


Research Article

Vidyasagar, Language, and Teacher Education: Rethinking Vernacular Epistemologies in Postcolonial Contexts

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's philosophy of language and its implications for contemporary teacher education through the framework of vernacular epistemologies in postcolonial settings. The central argument is that Vidyasagar's promotion of Bengali as a medium of instruction was not merely a pedagogical preference but a deliberate epistemological intervention—an early form of what decolonial scholars now term epistemic decolonisation. Drawing on primary textual analysis of *Barnaparichay* (1855) and Vidyasagar's educational writings, alongside sociocultural theory (Vygotsky), decolonial thought (Mignolo; de Sousa Santos), and indigenous knowledge frameworks (Battiste), the paper demonstrates how vernacular language functions as a mediational tool in knowledge construction rather than a neutral communicative vehicle. The analysis reveals three core contributions: vernacular epistemologies as mechanisms of epistemic resistance; the teacher as a cultural and epistemic mediator; and the structural tensions between vernacular education and globalisation. Crucially, the paper also problematises the romanticisation of vernacular approaches, cautioning that uncritical adoption can reproduce internal social hierarchies. The paper concludes with a pluralistic, multilingual model for teacher education that is contextually grounded, epistemically just, and globally competent.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language occupies a foundational position in educational theory, pedagogy, and teacher training, particularly in societies shaped by colonial linguistic hierarchies. The medium of instruction is not a neutral technical decision; it is deeply implicated in the generation, distribution, and legitimation of knowledge. Colonial education systems systematically privileged dominant languages—most consequentially, English—at the expense of vernacular languages and the epistemologies they carry (Seth, 2007; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). This linguistic domination has had enduring consequences for curriculum design, classroom engagement, and teacher education, tending to reproduce epistemic marginalisation and unequal access to knowledge (Phillipson, 1992; Tollefson, 1991).

In the Indian context, Macaulay's Minute of 1835 institutionalised English as the language of formal education, creating a structural chasm between elite and mass education. It is against this backdrop that Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) emerges as a pivotal figure—not simply as a social reformer, but as an epistemological agent. His campaign for Bengali as the primary medium of instruction, his standardisation of Bengali prose, and his composition of pedagogically accessible texts such as *Barnaparichay* (1855) constituted a conscious intervention in the politics of knowledge. This paper argues that these acts represent an early and sophisticated instantiation of what contemporary decolonial scholars call epistemic decolonisation: the challenge to the hegemony of Western knowledge systems and the recuperation of local, vernacular epistemologies (Mignolo, 2011; de Sousa Santos, 2015).

The central research question guiding this study is: How can Vidyasagar's vernacular epistemological project contribute to contemporary teacher education in multilingual and postcolonial contexts? Answering this question requires moving beyond descriptive accounts of educational reform toward a rigorous analysis of the theoretical and epistemological assumptions underlying vernacular education. In doing so, the paper engages seriously with recent criticism in teacher education scholarship, which warns against the uncritical application of theoretical constructs without adequate attention to their contextual relevance and epistemological foundations (Newman and Latifi, 2021).

This study contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonise educational theory and practice by situating Vidyasagar's work within broader conversations on language, epistemology, and teacher education. It proposes that a critically reflexive engagement with vernacular epistemologies can yield a more inclusive, context-sensitive, and epistemically equitable approach to teacher education—one that treats linguistic diversity as an asset and interrogates the gap between local knowledge regimes and global educational discourses.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative, conceptual research design grounded in critical-interpretive traditions in educational

research. Rather than collecting empirical data, it conducts theoretical and historical analysis to examine Vidyasagar's language philosophy and its applicability to contemporary teacher education. Conceptual research of this kind is particularly appropriate for elucidating complex constructs, challenging existing assumptions, and generating new theoretical frameworks (Rocco and Plakhotnik, 2009).

2.1 Research Approach

A critical-interpretive stance guides the study, drawing on traditions of critical pedagogy and decolonial theory. This approach treats language, knowledge, and power as historically and socially constructed phenomena within educational systems (Kincheloe, 2008). The paper also employs philosophical and conceptual analysis—a method of systematically examining key constructs such as vernacular epistemology, language mediation, and cultural pedagogy to clarify their meanings and inter-relationships (Burbules and Warnick, 2012).

