Indian civilization is one of the ancient civilizations of the world with a hoary past that dates back to 2500 to 3000 B.C. But during the eighteenth century the Indian society especially Bengal was in a dilapidated state. Devoid of education ignorant people were then dictated by religious orthodoxy, various social customs, degrading superstitions. Utter chaos had rendered the society a virtual wasteland. And in such a wasteland Kulismun, child-marriage and abominable rite of sati filled the life of parkash-nashin’ women with pervading gloom and darkness. Life was ‘bhall’ to them.

It was this time when the gradual Euro-centric invasion was taking place. It was not merely an economic invasion rather the British conquest of India bore far-reaching ramifications. The two cultures’ encounter created a ‘contact zone’. It was a state of diffusion and confusion. On one hand the Evangelists were trying to spread education among the masses with their covert intention of religious indoctrination, on the other hand there was hot debate between the Orientalists and the Anglicists regarding the medium of instruction. Nevertheless the ‘contact zone’ produced some progressive men of letters who tried to stretch this awakening to the grass root level for socio-cultural transformation and regeneration.

Poly-glott Vidyasagar was one such man who played a very significant role in the intellectual flowering of Bengal. The geniusness of Vidyasagar lay in the fact that when there was no concept of universal education at that time – he tried to disseminate knowledge among the masses. Not only had this he also sought to integrate and assimilate western culture with the best features of his own country’s tradition. He thus formulated, prescribed and executed the re-defining process of sociocultural awakening in the nineteenth century Bengal.

To translate his ideas into reality he moulded a new system of education in and out of Sanskrit College with a broader aim of superstition free progressive society. During his tenure as the Principal of Sanskrit College he initiated unprecedented changes in both spheres of – administration and education.

As an administrative reformist he was an iconoclast. He opened the gates of Sanskrit College to all irrespective of caste, creed or religion. He needed a lot of reformative changes in both spheres of – administration and education. He not only established the schools, but also supervised them, recruited teachers per excellence in this regard that at that time when there was virtually noth-
Once again as the crusader for female education certain things must be singled out: 

- The changes that Vidyasagar initiated involved expansion and modernization of the curriculum. He introduced history, geography, ethics and natural philosophy i.e. elementary science, emphasized on the use of textbooks, promotion through examinations and in general an integration with the modern concept of western education. In other words he tried to structuralise, universalize and modernize the curriculum. It is interesting to note that after independence the several Educational Commissions set up by the Indian Government emphasized on structuralizing and universalizing education. In many ways Vidyasagar's ideas are echoed by them.

- In the post-independent period Indian Government has also set up National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) to formally oversee standards, procedures and processes of teacher education system throughout the country. In Vidyasagar's time there was no such concept. But to educate the students of the newly set up Model Schools far-sighted Vidyasagar understood the necessity of training the teachers in a befitting manner. So he set up the Normal School in the premises of Sanskrit College.

- The other notable thing is that Vidyasagar was not in favour of education for education's sake; rather he was utilitarian in this perspective. He linked education with the vocational aspect. That is why he even wrote his higher authority to create job opportunities for the passed out students of Model Schools.

- Again in this world of post-modernism and globalization the concept of trilingualism is quite rampant. But in Vidyasagar's time when there was no concept of universal education – even at that time he introduced the concept of trilingualism. He wanted the use of mother tongue for the beginners, then Sanskrit and English. What is even more interesting that Vidyasagar not only favoured the vernacular Bengali language but also sought to improve it by the means of English and Sanskrit.

- Now-a-days it is mandatory for the colleges to be accredited by The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). Even the inspection of schools is also quite essential. In Vidyasagar's time Vidyasagar himself supervised those schools and reported the government. He even appointed some inspectors to assist him in this regard.

- It is worth mentioning that now-a-days the teachers of schools and colleges are employed through teacher-recruitment examinations. In his time Vidyasagar also arranged for one teacher recruitment examination in the Sanskrit College (Ghosh 209).

Vidyasagar also channelised and directed his might for the propagation of women education. Under his able management Hindu Balika Vidyalaya, renamed by him as Bethune School evolved as one of the hubs of women education. He wrote articles, pamphlets and even re-read the Sanskrit scriptures to convince the people to send their daughters to school. Later on when the government decided to extend the grants-in-aid to the girls' school too – he within a very short span of time established as many as 40 schools in the interiors of Bengal. Often he had to bear the expenses for providing books, teaching-learning materials, dresses etc. to the students. Now-a-days when the government is trying to decrease the drop-out rates of the students by providing book grants, school dress, mid-day-meal etc. one is reminded of Vidyasagar's ideas in this respect. In many ways they were the brain child of Vidyasagar.

However when the government ceased to provide the grants-in-aid to the newly set up schools, Vidyasagar raised a fund Nari Siksha Prathishthan Vandar (Samanta 53) for rendering financial assistance to those schools. The tremendous achievement of Vidyasagar lies in the fact that undeterred and undaunted by stiff opposition he continued to fight the flame of women education in Bengal. What is even more astonishing that Vidyasagar had done all these inspite of being one Brahmin!

