

AMIYA P. SEN, *Vidyasagar: Reflections on a Notable Life* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan), 2021, 240 pp., ₹925.

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The book is not a conventional biography of Vidyasagar (1820–1891), the great representative of Bengal renaissance in the nineteenth century, but is an interpretative work based on his life and times. Besides collecting and collating facts from the extant biographies of Vidyasagar and evaluating the assessment of later historical works on him, the author carries on his reflections in multiple ways on the social, educational and cultural issues in Vidyasagar's time. These reflections lead the author to identify Vidyasagar as one 'whose memory has been vandalized by both the Indian Right and the Left'.

Though, in his brief introductory note, the author critically analyses the earlier biographies of Vidyasagar as sort of a 'Procrustean Bed' of suiting one's accounts to one's fulfilment, the main facts of his life are well brought out in a chapter titled 'A Luminous Life Lived in full'. The narrative could have been further strengthened if the author had used Vidyasagar's latest biography by France Bhattacharya, published in 2019. But even this chapter should not be taken as a simple narrative as it seeks answers to certain complex questions at the same time. One such question, for example, is why Vidyasagar's short autobiography focuses more on his ancestors than on himself, suggesting that this 'was really to underscore his own pedigree and intellectual lineage' (p. 39). Some explanations are only hinted at. While discussing Vidyasagar's Minute titled *Notes on Vernacular Education* (7 February 1854), the author notes that the government spending on primary schools in Bengal was lower compared to Bombay, North-western Provinces and the Punjab. As regards Vidyasagar's campaign for female education, the author brings to light two earlier supporters of the cause, the conservative spokesman, Radhakanta Deb (1787–1867) and Pandit Gourmohan Vidyalkar, saying as early as 1822 that 'the practice of keeping girls illiterate was opposed to Hindu *nitishastra*' (p. 65). The 1860s marked the climax of Vidyasagar's activity on the issue of widow remarriage. However, a feeling of defeat and despondency developed in his mind more than two decades before his death, as he declared in November 1869 that he wanted to isolate himself from worldly life 'to the extent possible'. The author notes (p. 85) that he did not attend his son Narayanchandra's marriage with Bhavasundari, a widow, in 1870, though the event was in conformity with his ideal of widow remarriage.

In the chapter on Vidyasagar and the Women's Question, we have a discussion of five issues, namely, pre-mature marriages of girls, female education, widow re-marriage and Kulin polygamy. As regards the ills of premature marriage, the author's arguments centre round Vidyasagar's tract, *Balyabibaher Dosh* (1850), which has four distinctive features. First, it acknowledges the impact of female education on the larger issue of improving the social status of women. Second, it

vividly connects the issue of pre-mature marriages with that of widow remarriage. Third, Vidyasagar's arguments here make no pointed reference to *shastra* as the guiding power behind the change, depending for it mainly on reason and humanitarian spirit. Finally, the tract views the problem from a modern perspective, namely, the view that the basis of every marriage should be a happy conjugality born out of mutual love and respect.

Even before Vidyasagar published his two successive tracts on widow remarriage in January and October 1855, he called on Raja Radhakanta Deb, the architect of the Dharma Sabha. Not satisfied with his response, Vidyasagar finally thought of state legislation. He based his arguments in favour of widow remarriage on five main points. First, Dharma is determined by *shastra*; hence a thing in conformity with *shastra* has to be *dharmic*. Second, widow remarriage is *dharmic* because *shashtra* sanctions it. Third, widow remarriage is valid in Kaliyuga since this is permitted by the lawgiver Parasar. Fourth, since living a life of strict celibacy is especially hard in degenerative Kaliyuga, it cannot be the desired or expedient course of action. Finally, *vivaha* or marriage as the best means of relief for a widow. The author, however, raises three questions without, strictly speaking, answering them. Did Ram Mohan Roy not know of the *Parasar Smriti* and of its special status? Did Vidyasagar not display some haste in resting his case on Parasar alone? Why did Vidyasagar not venture in the task of suitably producing modern commentaries on Parasar?

Similarly, Vidyasagar's arguments against Kulin polygamy are re-examined by the author. These are also based on *shastras*, but the subtle points are novel. There were two kinds of Hindu marriages: one dictated by *sanskar* or *bidhi* and the other following sexual passion (*kamyā vivaha*). Vidyasagar's personal interpretation of *shastras* was that *kamyā vivaha* could take place only outside one's *jati*. However, since inter-caste marriages were prohibited in Kaliyuga, a man must limit his marriage to his first wife from his own *jati*. There were certain exceptions where a man could take a second wife, such as infertility in the wife, her death or the death of a son born to the couple. Though Vidyasagar knew that Kulinism was bound to disappear with the progress of time and education, the author criticises him for his 'twisting' of *shastras* for buttressing his arguments against it.

Finally, the author comes to the question of the Age of Consent Bill, passed on 19 March 1891. Prior to it, the government sought Vidyasagar's opinion about it which came in the form of a reply (16 February 1891) where, while he did not oppose the bill in principle, he criticised the manner in which it had been framed and its future implications. Biographers such as Benoy Ghosh have taken this as signifying an amount of backtracking on his part, creating thereby a difference between an early and later Vidyasagar (d. 29 July 1891). The author thinks the bill of 1891 was essentially a move to amend the Penal Code, and the controversy was only tangentially related to the age of marriage, though Vidyasagar did not miss to notice it.

The book contains a postscript titled ‘Was Vidyasagar an Atheist’? The author considers it a moot question if Vidyasagar had a settled opinion on God and religion. The fact seems to be that he stayed away from two major currents of Hindu religiosity in Bengal during his lifetime: the abstract monotheism of the Brahmos and the neo-Puranic devotional cult of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. ‘Vidyasagar himself had a deep-seated sense of religion but one that was thickly enmeshed with notions of personal virtue, an honest calling and a pressing sense of public duty’ (p. 200).

In this interpretative biography on Vidyasagar, many reflections of the author loom large. Vidyasagar was more a worker than a thinker in his literary activities. The penchant of recent scholarship (Asok Sen, Sumit Sarkar, Brian Hatcher and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay) for shifting attention from his person to broader socio-historical context has led to relative neglect of the man and his agency. On the women’s question, Vidyasagar has been consciously implicated with what has been now understood as patriarchy. By contrast, his self-understanding as a Brahmin is relatively neglected. Compared to Ram Mohan Roy, ‘reason’ increasingly took a backseat in Vidyasagar’s ideology. However, he adopted a hermeneutic approach in his appeal for remarriage of widows which even Ram Mohan had failed to do. These reflections are important for further discourse, to be defended or modified. But some of the reflections and their implications are uncalled for, such as on the alleged denial of Vidyasagar’s own entry at the Asiatic Society because of his *chati* shoes. Such slips should not, however, make us overlook the fact that we have here a good academic work on Vidyasagar, which raises important questions on both the seeds and limits of his thought.

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