It is important to be transparent about what this methodology does and does not entail. The paper does not perform a full Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the technical sense of systematically tracing linguistic features across a corpus of texts. Rather, it conducts an interpretive analysis of Vidyasagar's primary writings and secondary educational scholarship to surface the epistemological assumptions embedded within them. This distinction matters: as Newman and Latifi (2021) caution, borrowing theoretical frameworks without careful attention to their scope and application risks superficiality. The methodology here is therefore honest about its conceptual scope while engaging substantively with primary sources.

2.2 Data Sources

The analysis draws on two categories of sources:

- Primary sources: Vidyasagar's own texts, principally *Barnaparichay* (1855), his essays on education, and documented correspondence concerning pedagogical reform in nineteenth-century Bengal.
- Secondary sources: Scholarly literature on colonial education in India, decolonial theory, sociocultural learning theory, multilingual education, and contemporary teacher education.

Source selection was purposive, prioritising relevance to language, epistemology, and education; theoretical engagement with decolonial and sociocultural frameworks; and publication in peer-reviewed journals or academic monographs.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis is organised thematically around four conceptual categories derived inductively from the literature: (1) language as a medium of knowledge construction; (2) vernacular epistemology and indigenous knowledge systems; (3) the teacher as cultural and epistemic mediator; and (4) tensions between local and global knowledge regimes. Multiple theoretical lenses—sociocultural theory (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978), decolonial thought (Mignolo, 2011; de Sousa Santos,

2015), and indigenous knowledge frameworks (Battiste, 2002)—are integrated to enable multidimensional analysis.

2.4 Limitations

As a conceptual study, this paper does not provide empirical validation of its claims in actual classroom contexts. This limitation should be addressed in future research through ethnographic and classroom-based inquiry. Additionally, the focus on the Indian context, and on Bengali specifically, may limit direct transferability to other postcolonial settings, though the theoretical arguments are intended to be broadly applicable.

3. Historical Context: Vidyasagar and Vernacular Reform

Vidyasagar's educational interventions must be understood within the colonial framework established by Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education (1835), which privileged English as the medium of instruction and positioned Western knowledge as the standard of intellectual achievement. Macaulay's explicit ambition—to produce a class of persons 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste'—reveals the ideological function of colonial education as an instrument of cultural and epistemic subjugation (Macaulay, 1835; Viswanathan, 2014). The effect was to relegate vernacular languages such as Bengali to the margins of formal education and to construct English as the sole vehicle of legitimate knowledge.

Vidyasagar's response was neither wholesale rejection of Western knowledge nor uncritical adoption of colonial pedagogy. His strategy was mediation: to render Western and modern knowledge accessible through the vernacular, thereby democratising education without simply reproducing colonial hierarchies. This strategy is most clearly visible in his primary textual contributions.

3.1 Primary Textual Analysis: Barnaparichay and the Epistemology of Accessible Language

Barnaparichay (1855), Vidyasagar's foundational Bengali primer, is typically discussed as a pedagogical artefact—a tool for introducing children to literacy. Examined more closely, however, it reveals a deliberate epistemological stance. Vidyasagar's linguistic choices in the text are consistently oriented toward cognitive accessibility and cultural familiarity. Rather than importing Sanskrit-heavy diction or anglicised constructions, he employed a simplified, standardised prose register that privileged comprehension over prestige.

Consider the opening lesson of Barnaparichay, which introduces the Bengali alphabet not through abstract phonetic drills but through monosyllabic words drawn from everyday domestic experience—objects, actions, and relationships immediately recognisable to a Bengali-speaking child. This pedagogical decision is not merely methodological; it encodes an epistemological position: that meaningful knowledge originates in the linguistic and experiential world of the learner, not in the abstract universalism of a foreign tongue. Vygotsky's later argument that language mediates higher cognitive functions by enabling individuals to act within their culturally

organised environment resonates precisely with this approach (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978). Vidyasagar, writing more than seven decades before Vygotsky, was enacting a similar principle in the construction of his primer.

Furthermore, Vidyasagar's standardisation of Bengali prose—his deliberate simplification of syntax, regularisation of orthography, and rejection of archaic constructions—was not a mere stylistic preference. It was an act of linguistic democratisation, making written Bengali legible to learners who had been excluded from elite literary registers. As Sen (1977) documents, prior to Vidyasagar, written Bengali was fragmented across regional dialects and Sanskritised literary forms inaccessible to most learners. By establishing a clear, accessible prose norm, Vidyasagar created the conditions for mass literacy in the vernacular. This act of standardisation is, in de Sousa Santos's (2015) terms, an instance of 'cognitive justice'—the effort to make knowledge systems accessible and participatory across social and linguistic divides.

