulness. This sense of eternal youthfulness and progressiveness in him, I worship most, because it is he who has prepared the path for us to follow in this country.” [75]

Vidyasagar never compromised on questions of ethics and morality

Vidyasagar has shown extraordinary greatness in another aspect too. Throughout his life, in family life as well as public life, he never compromised on questions of ethics and morality, in the least. It can be seen that many distinguished men, even though uncompromising in many aspects are found to compromise on certain matters, particularly in their family lives. These are rationalized by the logic: ‘It is such an insignificant matter!’ However, Vidyasagar is a rare exception in this respect too. I have already referred to some examples and feel it necessary to mention some more. Everybody is aware what deep respect he had for his grandmother and parents. There are many true stories about it, but also some exaggerations, interweaving truth and falsehood. But despite his respect for them, as he did not believe in god, any form of worship, rites, incantations and such others, he refused to be initiated regardless of their insistence. He was steadfast in his own conviction, even though they were deeply pained by it. He did not go to Dakshineswar even though Ramakrishna himself had come to his house to invite him. A few days before his death, when his daughter performed *hom* or the lighting of the ‘sacred’ fire; in spite of her plaintive appeal to him, he refused to participate in it. All this I have mentioned before, still I like to acquaint you with some more incidents. He was happy when he came to know that his son had voluntarily agreed to marry a widow. His brother had

informed him that their relatives would cease to have any relations with the family if this marriage took place, and so it should be stopped. In reply he had said that he considered the movement to introduce widow remarriage as the greatest deed of his life. For this, he was ready to sacrifice anything, even his life. In resounding tones he had proclaimed — “I am not a mere slave of customs. I will do what is necessary and which should be done for the welfare of the society and me. I will never be constrained by the fear of people or my relatives”.^[76] Again when his son later on began to dishonour his wife, got involved in deplorable deeds, Vidyasagar, in spite of objections from his wife, parents and brothers disowned his only son by publicly declaring that “Srijukta Narayan Bandyopadhyay, known to all as my son, has become wayward and has gone astray. For this and for other serious reasons, I have severed all association and relations with him...”.^[77] On this question, Vidyasagar had severe differences with his wife and his relations with her deteriorated, but nevertheless he was steadfast in his decision. Surya Kumar Adhikari, Vidyasagar’s son-in-law, was the Principal of Metropolitan College. All of a sudden, one day, Vidyasagar came to know that three to four thousand rupees in the fund could not be accounted for. He called his son-in-law immediately, rebuked him sharply and terminated his services. Even though he introduced widow remarriage, Vidyasagar for certain reasons had expressed disapproval about a particular widow remarriage in his native village and had asked the others to withdraw from it, but his brothers ignored his opinion and made arrangements so that the marriage could take place. He was so much injured by this that he informed his parents, his brothers and the people in his native village that though his financial aid to the family, schools and the charitable institutes established by him would go on uninterruptedly, he would never again visit his native place. Thereafter, though he lived for twenty more years,

never again did he visit his native place. There are many such incidents, known and unknown. Many intelligent persons would say that — ‘What was the need for such excesses? He could have easily accepted some minor wrongs and injustices of trifling nature’. No, Vidyasagar was unable to do this. It is for this reason that he attained such greatness of character. Within the family and in public life, everywhere, he was an uncompromising warrior against any kind of falsehood and injustice. There are many who deliver speeches in public on justice and injustice, make tall talks, but in deeds and behaviour, they act in a diametrically opposite manner. They are hypocrites. Now-a-days, in our country, particularly in the field of politics, their number is ever increasing. There is another section who desire to tread the path of ethics and morality but when their personal interests are at stake or when they run into trouble, they back out. Again there is another section, even among us who follow the path of ethics and morality in some aspects, but due to some weakness, particularly regarding their personal and family lives, they compromise. Today, we have to learn from this great character, how to wage an uncompromising struggle everywhere within the family and in public life in accordance with ethics and morality. When Vidyasagar had reflected an uncompromising attitude in his behaviour towards his grandmother, his parents, his brother as well as his wife and son, he did not bother what would people think or say about that, how would the society react to it or whether anyone would feel injured because of his conduct. He was steadfast in his truthful allegiance to ideology. Had he compromised in certain aspects, even then, due to his other noble deeds, his name and fame would have remained untarnished in history. But he was unable to even think in that way. His only desire was to live a life based on humanist values with high ethics and morality, which was the most advanced ideology of that era, and that is what he did. Whenever it was necessary, he

did not hesitate to fight against the then superstitions, obsolete and conservative society, even alone. How many characters can be found in history like this?