Once again as the crusader for female education certain things must be singled out:

- Now-a-days there is a lot of discussion on women liberation, women empowerment, gender discrimination etc. But one cannot even imagine the pathetic life of women during the eighteenth century. They were then not only treated as human beings. Vidyasagar realized that unless the womenfolk of this land are rescued from this quagmire there is no respite from this wasteland. So he, amid much hostility and opposition, started female education. Not only had this he also re-read the scriptures to justify his stance by quoting from them.

- At present there are several schemes initiated by the Central Government and the State Governments for the girl child- like – Kamyachree, Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao etc. In Vidyasagar's time he also established one Nari Siksha Prathishthan Vandar to render financial assistance to the girl students.

- It is also worth-mentioning here that in his later period of life Vidyasagar fought against kulism, child marriage and polygamy because these things were integrally related with women emancipation and their education. Truly Vidyasagar's effort in this regard was stupendous.

In the later period of his life, after resigning from the Sanskrit College he associated himself with Metropolitan School and College. The genesis of the Institution was a stupendous event in the National history of India as it was run by the natives, virtually with no help from the ruling British. To the indigenous people the Institution symbolized defiance and self-assertion – the proud display of nationalism and vaulting ambition.

In this age of globalization when there is the mushrooming of private institutions one may miss the subtle nuances to understand its significance and the role it played then. But it must be acknowledged that the Institution was the first Institution of national education that started to decolonize the mind of the indigenous people.

Multi-dimensional Vidyasagar apart from being one educational reformer was also a prolific writer. He used his mighty pen to write, translate, edit and publish primers, readers, and text books for the students. He simplified and rationalized the Sanskrit grammar to make learning effective, joyful and meaningful. Mention must be made of the Bengal primer Varna-parichay – a timeless wonder. The book foreshadowed the application of psychology into education. The other books Onforestry, Oasana (Buddhist law and culture), Oaparisthana (holy water), Oadakarit etc. also upheld profound moral. They imbibed in them what we call at present value education.

Besides being a prolific writer Vidyasagar was also an 'Improving Vernacularist'(Hatcher 86). In the true sense of the term he was the architect of Modern Bengali prose. He improved and modernized the Bengal prose to disseminate western learning to the grass root level. It is he who systematized, rationalized and simplified the Bengal prose by freeing it from pedanticism and pedestrianism. He added rhythm and beauty to it thus making the soil fertile for Rabindranath Tagore to evolve.

Thus iconoclast Vidyasagar re-defined the fate of Bengal by initiating a paradigm shift a structural change in the field of education. Modern Bengal as well as India is really indebted to this mighty man who left an indelible impression by revolutionizing the entire field of education. He seems to be non-pareil in this regard. Though he has not philosophised his educational thoughts in a codified manner like other educational thinkers have done but his books, readers, letters and the notes clearly show his views and philosophies of education.

As per as his concept and aim of education is concerned he was an eclectic – a symbiost who tried to synthesize and amalgamate the different philosophies of education. He aimed at nurturing the child into a full grown individual having humanitarian outlook who would be progressive, liberal, rational and nationalistic in spirit. In the grand scheme he assigned the teachers with greater roles. They were no mere facilitators of reading and reciting rather they were entrusted to develop in students deeper insight of events and situations so that in near future the students would become ideal citizens of the nation who would contribute meaningfully for the cause of the society.

The glorious achievement of Vidyasagar lies in the fact that when there was virtually nothing he like a true visionary brought out one educational system – designed it, executed them and integrated it with our life to bring about socio-cultural transformation. He directed all his might and effort to structuralise the educational system to reach to the margin i.e. the sub-alterns to empower and enable them to contribute to the centre. Truly to him education was the tenor – the vehicle of resurrection – the panacea to ameliorate the ills of society and to us – the beneficiaries – he is the modern Prometheus.

NOTES

1. The Purad harash is a poem by Sarojini Naidu where she paints the tragic life of the Muslim woman.

2. This is Mary Louise Pratt's concept. She introduced this concept in a 1991 keynote address to the Modern Language Association titled Arts of the Contact Zone.


4. Continuous and comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) is a process of assessment mandated by the Right to Education Act, of India. As a part of this system, student's marks will be replaced by grades which will be evaluated through a series of curricular and extra-curricular evaluations along with academics.

5. National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) is an Indian Government
body set up under the National Council for Teacher Education Act, 1993. It was set up in 1995. This council function for the central as well as state governments on all matters with regards to the Teacher Education and its Secretariat is located in the Department of Teacher Education and National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

6. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is an organisation that assess and accredits institutions of higher education in India. It is an autonomous body funded by University Grants Commission (UGC).

7. Kanyashree Prakalpa is one of its kind initiatives taken by the Government of West Bengal to improve the life and the status of the girls by helping economically backward families with cash.

8. Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save girl child, educate girl child) is a Government of India scheme that aims to generate awareness and improve the efficiency of welfare services meant for women.

9. Eclecticism adheres to or is constituted from several theories, styles, and ideas in order to gain a thorough insight about the subject and draws upon different theories in different cases.

REFERENCES: