

Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar a story of his life and work

SUBAL CHANDRA MITRA



CHAPTER I.

BIRTH AND ANCESTRY.

Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar^[1] was born on the 26th day of September, in the year 1820, corresponding with the twelvth of Asvin, 1227, Bengali Era, of a poor, but respectable Brahman family, at Birsingha, a small village in the district of Midnapore, in the lower provinces of Bengal. His father's name was Thakurdas Bandyopadhyay. Isvar Chandra was his first-born son. The village Birsingha is 52 miles to the west of Calcutta, the metropolis of India, and is only 5 miles from Ghatal, which is one of the subdivisions of the Midnapore district. But Birsingha was not the Original home of the family. Vidyasagar's grandfather had removed there from Banamalipur, where the family had been living for several generations. Banamalipur is a village in the Hugli district, lying to the west of Tarakesvar, a sacred place with the Hindus, where thousands of pilgrims from different parts of India assemble annually to offer their *pūja* (prayer and offerings) to their god Tarakesvar or *Siva*. The

life and character of a man are greatly influenced by his surroundings. This was amply verified in Vidyasagar. We should therefore begin with a brief description of the family, he was born in. His pedigree may uncontrovertibly be traced to his great grand-father. In this respect it would be better to quote what Vidyasagar himself has said in his auto-biography:—

"My paternal great-grandfather, Bhuvanesvar Vidyalkar,[2] had five sons, of whom the eldest was Nrisingha Ram, the second, gangadhar, the third, Ramjay, the fourth, Panchanan, and the fifth, Ramcharan. The third, Ramjay Tarkabhusan, was my grandfather. After the death of my great-grandfather (father's grandfather), his first and second sons managed the family affairs. In a short time, my grandfather, Ramjay Tarkabhusan, had some dispute with his elder brothers about the family property, and soon the dispute rose into downright quarrel and breach of brotherly friendship. Ultimately, my grandfather left the village in disgust.

"There lived, at that time, in the village of Birsingha, a famous Pandit (profound sanskrit scholar) named Umapati Tarkasiddhanta.(2 again) My

grandfather, Ramjay Tarkabhushan, was married to Durga Devi, the third daughter of Umapati Tarkasiddhanta. Ramjay Tarkabhushan, had by this wife, two sons and four daughters. Of the two sons, Thakurdas was the first, and Kalidas, the second. Of the four daughters, the eldest was Mangala, the second, Kamala, the third, Govindamani, and the fourth, Annapurna. Thakurdas was my father.

"After Ramjay Tarkabhushan, my grandfather, had left his native village, his wife Durga Devi was living with the family at Banamalipur. But, unfortunately, the brother's of her husband, in a short time, began to look down upon and neglect her and her children; and the neglect soon rose to such a height that she was compelled to leave the village, and take shelter in her father's house at Birsingha. For a few days she lived here comfortably, but presently her misfortune began anew, for she soon saw that she could not live peacefully in her father's house, as she had imagined.

"Umapati Tarkasiddhanta, the father of Durga Devi, had grown too old to look to the management of the family affairs, which had consequently to be left in the hands of his son, Ram

Sundar Vidyabhushan.[3] This Vidyabhushan and his wife were not well disposed towards Durga Devi and her children, and were always a source of oppression and terror to them. The husband and wife treated them with such disdain and inhumanity that Durga Devi had no other alternative than to leave at once this dreadful shelter, namely her father's house. Her father, Umapati Tarkasiddhanta, was deeply and sincerely pained at the conduct of his son and daughter-in-law, but he was now quite helpless himself. He, therefore, had a hut built for his daughter in the neighbourhood, not very far off from his own house; and here Durga Devi began to live with her children, and passed her days in a most wretched state.

