

Vidyasagar and Women

SWAR Chandra Vidyasagar belongs to the history of L transgressions and deviations, breakages and wreckages. 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, hts 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, prosestylist, 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-

Focus on Margins and Silences his undertaking was so radi cally 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 ail misplaced.

True, the image of Vidyasagar has been constructed from various vantagepoints, 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 adversaries. 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

Vidyasagar understood well that in a country not independent, women can most tellingly exhibit what worst forms can oppression take, and how the dominance/dependence, centre/margin, speech/silence oppositions operate in a particular society.

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

in the colonialized 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.

Given the spate and scale of Vidyasagar's activities accompanied by their flagrant social consequences, and given his unusual personal traits. Vidyasagar, now and then, tends to induce a spell of mythologization. However, the mythical and proverbial Vidvasagar whose life was indeed inordinately eventful is not always unreal, for the nature of

driving forces behind many of his undertakings, particularly the one intended for women. Indeed, both the masculine and the feminine in Vidyasagar, in an excellent concert, went on to shape his struggle for freedom - freedom of both men and women, of man.

But, Vidyasagar's most prominent concern was women. speak in terms of an unambiguous superlative to indicate the reality and metaphoricity of Vidyasagar's struggle for freedom. It is more than established that to speak of Vidyasagar is to speak of widow-marriage, even though quite a number of similarly significant accomplishments could be attributed to him. Vidyasagar himself said in a letter he wrote to Shambhu Chandra, his brother: "... the introduction of widow-marriage constitutes the most significant and the best task in my life. indeed. I am not sure if I will ever be able to accomplish a task better than this." These were not mere words, or mere superlatives. All of his social politics was engineered by the desire to serve women, primarily women, unambiguously privileging their causes and inter ests over anything else.

To some, such a characterization of Vidyasagar may sound fantastic or may appear to be a limited one, but one needs to look deeply into the mission and vision accompanied by

Eritrean Women. "Women were

encouraged to take part in the

which Vidyasagar fought for women's causes in an essentially male-dominated society, colonial repressions, feudal norms and values, and by religious blindness. Indeed, to speak of Vidyasagar's first, foremost and fundamental confeminist, but to mark him as a promoter of freedom and humanism, as a social reformer. activist who could understand most backward and oppressed

fight for women would be to

courage and commitment with in a society characterized by cern with women is never to dilimit or fragment him as a as a down-to-earth and secular well that women constituted the segment of society, and that to

by Azfar Hussain celibacy, the practice of 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 Indeed, Vidyasagar had to struggle strenuously with his radical social, cultural and political project of introducing widow-marriage in a maledominated, colonized, religiously prejudiced society like

India. True, prior to his movement for widow-marriage, a But, it was Iswar Chandra kind of, what sociologists call, 'collective situation' was brew-

polygamy and of suffering widows to burn with the corpse of their husbands, were condemned ..." Indeed, towards the beginning of the 1830s, the progressive, pro-liberation forces in Calcutta started exhibiting the dehumanizing and fragmenting effect of a feudal culture characterized by prejudices and religious orthodoxy Such forces, at their meetings and discussions, shot forth their slogans point-blank at feudalism: "Down with Hin dutam! Down with Orthodoxy!"

Vidyasagar who effected a deci

Today is the 102nd death anniversary of

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the nine-

teenth-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 na-

tionalism can constitute an ideal concert

in a single personality. The Baily Star takes

this modest opportunity to pay homage

to this "real friend and righteous man"- Is-

ows, but also surfaced the explottative and discriminatory nature of feudal society where women were the worst victims of all social evtls. 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 widowmarriage unfailingly attracted A popular readership. It is surprising that at that time, as many as 15000 copies of the

Vidyasagar went on to every walks 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.

als of Gramsci, Pundit

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

tions. With support, not as adequate as could have been, from Dalhousic and Bethoon, Vidyasagar almost undividedly concentrated on female education. Understandably, the nineteenth-century Bengali society was not ready for this, despite Rammohan's earlier efforts, and Vidyasagar had to confront mounting obstacles posed by prejudices, religious bigotry, and other similar reactionary elements. During Vidyasagar's times, this adage was deeprooted in the mass speech and beltef: "If a female ts educated she is likely to be a widow." One can certainly see here the culturally backward and inordinately inhibiting social space within which Vidyasagar had to operatel Vidyasagar's activities with

regard to female education started in 1849-50. Since 1850, Vidyasagar had been associated with Bethoon Girls' School. It is indeed astonishing to notice that only within a span of less than a year, from May 1857 to 1858, Vidyasagar was able to establish as many as 35 girls schools: 20 in Hooghly, 11 in Burdwan, 3 in Medinipore and i in Nadia. The total expendi ture of these schools stood at 845 rupees, and the total number of students was 1300. But Vidyasagar was soon disappointed with the Indian Government when it declined to extend financial assistance. Yet Vidyasagar raised funds locally to keep these institutions alive. It is possible to multiply further instances of Vidya sagar's women development activities, but the essential point may be seized right now:

