

# **Vidyāsāgar**

**THE TRADITIONAL MODERNISER**

Amales Tripathi



**PUNASCHA**

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## INTRODUCTION TO FIRST EDITION

I wrote this book in 1970 to commemorate the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Iswar Chandra Vidyāsāgar's birth.

I had been reading Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (second edn.) and had been thinking if Kuhn's notions of "paradigm" and "paradigm-shift" could enrich the cultural and intellectual history of India in the nineteenth century, confused for some time by the blind application of Burchardt's more than a century old view of the Renaissance in Italy. Kuhn's notion of 'paradigm' embodies the sense that human activities are defined and controlled by tradition. Tradition is a set of devices and principles that have proven their ability to order the experience of a given social constituency. It is socially grounded and its function is that of organization. It is not a passive entity, capable only of adapting to an externally defined challenge. It helps to define a given contingent experience and in responding to it. Organization may be achieved through a number of modes or devices, ranging from formal institutions to informal habits and from abstract principles to concrete examples of problem-solution in the past. Kuhn puts some emphasis on the latter.

Change is possible within the terms of an operative tradition in so far as its elements are able to expand their implications enough to deal with new experiences while not losing their identity.

But, however tenacious, a tradition, it may yet fail to control an experience: (1) when another great culture offers a challenge

next door, thereby creating a constant source of novel stimuli too immediate to be ignored even by those who would prefer to shut their eyes to its existence, (2) when a political upheaval replaces one governing elite by another, and (3) when dynamism within the tradition itself asserts. In such cases a crisis occurs, a community is disorganized and attempts to refurbish the old tradition are replaced by the conscious search for new and fundamental devices of organization.

The search may lead to alternative proposals, which may be called candidates for problem solving. The community's entire store of cultural resources may be ransacked before a consensus begins to emerge that certain proposals are superior to others. The more complete the consensus, the more likely that the new organizing devices will become traditional. As David A. Hollinger puts it, communities may, during this "paradigm-shift", go through a full cycle of (1) secure tradition, (2) novelty and confusion, (3) disagreement over whether to resist innovation or encourage it, and if the latter, in what direction, and (4) coalescence around a candidate that might become another secure tradition. Unanimity may not be found, however, for this full cycle and confusion and conflict may continue after the third stage.

It may not be fruitful to apply the above thesis to a vast and pluralist society like the Indian, but it can yield good results if applied to a more or less culturally homogeneous area like Bengal. I have found in it a more historical approach than the so-called Renaissance model. The most pertinent question that can be raised is whether India, even Bengal, had a secure tradition in the eighteenth century. But the presence of a novel culture next door, a political upheaval replacing the governing elite and an inner dynamism within the tradition itself cannot be controverted. The crisis had been corroborated by all sorts of evidence. The conscious search for new devices in the store of indigenous cultural resources is obvious in the cases of Rāmmohun, Vidyāsāgar, Bankimchandra

and Vivekānanda. Alternative proposals came from the Orientalists as well as the Derozians and many others. Only what we can call a consensus eluded us.

I have put Vidyāsāgar in this milieu as his life itself was a grand model, and the work, mainly analytical in character, is now open to the judgement of my compeers. For details of Vidyasagar's life one cannot hope for more than what has been offered by Indramitra in *Karunāsāgar Vidyāsāgar*.

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I have used some new secondary materials from John Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck, The Making of a Liberal Imperialist 1774-1839* (1974), John Clive, *Thomas Babington Macaulay. The Shaping of an Historian* and Brian A. Hatcher, *Of Improvement Vidyasagar and Cultural Encounter in Bengal* (O.U.P., Cal., 1996) and a few articles from the *Cambridge Historical Journal* in this edition, but the analysis and conclusions have not been changed. I thank Sri Biman Bose, Actg. President, Bangiya Svāksharatā Prasar Samiti for using this book for his praiseworthy literacy campaign. I am grateful to Sri Sandeep Nayak of *Punascha* for taking so much care in production.