He has shown the highest standard of the then ethical values

In this context, I would like to provide a few more examples of the advanced ethical outlook of Vidyasagar. If anybody, even someone unknown to him would point out any mistakes made by him in any matter, he would accept it immediately and gratefully. In the book titled ‘Karunasagar Vidyasagar’, we find an incident. Muhammad Riazuddin Ahammad, very young in age, living in Barishal District of the then East Bengal had a feeling that the book ‘Bodhoday’ contained certain errors. After much thinking and hesitation, he wrote a letter to Vidyasagar informing him of his observations. He never imagined that he would get a reply. Yet, a few days later, he was astonished to find that Vidyasagar had acknowledged the errors and expressed his gratitude to him. Thereafter as long as Vidyasagar was alive, every publication of ‘Bodhoday’ contained the acknowledgement of gratitude for pointing out the errors. There are some other incidents like this. He used to say: “Deceiving anyone knowingly or being involved in some deed, and then to behave in a way even partly opposed to it – both are very bad deeds.”^[78] He followed this ethics in letter and spirit. He used to help many unknown persons in trouble. Some used to take help from him by way of falsehood. Once, one of them was caught in the act. Vidyasagar’s associate told him: “Many deceive you like this because you are too good natured”. Vidyasagar’s invaluable reply was - “In order to help others, one has to be prepared to get deceived a few times. To be deceived is better than to deceive others.”^[79] In this way, he had been deceived sometimes but neither did he deceive anyone for any reason

whatsoever, nor did he ever withhold his help. His opponents had spread so many slanders, told so many lies about him, injured him in so many ways, but he neither lost his patience nor had ever counter-attacked anybody. He had refuted his adversaries with razor sharp reasoning. What a high ethical standard did he reflect in his conduct towards his adversaries and slanderers can be found in his conduct towards Bankimchandra. Bankimchandra in his book titled 'Bishbriksha' had made very offensive remarks about him; in 'Bangadarshan' too he had made satirical and adverse comments against him, but Vidyasagar though pained by these, levelled no criticism in turn — on the contrary he looked upon Bankimchandra and his contribution to Bengali literature with affection and praise. In this regard, Vidyasagar's conduct serves as an example to us even today. Some adulator thinking that Vidyasagar would be pleased if he criticized Bankimchandra once told him — "Did you know that Bankimchandra works as a Deputy Magistrate under the British throughout the day and spends the night drinking in company of dancing girls". Vidyasagar to the adulator's great disappointment answered — "Is that so? Then my respect for Bankim has now increased more. If after a whole day's work, he spends the night doing all these, how does he manage to author such beautiful books?"^[80] Just think, what high standard Vidyasagar reflected as a man.

**His guiding philosophy of life was not 'kindness' or
'compassion' but to help people in distress**

To think and speak of Vidyasagar as an 'ocean of compassion' is according to me wrong. I am showing kindness, doing charity implies that someone needy is begging and I am giving him something from above. There is a sense of self-satisfaction and vanity in it. Many engage in acts of compassion and charity, thinking of the after-life, while another section does it to acquire name and fame. Vidyasagar had no

such intension, because he neither believed in after-life, nor did he run after name and fame. He never forgot the abject poverty in which he had spent his childhood and that he had been able to succeed with help from others only as well as his own arduous struggle. That is why, when Jaladhar Sen, the litterateur, in his teens, went to seek help from Vidyasagar and broke into tears while recounting his poverty stricken condition, Vidyasagar tenderly wiped away his tears and assured him with the following words – “Poverty is not a crime. I was just as poor as you are.”^[81] In the same way, he had made arrangements for the poet Nabin Chandra Sen to stay and study in Calcutta because of his financial distress. After getting established, both of them had recollected Vidyasagar’s contribution in their lives repeatedly with deep reverence. With his empathic compassionate mind, he had helped so many known and unknown persons in villages and towns, without ever recalling those acts and without informing them anyone. To stand by the side of a man in danger, to help him in time of distress or when he is helpless was to him a bounden duty. Nobody in danger had ever returned from him without getting aid. Even though someone might not have had approached him, on hearing of his distress from others, Vidyasagar had sent help. What he had earned, he had given away with all his heart, even running into debts to help others. To help others in times of distress had become the guiding principle of his life. Vidyasagar’s will is also a historic document. Since he did not believe in religion, he left nothing for any religious institute. The will contained a huge list of beneficiaries which included poor relatives, persons unrelated, mothers who had lost their sons, widows, wives abandoned by their husbands, impoverished families along with many educational institutes and charitable dispensaries. He had given away everything in such a manner that his two daughters, who subsequently suffered abject poverty had to seek the help of others even to the extent that one of them had to work as a