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.'

encaged like birds, imprisoned within highly prescribed limits of permisable behaviour laid down by an array of maledominated 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 corre spondence, between indigenous classical Sanskritic 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

Vidvasagar 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

Lemlem Gebrewold, Abeba

Tuccu and Selamawit

Tesfahungein are keen to capi-

talise on their wartime speciali-

ties and learn new skills

Students in an English lan-

guage group, they are perform-

Vidyasagar accomplished the greatest 'political work of culture by showing that the path to freedom and light lies in the emancipation of women, and that the male cannot be liberated if the female is not. He also identified the perpetual enemies of freedom: bigotry and fundamentalism, lack of educa tion and conscience. Indeed this "first man among us" and the "greatest Bengali", as Madhusudan characterized Vidyasagar, could tellingly exhibit that contemplation without action, and action without contemplation are ineffective, as vision without courage, and courage without vision are equally empty. In today's Bangladesh, where anti-liberation forces are alarmingly active, Vidyasagar certainly constitutes a living inspiration for us in our continuing struggle for freedom. It was he who clearly exemplified the fact that work is love made visible, and that freedom is not a frozen noun, but an active verb - not a mere concept, but a continuous process.

indeed: Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar did not only interpret his society, but wanted to change it. And he yielded some changes, with "the genius and wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman, and the heart of a Bengalee mother."

The writer teaches English at Jahangirnagar University and on the editorial board of 'Saptahik Samoy'.

ing or training for jobs which in

many African countries would

be the preserve of men: com-

puter operator, administrator,

"We've adjusted well to

peacetime," believes Abeba, who

was among the first women to

join the EPLF and who now

works as a librarian in the

Ministry of Information in

Asmara. "But we'll have to work

very hard to rebuild the coun-

try. Our struggle continues in a

soldier, Abeba, 37, has sacri-

ficed much and has to catch up.

In all her time in uniform, she

never once returned to Asmara

to see her won family. Married

in the last year of the war, she

and her husband have yet to be

demobilised and both live in the

military barracks in the capital.

They earn 60 birr per month

each and must rely on relatives

for support. They have no chil-

Others like Meaza Haile have

even greater hurdles to over-

come. Meaza, 27, spent six

years at the front line before

losing both her legs in a land-

mine explosion in 1987. She is

now living at Denden military

base in Asmara and, along with

other disabled women, is

learning such basics as English

mathematics and science.

Having spent 17 years as a

librarian, journalist.

different way.



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

'Atmiya Sava', Derozio and his students (Young Bengal). Debendranath Tagore and his Tatmabodhini Sava, and of course, the Brahma society were involved in various progressive actions and ideas, exhibiting concerns with women's issues. Vidyasagar was also directly and indirectly involved with some of these groups which provided energy and inspiration to his subsequent advocacy in favour of widow-marfage. In 1815, Rammohan Roy established a group called 'Atmiya Sava' which, now and then, held meetings and discussions on the issues and interests of women including child-marriage, infant widowship and of course, satidaha (the burning of a woman together with the corpse of her husband). In Calcutta Journal of 1819, an account of one of such meetings is provided thus: "At the meeting in question ... the necessity of an infant widow passing her life in a state of

sive stir in various circles through boldly articulating a critique of the orthodox religious, cultural and legal resis tance to widow-marriage. Vidyasagar wrote an article in the Bengali year of 1272 in the Tatmobodhini Patrika, unwaveringly underscoring the need for legalizing widow-marriage. Then, in January 1855, he wrote a book on widow-marriage, and in October of the same year, he made an appeal to the Indian Government for legalizing widow-marriage. It needs mentioning here that Vidyasagar's book on widowmarriage was not a mere pamphlet of a revolutionary activist boldly hammering on a series of rhetorical imperatives, but it was aglow with a fresh fire of creation on the one hand, and was a brilliant example of ratiocination, reason and intellect jazzed up by the lofty spirit of humanism. The book not only focused on the need for removing all legal objections to the remarriage of the Hindu wid-

war Chandra Vidyasagar.