Calcutta, 1997

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## I

### THE MODERNITY OF TRADITION

Iswar Chandra Vidyāsāgar was one of those few worthy Indians who emerged whole and enriched from the clash of cultures that engulfed their land in the nineteenth century. The discovery of the Western thought and value system was still a novel experience but it attracted much notice because it remained superficial. The recovery of the ancient Indian civilization ran deep and disturbing, but, being familiar, was often overlooked. The educated Indian elite were confronted with a challenge from within which was perhaps more severe than the challenge from without. Rāmmohun Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyāsāgar were the first to make the right response to both. Having the wisdom to discriminate, they would not borrow from the dazzling panoply of the West but what had perennial relevance for man and what could be adapted to suit the national genius of India. Having the knowledge to judge, they re-examined the indigenous tradition and retained what was genuine and what could still be utilised to meet the changed needs of the day. Out of both they sought to fashion an integrated character, strong enough and supple enough to bear the burden of modernisation.

Modernity and tradition have usually been placed in a dichotomous rather than a dialectical relationship. The model of the former has always been taken from the West. Actually, however, these two concepts are not totally divorced, and traditional features persist in a modern society as modern potentialities exist in a traditional one. Social change arises not

merely from the impact of external revolutionary forces but also from alternative possibilities inherent in the established system. The correlation between a geographical or cultural concept (the West) and a social process (modernization)' was an historical accident. Vidyāsāgar perceived creative possibilities within the Indian context, only if some modifications were adopted from the progressive Western values. He never confused modernization with westernization.

Let us take an example-the use Vidyāsāgar made of his profound Sanskrit learning. Here there is a fundamental difference between the European and the Indian Orientalists, on the one hand, and Vidyāsāgar, on the other. The former wanted to revive the glories of Vedic or Gupta India on the basis of a renewal of studies of Vedic or classical Sanskrit texts. This attitude to classics ran through Petrarch's reading of Cicero and Cola Rienzi's attempt to revive the Roman Republic. Vidyāsāgar did not befool himself with such a patrician humanist dream. He wanted to develop a vernacular language out of Sanskrit and spread useful Western knowledge through an enriched vernacular literature. He cut out from the syllabus all scholastic deadwood, streamlined the courses, wrote aids to teach grammar without tears and firmly established Sanskrit as the mother of the vernacular language. When the child was mature enough on fare furnished by his own excellent text books, it drew new ideas and sensibilities from English literature and science. Where the educational model of Macaulay and Trevelyan had split the personality of the elite and failed to filtrate to the masses, Bengali, now armed with a form from Sanskrit and a world-vision from English, succeeded in giving the elite a creative outlet and the masses a taste of knowledge. A traditional institution had been imaginatively channelised into a modernising role and made to contribute to national regeneration.

Not all of the past of a nation is significant for a moderniser, and the true one chooses only the most rational, universal, dynamic and humane segments of it. For the Derozians the Indian past

was an anathema, everything had to be built anew on a *priori* ideas of Enlightenment. For the orthodox, the Puranic and the provincial past alone counted. They were ignorant of any richer and fuller past and their interests as well as emotions were involved in defending what they held dear, even though it might be dying. Vidyāsāgar declined to accept either of these positions. Rationalist he certainly was, and perhaps even a bit of a sceptic in his philosophical attitude. Born a commoner amidst abject poverty, he need not have learnt to rebel from the pages of Tom Paine, like his affluent Hindu College contemporaries. Though highly emotional and easily moved to pity, utilitarian calculation was not alien to him. But he had an inherent sense of proportion that rebuked exaggerated poses and exhibitionist petulance, an integrity of character which brooked no discrepancy between intellectual conviction and conformist inaction. While his strong roots rejected any doctrinaire imposition of foreign grafting, the orthodox attempt to fossilize the immediate past repelled him by its intellectual obscurantism and moral obtuseness. They had made the wrong choice of tradition, he felt, and confused the local and regional rites (*desachar*) of a decadent age with the eternal religion (*sanātan dharma*) of ancient India. He would appeal to shastras like any of them, but because he knew a lot more about the shastras than they, he could distinguish between the genuine and the fake, the relevant and the archaic, the perennial and the parochial.