"At that time, many poor, helpless women of Bengal earned their livelihood by spinning cotton into thread by means of a spinning wheel, known by the name of *Ckarka*, and by selling them to the weavers. Durga Devi was now compelled to take to this industry. But the income from this source was too small to maintain herself and her six children. Her father helped her now and then, but even this, added to her own income, was barely sufficient to feed and clothe them. As a matter of fact, Durga

Devi was most miserably circumstanced, and she always shed tears at the sight of her barely-fed children. Her eldest son, Thakurdas, was at this time fourteen or fifteen years old. At this young age, he, with his mother's permission, left her cottage, and proceeded to Calcutta in search of livelihood.

"Sabharam Vachaspati,[4] a near kinsman of ours, had settled in Calcutta. His son, Jaganmohan Nayalankar,[5] had been a pupil of the famous professor, Chaturbhuj Nyayratna,^(5 again) and had been in great favour with him. Consequently, through highly favourable recommendations of the professor, he soon rose to eminence, and became, in his turn, a distinguished professor of the Nyay School of philosophy. Thakurdas presented himself before this near kinsman, and, with tearful eyes, explained the reason of his sudden appearance in Calcutta, and besought his shelter. Jaganmohan Nyayalankar was now well-off, and he generously fed and helped the needy. It was not, therefore,

"Before leaving his mother, brother, and sisters, Thakurdas had read the *Sankshiptasar Vyakaran* (a Sanskrit grammar) first at Banamalipur, his paternal home, and then at Birsingha, the birth-place of his mother. When he thus found shelter in the house of his near kinsman, who was a famous Sanskrit scholar and professor, it was at first arranged that he should apply himself to the study of that ancient language (Sanskrit), and his own inclinations too were in favour of Sanskrit education. But the difficulty was that it would not easily fulfil the ends for which he had come to Calcutta. The recollection of his mother, brother, and sisters, whom he had left in a most deplorable situation, made him forego this design. At last, it was definitely settled that he should attend to such education, as would soon enable him to earn some money.

"At that time, a little knowledge of English easily procured berths in European mercantile firms; and it was, therefore, thought advisable for Thakurdas to have a little English instruction, instead of Sanskrit. But English education was not easily obtainable then, because there were only a limited number of English schools, and these were

resorted to only by the rich, as they were very costly, and the poor could not afford to pay for such education. Under the circumstances, it was quite impossible for poor, helpless Thakurdas to obtain his English education in a school. It was finally settled that he should read English with a friend of Jaganmohan Nyayalankar's, who had a tolerable knowledge of English, and who, at the request of his friend, the famous Sanskrit professor, consented to give Thakurdas lessons in English. This gentleman was employed in a mercantile office, and so he had no time during the day to impart his gratuitous instruction to Thakurdas. He told the boy to come to him after night-fall, and the poor pupil daily attended the night school and received lessons free of cost.

"It has been said before, that Jaganmohan Nyayalankar used to give food and lodging to many poor outsiders, who had very little or no relation with him. In the evening, the feeding of these poor people was finished immediately after sunset. And this was the time when Thakurdas had to leave Nyaylankar's house and go to his teacher for the sake of a little English education; and when he returned from his teacher's house, it was too

late, and he had to pass the night without food. This happened to him every night, and he thus grew thinner and weaker day by day. One day, his teacher asked him the cause, and he, with tearful eyes, explained to him the real cause of this sad change. While this conversation was going on, a kind-hearted gentleman of the *Sudra* caste was sitting there. He was deeply moved at the sad tale, and he told Thakurdas that he should no longer lodge in the house of Jaganmohan Nyayalankar, and that if he could cook his food, he was ready to give him (Thakurdas) food and shelter. As was expected, Thakurdas was highly delighted at the proposal, and readily accepted the kind offer. The next day he left his former refuge, and took shelter in the house of his new benevolent patron.

