



WOMEN ON THE MOVE

Vidyasagar and Women

Focus on Margins and Silences

ISWAR Chandra Vidyasagar belongs to the history of transgressions and deviations, breakages and wrackages. To know him is to know of those striking deflections which constituted his enterprises — social, cultural, educational, literary — marked by vision and courage. But, his deflections cannot certainly be passed off as the romantic breakages of the dissatisfied, or of the iconoclast. Indeed, Vidyasagar broke grounds in many fields; but, his breaking was always accompanied by making, as his transgressions never led to impasse, but only to possibilities worth exploring.

Vidyasagar's India was that of the nineteenth century, an India colonized, an India marginalized and silent. True, this century had its own achievements and accomplishments, including Vidyasagar's, marked by the introduction of modern education, a contact with the English language and Western education and the rise of the middle class accompanied by the brewing and blooming cultural possibilities of the city of Calcutta itself. These signs on the superstructure were glittering indeed, but what was bitterly true was that India was not free. It must be remembered at the beginning that Vidyasagar — the nineteenth-century social reformer, development activist, prose-writer, text-book writer, teacher-trainer-educator, policy maker, printer and publisher, etc — was trying to break grounds in an India which was not independent, which was politically and culturally vul-

his undertaking was so radically explosive and his persistence was so much charged with the innate Herculean strength that his image is bound to be one not available in the stream of common types. Rabindranath Tagore, while speaking of Vidyasagar's greatness, particularly emphasized 'uniqueness', a quality which provides the effect of 'defamiliarization', and Tagore's emphasis, if considered in the context of history, was not at all misplaced.

True, the image of Vidyasagar has been constructed from various vantage-points, which means that Vidyasagar has power and potentials for encouraging a wide range of readings. The image Tagore evoked of Vidyasagar was a strikingly masculine one: Tagore, apart from singularizing him, identified "an indomitable masculine will and force" in Vidyasagar who could undertake a cyclopean task even in the face of foreseen odds and adversities. On the other hand, Madhusudan Dutt attributed an essentially feminine image to Vidyasagar; Madhusudan was more than convinced that Vidyasagar had "the heart of a Bengalee mother". The mother in Vidyasagar, it needs noting, was one of the most positive

courage and commitment with which Vidyasagar fought for women's causes in an essentially male-dominated society, in a society characterized by colonial repressions, feudal norms and values, and by religious blindness. Indeed, to speak of Vidyasagar's first, foremost and fundamental concern with women is never to dilimit or fragment him as a feminist, but to mark him as a promoter of freedom and humanism, as a social reformer, as a down-to-earth and secular activist who could understand well that women constituted the most backward and oppressed segment of society, and that to fight for women would be to

of Vidyasagar on women's causes with all of his possible ideological strength can certainly enable us to say today: "If you want to understand the nature of a society, only take a look at its women and see how they are."

Indeed, Vidyasagar had to struggle strenuously with his radical social, cultural and political project of introducing widow-marriage in a male-dominated, colonized, religiously prejudiced society like India. True, prior to his movement for widow-marriage, a kind of, what sociologists call, 'collective situation' was brew-

ing, but also surfaced the exploitative and discriminatory nature of feudal society where women were the worst victims of all social evils. The book also shows that one of the most courageous attacks Vidyasagar ever made was on religious fundamentalism which alone could create a prison-house of language, analysis and understanding, pushing both men and women to a situation where all 'eye things eyelessly'.

By virtue of its transparent, glittering persuasiveness, Vidyasagar's book on widow-marriage unfailingly attracted a popular readership. It is surprising that at that time, as many as 15000 copies of the

book were sold! However, the book outraged a number of reactionary pundits who, in turn, wrote books strongly underlining Vidyasagar's shastric and religious sacrilege. So, Vidyasagar, untrammelled as he was by resistance, had to write yet another book on the same subject, where he ably justified the *raison d'être* of widow-marriage through closely reading and demystifying ancient shastras and religious texts, and thus, exposed the hollowness of those reactionary, custom-abiding pundits who had no other option than to blindly cling onto religious fossils.

But, Vidyasagar did not certainly end up in writing. He was indeed flagrantly dissimilar to today's Bengali intellectuals, alienated from people and action — who have a pen but no flesh to move, who can write but are tellingly impotent in actions. But, exemplifying a rare combination of *gnosis* and *praxis*, contemplation and action à la the 'organic intellectu-

al' of Gramsci, Pundit Vidyasagar went on to every walk of society so as to mobilize a lasting movement in favour of women. His unmistakable regard for democracy was tellingly illustrated in an action which, as Vidyasagar proved, is not a recent phenomenon but was an action which Vidyasagar himself could think of in the nineteenth century — signature-campaign. Vidyasagar's massive signature campaign, launched at his lonely initiative, brought together as many as 1000 people in favour of widow-marriage. Widows began to remarry without obstacles. At Vidyasagar's own initiative, his eldest son got married to a widow. It must be mentioned here that Vidyasagar's initiative in the case of this marriage only amounted to an intellectual, ideological and rational stimulation; in fact, it was his son who willingly got married to a widow.

