

CELEBRATING 199TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR

# A Man in 'Forty' Million



**I**N 1891, shortly after the death of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "One wonders, how God, in the process of producing forty million Bengalis, produced a man." Tagore, who famously termed Bengal as an

enchanted mother keeping her seven crore children under the lid of Bengalis without actually allowing them to become humans ("Bangamata", from *Chaitali*, 1897), found in Vidyasagar an exception. For Tagore, Vidyasagar was man enough to stir up an inept and inert nation and bring in some serious radical reforms, a process that started with Raja Ram Mohan Roy and came to be known as the Bengali Renaissance.

In his life-sketch of Vidyasagar, Tagore wrote, "He was born at a time, which contained modern elements, without necessarily rejecting the future. The Ganges that has died down finds its currents stagnant in a fen; but the Ganges that flows drifts away from the stagnancy to connect itself with the sea. This is the current of Ganges that we call modern. The life of Vidyasagar follows the current of the Ganges of all time; that is why Vidyasagar is modern" (My translation. Tagore, R. "Life of Vidyasagar," *Dipika*). As we enter the last year before the bicentenary of Vidyasagar's birth, Tagore's evaluation of the "only" man of his time is useful to understand why reflections on this social reformer, educational leader, generous philanthropist, Sanskrit scholar and devoted son with filial piety, are needed now more than ever.

I guess it takes one to know one. In Vidyasagar, Tagore identified not only a type of modernity but also a process of modernisation, i.e. simplification of Bangla language by freeing it from the heavy clutches of Sanskrit. Elsewhere, Tagore recalled how his poetic spirit was moved by one phrase that he picked up from the nursery primer written by his predecessor: "jol pore/pata nore", or "the rain drops/the leaves flop" (my translation). Vidyasagar's language gave Tagore the sonic quality required for his poetic expression. His characterisation of modernity likewise involves a word play on "Vidyasagar," literally meaning a "sea of knowledge" to gauge his greatness.

Over the years, it is this title that has usurped the original name: Ishwar Chandra Sharma. Interestingly, the title "Vidyasagar" appears in the official certificate of his law exams obtained in 1839. This can mean only one thing: his scholarly reputation earned



A statue of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in Kolkata, India.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

him the pedigree during his studentship at The Sanskrit College and University where he studied for twelve years. The degree entitled him to join as a "judge pundit", a legal counsellor for European judges. Yet his father felt that Ishwar Chandra's studies were not complete. He studied for two more years before joining Fort William College as the Head Pundit of Bangla.

Ishwar Chandra was born in a Bengali Hindu Brahmin family to Thakurdas Bandyopadhyay and Bhagavati Devi at Birsingha village under west Midnapore district, West Bengal on September 26, 1820. His father brought him to Kolkata at the age of six. The boy genius apparently learned all the English numerals simply by studying the wayside milestones and impressed the school headmaster at Sanskrit school where mathematics was taught in English. He found lodging in the house of Bhagabat Charan in Burrabazar where lived a life of austerity. The maternal affection of Bhagabat's daughter Raimoni had a shaping influence on the young boy who developed a deeper insight into the plight of women

in nineteenth-century Bengal. Vidyasagar was equally influenced by his own mother; he famously swam across the turbulent river during a storm to honour his mother's lettered wish of seeing him. These anecdotal collages make Vidyasagar larger than life. The focus shifts to his charitable gestures despite his poverty, his effort to study under the streetlamps to save oil, his repartee and his recurrent entanglements with the British administrators, his walking habit in proverbial wooden shoes. Somehow in a changed century, I guess the real mission of Vidyasagar, the man, is lost in these anecdotal snapchats. The birthday celebration allows us to reconfigure his contributions to our Bengali identity, our essential pride and humanity.

While Vidyasagar's efforts to break the mental shackles and superstitions, particularly in the realms of primary vernacular education and widow remarriage, have carved his niche in history, his critics have found faults in the way he collaborated with the British Raj, touting him as its beneficiary. Then there are those leftist

critics who believe Vidyasagar's individual charisma did not bring any true social change as he failed to engage the peasant class. It is fashionable to judge and dismiss someone great with the benefits of the hindsight as well as with trendy theoretical jargon; but the real merit of a person can only be ascertained once the critical dust has settled down. The last two hundred years have given us an equitable distance from history to assess why Vidyasagar is idolised as the ninth most influential Bengali (BBC, 2004). Is it for his contributions to Bangla language and literature? Is it for all the schools that he established or the education system that he revamped? Is it for his generosity that allowed many, including writers like Michael Madhusudan Dutt to prevail? Is it for his scholarship that took the agenda-ridden pandits by their *tikis* (the long tuft of hair that rises like a flame in the shaven heads of scholars) and exposed their religious hypocrisies? Or is it for viewing women as humans? Or is it for his campaign for remarriage of widows?

Despite Vidyasagar's knowledge of the

ancient scriptures, he was not a darling of Hindu leaders. Last month, when BJP's roadshow vandalised a bust of Vidyasagar in Kolkata, there was considerable backlash. In a battle between the incumbent and the procumbent, Mamata Banerjee's supporters argued that the central government's exponent Amit Shah was completely out of touch with the Bengali sentiment. The attack on the bust symbolised the rift that Vidyasagar always had with orthodox religion and its aftermath. One wonders, why Vidyasagar considered only his parents worthy of his worship. He was indeed a secular soul in a religious body; he decolonised his mind in a colonial milieu and proved himself to be a progenitor and a product of the Bengali Renaissance.

His lifelong endeavour has been to establish schools where students of all castes could find access to the benefits of education. He wrote a series of textbooks in Bangla to make western education available for his countrymen. He engaged with the British with pride and dignity that was unheard of. He reciprocated the gesture when one of his colleagues had his feet up on the table and cigars in his mouth; he petitioned against the customs of taking off shoes by native scholars before entering the museum; above all, he filed a petition for the remarriage of widows not before tackling the bunch of sponsored pundits who tried to justify polygamy of the rich upper class yet refused the remarriage of widows once the burning of the *suttee* was abolished.

His literary works are informed by the lifelong mission of accessibility. He trans-created Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* as *Bhramtibilash*; retold the myth of Sita's exile or Sakuntala's. In all three of these instances, his sympathetic portrayal of women is evident. Vidyasagar, for instance, does not present Sakuntala as an object of carnal desire as in Kalidasa's text. In his version, Sakuntala is depicted with all her innocence. The adage—the best men are best for women—is applicable to Vidyasagar. He is a man in a million because he executed what he believed in; he did not confine himself in pedagogical discourse and poetics—he put them into practices. There are many intellectual rebels that the colonial rift of the nineteenth century produced. But Vidyasagar stands out because of his scholarship, genius, humility, generosity, and principles. He freed himself from the mind forged manacles created by the upper class, upper caste, and "uber" race. He aspired to do the same for his own kind by creating a thought current that would lead to the sea.

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## BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



## BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



## ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



September 26, 1815

Russia, Prussia and Austria sign the Holy Alliance

Russia, Prussia and Austria sign the Holy Alliance

Also known as the Grand Alliance, the coalition was formed with the aim to restrain liberalism and secularism in Europe in the aftermath of the devastating French Revolutionary Wars.

## QUOTABLE Quote



GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

(1927-2014)

Colombian novelist, short-story writer, screenwriter and journalist

What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it.

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