domestic help in a family in Kashi. In 1925, on 19th April, in the Bengali daily *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, this pathetic story along with the appeal of Dr. (Mrs) Bidhumukhi Chowdhury was published. On reading it, one can hardly hold back one's tears. She writes — "...The second daughter of noble Vidyasagar, the greatest donor in Bengal, came to me to seek help. Both she and her younger sister are spending their days in great distress. ... There are still many descendants in Bengal whose forefathers had been economically sustained by Vidyasagar. Even if not economically nurtured, there is scarcely any person in Bengal who is not indebted to Vidyasagar either directly or indirectly. So, it is our expectation that everybody, cherishing the memory of that great man would strongly resolve to rescue his children from such sufferings".^[82] Needless to say, many responded to this appeal. Vidyasagar, who had given away everything, did not calculate that his children might get into distress and left nothing for them — how would history view this Vidyasagar?

Not wealthy persons, but ordinary poor people were closest to Vidyasagar

He had said: "As long as I live, I will try to do my utmost for others".^[83] I have already told you that Vidyasagar carried in his heart an infinite sense of empathy and compassion for the impoverished and deprived people. Now, in this context I like to recollect some of his pronouncements and a few incidents, whose significance is immeasurable. He knew that all the wealth of society is produced by the tireless labour of these poor people, but these products are consumed by the wealthy. So, he condemned the educated wealthy and said — "We look down upon the lower classes with more abhorrence than an animal. Alas! The vanity and egotism of the so-called educated class is so much that they even feel constrained to include within the human class those who are the real strength and the basis of hope and

confidence in this country.”^[84] Throughout his life, he had avoided this so-called educated section of elite as far as possible and used to consider the destitute, impoverished people as one of his own and would associate with them. He said, — “However indigent a condition of a person may be, it is in no way proper for him to serve others like a slave and not to preserve his own honour and dignity”,^[85] so that the impoverished do not renounce their self-respect and act virtually as slaves to the wealthy, due to their indigence.

One day Maharaja Jatindramohan Thakur was going somewhere riding a horse-drawn carriage. On his way, he saw Vidyasagar sitting on the pavement in front of a grocery, smoking the hookah (country tobacco inhaling instrument) and chatting with some people. When he met Vidyasagar later, he asked in a critical vein — ‘Why do you associate with that type of people?’ In reply, Vidyasagar’s famous remark was — “You see, they are part of my family, ... our family life is not with kings and Emperors....I can leave you, but I cannot leave them”.^[86] Note that he says, he belongs to the family of the ordinary poor people; he could break the company of the wealthy but not these poor people who were his near and dear ones. Another matter should be mentioned. He did not practise the customs in regard to higher and lower castes, Hindus and Muslims and untouchability. During famine he organized kitchens in Birsingha (his native village) for charitable mass distribution of food as well as to provide shelter. He came to hear that the women belonging to the so called lower castes namely *hnari*, *dom*, *muchi*, etc., were facing great inconvenience since there was no hair oil for them. So, he procured oil for them. But the people who were distributing oil were found poring that on the palms of the so called lower caste women from above lest they should touch whom they consider as untouchables. One day, on observing this, Vidyasagar himself came forward and rubbed oil on their hair as if a mother was nourishing the hair of her child. In

