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Celebrating the Precious Mettle of Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar

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During the bicentennial year of the birth of Vidyasagar, what does it mean to celebrate the man and honour his legacy?

This year India celebrates the 200th birth anniversary of Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), the great reformer, educator, printer-publisher and prose stylist. Since his birthday last year on 26 September, there have already been numerous events dedicated to remembering and honouring his life, from his birthplace in Birsingha to the rural retreat he built for himself in Karmatar, and, of course, in Kolkata where his professional career largely unfolded. Politicians, scholars, artists, and a host of ordinary citizens have all found ways to recognise the achievements of a tireless change agent who advocated on behalf of Hindu widows, opened up new pathways in vernacular education, experimented with new models for Bengali publishing, and placed his stamp on the very character and style of modern Bengali culture.

But the man we celebrate was also something of an enigma: he was famously elusive on questions of faith, curiously wed to projects of radical change framed in relation to scriptural authority, and simultaneously both a social elite and a man of the people. In the past it has been fashionable to engage in wordplay around the relative balance of tradition and modernity in Vidyasagar. It is time to be done with all that. Let us just say it: he was a thoroughly modern individual, even if also a colonial subject. Instead of focusing on tradition and modernity, I propose we consider recognising two important dimensions of the man, what I call the major and the minor Vidyasagar.

Testing the mettle of the man

In September 2019, I was grateful to be invited to deliver the keynote address at a two-day international seminar convened by the Asiatic Society in Kolkata. The overarching goal of the seminar was to explore the impact and legacy of Vidyasagar, not just in Bengal but across India during the late 19th century. Specialists were asked to reflect on developments around social reform taking place in Maharashtra, South India, Assam, and the Panjab. It instantly became clear just how widely the impress of Vidyasagar's vision was felt even during his own lifetime. Yet notwithstanding this important takeaway from the seminar, the decision to pursue Vidyasagar's influence in this way carried one particular risk. It meant we had fewer occasions to spend reflecting on Vidyasagar himself, his work, his commitments, the challenges he faced, and the legacy he leaves behind - what I have elsewhere called his "after-life." There were those who regretted this unintended consequence of the programme. That said, Vidyasagar was never completely sidelined. After all, how could he be?

The Asiatic Society seminar came less than six months after the wanton destruction on 14 May of a bust of Vidyasagar in north Kolkata. It was election time and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Amit Shah was in town; his presence elicited vibrant protests. Clashes broke out. And in a particularly ugly episode outside the precincts of Vidyasagar College a bust of the reformer was smashed. Despite the fact that BJP hooligans were the perpetrators, the local BJP candidate accused the Trinamool Party of deliberately damaging the image in order to cast blame on the BJP. In Uttar Pradesh, the Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath also laid blame on Trinamool supporters who he accused of being opposed to "idol worship." As tragedy lurched toward farce Prime Minister Narendra Modi weighed in on the matter, promising to replace the shattered bust of Vidyasagar with an even bigger and better image - a *pancha-dhatu murti*, no less! It was all too much for West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, who voiced the wounded pride of the Bengalis while pushing back at the BJP. She vowed the state government would take care of replacing the broken image and had plenty of resources to do, so thank you very much.

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It all became surreal. For a brief moment it seemed that everyone had changed their Facebook profile to feature an image of Vidyasagar, as if to lay claim to the man. If only some of them had taken the time to do even a quick Google search. It might have spared us postings from those who confused Vidyasagar with Rammohun Roy or mixed up the widow marriage movement with the earlier campaign against sati. As social media exploded with expressions of anger and outpourings of remorse, many took the occasion to profess their admiration for the pandit. In due course debates erupted anew over how the legacy of such a man ought to be

honoured and protected. No one had seen it coming, but all of sudden Vidyasagar had become the man of the hour. A headline in the *Indian Express* read, "128 years after death, Vidyasagar becomes election issue in West Bengal."

