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Underexplored Aspects of Vidyasagar in a New Translation

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Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar's polemic against polygamy among the Kulin Brahmins of colonial Bengal was published in Bengali in 1871. A rich and contextual English translation by Brian Hatcher offers new perspectives on customs that were unbearable for both married and widowed women.

In 1871, a Bengali book of 120-odd pages, titled *Bahuvivaha: rahita haoya uchita kina etadvishayaka vichara*, was published by Sanskrit Press, Calcutta. It was authored by Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891), a major educationist, social reformer, Sanskrit pundit, author, and philanthropist of colonial Bengal. It is only in 2023—223 years after Vidyasagar's birth and 152 years after the publication of the original—that its first English translation, by Brian Hatcher, has been published.

Given the historical, cultural, methodological, and even contemporary significance of *Bahuvivaha*, the long wait for an English translation has been unfortunate. The other texts of Vidyasagar have also not fared well in this respect. The significance of Hatcher's work, an indispensable Vidyasagar scholar of our time, lies in the attempt to make the social reformer's works available to the English-speaking world.

Bahuvivaha is a historically crucial text that exposed the horrors of Kulin polygamy and was a major addition to a series of works that addressed the "woman question" in the 19th century. Polygamy among the upper-caste Hindus was a "business"—a means to acquire money and gifts—for Kulin bridegrooms while it demeaned the brides. It led to the unspeakable suffering of innumerable upper-caste Hindu women.

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Typically, high-caste fathers were eager to marry off their daughters to Kulin Brahmins because this was considered a means of preserving their purity and rank on the caste ladder. Vidyasagar described this as "an irrational desire to protect clan status" (Vidyasagar 2023: p. 63). The situation had worsened, Swami Vivekananda pointed out, because the number of women was greater among the high castes than those of men (Vivekananda 2011: p. 145).

Hatcher mentions that women were "trapped in marriages to men with as many as five, ten or twenty other wives" due to the practice of polygamy (Hatcher Introduction in Vidyasagar 2023: p. 2). In some cases, the numbers were much higher. According to Usha Chakraborty, "In 1871 it was found that 33 *kulin* [sic] Brahmins of Hooghli [sic] District were married to 2151 women" (Chakraborty 1963: p. 8). It was neither practically possible to keep all these wives in a single household, nor did the husbands have any intention of doing so. The wives remained in their fathers' houses and the husbands paid "visits" to them as and when they could afford some money and gifts (Introduction p. 36).

For the wives, such a marriage was the beginning of suffering. They hardly had any occasion to stay at their husband's place, where they were in any case at the mercy of his dominating sisters. Back at her father's house, the bride suffered loneliness and was ill treated by her brothers' wives. The situation became terrible when the husband died.

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In many instances, young women were married off to old Kulin men, some of whom were on the verge of dying. When these old men died, widowhood became a curse on these young women. Remarriage of widows was talked about, but the preferred custom was widows burning themselves on the pyre. If not, the widows had to practice such strict austerity and asceticism that their life turned into "a living death" (Chakraborty 1963: p. 18). Unable to survive, many widows turned to prostitution.

"The Chief Magistrate of Calcutta reported in 1853," Usha Chakraborty notes, "that in the metropolis of 4 lacs there were about 10,000 Hindu prostitutes including several *kulin* [sic] Brahmin wives" (Chakraborty 1963: p. 10). In 1869, according to a report in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 90% of the prostitutes in Kolkata were widows and the bulk of them were from the Kulin Brahmin quarters (Chakraborty 1963: pp. 17-18).

While *Bahuvivaha* highlighted the plight of high-caste women who suffered because of Kulin polygamy and called for legislation to abolish the custom, it did not have any effect. No law was brought forth for this by the British government, which was afraid of causing social unrest. That Vidyasagar sought the intervention of the colonisers to change his own society and that the British shied away from intervening sheds light on the complex relations between the colonisers and the colonised. It was almost 100 years later that the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 outlawed polygamy, except for the Muslims.