deep respect Rabindranath wrote — “...from within his compassion, an unhesitating and bold humanism blossoms out, observing which with our eternally habituated attitude towards these lower classes, our mind and buried human valuescannot but be attracted in reverence”.^[87] In Bardhaman, (a district town) when cholera broke out in epidemic form in the Muslim neighbourhood, he rushed there with his homeopathic medicines. He would take any patient on his own lap to give him medicines and to nurse him. As usual, he did not care to go by social custom of religious discrimination or untouchability. In this context, another incident is worth mentioning. One day, in the scorching heat of a summer noon, he was once carrying on a conversation with several established persons in the drawing room of a wealthy person. There was a large country cloth fan providing a flow of air in the room. At this time, an old doorman (darwan), sweating heavily came to Vidyasagar to give him a letter. Seeing him in this condition, Vidyasagar was insistent and made him sit by his side to take rest for some time. This infuriated the persons present and after the doorman had left, they asked — “How could you allow a doorman to sit with us?” What he told in reply would be ever remembered. He said, “How would you judge the matter — by the norm of Hinduism or by some other standard? Listen, according to Hindu views this doorman is a Brahmin from Kanauj. They even don’t touch our water. Had your father or forefathers been here today, the dust from his feet, instead of falling on this carpet would have found a place on their heads. Again, if we judge according to another view, I say, today we all get monthly salaries to the amount of five hundred, seven hundred and one thousand rupees. But that doorman gets a monthly salary of mere five rupees. In this condition, I cannot disregard him, as my father used to work in a shop in Barabazar area of Kolkata for the same salary. Before looking down upon him, I have to do the same to my

own father”.^[88] Many can make tall talks, but how many can honour the dignity of the poor in this way? This is why he was an extraordinary man.

This extraordinary aspect is revealed in another incident. In a male dominated society, a section of women, after being exploited, deprived and deceived, are compelled to stand in the streets, turning themselves into commodities in the flesh market. The so-called civilized society abuses them as ‘morally degraded’ or ‘prostitutes’ and turns away in disgust thus preserving their own ‘purity’. Vidyasagar knew why and due to whose fault they were suffering such extreme misery. One evening he was passing through Bowbazar area of central Kolkata when he saw a woman standing in the rain, getting wet while trying to find a client. Vidyasagar went up to her and handed over all that was in his pocket with the words — ‘Go back my mother, do not get drenched any further’. With what compassion did he address her as his mother! Biharilal Sarkar writes that when he returned home at night, Vidyasagar frequently used to give these distressed women financial help in order to send them back. Another incident should be mentioned; otherwise the discussion on Vidyasagar would remain incomplete. This is an incident occurred a few days before his death. He was very sick then. His health had broken and he was bedridden. His admirers were insisting that he should go to Karmatar (a place in Burdwan district) as the climate there was good, and if he went there he would recover as happened earlier. At times, being disgusted with the so called urbanized elitist environment of Kolkata, he used to go to Karmatar as he was immensely attracted by the natural simplicity and honesty of the *Santhal* population (a tribal group) living there. Amongst them, he could find desired mental peace. While being with them, he used to treat the ailing ones with his knowledge of homeopathy and also do various social works. But this time, the greatman in his death-bed was in tears and did not give

consent to it. What he said then will always be remembered. He said: “Had I been in possession of huge wealth, I could have gone and stayed there without any anxiety and both my body and mind would have been in a state of well being. Do I have that means? Look, at Karmatar, he who could easily consume a seer of rice, soup of half a seer of Bengal gram (a kind of pulse), half a seer of potato and a seer of meat has to subsist now-a-days on a poa (one-fourth of a seer, the then standard weight measuring count like 1 Kilogram of today) of maze-flour, for being unable to procure anything else to eat. If I go there, I would consume good food while at the same time I would have to see the ‘Santals’ (tribal people) all around die of starvation — how can I bear this?”^[89] Even at death’s door, this anguish for the impoverished starving people, placing them even above his own survival — how many people in human history could do this? All of you know that this number is insignificant and they are the ones who have lived on and will continue to live on through the ages.

His historic remark about the limitation of the National Congress

Finally, another matter needs to be discussed. You are aware that during the period of Vidyasagar, the freedom movement in our country had not yet attained its full development. During the fag end of his life, a section of the enlightened society was being influenced in a scattered manner by the democratic republic, democratic revolution and democratic thoughts of Europe. Meanwhile, a part of the Indian comprador capital had got transformed into industrial capital in a scattered manner though it had not yet attained homogeneity and had not yet reached the stage of national capital. However it was slowly advancing towards this goal, as a result of which nationalism was developing in an embryonic form in the womb of the country. In this