Of course, Vidyasagar had been no stranger to controversy in his own lifetime; he was all too frequently the butt of ridicule and disrespect, if not more violent threats over his promotion of social change. Even the indignity of having his image smashed was nothing new. Decades before, Naxalites in Kolkata had knocked the head off a statue of Vidyasagar in College Square, taking issue with his alleged complicity in colonialism. Now he found himself in a new kind of political fracas - the centerpiece of a tawdry ideological tug-of-war. One can only imagine how he might have responded to such a scene. Perhaps he would have smiled ruefully and commented: Now what good deed have I done that I should have to suffer this!?

In retrospect, we can say that the events of May 2019 offered an oddly resonant prelude to the bicentennial. If nothing else, the apparently widespread confusion around Vidyasagar foregrounded just how imperative it remains to educate the public about Vidyasagar's historical context and his manifold contributions to shaping modern Indian life. Likewise, the scramble to right the wrong perpetrated on Vidyasagar's image also suggests the ongoing need to explore what such a man has to say today. And then there was the simple question of memorialisation. How are the memories of such figures best preserved? In this latter connection it is worth remembering that similar questions had been the order of the day on the occasion of Vidyasagar's death in 1891. In public gatherings and impassioned speeches great leaders of the day like Rabindranath Tagore wondered out loud how best to honour the legacy of the man. There were of course calls for the creation of memorial images, but as far as I recall there was no discussion of *pancha-dhatu murtis*. Even in those days of resurgent Hinduism and culturalist assertion it seems no one made the mistake of confusing Vidyasagar for either a deity or a proponent of Hindu dharma.

> There is no need to cast him in the precious metal of *pancha-dhatu*. Maybe we ought to just strive to live up to his own particular precious mettle, that rare combination of character, feeling and judgment that set him apart from so many, then and now.

Seen in this light, the Prime Minister's pledge to create a massive *murti* out of precious metal is yet another byproduct of the saffronised politics of the neoliberal present in which agents of the state attempt to force the vibrant features of the Indian cultural mosaic into one monochromatic Hindutva. It may be precisely here, when Vidyasagar tends to get celebrated as both a *traditional* pandit and *modern* reformer that we can see how such terminology works to the detriment of his memory. If nothing else, it tempts some to think they can appropriate Vidyasagar as a paragon of Brahmanical Hinduism and yet also gain credit for apparently endorsing ideals of progress and improvement. How convenient for them!

If such were to be the implicit message behind a towering, shiny statue of Vidyasagar it would be a serious affront to Vidyasagar's legacy, not to mention his values. Let us hope he will not find his legacy yoked to the task of promoting cultural hegemony under the guise of enlightened progress. As I remarked in my keynote at the Asiatic Society, if we wanted to focus on the special sanctity of five elements (*pancha-dhatu*), a far better path would be to identify five things about Vidyasagar's character that are worth cherishing. We might thus choose to honour his courage, honesty, compassion, generosity, and love of learning. There is no need to cast him in the precious metal of *pancha-dhatu*. Maybe we ought to just strive to live up to his own particular precious mettle, that rare combination of character, feeling and judgment that set him apart from so many, then and now.

Holding centre stage

Even if the seminar at the Asiatic Society - with its focus on following Vidyasagar beyond Bengal - attempted to foster reflection on the generalised spread of social reform across South Asia, it is hardly surprising that Vidyasagar nonetheless managed to hold centre stage. After all, there we were, gathered in Vidyasagar Hall (renamed around the time of Vidyasagar's death centenary in 1991); there we were, seated beneath a life-sized portrait of the man. It was inevitable that conversations would circle back to a figure whose memory actually pervades the very edifice of the Asiatic Society. It was here, after all, that Vidyasagar experienced an important rebuff to his cherished sartorial style, facing exclusion from the premises for wearing chappals instead of shoes. The "Shoe Question" is now the stuff of memory, as familiar to Bengalis as the cover-pages of Vidyasagar's schoolbooks, not least *Varnaparichay*. Indeed, the enduring association between Vidyasagar and the Bengali printed word was celebrated at the seminar through the inclusion of a vibrant and informative display illustrating Vidyasagar's role as printer and publisher (organised in collaboration with Jadavpur University).



