

Densely informative & evenly toned

This book avoids the pitfalls of trying to fit Vidyasagar within cast-iron argumentative structures... A review

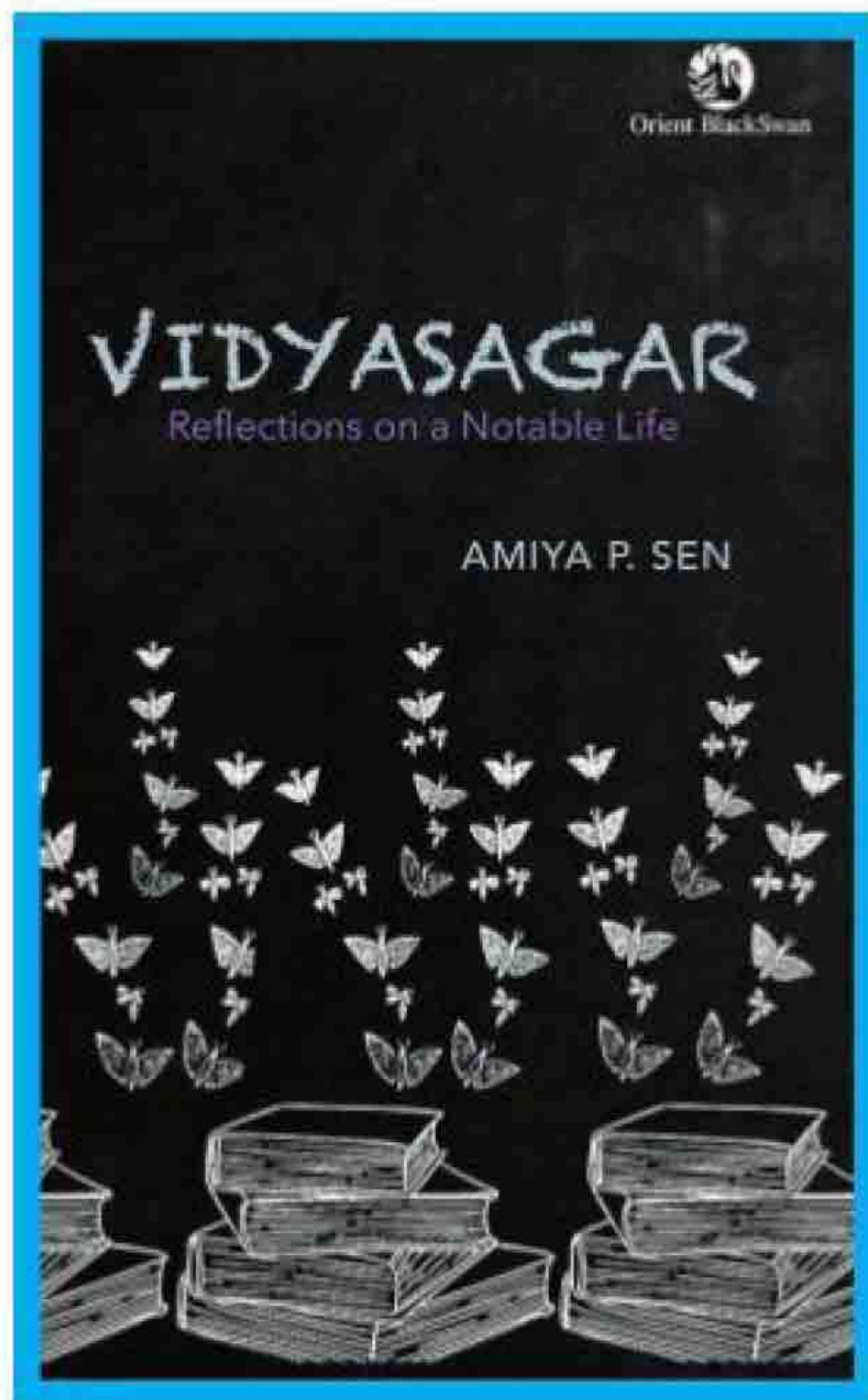
NANDINI
BHATTACHARYA

Every great life deserves a new lease of life periodically to revivify its extraordinariness within a community. Historian Amiya Prosad Sen's latest biography *Vidyasagar: Reflections on a Notable Life* works on similar principles, but is also keenly responsive to the particularity of Vidyasagar's 200th anniversary, which was celebrated last year. The prescient need to record a life that Michael Madhusudan Dutt described as being the "first... amongst us" cannot be overemphasised.