But, as Hatcher rightly reminds us, Vidyasagar's text achieved a moral and visionary success though not a legislative one (Introduction pp. 19, 21). The text is as important today as it was in 1871. In 2023, when debates around a uniform civil code are going on in India and the practice of polygamy in some communities, including Muslims and some tribal groups, is being questioned, Hatcher's translation of Vidyasagar offers different viewpoints on the subject.

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In my view, what Hatcher's translation of *Against High Caste Polygamy* brings out are the techniques and methods of research and analysis used by Vidyasagar to build and bolster his multi-layered argument against those who wanted to retain polygamy. Vidyasagar refutes, at length, the seven key objections his opponents have. This is supplemented by six minor objections, which are briefly addressed at the conclusion of the text.

For the convenience of readers, Hatcher gives a subtitle to the seven objections, which are simply titled "Objections" ("*apotti*") in the original. This is the bedrock of Vidyasagar's argument, and each section begins with him mentioning the stance of his opponents—the defenders of polygamy—before he refutes it with reasoning and evidence.

Vidyasagar's core contentions in the seven sections were:

? Polygamy was not approved of in the shastras (scriptures);
? Polygamy would be a transgression from dharma;
? Banning polygamy would not destroy the broken Kulins;
? Kulin polygamy was far from being in decline in 1871;
? A second marriage was harmful and sinful for the Kayasthas, and if banning polygamy led to a ban on such marriages, it was for the good;
? Bengali society had failed to eradicate this evil and government intervention was therefore required; and
? The people were right in petitioning the government and seeking a law to ban polygamy.

What strikes the reader is not just the substance of Vidyasagar's reasoning but also its form and structure. To substantiate his analysis of the subject, Vidyasagar included material from diverse sources, including anecdotes, stories and first-hand accounts; passages from Sanskrit scriptures; explanatory footnotes; statistical tables on specific Kulin Brahmins—their names, age, residence and number of wives; a copy of the 1871 Bill against polygamy drafted in English by Raja Devnarayan Singh; and even a poem by Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay (not included in the translation).

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Vidyasagar combined both quantitative and qualitative research methods for the text published more than 150 years ago, and he is rightly considered by Hatcher as a pioneer in research in the social sciences ("an incipient social scientist or *samajvijnani*") (Introduction p. 39). Hatcher finds that "inventive storytelling" plays a significant part in Vidyasagar's method and describes it as "imaginative sociology", following Sudipta Kaviraj's concept of "imaginative history" (Introduction pp. 34-38).

Hatcher also highlights Talal Asad's theorisation of modern statistics as being "implicated not merely in the work of representation but also in the work of political intervention" (Introduction p. 41). Vidyasagar's text demonstrates the truth of this idea in that one finds "an early appropriation of the same tools by a local intellectual to pursue an avowedly political project, one that involved yoking quantitative data to a claim for state intervention" (Introduction p. 41). Vidyasagar's outline of the history of attempts to ban polygamy from 1855 to 1871 also shows his capability as a historian. The text, therefore, reveals various aspects of the author as a social scientist.

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In a 44-page introduction to the translation, Hatcher does not shy away from mentioning Vidyasagar's faults and the limitations of his perspective. "His vision belongs to an elite, Brahmanical, and essentially patriarchal moral universe," he notes (Introduction p. 9). For instance, in the final analysis, Vidyasagar was "reluctant to grant complete autonomy to women" and to what extent he can be designated as a reformer is a matter of debate (Introduction p. 9). Nevertheless, Hatcher emphasises that what stands out amid Vidyasagar's ambiguities and flaws in his arguments is his "fundamental ethical commitment" to address the evils that plagued Bengali society (Introduction p. 10).

The significance of *Against High Caste Polygamy* lies in that it highlights how Vidyasagar's persona combined both a social reformer and a social scientist. Hatcher's translation is noteworthy and deserves discussion. It is a commonplace in translation theory that exact word-to-word equivalence between the source text and the target text is impossible to achieve and perhaps undesirable. The form of equivalence that is emphasised, following a popular concept by Danica Seleskovitch, is that of "sense equivalence", which is largely dependent upon how the source text is interpreted by the translator. The translation thus becomes more than a mechanical linguistic exercise.