Asiatic Society seminar on Vidyasagar.
Photo: Brian A. Hatcher (2019)

The audience for the seminar represented a wide spectrum of engagement, from senior academics and well-established scholars, to non-academic aficionados and amateur historians, to an impressive turnout of students from schools and universities in Kolkata and surrounding areas. I was especially heartened by the presence of so many young students. I took it as a sign not merely of a creditable ongoing commitment in Kolkata to the values of scholarship and debate, but also of ongoing and profound curiosity about a formidable figure from India's recent past. Needless to say mobile phones were everywhere and "selfies" were mandatory. However, more striking to me was the sheer number of attendees - young and old - who carried books, talked about books, and asked where more books could be had. Kolkata is a book-loving city of course, but the release by the Asiatic Society of four publications to celebrate the occasion, paired with an exhibit dedicated to Vidyasagar as vernacular publisher, served as potent reminders of one of the fundamental ways Vidyasagar worked to transform modern society.

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One might easily take away from this the simple lesson that more books are needed, not least to think anew about such a figure. Our modern curricula and official textbooks have made us too comfortable with basic categories like "social reformer" and our familiarity with such categories can make it difficult to recognise the complexity of figures like Vidyasagar. Most of us can surely rapidly compile a list of reformers from Rammohun to Ranade, and we can just as quickly trot out the names of the great reformist campaigns of the nineteenth century. But after that, then what? It is as if, being so widely known and comprising such a shared narrative about Indian national modernity, lists like these put a sort of stop to critical reflection. They too easily become collective acts of official memory,

which are predicated on unstated (and mostly unwitting) acts of forgetting.

Here may be where the well-intentioned plan of the two-day seminar ran its biggest risk. By inviting a review of reform movements across South Asia in the wake of Vidyasagar's work, the event opened the door to another rehearsal of familiar stories, grounded in familiar tropes about national awakening, the recognition of powerless groups, and the emancipation of individuals from the grip of tradition. The very comprehensive scope of the seminar thus inadvertently lured us back down familiar pathways; it barely pressed us to reconsider the meaning of reform in Vidyasagar's moment, to ponder the consequences of liberal visions of progressive change, or to ask what alternate memories might need to be recovered.



An early 20th century celebration of Vidyasagar.
Photo: Natesan Publishers (no date)

In this respect the exhibit on printing and publishing may have been the single most generative element of the event, made all the more productive by its installation just outside the hall in which the formal sessions were convened. What the exhibit offered - with its delightful sequence of high-quality posters dedicated to illustrating key elements of technological, typographic, biographical, and educational change - was an alternate narrative of Vidyasagar's life, that decentered the heroic reformer in order to bring forward someone else: a new kind of entrepreneur of the emerging colonial public sphere. Here one had to marvel at Vidyasagar for his canny ability to learn the art of printing; his astute business sense for turning the creation of schoolbooks into an engine of profit; and the more expansive connectivities that made up the world of publishing in mid - to late -19th century Kolkata. No need, for the moment, to invoke the "heart of a Bengali mother" or praise the "invincible manliness" of Vidyasagar. Even if the exhibit offered no explicit argument, it opened up pathways for reflection on Vidyasagar's place in the economy of the emerging book market; it allowed us to think about the role of that market in relation to print modernity and the creation of new modes of argument and cultural assertion; and it fostered a sense for Vidyasagar as colonial individual.

> [V]iewing Vidyasagar as little more than a type risks missing the unique elements of his personality and the evidence of his agency as a modern individual.

I have elsewhere questioned Sudipto Kaviraj's claim that Vidyasagar turned his back on modernity, unlike his junior contemporary, Bankimchandra Chatterjee. Kaviraj suggests that far from qualifying as a modern individual, Vidyasagar represents little more than a "type," someone who remained in thrall to tradition. I disagree, not least because once again such a view leads inexorably back to those unsatisfactory binaries around tradition and modernity. What is more, this way of understanding Vidyasagar actually illustrates something I have also argued, which is the tendency we have to miss him just when we try to pin him down. In this case, viewing Vidyasagar as little more than a type risks missing the unique elements of his personality and the evidence of his agency as a modern individual. One only has to spend some time pondering Vidyasagar's role as printer and publisher to recognise the unmistakable features of a modern entrepreneurial actor with a knack for new technology and a keen sense of how to negotiate the ins and outs of the changing colonial marketplace. Too often we get hung up on the man's *dhoti-chaddar* and his chappals and we miss the chance to picture him surrounded by type sorts and a clanking Stanhope press. We conjure the type of the pandit and we miss the reality of an inventive change agent, busy effecting changes in everything from punctuation and conjunct consonants to the kinds of language that could be coined to increase the traction of science and technology in daily discourse. Even Vidyasagar's deference to the Shastras should be considered in this light. Because he appealed to Parashara does not make him a revivalist or reactionary. This was no religious fundamentalism, but an expression of a kind of modern Indian conservativism fueled by the changing status of scripture under the terms of Orientalist knowledge-production.