"But the earnings of this kind-hearted benevolent gentleman were not equal to his generosity. He was an ordinary broker, and earned a very scanty livelihood. He lived from hand to mouth, yet his kind heart always melted at the tale of other people's distress. Thakurdas considered himself very fortunate that he now had two bellyful meals every day. But this happy state of things did not last long. As ill luck would have it, in a short

time, the paltry income of this benevolent benefactor was still reduced, and what he daily earned, was not always sufficient to maintain two persons with comfort. He used to leave his house early in the morning, and toiled hard to earn a few pice, not only for his own sake, but also for the sake of the poor Brahman boy, whom he had kindly taken under his protection. But, unfortunately, many a day he could not return to his house in time, and consequently, on those days, Thakurdas had to remain without mid-day meal.

"Thakurdas had no other property than a small brass *thala* (shallow dish) and a *lota* (waterpot) of the same metal. He used to eat his rice from the *thala*, and drink his water from the *lota*. In some parts of India, even in Calcutta, a few teak leaves stitched together are used by the poor to eat their rice from. Now, Thakurdas thought within himself thus:—'The purposes of a *thala* may be well-served by teak-leaves, I shall be able to manage the eating of my rice even without a *thala*. So if I part with it I shall not feel its want. Let me sell this *thala* and retain the *lota*. The sale proceeds shall be my pocket money. I shall use this money in cases of utmost emergency. The day I shall be

deprived of my midday meal, I shall lay out a pice in buying something to eat, and thus save myself from starvation. Having thus bethought himself, he went one day to a brazier's shop, and offered the *thala* for sale. But the brazier declined to buy the *thala*, saying that purchase of old plates and utensils sometimes threw them into great difficulties, as most of the articles thus purchased were stolen property. Thakurdas entreated the brazier earnestly, but he turned a deaf ear. He then went to the other braziers, one after another, but none of them yielded to his request. Greatly dejected at the disappointment, he returned to his lodging, quite as helpless as ever.

"One noon, when the sun was in its zenith, Thakurdas under intense pressure of hunger, began to pace up and down the street, in the hope that his mind would thereby be diverted from the thoughts of want of food, and he would thus forget the pangs of hunger. Unconsciously, by slow movements, he walked from Barabazar to Thanthania, a distance of nearly two miles. But far from the results he had anticipated, the physical labour caused by his pedestrianism, kindled his appetite more fiercely, and he was so much overcome with

hunger and thirst, that he was quite unable to move farther. Presently, he found himself standing before a shop, where a middle-aged widow was selling such poor victuals, as *Muri* (fried husked rice) and *murki* (fried paddy soaked in molasses). On seeing him thus standing, the woman asked him kindly, "Why are you standing here, my boy?" Thakurdas answered that he was thirsty, and begged for a little water to drink. The kind woman very affectionately told him to sit down, and thinking that it would not be proper to give the Brahman boy only a little water with nothing to eat, gave him some *murki* and some water. She gazed at him as he greedily devoured the *murki*, and asked him whether he had eaten any food that day. Thakurdas replied, 'No, mother, I have had nothing to eat to-day till now.' Thereupon the kind-hearted woman told him to desist from drinking water, and to wait a little. She at once hastened to a milkman's shop, and came back with some curd, which she graciously placed before Thakurdas, and presenting him with some more *murki*, pressed him to make a belly-ful meal of the curd and *murki*. After the meal had been over, the benevolent woman, by kind and affectionate

words, drew out from Thakurdas all particulars of his circumstances, and at last told him to come to her, whenever he would be in want of food.[6]

"Henceforth whenever he felt the pangs of hunger, and could not procure food in the daytime, he used to go to the kind-hearted woman, and she was always very glad to feed him heartily in the manner related before.

"Some time after this, Thakurdas, with the help of his protector, secured a berth worth two Rupees[7] a month. He was highly delighted at this appointment, but did not leave the protection of his benefactor, who had given him shelter in times of dire need. He lived in the same house with his protector as before, and without minding in the least his own privations, began to regularly send the two rupees every month to his mother to mitigate her sufferings. He was very intelligent and industrious, and performed his duties most willingly and cheerfully. For this reason, his employers, wheresoever he was employed, were all highly satisfied with him.