To borrow an idea from Jacques Derrida, a translation is basically an exercise in "transformation"—"of one language by another, of one text by another" (Derrida 1981: p. 20). When translation is understood as an interpretation-based transformation, it is no longer a passive exercise. Instead, it becomes a creative act, or as P. Lal described it while writing about his translations of Sanskrit plays into modern English, a "transcreation" (Lal 1964: p. 5). However, when translation is understood as transformation and transcreation, the chances are the texts will look and feel different at the plastic and semantic levels.

Hatcher's translation of Vidyasagar's text does not always attempt to produce word-to-word equivalence, and rightly so. As a scholar on Vidyasagar and colonial Bengal, he focuses more on sense equivalence. To give just one example, consider the title. A verbatim translation of Vidyasagar's *Bahuvivaha: rahita haoya uchita kina etadvishayaka vichara* would be "Polygamy: An argumentation on/ analysis of the subject of whether it should be banned or not." Hatcher argues that Vidyasagar's text is an unequivocal condemnation of polygamy among upper-caste Hindus and the question of "whether or not" does not arise. Hatcher also replaces the word vichara—literally meaning assessment, argument, or critical analysis—by "appeal."

There is truth in Hatcher's claim that the text is fundamentally an unambiguous appeal to ban polygamy. However, Vidyasagar does engage in *vichara*. He does build up his arguments in a consistent and structured manner—mentioning the *purva paksha* (the claim of the opponents) and then refuting it through the *uttar paksha* (his claim). This aspect of Vidyasagar's analysis, which is captured in the original title, is lost in its English translation.

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By translating the title as "Against High-Caste Polygamy: A Colonial Era Appeal to Abolish Kulinism in Bengal," Hatcher aims to accomplish two things. First, he specifies the kind of polygamy being criticised—the "High-Caste Polygamy" or the Kulin Brahmin polygamy of colonial Bengal; and second, he prefers a thematic interpretation of the original to a literal translation of it. This leads to the inclusion of some additional words such as "High-Caste", "Colonial Era", "Abolish", and "Kulinism in Bengal", which are absent in the original title. However, such a transformation of the 150-year-old text is perhaps the only way to make it relevant and reader friendly to today's English-speaking world.

Indeed, Hatcher's translation is a self-conscious attempt to make the text lucid and readable. To this end, he has rearranged some scholarly parts of the original—like Vidyasagar's use of long Sanskrit quotations as supporting evidence for his arguments, tables, footnotes, and lists of names—by placing them at the end of the text. This might appear to be yet another act of unfaithfulness to the text but the larger goal of the translator is to ensure that the narrative is not interrupted and the text remains reader friendly. What is placed at the end may be used by experts but Hatcher's foremost objective is "to help the text speak to the non-specialist reader" (Hatcher Note on the Text and Translation in Vidyasagar 2023: p. xii).

There is one issue that could have been separately addressed either in the "Introduction" or in the "Note on the Text and Translation". What strikes Vidyasagar's Bengali readers today is the 19th century literary Bengali language—used typically in writing—which is now obsolete. The literary language of the time—known as *sadhu bhasha*, as opposed to *chalita bhasha* or colloquial language—was heavily Sanskritised. In most cases, it was also syntactically complex. Yet, it was unique in its own way, possessing an aesthetic elegance envied by modern writers.

Vidyasagar and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay were two hugely influential authors who wrote in *sadhu bhasha*. Vidyasagar "made an explicit effort to avoid non-Sanskrit words", unlike Bankim, who was more lenient towards derivative Bengali words (Huq no date). Consequently, two styles of Bengali writing came into existence—the Vidyasagari and the Bankimi. Akshay Kumar Dutta, for instance, was influenced by the Vidyasagari style.

Any English or European translation of a Bengali work written in *sadhu bhasha* will fail to convey the linguistic and literary flavour of the original. *Against High Caste Polygamy* is no exception. While this loss is an inevitable part of any such translation, a note on the Bengali language used by Vidyasagar would have made Hatcher's discussion on translation complete.

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