



National Journal of Hindi & Sanskrit Research

ISSN: 2454-9177

NJHSR 2026; 1(64): 111-114

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www.sanskritarticle.com

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Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's Translation of European Classics: A Translation Study

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Abstract

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's Contribution to the growth and development of Bengali language is immense. It was he who connected Bengali with its source Sanskrit and at the same time he imported different elements of English language to Bengali. He demonstrated his excellence as a writer both as a creative writer and a translator and as a translator he worked with both Sanskrit and English. The present paper tries to examine his contribution as a translator of European classics. He translated those tales into Bengali not only literally, but also culturally as those tales were indianized by him. The main purpose behind his translation works was to provide his readers entertainment and moral lessons at the same time and it was mixed with enough wit and humour also.

Keywords: language; translator; classics; culturally; Indianized

Vidyasagar's translations were rarely literal; he often creatively adapted, simplified, and localized classical texts—primarily from Sanskrit—to make them accessible and appealing to 19th-century Bengali readers. He reshaped characters, removed archaic or vulgar elements, infused modern sensibilities, and elevated Bengali prose style, making these works feel almost original in their grace, wit, and humanism. Scholars note that he bridged ancient Indian literature with contemporary Bengali culture, humanizing divine or epic figures (like Rama and Sita) into relatable, modern individuals.

Key Translations and Adaptations

Vidyasagar's major translation/adaptation works include:

Betaal Panchavinsati (বেতাল পঞ্চবিংশতি, 1847) — An adapted retelling of the Sanskrit Vetala Panchavimshati (Twenty-five Tales of a Vetala/Goblin). He improvised stories, removed vulgarity, and made them suitable for modern readers, creating his own distinctive version rather than a direct translation.

Shakuntala (শকুন্তলা, 1854) — A celebrated adaptation of Kalidasa's Sanskrit classic Abhijnana Shakuntalam. Vidyasagar transformed the characters (Shakuntala and her companions) into relatable Bengali figures, emphasizing natural dialogue and emotional depth over strict fidelity to the original.

Sitar Vanavas (সীতার বনবাস, 1860) — An adaptation drawn from episodes in the Ramayana (primarily Valmiki's version), focusing on Sita's exile. He portrayed Sita as an admirable, humanized figure, contributing to refined literary taste among the emerging educated Bengali class.

Bhranti Bilas (ভ্রান্তি বিলাস, 1869) — His famous prose adaptation/narrative retelling of Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors. This was one of the earliest significant Indian engagements with Shakespeare, adapted freely into Bengali with humor and local flavor to suit readers.

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He also translated or adapted portions from the Mahabharata (1860) and wrote biographical sketches of Western scientists (e.g., Copernicus, Newton, Herschel) in Bengali to promote scientific temper.

Impact as a Translator

Vidyasagar's approach was innovative: he used translation as a tool for cultural modernization and literary enrichment rather than mere reproduction. His works helped standardize and beautify Bengali prose, moving away from heavy Sanskritized forms toward clear, elegant expression. Contemporary critics sometimes dismissed him as "just a translator," but closer analysis reveals his creative genius—he was effectively creating new Bengali literature through adaptation.

His translations served broader goals: improving literary tastes, introducing humanist values, and supporting social reform (e.g., by presenting dignified portrayals of women like Sita and Shakuntala). Rabindranath Tagore and others hailed his profound influence on Bengali language and literature.

In short, Vidyasagar the translator was a master adapter who bridged Sanskrit classics (and even Shakespeare) to modern Bengal, leaving an enduring legacy in prose, education, and cultural awakening.

The contribution of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar to the growth and development of Bengali prose is beyond question. It was Vidyasagar who made a concrete foundation of Bengali as a standard language. What Chaucer did for English, Dante for Italian, Goethe for German, Vidyasagar did for Bengali language and literature. Later writers like Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay or Tagore built marble edifices of the language on the rock foundation made by him. Vidyasagar's writings in Bengali can be broadly divided into two categories - creative writings and translation. Undoubtedly he was at his best in the second category of his writings and this translation works of Vidyasagar again can be divided into two different groups:

1. Translation from Sanskrit into Bengali
2. Translation from English Into Bengali.

A great personality of multiple sheds, Vidyasagar is chiefly noted for his contribution to social reformation of which education was the greatest part and the main purpose behind his writings was to enlighten people with the consciousness of ethics. But though a man of vigorous personality Vidyasagar didn't avoid the use of wit and humor in his translation.