Vidyasagar's struggle for freedom was not only confined to widow-marriage, or to a movement against child/early marriage in favour of women. He was immensely interested in female education as well. An ardent and discriminating reader of social dynamics, Vidyasagar found women

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nerable to all threats that colonialism could possibly pose. Therefore, Vidyasagar's transgressions, exemplified first in his own pronouncement of "I am not a slave to customs and conventions," assumed an explicitly political significance in the face of the colonial hegemony.

In the colonized India, Vidyasagar was, indeed, a freedom fighter in every sense of the term. His emphases on the freedom of Bengali prose from fixity, laxity and obscurity, on the spread of education, modern and secular in nature, and on various social and educational reforms only attested to a life-long struggle for freedom. Vidyasagar was so passionately but steadily involved in. Freedom was his destination, but at the heart of his struggle lay his utmost — in his own words "ultimate" — concern with the causes and interests of women who were socially and culturally relegated to margins and silences.



bring to the fore the issues of freedom and expression, rights and claims, hitherto relegated to the margin, to the zone of oppressive silence. In other words, to fight for women, for Vidyasagar, was to fight against the worst forms of oppression and repression, against the worst values of feudalism, engendered by the socio-political structure and also by religious fundamentalism. Indeed, the question before Vidyasagar remained transparently focused: "If a man after his wife's death can remarry, then why not a woman?" Vidyasagar also understood that in a society struggling for freedom, nothing can better unleash the latent, creative social energy to achieve the desired liberation than a concentrated focus on women who most tellingly exhibit what worst forms can oppression take, and how the dependence/dominance, centre/margin, speech/silence oppositions operate in a particular society. Indeed, the zooming-in

Today is the 102nd death anniversary of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the nineteenth-century social reformer, and one of the greatest Bengali prose-writers. "Not only Vidyasagara but Karunasagara also" and "the greatest Bengali" as Madhusudan ardently characterized Iswar Chandra, he was born on 26 September, 1820, and died on July 29, 1891. Apart from evolving an ideal prose style in Bengali, Vidyasagar exhibited the enthusiasm, clan and energy of a freedom fighter in every sense of the term. Looking at his vision and action, one can see how secularism, humanism and nationalism can constitute an ideal concert in a single personality. The *Daily Star* takes this modest opportunity to pay homage to this "real friend and righteous man" — Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar.

The zooming-in of Vidyasagar on women's causes enables us to say today: 'If you wish to understand the nature of a society, take a look at its women and see how they are.'

engaged like birds, imprisoned within highly prescribed limits of permissible behaviour laid down by an array of male-dominated institutions ranging from the family to the schools and colleges. Vidyasagar wanted to break this cage through focusing on the female access to education which alone can enable women to shake off the spell of margins and silences. Of course, his emphasis was on the spread of education as a whole; he, in fact, stressed education based on a natural concert, and an active correspondence, between indigenous classical Sanskrit education and modern Western education, and thus, his stress fell on nationalism, secularism and humanism. But, Vidyasagar realized that neither secularism nor humanism could find space for cultivation, or that freedom could not be achieved, without ensuring women's access to education. That to educate women is to educate a society creating space and scope for development and freedom was not an epiphany, but a realization born out of a close reading of a colonized, culturally and economically backward society Vidyasagar lived in.

But, it was one of the greatest challenges for Vidyasagar to press ahead with his agenda of female education. True, only marginally, female education spread in Bengal at the initiative of the missionaries, prior to Vidyasagar's active interven-

AS Eritreans enjoy their newfound independence they are doing their best to put behind them the suffering endured during 30 years of war against Ethiopia and turn their minds to the formidable task of reconstruction.

It is a task which most Eritreans approach with enthusiasm although none are more aware of the difficulties ahead than Eritrean women. Having proved themselves in battle, they now face a new struggle.

Early on in the conflict, the educated people in the EPLF realised the country's liberation could not be achieved without the participation of women," says Askalu Menkerios, president of the National Union of Eritrean Women. "Women were encouraged to take part in the

indicates is that, despite the advances of the war years, women still lag behind in terms of administrative and political experience.

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cult to eradicate. EPLF leaders, aware of the contribution that women could make to a force outnumbered and outgunned by a Soviet-backed enemy, encouraged the recruitment of women fighters. The first female fighters joined in 1973, twelve years after the start of the liberation struggle. At this time the EPLF was still a resolutely celibate movement in which women were required to wear baggy clothes, buttoned up to the neck.

The front's intellectuals stressed the importance of women's emancipation and new marriage laws were introduced in 1980. These laws, which extended to the civil population in areas controlled by the EPLF, banned dowries and arranged marriages. But, it soon became apparent that many couples were rushing into marriage without having known each other for long.