book outraged a number of reactionary pundits who, in turn, wrote books strongly underlining Vidyasagar's shastric and religious sacrilege. So, Vidyasagar, untrammeled as he was by resistance, had to write yet another book on the same subject, where he ably justified the raison d'etre 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.

book were sold! However, the

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 a la the 'organic intellectu-

## Women's Liberation is a Dream in Village indicates is that, despite the marginalisation of women. "Early on in the conflict, the by David Orr advances of the war years, Fighters like Hewit Goitome,

S 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 enthustasm although none are more aware of the difficulties ahead than Eritrean women. Having proved themselves in battle, they now face a new struggle.

The new government of Eritrea, announced in June, has only three women out of a total of 34 positions. Only one of the 14 ministers is a woman: Minister for Justice Fawzia Hashim.

During the long struggle for independence from Ethiopia, women played a vital role in the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). They made up one-third of the rebels' number during the last two decades of the conflict, giving the EPLF a greater percentage of female fighters than any other modern guerilla force.

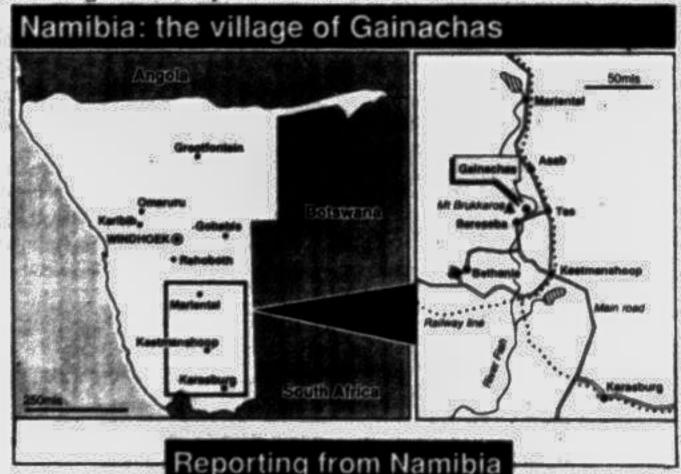
Some 30,000 women served in the front, fighting not just alongside men but sometimes commanding them. In doing so they achieved a level of equality unrivalled elsewhere in Africa.

With the formal declaration of Eritrean statehood in May, women began to wonder aloud whether they could consolidate in peacetime the advances made in war.

educated people in the EPLF women still lag behind in terms realised the country's liberation could not be achieved without the participation of women," says Askalu Menkerios, president of the National Union of

of administrative and political experience. However, Eritrean women have come a long way in a short

period of time. For centuries an underclass with little access to



struggle and in doing so they gained respect and acquired skills they did not have before. But now the war is over people are beginning to realise that Eritrea's liberation does not mean the automatic liberation

of women." What the small numbers of women in government positions

education and no right to the ownership of property, women had little to expect from life apart from marriage and child rearing.

Even today about 85 per cent of Eritrean women are illiterate. In rural areas such practices as dowry giving and female circumcision are proving diffi-

cult to eradicate. EPLF leaders, aware of the contribution that women could make to a force outnumbered and outgunned by a Sovietbacked 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.

From 1980 onwards, married fighters were not obliged to live in communal barracks but could have their own homes behind the lines. Mothers with recently born children were assigned tasks away from the front line. Later on, in cases of mothers wishing to return to the trenches, fathers in administrative jobs would look after the children. Birth control was encouraged in the ranks of the

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.

"Women had to make many sacrifices during the war but they knew where they stood," says Askalu Menkertos, who was in the armed forces from 1975 until the end of the conflict. "Now in peace there is obviously more emphasis on family life and women are expected to have children. Birth control is controversial religiously and politically. Both Catholics and Muslims oppose it. There is also the view that women should be regenerating the population instead of trying to prevent preg-

nancy." In order to avert the

Askalu Menkerios believes it is essential that they be able to compete for jobs on equal terms. In addition to literacy and health programmes, the National Union of Eritrean Women is promoting vocational training for women in both rural



Kaleni Hiyalwa

have nothing to share."

simplest matters in their home



When Namibian journalist Kaleni Hiyalwa went to stay in a remote village of her country to report for Gemini News Service the first days

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

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

"I'm proud of my injury," says Meaza, who wants to study radio maintenance at technical college. "I was injured for the people and the nation. I was ready to give my life."

-Gemini News