> [V]idyasagar's industriousness in promoting a kind of Bengali bourgeois morality illustrates both his creative response to a world experiencing new strains and his complicity in endorsing some cultural options while closing off others. But make no mistake, he was a modern individual living and acting in a bourgeois colonial milieu.

Likewise, if Vidyasagar chose to rewrite the stories of classic Sanskrit characters like Sita or Shakuntala, was that because he could not think himself out of the past? Could a mind and a personality so oriented toward change really be blinkered in such a way? Or was there a reason he made those choices? We should not lose sight of the fact that his was a conscious programme to identify topics that would translate into successful entrants into the growing market for what passed for "useful knowledge."Indeed, the very fact that for Vidyasagar "useful" was synonymous with "respectable" (and hence purified of the erotic or suggestive) is not evidence of a type of puritanical throwback but proof of his active attempt to respond to - and shape - a newly emerging world of public comportment. We may wince a bit at the narrowness of his moral vision, but his narrowness should not be typecast as traditional; those schoolbooks and moral tales actually represent his active packaging of a moral programme. Here it helps to make a direct analogy to the new patriarchy of the late colonial moment, when women's lives and characters were re-scripted in the interests of bhadralok hegemony and Hindu pride. Like such efforts, Vidyasagar's industriousness in promoting a kind of Bengali bourgeois morality illustrates both his creative response to a world experiencing new strains and his complicity in endorsing some cultural options while closing off others. But make no mistake, he was a modern individual living and acting in a bourgeois colonial milieu.

A bourgeois colonial subject

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that modern bourgeois politics represents nothing less than the "republic of property." In this republic, the multitude of the poor exists only on the very margins of capitalist production. It is a point worth considering when pondering the grand projects of liberal reform in colonial India - from Brahmo theism to Vidyasagar's campaign to legalise widow

marriage. We are all too keenly aware that such initiatives, for all their brilliance and grand intentions, remained hamstrung by virtue of their distance from India's multitudes. So many of the great reform initiatives fell short of any revolutionary promise regarding the creation of a "radically plural and open body politic." In this respect, as Asok Sen long ago noted, there remained even in the case of a great reformer like Vidyasagar, a troubling disconnect between articulation and fulfilment. Following Hardt and Negri we could say this had much to do with the investments of reformist intellectuals in the republic of property. Even Vidyasagar, for all his independence, was never loath to seek the support of privileged zamindar landholders; if anything, he seems to have accepted their social rank and depended on their ability to dole out patronage. If the reformist project thus catered to the republic of property, what hope was there for transformation in the lives of the multitudes?

> Vidyasagar clearly understood and embraced a kind of colonial modernity in which property, status and respectability could all be accumulated for show value and also wielded to reformist ends.

Thinking about Vidysagar in these terms reminds us that in such a figure we witness the emergence of the modern bourgeois subject in colonial India. It is not merely that Vidyasagar was an independent spirit, nor that he was a creative and industrious entrepreneur. Just as importantly, Vidyasagar embodied key elements of bourgeois class aspiration. One need only think of his splendid house in Badurbagan, with its library of leather-bound books and rooms outfitted with European furniture. Vidyasagar clearly understood and embraced a kind of colonial modernity in which property, status and respectability could all be accumulated for show value and also wielded to reformist ends. Here one might depart somewhat from the view of Asok Sen and argue that far from finding in Vidyasagar clear proof of the failure of modernity in colonial Bengal, we find in his allegiance to the republic of property evidence of his own bourgeois modernity. Such was the cost of converting to modernity, if we adopt a useful concept from Peter van der Veer.