Vidyasagar was a great scholar of Sanskrit language and literature and in his translation from Sanskrit to Bengali he demonstrated well his excellence. It was with him Bengali

language got back its connection with its source and at the same time it went beyond the control of Sanskrit. His fame as a translator of Sanskrit rests on his translations of "Betaal Panchvimshati" and "Abhigyan Shakuntalam". In these works the translator tried hard to simplify serious themes of the stories in order to entertain common readers of the time. His translations were rarely literal; he often creatively adapted, simplified, and localized classical texts—primarily from Sanskrit—to make them accessible and appealing to 19th-century Bengali readers. He reshaped characters, removed archaic or vulgar elements, infused modern sensibilities, and elevated Bengali prose style, making these works feel almost original in their grace, wit, and humanism. Scholars note that he bridged ancient Indian literature with contemporary Bengali culture, humanizing divine or epic figures (like Rama and Sita) into relatable, modern individuals.

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He also translated or adapted portions from the Mahabharata (1860) and wrote biographical sketches of Western scientists (e.g., Copernicus, Newton, Herschel) in Bengali to promote scientific temper.

As a translator from English to Bengali he is chiefly noted for the translations of two popular classics - "Aesop's Fables" and Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors". The fables were originally written in Greek and it was translated in various languages around the world. While translating the work into Bengali Vidyasagar followed the translation by

.....Aesop's Fables contains hundreds stories with animal characters and Vidyasagar selected 85 of them in his translation. It was because of the ethical aspects of the stories he translated them to teach young learners the lessons of morality. Vidyasagar's superiority as a translator is not yet superseded by any other as he didn't keep himself restricted within the boundary of literal translation and concentrated on cultural translation. In the translation of the fables the stories were not only translated but also they were Indianized. He placed those stories against typical Indian society and in this ingenious way those European stories were connected with contemporary Bengali society. In his translation of the work Vidyasagar followed Thomas James' translation of the fables into English. Long before writing "Kathamala " Vidyasagar wrote a story in which a boy named Bhuban turned into a thief due to his aunt's indifferent behaviour in his upbringing. It was originally a translation of one of the fables entitled "The Thief and His Mother". Though written for his Bengali primer book the story has a wonderful dramatic spirit that touches the tender hearts of the little learners deeply. Aesop's Fables, originally written in Greek by Aesop whose identity still remains obscure, has a long tradition of translation and adaptation from time to time. It was Friedas and Avianus who rendered the stories in Latin poetic version and Babrius did the same thing in Greek. In the first edition of "Kathamala" Vidyasagar selected only 75 fables and then he added few more stories from time to time to the work which finally included 84. In his selection of the stories Vidyasagar laid importance on their Indian aspects. A close reading of the stories reveal the influence of Indian "Panchatantra" and "Hitopadesha" on them. The fables contain a large number of animal characters that behave like human beings. Actually it is through their activities that the characters of human beings are demonstrated. In the stories one animal stands for one particular characteristic of man and woman. For example, ass stands for foolishness, fox for cleverness , dog for faithfulness , lion for bravery and so on. Thanks to Aesop's perfect presentation and plot construction of the stories the fables provide pure pleasure remaining free from dry didacticism.

Vidyasagar's interest in English language and literature increased during his days in Fort William college as a teacher because most of his students were British civilians. He read English classics voraciously and was especially impressed by the plays of Shakespeare. But why he selected his "Comedy of Errors" is still an unresolved question. This play is not counted with the greater tragedies and comedies of the bard of Avon. Perhaps the hilarious laughter provided by the play appealed to him and in his challenging life it

served pure pleasure to him. The case of his "Bhrantibilas" ("ব্রান্তিবিলাস") is something different from the translation of Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors". It is actually a prose version of the comic play in Bengali. It was Charles and Mary Lamb who were the first to recreate those plays in prose and it is clear that Vidyasagar was deeply influenced by them. In his work he not only translated its language, but brought considerable changes in the setting and names of the characters of the play according to the Indian culture and society in such a way that the stories seems to be his original creation. It is no exaggeration to say that few Bengali readers knows that "Kathamala" is a translation work.