condition, a maxim presented as a tale in the book titled 'Kathamala' authored by Vidyasagar has subsequently acted as an invaluable guidance in the Swadeshi (freedom) movement. A dog is chained throughout the day and unleashed only at night by its master, who then gives the dog very good food. And a tiger roams about freely but is starving. On observing this, the dog advises the tiger — 'Come to me, accept these chains then you will get a lot of good food.' The tiger in reply said: 'It is thousand times better to suffer the pangs of hunger by being free than to enjoy royal privileges by being downright subjugated.' To the freedom fighters in different countries the significance of this brief remark is boundless. Later, in the book titled 'Pather Dabi' written by Saratchandra, the revolutionary leader Sabyasachi also echoed the same sentiment — "In exchange of freedom, we do not want to live in a heavenly kingdom remaining subjugated". In the last years of Vidyasagar's life, in 1886, the National Congress was formed by some wealthy 'babus' to act as a platform for appeals and requests to the British Government. In the next year, on hearing that preparations were going on to organize the second session of this Congress in Calcutta, the remark made by Vidyasagar has not lost its great significance even today. On observing that the leaders of the then Congress did not give any thought whatsoever to the starving people of the country, he became aggrieved and exclaimed — "The 'babus' are active for the Congress; they are bragging, delivering speeches, boasting of saving India; every day thousands are dying of starvation, but nobody is paying attention to it".^[90] When several organizers approached him, and invited to participate in the Congress session, he asked them directly — "To achieve the country's freedom, if it is finally necessary would you take up the sword?" On hearing this question, the persons who had come to invite him became perplexed and began to falter in their reply. Vidyasagar understood their answer and told them

clearly, “Then you proceed without me.”^[91] That means, he had no intention to join the Congress who did not care for the starving impoverished people of the country and who had no intention of conducting armed struggle against the British.

The compromising national bourgeois leadership along with the so-called Marxists did not let Vidyasagar’s struggle succeed

A few years after Vidyasagar’s death, the ideas of nationalism, after its infancy, had reached early youth. And 14-15 years after his death, during the movement against the partition of Bengal, petty-bourgeois revolutionism came to the fore for the first time. In various states in India, revolutionary groups appeared in a scattered manner. In the meantime, Indian capital had consolidated itself and developed into national capital. It gained in strength by grasping the opportunity arising from the First World War, and it began to use the National Congress as a weapon to fulfill its own nationalistic designs. Again, earlier in the international arena, world capitalism had crossed its previous stage of free competition and had reached the stage of monopoly capital and imperialism, as a result of which it lost its progressive character and in the process acquired reactionary characteristics. Indian national capitalism had been born in the reactionary stage of world capitalism as a result of which it was at its inception and not as revolutionary as the European capitalism of the early stage when it was a rising force. On the other hand, in 1917, in Russia under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin, the anti-capitalist working class revolution was crowned with success as a result of which, the national capitalist class of our country beset with the fear complex of armed revolution began to play an anti-revolutionary compromising role. The National Congress also moved along that line. Again, during Vidyasagar’s time, our society had

been unable to accept his ideas of secular humanism free from religious prejudices. At that time, the entire society was under the sway of spiritualist religious thinking. The British government was also, for obvious reason, not willing to introduce secular education based on scientific outlook as proposed by Vidyasagar. It is true that both Ramkrishna and Vivekananda had deep respect for Vidyasagar. But both of them made a persistent effort to revive moribund Hindu religion as against the secular humanist outlook upheld by Vidyasagar. This obstructed furtherance of the noble movement initiated by Vidyasagar. Bankimchandra opposed Vidyasagar from a conservative outlook. In spite of having profound respect for Vidyasagar, Rabindranath was also, in ultimate analysis, guided by the compromising trend of Indian Renaissance. So the ideology and outlook of Vidyasagar were not reflected in the literary creations of Rabindranath. The only exception was Saratchandra, who as a revolutionary humanist litterateur had pronounced boldly in his celebrated novel 'Pather Dabi' (Demand of the road) that, "All religions are false — superstitions of the ancient times. There is no greater enemy of humanity than this". With deep pain, Saratchandra had observed: "When late Vidyasagar succeeded to legalize widow remarriage with the help of the government, he only sought to justify it based on religious scriptures. He did not pay that attention to the deeply entrenched Hindu religious mindset. So the bill was passed, but the Hindu society did not accept it. His magnificent effort became infructuous. He had to sustain a barrage of blame-disgrace-persecution. But none of the litterateurs of his time stood by him. Perhaps they could not accept his novel idea and outlook. May be they were too afraid of social reprehension they might had to face. Whatever may be the reason, the fact remains that the flow of this modern idea got choked. It could not permeate into the different strata of the society or penetrate into the heart of the common households.