"In two or three years, Thakurdas had a pay of five rupees a month. The sufferings of his mother, brother, and sisters were now much relieved. At

this time, my grandfather (Thakurdas's father) returned to his native place. At first, he went to Banamalipur, but not finding his wife and children there, he came to Birsingha, and there joined his family. At his return home after an interval of seven or eight years, every one was delighted. He considered it humiliating to live in his father-in-law's house or in its neighbourhood. He, therefore, designed to remove with his family to Banamalipur, his paternal home. But when Durga Devi, his wife, related with tears in her eyes, the inhuman conduct of his brothers, he gave up his design, and most reluctantly consented to settle down permanently in Birsingha. It was in this wise that Birsingha became our place of abode.

"After a short stay at Birsingha, Ramjay Tarkabhushan, my grandfather, came down to Calcutta, to see his son, Thakurdas. When he heard from Thakurdas's benefactor and protector of his son's patience, forbearance, and diligence, he was highly delighted, and showered upon his son his choicest blessings. At this time, there lived, in the Barabazar quarter of Calcutta, a certain well-to-do gentleman. of the *Uttar Rarhiya Kayastha* family, by name Bhagavat Charan Sinha. My grandfather

had a great intimacy with this gentleman, who was a perfect pattern of a Hindu householder. He was very kind and benevolent. On hearing from my grandfather everything connected with him, from the time of his leaving his native place, he was deeply touched, and proposed that henceforth Thakurdas should put up with him in his house, and that he would undertake to provide him with proper meals, adding, at the same time, that when Thakurdas was able to cook his food, there was not the slightest chance of any inconvenience.

"My grandfather, Ramjay Tarkabhushan, was very pleased at the offer, and readily accepted it. He placed Thakurdas under the care of this kind gentleman, and then returned to Birsingha. From this time forward, the troubles of Thakurdas with respect to his meals were over. On receiving regularly the necessary bellyful meals twice a day, he considered himself entering into a new life. This happy combination did not only put an end to his troubles of proper food, but was also the means of providing him with a better appointment. Bhagavat Babu secured for him a situation worth eight rupees a month. When his mother came to learn that her son, Thakurdas, had got an appointment

bringing a monthly salary of eight rupees, her delight knew no bounds.[8]

"Thakurdas was, at this time, twenty-three or twenty-four years old. My grandfather considering this a marriageable age, married him to Bhagavati Devi, second daughter of Ramkanta Tarkavagis[9] of Goghat. This Bhagavati Devi was my mother. In her childhood, she had been brought up with the family of her maternal grandfather."

Ramkanta Tarkavagis had, in the prime of his youth, lost the sanity of his mind. His father-in-law, Panchanan Vidyavagis[10] of village Patul, therefore, took him with his wife and children to his own house, and housed them there. In spite of medical treatment of different kinds, for a long time, by experts, Ramkanta did not recover from his malady, and he died quite insane. It was for this reason that Vidyasagar's mother, Bhagavati Devi, had been brought up in the house of her maternal grandfather. Ramkanta Tarkavagis had two daughters, of whom Bhagavati Devi was the younger. Her mother's name was Ganga Devi, who again was the eldest daughter of Panchanan Vidyavagis. He had five other children, four sons and one daughter, besides Ganga Devi.

Vidyasagar was famous for his spiritedness, truthfulness, frankness and love of independence. It appears that he imbibed these virtues from his father and grandfather. Ramjay Tarkabhushan, his grandfather, was a man of independent spirit. He never flattered anybody, nor was he ever daunted by the threats of malicious persons. It was this love of independence and spiritedness that turned his brother-in-law (wife's brother) and his partisans to be his enemies. His idea was that the country, at that time, was devoid of men (*i.e.*, good men) and that it was full of beasts. His amiability, modesty and truthfulness were equal to his spiritedness. It is said that while he was traveling to the different pilgrimages after leaving his home, one night he heard somebody say to him in dream:—"Your wife has left your native village, Banamalipur, and has been living in Birsingha." At this, he returned to Birsingha, and once again took charge of his family.