Vidyasagar's house in Badurbagan, Kolkata.
Photo: Brian A. Hatcher (2012)

The minor Vidyasagar

At a time when the multitudes find themselves simultaneously encompassed by neoliberal modernity and yet excluded from its choicest material rewards, it is hard not to agree with Asok Sen in emphasising the failures and futilities of reform. But the very fact that Vidyasagar has also been celebrated again and again as a kind of lonely, frustrated Don Quixote makes me think there is another Vidyasagar we need to recognise. Not the heroic reformer, but the one with the courage to turn the tables even on his own success. To see how we might recover an appreciation for this Vidyasagar, a brief detour to Hardt and Negri's *Commonwealth* may prove useful.

According to Hardt and Negri the key to challenging the republic of property need not lie in rejecting modernity outright; what if we sought, instead, to inhabit the terrain of an "altermodernity." The concept owes its inspiration to movements that wrestle with

globalisation, especially that moment when solutions are found not in rejecting the global but in reframing it: not anti-globalisation, but "alterglobalisation. The terminological twist yields a shift in practice away from outright binaries of resistance that tend to deaden in forms of anti-modernity. Rather than the static postures of anti-modern politics, Hardt and Negri envision altermodernity as an expansive and open political vision that remains structured by fundamental notions of modern liberalism even as it seeks to cut against the grain of its exclusionary logic. To show how this might be possible, Hardt and Negri make an innovative interpretive move in which they rethink the significance of Immanuel Kant's well-known essay, "What is enlightenment?" In that essay Kant had famously defined enlightenment by quoting Horace's injunction: *sapere aude* , "dare to know!" For Kant this injunction was central to the task of moving beyond self-incurred tutelage and deference to received authority. This is Kant's great message, say Hardt and Negri; this is the "major Kant." Here we have the core philosophical insight undergirding all modern liberal projects. Put simply, the motto "dare to know" marks the logic and goal of all bourgeois aspiration, not least when it comes to the grand modern visions of reason, reform and progress.

> [C]ould there be two Vidyasagars as well - a major and a minor one?

But Hardt and Negri's innovation is to claim there is also a minor Kant - one we discover when we turn his words on their head, as it were. For the minor Kant the motto is not "dare to know," but rather "know how to dare." According to Hardt and Negri one discovers this minor Kant by reading him against the grain. This is the guiding voice of altermodernity, articulating - so they argue - not a rejection of reason but a kind of "alternative rationality." This is the voice of a reason willing to support acts of creative resistance from within the bourgeois republic of property. Knowing how to dare would constitute the necessary first step toward articulating new modes of social and political life capable of embracing "the multitude" and not just serving the needs and wants of the privileged.

This encourages me to ask, could there be two Vidyasagars as well - a major and a minor one? Unlike Kant, of course, Vidyasagar wrote no philosophical manifesto; he left us no programmatic statement regarding his philosophical vision or political views. Therefore, if we are to identify the major and the minor Vidyasagar we must risk a bit of invention. If Kant had his motto, what was Vidyasagar's motto? Perhaps the major Vidyasagar would tell us "there is nothing higher than dharma" (*dharmat param nasti*). The motto of the major Vidyasagar seems to affirm the structuring truth of a shastrically mandated social order. Thus, even when promoting change, Vidyasagar did so in the name of dharma. Needless to say, this dharma was coterminous with the ordered structures of privileged Bengali society, not least the prerogatives around *jati-bheda* and *raja-dharma*. In the major Vidyasagar we find no path to a revolutionary re-ordering of things; we have, rather, the affirmation of existing privileges. Hence his reservations about opening the Sanskrit college to lower castes and his repeated deference to norms of bourgeois respectability.

> Where the minor Vidyasagar really shines forth is in his unflagging love of irony, sarcasm and humor.

So where might we find the minor Vidyasagar? Ironically, while Hardt and Negri have to turn Kant on his head to make him articulate an alternate truth, I believe in Vidyasagar's case no such contortions are necessary. We already know the minor Vidyasagar quite well. We encounter him every time we find ourselves under the shadow of his brow; every time we note a certain twinkle in his otherwise unflinching gaze; every time we witness him delivering a strategic pinch to the belly, as he famously did to the Brahmo reformer Shibnath Shastri. These are all indices of the minor Vidyasagar, the one who teased, taunted and tested the strictures of modern colonial reason.