Frankly no one is better suited than Sen to write such a book, given his lifetime of scholarship in areas of 19th century social reform movements, especially those in colonial Bengal, and his stellar record in producing life-histories of social reformers, such as those of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Rammohun Roy, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Sister Nivedita.

This life history of Vidyasagar, is however, a far more sustained and serious work of scholarship, taking into account as it must, the prodigious and textured body of scholarship that has preceded Sen's book. While notable intellectuals had already written about Vidyasagar's "life" during his lifetime, the man himself had also initiated the process of recording his own life. His son Narayan Chandra Bandyopadhyay named and published a fragmentary piece as *Vidyasagar Charit: Swarachita* posthumously in 1891. Vidyasagar's contemporary Chandicharan Bandyopadhyay produced a detailed biography of the former with the help of family papers right after his passing. The immense archival value of his *Vidyasagar*, however, was tarnished when Sambhu Chandra Vidyaratna (Vidyasagar's younger brother), in *Vidyasagar Jibon Charit O Bhrom Nirash*, charged the author of mythologising Vidyasagar's life.

In other words, all those classic 19th centu-



ry controversies regarding life writing as a mode; the debates between older ways of deifying an extraordinary figure, and newer ways of "secularising" a great person by drawing him with human flaws and contradictions, had already been played out during Vidyasagar's life and very soon after his death.

Sen positions this new life narrative in English as enabling a fruitful dialogue between the two often distanced interpretative communities — the culture-conscious Bengali reader and the Anglophone "other". I believe he succeeds in this

primary intention, as both sets would like this comprehensive biography and refer to it for any Vidyasagar-related information.

The book makes no wild claims, is evenly toned, and densely informative. Even a cursory glance can detect the enormous scholarship that has gone into producing this evenness of tone, an understated excellence that Bengalis usually describe as *bouddhik abhijatya* (aristocracy of intellect).

The cover with a sketch of books and flying birds by a schoolgirl called Nayantara Sen is apposite. It brings together, graphically speaking, the past of Vidyasagar's struggles against pervasive 19th century misogyny, and the present state of women in this country.

The book is chronologically organised, introducing the ideological trajectories of earlier biographies and critically describing Vidyasagar's life events. Those are followed by Vidyasagar's "Thoughts on Education", "Vidyasagar and the Woman Question" and a "Postscript" considering his engagement with religious beliefs. Down the years, these three areas have been, by and large, the major thrust areas of Vidyasagar scholarship and Sen's book is no exception.

The education reforms chapter is the more riveting part of this book, as it brings to the fore a wealth of information, not examined in any detail in earlier works. The foregrounding of indigenous traditions of women's education, and of women as teachers (especially among the Vaishnav sects of Bengal) is a healthy corrective to the uncritical celebration of British emancipatory moves with respect to women's education in the subcontinent. This chapter also casts its net wide to bounce off Vidyasagar's educational reforms with those in North India and Maharashtra.

The last chapter on Vidyasagar and his religious beliefs (or the lack thereof) is excellent, and Sen brings in his vast erudition about subcontinental faith cultures to texture this piece.

Spot
Light

**VIDYASAGAR:
REFLECTIONS ON A
NOTABLE LIFE**

**BY AMIYA PROSAD SEN
ORIENT BLACKSWAN, NEW
DELHI
256 PAGES, RS 925**

The end is poignant as the high and low, sublime and bathetic, *astik* and *nastik* (believer and non-believer) meet in the songs that the great man heard and enjoyed.

A faint dissatisfaction about the book ensues from its refusal to commit to any ideological position. Sen deploys a gallows humour-inflected analogy at the outset to account for that. He refers to a fixed size iron bed, the length of which the bandit Procrustes supposedly used, to fit every visitor into, tall or short, either by brutally chopping off their legs or stretching them even more brutally.

Sen's book avoids the pitfalls of trying to fit Vidyasagar within such cast-iron argumentative structures. Hence, every position about Vidyasagar is negated by evidence to the contrary. Vidyasagar's education reforms, stance towards women's education, social reform initiatives, and engagement with Brahmanical faith structures appear mired within multiple contradictory positions. Sen presents such contradictions as inalienable binaries without ever trying to explain them in terms of post-structuralist irresolutions. We, in our human limitations, crave for a more intention-inflected biography, especially when it describes a man as passion-driven as Vidyasagar.

By way of summing up, this book is a must-read for all scholars of subcontinental colonial history and Vidyasagar acolytes.