The land-owner of the village, Birsingha, offered to him his homestead land free of rent, and his friends and relations urged him to accept the offer. But he thankfully declined it. Isvar Chandra

Vidyasagar, in his auto-biography, thus speaks of his grand-father:—

"He never depended upon, or flattered, any body. It was his firm conviction that death was preferable to dependence on another person. He was a vegetarian, and ate only one meal a day. His character was stainless and pure, and he always took great care to devote most of his time and attention, to the worship of his Heavenly Father."

Ramjay Tarkasiddhanta's bodily strength was equal to the strength of his mind. Body and mind are so very closely connected that the strength or weakness of the one is generally followed by the strength or weakness of the other. We have seen, with our own eyes, the truth of this verified in Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar, and we have heard of it in his grandfather, Ramjay Tarkasiddhanta. Ramjay always travelled fearlessly with an iron cudgel in his hand. One day, on his way to Midnapore from Birsingha, a bear came upon him. At the sight of the animal, he took his stand behind a tree. The bear tried to seize him with its fore paws. No sooner had the beast stretched out its paws to catch hold of Ramjay, than he seized it by its outstretched paws, and began to rub the ugly beast

against the tree. Soon the bear was nearly dead. Seeing that the brute was completely overpowered and almost dead, Ramjay left it really and proceeded on his journey. But the beast, was not dead, and no sooner was his back turned than it rose, and tore his back with its sharp nails. Ramjay had now no other alternative than to let fall his iron cudgel on the bear's head, which killed it on the spot. He had to suffer for upwards of a month from the effects of the wound, and the sore mark was visible on his back as long as he lived.

When Thakurdas was able to work well and take good care of the family, his father, Ramjay Tarkasiddhanta, again went out on a pilgrimage, and returned home a second time, when his grandson, Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar, was in the womb of his mother. It is said that, one night, when he was staying on the top of a hill, Ramjay dreamed that a good male child, who was destined to do much real good to the country and to win a worldwide renown, was going to take its birth in his family. This dream made him forsake his ascetic life and return again to his home. This child was Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar.

When Ramjay returned a second time to Birsingha, he saw that his daughter-in-law, Bhagavati Devi, was really pregnant, but at the same time quite insane. She had lost her sanity from the moment she had conceived the child in her womb. This insanity lasted throughout the whole period of her pregnancy. Strange to say, that although with continued treatment of different kinds for ten months failed to cure her, yet no sooner was she delivered of the child, Isvar Chandra, than she began to regain her sanity even without any medical help. In a short time, she was as sane as ever, and continued so to the last day of her life. Kind-hearted as she naturally was, she was ever afterwards seen to feed and clothe the poor. As is the custom with unalloyed Hindu women, she cooked food with her own hands, and took great delight in distributing it to the guests and the needy, without distinction of caste or creed. Her generosity, kindness and benevolence were unparalleled. We shall try to give a more detailed description of her character later on, But we may mention here, in passing, that kindness of heart, which figured so conspicuously in Vidyasagar's character, and endeared him to all classes of people, and which

caused his name to be lovingly cherished in memory by everybody, was due mostly to his ever-kind and bounteous mother. George Herbert used to say:—"One good mother is worth a hundred school masters." The truth of this saying has been verified in all such great men, as Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar, Napoleon Bonaparte, and others.

Formerly in India, the science of astronomy, palmistry, and fortune-telling, generally known by the name of astrology, like all other sciences, had risen to perfection. Even at the time of Vidyasagar's birth, there were many astrologers, palmisters and fortune-tellers, who could by the help of their occult science, foretell the future of a new-born child. Before Vidyasagar's birth, Bhavananda Bhattacharya, a great astrologer of the time, had predicted that Bhagavati Devi (Vidyasagar's mother) would give birth to a child, who would be a bodily incarnation of humanity, and that after the birth of the baby, she would recover her former sanity. This prediction of Bhavananda Bhattacharya was fulfilled to the letter. It was for this, or some similar, reason that Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar was a great admirer and advocate of this occult science.