Where the minor Vidyasagar really shines forth is in his unflagging love of irony, sarcasm and humor. If the major Vidyasagar was capable of putting together copiously annotated textual arguments aimed at convincing recalcitrant pandits using their own terms of debate, the minor Vidyasagar liked to poke fun at dim-witted Sanskrit scholars who couldn't think themselves out of their own logical puzzles. Recall his joke about the pandit whose wife left him to watch the rice as she ran an errand; when she came home she found the pot overflowing and the poor man frantically searching his *punthis* for a solution to the problem! This is the voice of the minor Vidyasagar, the one who had no time for preachers and attorneys, to guardians over the republic of property. Preachers in particular really drew the ire of the minor Vidyasagar; he had no time to wave the flag of religious truth, let alone for those who browbeat others over orthodoxy. He much preferred to cast doubt, call out pretense, challenge abuse, and even shame the prideful.

The motto of the minor Vidyasagar would therefore have to be a Sanskrit phrase he liked to quote from the Mahabharata: *dharmasya tattvam nihitam guhayam*. "the essence of truth is shrouded in mystery." When he cited this phrase the minor Vidyasagar did so to remind people that before rushing to defeat your rivals in religion or politics, why not first practice caution. Why not embrace compassion rather than seeking victory? This is the motto of the Vidyasagar who lives on in so many legends, the man who is the

cherished possession of the widest range of Bengalis and Indians alike. I find it truly telling that the multitudes are scarcely put off by the unflinching reason of the major Vidyasagar, that paragon of Brahminical pride; rather they are drawn to the minor Vidyasagar, the man who knew when to dare. This is the Vidyasagar who knew when it was right to run to the aid of malaria victims suffering far from the parlours of comfortable Calcutta; who knew how to idle in the street with friends telling jokes and poking at the pretentions of missionaries and Brahmos alike. This is the Vidyasagar who was even willing to court offence. The minor Vidyasagar refused to cower before the British colleague who showed him disrespect; instead he found a way to return the favour - and come away the moral victor!

> Is it a coincidence that both Gandhi and Vidyasagar live on in endless stories and modern folktales, the historical veracity of which is entirely beside the point.

During the course of the seminar at the Asiatic Society in September, whether in formal meetings or casual conversation, I was reminded again and again of how this minor Vidyasagar remains a compelling figure for many. To register this fact it is enough to notice how people from widely different stations and walks of life perk up when Vidyasagar's name is mentioned. It is enough to notice how he lives on especially in anecdotes that tell of him happily being mistaken for a gardener or a coolie. His very choice to inhabit the costume of a Brahmin pandit while courting misrecognition as a common bearer or country bumpkin speaks to the way he continually played the major and the minor off one another.

As I have suggested elsewhere, Vidyasagar lends himself in this way to comparison with Mahatma Gandhi, a man both synonymous with the liberative politics of anti-colonial protest and also beloved for his precocious wit, self-deprecating humor, and undeniable connection to ordinary people. Is it a coincidence that both Gandhi and Vidyasagar live on in endless stories and modern folktales, the historical veracity of which is entirely beside the point. Major figures in the shaping of modern India, they each also have a much-beloved minor side. Or one might think as well of Rammohun Roy, someone who succeeded not simply by liberating reason, but - as Milinda Banerjee has suggested - by knowing when to trip it up. Perhaps this all helps explain why Vidyasagar was so reluctant to join with organised initiatives led by ambitious, politically-minded leaders. In his reluctance we catch yet another glimpse of an alternative subjectivity that refuses to endorse even the logic of emancipatory liberal politics.