The skilful use of tradition for social reforms is best exemplified in the issue of widow-remarriage. Strangely enough, it was the Derozians who had first come across the sloka of *Parāsara Samhita*, a variant of which Vidyāsāgar later used to bolster the case for widow-remarriage. But they did not know what to do with it; nor did they care, for the irrationality of forced celibacy of widows was self-evident and utilitarian calculus demanded its instant abolition. They did not move out of their academic groves to translate the precept into practice. They did not pressurize the Government by mass action to sanction it by a declaratory law. The orthodox *pundits* quoted any number of texts in defence of



the evil (as they had done once in the case of the *Suttee*), again caring little about their historical value or present relevance. Vidyāsāgar took great pains to discover the injunction in the original texts and, once sure of its genuineness, moved into battle position. Entirely modern methods of publicity and mass petition were geared to the reestablishment of an historical link with the great Hindu tradition, and the intellectual resistance of the conservative was as surely overborne as the apathy of a neutrally inclined Government.

Vidyāsāgar modernised the traditional role of the Brahmin. The Brahmin had not always been the contemptible beggar or the intellectual charlatan who sold his half-baked knowledge for a mess of pottage. At many stages of Indian history he had come to hold responsible positions of secular authority and discharged them with skill and vigour. A link between the political organization and the ethical ideal of society, he had informed the former with a higher purpose and the latter with a practical content. Wisdom had been the hall-mark of the Brahmin, not scholastic acumen or ritualistic proficiency; *sila* (conduct), not *kula* (lineage, often concocted); self-imposed poverty, not importunate patronage-hunting; spiritual detachment, not egregious mixing with the worldly; righteous indignation against moral wrong, not timid or selfish temporisation; generosity and charity as the material of mind and rule of life, not social sadism, born of complex. This archetypal Brahmin had become an utopia for centuries and most of his qualities had suffered eclipse during the time of troubles. Vidyāsāgar recultivated them in himself and reinforced them by some of the qualities of the archetypal protestant of the West—rationality, individuality, enterprise, devotion to worthy causes, capacity for leadership in critical situations, obstinacy of principle and courage of conviction, innate sense of justice that put the public over the private interest, hatred for solemn cant and preference for work to words, and, finally, a concern for life here below. Tagore summed these up in two precious phrases—“invincible manliness and indelible humanity”

(*ajeya paurush o akshay manushyatva*). The combination of the ancient Brahminical ethic and the modern protestant ethic was not easy; some of the elements, like the post-Calvin acquisitiveness and the Brahminical non-attachment, would never mix. But Vidyāsāgar knew what was germane to the development of his personal character and necessary to the execution of his public programmes. He had a good head for business and was perhaps the most successful publisher of his time. He might have minted money at the bar, like his friend Justice Dwarkanath Mitter, had he so desired. He might have invested his savings and profits in landed estates, like his predecessor, Rāmmohun Roy. He might have even led a moderate political party, like his Maharastrian counterpart, M. G. Rānāde. But he deliberately chose a different role for himself— the new Brahmin as an educationist and social reformer—and confined himself to that, disregarding blandishment of prestige, status, money and power that other careers laid open before him. He took the gravest possible risk and was actually ruined by his choice. This was quite unlike the middle class, East or West, who would calculate the risk and avoid loss under the cover of verbiage.

All but one portrait of Vidyāsāgar show a rugged exterior. As a young student, he has a thick-set figure—short and burly. The brave chin seems to possess nature's own power. The thin lips are closed with a firmness of purpose that is matched by the compact energy of the lofty brow. The brow distinguishes him as a lion among men. But the lion has no mane. He is not actually bald but gives his hair a peculiar cut (fashionable among Oriya palanquin-bearers) which leaves a patch at the centre and back of the scalp. He has deep, penetrating eyes which, moved to pity (as is often the case), become soft as a dove's. His nose is longish and straight. He always appears cleanshaven. His normal dress is simple and minimal— a coarse dhoti, a plain *chādar*, and a pair of native slippers (which borrow his name). He frankly shows repugnance for formal dress and fights shy of formal occasions. The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal gracefully allows him to

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