

## Review

*Vidyasagar: The Life and After-life of an Eminent Indian*, by Brian A. Hatcher. London/New Delhi: Routledge, 2014. xxv + 182 pp., £19.99 (pb). ISBN 978-0-415-73630-5 (pb).

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Ishwar Chandra Bandopadhyay (1820–1891) was an accomplished scholar, educator, author, translator, reformer, humanist, entrepreneur and philanthropist whose life has been much celebrated in Bengal as one of the most creative figures of the ‘Bengal Renaissance’. He is best known as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar ‘Ocean of Knowledge’—so denominated upon his graduation from the Sanskrit College, Calcutta. Born into an impoverished Bengali brahman family, Vidyasagar’s intellect, learning and energies were focused upon a wide range of progressive innovations including reformed Sanskrit education, translation of important western literature into Bengali, reform and simplification of the both the alphabet and prose of the Bengali language. In his public life, he became renowned for his championing of the cause of Indian women—promoting the reform of permitting widow marriage and campaigning against high caste polygamy. He became famed as a philanthropist and practitioner of homeopathic medicine. While many anecdotes survive regarding his ironic sense of humour, there are also stories of bitter and long-lasting disputes with former friends and colleagues. In short, Vidyasagar’s life may offer a rich and complex tableau of a remarkable ‘pathfinder’ negotiating the intersection of colonialism and modernity in nineteenth-century Bengal. Although a major figure in Bengali culture, he is less well known elsewhere in South Asia and the world beyond. A fresh examination of his life and works should be a welcome addition to the literature, particularly in that Professor Hatcher is recognized as an accomplished interpreter of India’s colonial experience seen through prisms of cultural encounter and religious change in nineteenth-century Bengal, for example, *Idioms of Improvement : Vidyasagar and Cultural Encounter in Bengal* (1996), as well as a translator of Vidyasagar’s reformist writings.

Hatcher’s new study is a volume in *Pathfinders*, a new series from Routledge under the general editorship of Dilip Menon, intended to explore the

intellectual history of South Asia through the lives and ideas of significant individuals within a historical context. These ‘pathfinders’ are seen to represent a break with existing traditions, canons and inherited histories.

Indeed, inherited histories occupy the foreground of this new study—a sophisticated examination of the challenges to understanding the life and identity of an ‘eminent Indian’ in the light of an unstable and evolving context of biography, autobiography, memory and aspiration. In a sense, this is not a biography, but a biography of biographies. In his introduction, Hatcher states his concern to avoid ‘the comfortable teleology of the “life story”’, instead surveying selected issues or themes that ‘promise to shed new light on Vidyasagar and his legacy’ (p. xxii). This approach is reiterated in the book’s conclusion: ‘biographers should resist the temptation of creating a puzzle for which their subject, surprisingly, holds the solution. Instead of arriving at the point where one claims to know one’s subject well enough to reveal it in full and final form to others, perhaps we would do better to adopt a position of biographical agnosticism’ (p. 160).

Biographical writing on Vidyasagar commenced even before his death; Hatcher employs an 1872 account of modern Bengali literature to introduce some elements of the life story, including village education, Sanskrit training in Calcutta, recognition as a *pandit* (including the bestowal of the title ‘Ocean of Learning’, that is, Vidyasagar;) educational service, writing Bengali textbooks adapting Western learning, promotion of social reforms propounding widow remarriage and opposing high caste polygamy. Hatcher suggests that this early work established a template for considering Vidyasagar’s intervention in education, literature and society. The study proceeds through a careful survey of a number of other Bengali biographical works. Hatcher also notes the absence of significant English language successors following on a 1902 publication.

The balance of the book sketches aspects of this elusive figure. Hatcher demonstrates how an anecdote of Vidyasagar’s reception of a Baul singer has been taken as evidence of his religiosity and/or his humanism and secular values. He suggests that the ‘non-linearity’ of Vidyasagar’s ‘autobiography’ with its focus on parents and grandparents may be read as an indirect invocation of the dislocations and movements that shaped his own life. Chapter Four, ‘The Stuff of Legends’, explores how Vidyasagar is ‘enshrined in biography and popular memory as a friend of the friendless, a patron of the poor and a champion of the powerless’ (p. 78). His retelling of Kalidasa’s Sanskrit drama *Shakuntla* in Bengali prose was intended to set a new standard in that emerging literary genre, but has also been related to his concern for Hindu widows. Vidyasagar’s irony and humour and satire are explored in the light of maintaining self-respect in the colonial context. Hatcher’s strong research credentials in Bengali cultural history and analysis of polemic are displayed particularly in Chapter Six, ‘The Tale of Two Pandits’, which explores that collaboration and ultimate fracture between Vidyasagar and Taranath

Tarkavchaspati—allies in promotion of widow marriage—who fell away over personal insults or a campaign against high caste polygamy.

The cover of this volume features a bust of Vidyasagar at the Jharkhand village of Karmartar, to where he retreated in 1873 from the noise, dirt and pressures of Calcutta. In a sense, the cover offers a clue to the entire book—a solid ‘memorial’ that, as the author tells us, has been somewhat obscured by later vegetation—making the view elusive. In the same manner, Vidyasagar’s life has remained elusive in its repeated tellings. Hatcher’s sophisticated analysis may serve as a guide to those who wish to come to a closer understanding of this remarkable figure of the Indian renaissance as well as a hint as to how challenging that quest might be.