To understand this aspect of his translation better we may concentrate on the original story of "Kathamala" and its translation by Vidyasagar. The title of the story is " The God in the Manger" :

"A dog his bed in a manger , and lies snarling and growling to keep the horses from their provider. " See," said one of them , " What a miserable cur! Who neither can eat corn himself nor will allow those who eat who can."

In his translation Vidyasagar writes:

কুকুর ও অশ্বগন

"এক কুকুর অশ্বগনের আহারের স্থানে শয়ন করিয়া থাকিত। অশ্বগন আহার করিতে গেলে , সে ভয়ানক চীৎকার করিত , এবং দংশন করিতে উদ্যত হইয়া তাহাদিগকে তাড়াইয়া দিত। একদিন এক অশ্ব কহিল " দেখো এই কুকুর কেমন দুর্বৃত্ত। আহারের দ্রব্যের উপর শয়ন করিয়া থাকিবেক, আপনিও আহার করিবেক না , এবং যাহারা ঐ আহার করিয়া প্রাপ ধারণ করিবেক, তাহাদিগকেও আহার করিতে দিবেক না। "

(বিদ্যাসাগর রচনাবলী 2 page 327)

The language of Vidyasagar's works in Bengali was far different from today's colloquial Bengali. He wrote in 'sadhu bhasa' which was a standard version of Bengali replete with ' tatsama" words coming from Sanskrit, the source of Bengali. Not only Vidyasagar writers of his time like Raja Rammohan Roy , Michael Madhusudan Dutta , Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay Rabindranath Tagore mostly used this standard version of Bengali. In this story mentioned above his translation is literal almost word for word. But in some other stories and in the translation of Shakespeare he concentrated more on thoughts and ideas of the content rather than literal meanings of the words.

"Comedy of Errors' ' is not counted among the best comic plays of Shakespeare. But in one point the play is regarded best and that is because of the hilarious laughter it produces on the stage. The way Shakespeare handles the plot

construction is also a matter beyond question. Vidyasagar read Shakespeare voraciously and was impressed by the genius of the great playwright and felt an urge to introduce the bard of Avon to general Bengali readers. In this case he chose this play to serve pure pleasure to the readers. Shakespeare in prose is obviously a challenging task because it is almost an impossibility to present the dramatic spirit of those plays perfectly in prose. Lamb brother and sister tried it well in their "Tales from Shakespeare " and Vidyasagar was highly influenced by their work and translated "Comedy of Errors' ' into Bengali as "Bhrantibilas". In this work also he succeeded well to touch the reader's mind thanks to his mastery over both the languages.

This Shakespearean comedy constructs an intriguing plot evolving around a couple of twin brothers lost from each other due to a shipwreck. In this work also Vidyasagar Indianized the names of the places and characters to entertain the Bengali readers in a more effective way. He changed the names of the original Syacuse and Ephesus as Hemkut and Jayasthal respectively , and Antephelus and Ephesus became Chiranjeev and Kinkar in his translation. The plot of the play perfectly portrays ancient Indian society instead of Shakespeare's England. Vidyasagar knows how to maintain brevity in his writing and hence he avoids unnecessary digressions that marks most of the Elizabethan comic plays. Vidyasagar's work is much more compact with a tight plot construction. As a translator he proves his excellence as he goes beyond copying the original work and mixes his own creative imagination. Till today he is treated as the best translator in Bengali literature, who translated from both Sanskrit and English with almost equal perfection. His contribution to translation of European classics is so important that he becomes something more than a translator , a co-creator rather. Unfortunately because of his deep involvement in different social works he couldn't invest more time in translation, otherwise Bengali language and literature would have been more enriched with his wonderful skill of translation.

Vidyasagar's approach was innovative: he used translation as a tool for cultural modernization and literary enrichment rather than mere reproduction. His works helped standardize and beautify Bengali prose, moving away from heavy Sanskritized forms toward clear, elegant expression. Contemporary critics sometimes dismissed him as "just a translator," but closer analysis reveals his creative genius—he was effectively creating new Bengali literature through adaptation.

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