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Women's Liberation is a Dream in Village

by David Orr

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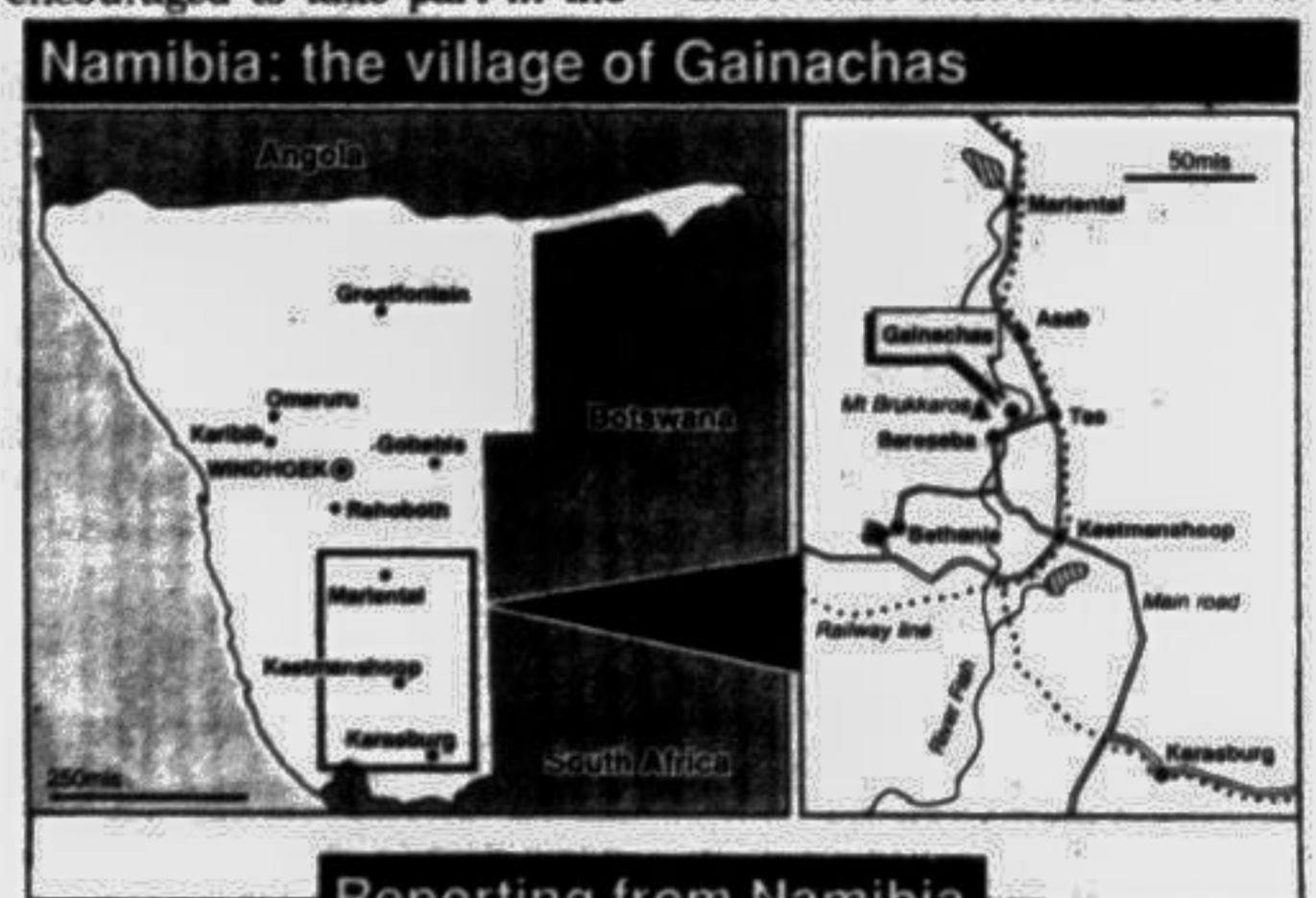
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the children. Birth control was encouraged in the ranks of the EPLF.

Now, two years after the end of the war, many women fear that the demand of national reconstruction will put pressure on them to abandon many of the freedoms they won. Eritrea faces severe social as well as economic problems. Up to 100,000 Eritreans, including 65,000 fighters died in the war of independence. Up to 750,000 refugees have yet to return from Sudan and other countries and 70,000 soldiers must be demobilised. Yet there are no jobs and three quarters of the population are still living on foreign food aid.



Reporting from Namibia

When Namibian journalist Kaleni Hiyalwa went to stay in a remote village of her country to report for Gemini News Service the first days were not easy.

Villagers were suspicious. After long experience of South African rule, they thought she had been sent as a police informer.

After a week or two things changed. The people organised a welcome party. Hiyalwa says: "People are kind. They want to help but have nothing to share."

Now she is back in Windhoek, the capital, where she freelances after a spell as women's page editor of Namibia Today.

In this final report about life in the village of Gainachas she looks at the place of women. What she found was typical of many societies in Africa: men are first and women have no voice even on the simplest matters in their home.



Views from the village

Kaleni Hiyalwa