One might even say Vidyasagar's life was punctuated by such refusals. One thinks especially of his decision in 1858 to resign his post as Principal of the Sanskrit College. Frustrated at constraints placed on his work to promote widespread education, Vidyasagar spoke back to bureaucratic rationality and at the system of authoritarian control that stymied his efforts to expand opportunities for learning in rural locations. Knowing when to dare his own wellbeing, he famously proclaimed, "I'd rather sell potatoes in the market." Here was Vidyasagar operating in the minor mode. There were times he refused to shy away from turning the tables even on his own cherished norms of Brahmanical authority. After all, when his fellow pandit Taranath Tarkavacaspati challenged him publicly, Vidyasagar adopted the guise of the "Competent Nephew" (*upayukta bhaipo*) to attack his learned colleague. Under that shadow identity he thumbed his nose at deference:

My great shortcoming is that if I see an injustice, I cannot remain silent out of deference to caste or a kinship relationship. As the *Nitishastra* says, *Dosha vachya gurorapi* 'One must mention the faults even of a teacher.' But these days things have gotten very bad. If, upon seeing someone's error, you speak up truthfully for their own benefit, they take it as abuse. Consequently, in such situations many remain silent. But such restraint is not fitting in the relationship between a 'competent nephew' and his uncle. That is, I am constrained to speak up both to protect my own *dharma* and for my uncle's benefit in this life and the next.

Here is the minor Vidyasagar, who is capable of quoting the Shastras to promote another kind of reason, one whose truth may occasionally be harder to embrace than the scriptures themselves. This is the Vidyasagar who spoke truth to power, as we like to say. And when he spoke this way, when he contested the dictates of colonial and capitalist reason, we might say he voiced a kind of altermodernity. If only on occasion and only in a minor key, he nonetheless called out the violence of subordination and exclusion inherent in the republic of property.

This may help us imagine just what a figure like Vidyasagar could mean (for instance) to the residents of refugee resettlement areas like Bijoygarh and Vidyasagar Colony in Kolkata. I was somewhat surprised to learn that one finds in the latter locale a rather imposing statue of the pandit, erected by the Vidyasagar Vastuhara Samiti. To be sure, we can easily imagine a cluster of official meanings that affix themselves to such acts of memorialisation. To erect an image of Vidyasagar in such a context is thus a way to

affirm modern, liberal projects of socio-economic improvement. But what does the major Vidyasagar, the bourgeois Brahmin, have to say to the dispossessed, the landless and those struggling on the margins of power? Or is it that the image in Vidyasagar Colony also celebrates the minor Vidyasagar; does it thereby register a voice of dissent; does it constitute recognition of the ongoing need to trouble the waters, to know when to dare change? In this regard, the minor Vidyasagar speaks for no party, offers no path; he simply stands there, his tireless glare directed at inequity and abuse. And what gives the image such force is perhaps the very tension between the major and the minor Vidyasagar: it celebrates both the modern liberal dream and enacts a kind of continued rejection of things as they are. Thus, in an image like that erected by the Vastuhara Samiti we can appreciate how Vidyasagar can simultaneously announce the potential of modern associational projects and subject them to constant scrutiny.



Vidyasagar memorial in Vidyasagar Colony.
Photo: James Bradbury (2019) by permission

Humour over destruction

I write all this knowing I stretch a point and run the risk of simplifying what by any account was an immensely complicated life, personally, professionally, and politically. And one of the most glaring limits to any celebration of the minor Vidyasagar's lies in the fact that his basic social position remained all but untouched by even his most elegant acts of daring. Nevertheless, I risk this interpretation on the occasion of Vidyasagar's birth bicentennial in order to suggest that if we want to think about memorialising a figure like this, we do well to think of the minor Vidyasagar as a kind of check on the all-too-easy celebration of a progressive Indian social reformer. That might be only another way of underwriting the durability of our neoliberal world order, with its roots in the very capitalist modernity into which Vidyasagar himself converted. Statues of precious metal speak too clearly the message of power and privilege. By contrast, it should be the precious mettle of the minor Vidyasagar - the one who knew how to dare - that gets remembered and celebrated, and finally enacted. In his humour and irony we might recover important gestures at other possible altermodernities. More than any triumphal statue, it will be Vidyasagar's jokes and his ripostes to power that continue to resonate with the multitudes. I propose we attempt to honour the jokes and build on their promise. After all, as C. L. R. James reminds us: "unfailing humor is an assertion of life and sanity against the ever-present threat of destruction."