But if it were not so, if the litterateurs did not remain so indifferent, they would have no doubt faced blame-disgrace-persecution. But, in that event, we might have seen a different mould of the Hindu society. The innovative idea of a beautiful society that appeared ugly, rude and absurd in the eyes of the then Hindus might have bewitched us now, after half a century, with the opulence of exquisiteness.^{92]} In order to remove this deficiency, Saratchandra in his various literary creations upheld the great cause Vidyasagar fought for with so aesthetically superb artistry, that brought tears rolling down the eyes of the readers, exuded deep and intense feeling in their hearts and thereby the ideology and life struggle of Vidyasagar could be reached out to the different strata of the society, even to the innermost quarters of the households. Saratchandra did not remain confined to the issue of widow remarriage only. Following the footsteps of Vidyasagar and subsequently being influenced by socialist thoughts, he fought against spiritualism, traditionalism as well the concept eternal immutable truth through his literary creations, essays and speeches. Even though Saratchandra conveyed the ideology and struggle of Vidyasagar, religious humanism remained as the main trend in this country and this was nurtured and used in their own class interest by the bourgeoisie who turned against science and reason due to their fear complex of armed revolution. Naturally this bourgeois class in the cultural field entered into compromise with feudal ideas, spiritualistic and religious thinking, while in the political field, they gave the freedom movement a reformist orientation. The National Congress played its role accordingly. As a result what was inevitable had happened. Because, the petty-bourgeois revolutionism could not become an alternative to the mainstream freedom movement dominated by national capitalism, and the so-called communists failed to build up a genuine Marxist movement. So, the genuine revolutionary working class movement failed to develop. Nor could it,

through an alliance with the petty bourgeois revolutionaries, show the way of an alternative struggle against the compromising reformist forces. Had there been a genuine Marxist party upholding the interest of the working class as an alternative to the National Congress, the political representative of the compromising national bourgeoisie, which was opposed to armed revolution, only and only that party could carry through the noble ideology of Vidyasagar. It is a matter of regret that so called Marxist parties like the CPI, CPI (M) and the Naxalites played just the opposite role. It is for this reason only that such a noble struggle and arduous endeavour by Vidyasagar could not succeed then. It is with deep sorrow that I am compelled to say so. What is the outcome of its perilous culmination — all of you are experiencing it with deep agony. The freedom movement led by the National Congress being based on religious and particularly Hindu religious nationalist, in place of secular humanist ideas free from religious prejudices and ideas, failed to build up an all-out national unity that was based on democratization of society and free from religious, caste and linguistic discrimination. It is solely for this reason that the country became divided and the flames of communalism, parochialism and casteism are flaring up frequently even today. The power hungry political parties, in the interest of breaking the peoples' unity and for the sake of electoral politics are fuelling the flames of fratricidal riots again and again. In the year of Vidyasagar's death centenary even, Babri mosque, a historical monument was destroyed on the plea that it was the birthplace of Rama, an imaginary mythological-religious character. The women, for whom Vidyasagar had fought so hard so that they were free from the shackles of the male dominated society, too, are in bondage still today, chained by the capitalist system. Widow remarriage has yet to be accepted by the superstitious Hindu society with respect and dignity. Even today, in large number

of families women are unwanted; every year thousands of female foeticide are perpetrated; child marriages still take place; the torture and murder of women after their marriage, not to speak of the countless raped — all these are happening everyday in our country. Every year hundreds of thousands of women, even 7-8 year old girls suffering from abject poverty, are forced into flesh trade. Thankfully Vidyasagar has been spared the sight of such a terrible situation. You are also aware what is going on in the name of education. Emphasis is being given on religious education with the vile objective of creating a mindset that turns against scientific outlook and reason. On the other hand, the commercial approach to education which Vidyasagar had cautioned against in the then British ruled period has been made very widespread, turning education into a commodity for the market. Over and above, the wants and hardships of the impoverished people, observing which Vidyasagar used to reel in pain and anguish; rushed to them again and again; broke into tears just before his death thinking of the starving ‘Santals’ of Karmatar — this poverty, hardship and starvation have taken an extreme shape today in India, ruled and exploited by capitalism. Every year, hundreds of thousands of impoverished people die from lack of treatment, starvation or driven to commit suicide being unable to bear the burden of huge debts.

What does true homage to Vidyasagar, the towering character of Renaissance, enjoin us to do?

In this extremely miserable condition of our country, what is incumbent on us, if we want to pay true homage to Vidyasagar? If we discharge our duties and responsibilities only by garlanding his portrait with flowers, delivering speeches with selected quotations; if you too, after praising his great deeds go about your daily routine of conventional life; if you are unable to spare some time even to think for once, what this

great character and his noble struggle calls upon us to do; then today's function and preparation is in vain.

This Vidyasagar whom I tried to acquaint you with was unknown to me also. Just as you had come to know about him from the school books or from popular tales, that is the way I, too, got to know about him. I gained the inspiration and outlook to get to know Vidyasagar in a new way from the eminent Marxist thinker Shibdas Ghosh. He deeply revered Vidyasagar as the noblest character of the then era and had repeatedly urged us to take lessons from the life-struggle of Vidyasagar along with other great characters, luminaries and revolutionary fighters of the past and to further advance devoted to the endeavour to cultivate and acquire the new revolutionary anti-capitalist ideals and character. I tried to discuss today with this approach and thus I could avail myself of the opportunity to learn again from this lofty character of the Indian Renaissance. For this, I am grateful to the organizers and also to all of you present here.

Again, I like to repeat that judged from all aspects, it can doubtlessly be said that Vidyasagar possessed the greatest character in the era of Renaissance and freedom movement of our country. Even in the Renaissance of the West, a character comparable to his would be very difficult to find.

Finally, let me remind you once again Vidyasagar's historic remark — “A long time will be required for the emancipation of this country. The cultivation and harvesting of men with old habits and instincts should be stopped, the seven layers of thick soil should be removed and after that if cultivation of new men can be accomplished, then only will it be beneficial to the country.”^[86] In these dark days of all-out crisis, the truth of this observation is manifesting itself more and more. Can we not move ahead carrying the appeal of this historic observation in our heart?

I hope you will ponder over these words of mine.

NOTES

- 1 Letter of Michael Madhusudan Dutta
- 2,3 Charit Katha — Ramendrasundar Trivedi
- 4,5 Vidyasagar Charit — Rabindranath Tagore
- ** Karunasagar Vidyasagar — Indra Mitra
6. Shibdas Ghosh, Selected Works, Vol. III, pp. 373
7. Shibdas Ghosh, Selected Works, Vol. III, pp. 563-565
8. Introduction — Dialectics of Nature – Engels
9. Communist Manifesto – Marx and Engels
10. Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism — Lenin
11. Letter to F. J. Mouat — Vidyasagar Rachana Sangraha
12. Empirio Criticism — Lenin
- 13, 14, 15, 16 Letter to F. J. Mouat — Vidyasagar Rachana Sangraha
- 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 Karunasagar Vidyasagar — Indra Mitra
- 21, 22, 23. Report of John Murdoch – Vidyasagar O Bangali Samaj
— Binoy Ghosh
24. Vidyasagar Rachana Sangraha
- 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 Karunasagar Vidyasagar — Indra Mitra
- 31, 32, 33 Vidyasagar Charit — Rabindranath Tagore
- 34, 35 Karunasagar Vidyasagar — Indra Mitra
- 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 4 Vidyasagar Rachana Sangraha
- 42, 43, 44. Vidyasagar O Bangali Samaj — Binoy Ghosh
- 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51 Karunasagar Vidyasagar — Indra Mitra
- 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57. Vidyasagar O Bangali Samaj — Binoy Ghosh
- 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65 Karunasagar Vidyasagar — Indra Mitra
66. What is to be done — Lenin
- 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74 Karunasagar Vidyasagar — Indra Mitra
- 75 Vidyasagar Charit — Rabindranath Tagore
- 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86 Karunasagar Vidyasagar
— Indra Mitra
87. Vidyasagar Charit — Rabindranath Tagore
- 88, 89, 90, 91 Karunasagar Vidyasagar — Indra Mitra
92. Sahitye Art O Durniti — Saratchandra Chattopadhyay