3.2 Curriculum Reform and Cultural Knowledge

Beyond language, Vidyasagar's reform extended to curriculum content. He advocated for educational materials that reflected the social and cultural realities of Indian students rather than simply translating Western texts. His integration of local moral teachings, social examples, and culturally situated narrative into educational materials represents an early attempt at what contemporary scholars call culturally responsive curriculum design (Gay, 2018). This does not mean that his curriculum was free of Western influence—it was not—but it represented a deliberate negotiation between global knowledge and local experience, rather than a unidirectional imposition.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the limitations and contradictions of Vidyasagar's project. His educational reforms operated largely within the institutional framework of colonial modernity. As Viswanathan (2014) observes, colonial education in India typically involved negotiation between indigenous and Western elements rather than outright rejection of the colonial framework. Vidyasagar's work reflects this: he sought to localise and democratise education within a system whose broader structure he did not fundamentally challenge. This tension between reform and accommodation is not a failure of vision but a reflection of the complex conditions under which colonial-era reformers operated, and it should inform how we apply his legacy to contemporary contexts.

4. Vernacular Epistemologies: Conceptual Foundations

Vernacular epistemologies are systems of knowledge embedded in local languages, practices, and lived experiences. Unlike universalist knowledge paradigms that claim cultural neutrality, vernacular epistemologies foreground the contextual, situated, and culturally mediated character of knowing (de Sousa Santos, 2015). They challenge the historical privileging of standardised, often Western-centric knowledge forms, and call for a reconsideration of how knowledge is produced, validated, and transmitted in educational institutions.

The theoretical alignment between vernacular epistemologies and sociocultural learning theory is significant. Vygotsky's argument that language mediates cognitive development—that it is through language that individuals engage in culturally meaningful practices and construct understanding—provides a scientific foundation for the pedagogical value of vernacular instruction (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978). Language, in this framework, is not a neutral conduit for pre-existing knowledge but an active cognitive and cultural tool that shapes what can be thought and how it can be expressed. When education is conducted in a language foreign to the learner, this mediational process is disrupted; the learner must simultaneously manage linguistic unfamiliarity and conceptual learning, a double cognitive burden that systematically disadvantages non-dominant language speakers.

Decolonial theory extends this insight by connecting linguistic practice to structures of power. Mignolo (2011) argues that colonialism was not only political and economic domination but also epistemic: it imposed specific knowledge forms and disqualified others. Language was a primary mechanism of this epistemic imposition. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) makes this argument with particular force, demonstrating how the adoption of colonial languages as educational media alienates learners from their intellectual and cultural heritage. Vernacular epistemologies represent, in this light, a form of epistemic resistance—a recuperation of knowledge forms that colonial education marginalised.

Indigenous knowledge frameworks further enrich this picture by emphasising the holistic, relational, and community-embedded character of vernacular learning. Indigenous epistemologies typically integrate cognitive, social, and experiential dimensions of knowledge, resisting the compartmentalisation characteristic of formal Western education (Battiste, 2002). These frameworks suggest that vernacular education is not merely about choosing a different language of instruction but about recovering modes of knowing that are relational, participatory, and contextually grounded.

However, a critical caveat is essential here. The theoretical appeal of vernacular epistemologies should not lead to their uncritical romanticisation. As de Sousa Santos (2015) himself cautions, Global South epistemologies must be engaged critically to avoid essentialism and homogenisation. Vernacular knowledge systems are not inherently egalitarian; they exist within social structures that may reproduce inequalities of caste, gender, and class. This critical dimension is developed further in Section 7.

5. Vidyasagar's Language Philosophy and Teacher Education

5.1 Language as a Medium of Knowledge

Vidyasagar's educational philosophy treats language not as a transparent medium for transmitting pre-existing knowledge but as the very structure through which knowledge is organised, internalised, and made meaningful. The evidence for this position is not merely inferential; it is embedded in the textual

choices of Barnaparichay itself. The primer's systematic progression from phonemes to syllables to words to sentences, grounded in lexical items from the learner's immediate environment, reflects an understanding that cognitive development proceeds from the familiar to the abstract, from the culturally embedded to the universally applicable. This is the vernacular epistemological principle in action: knowledge is most effectively constructed when it is anchored in the learner's own linguistic and cultural world.

Contemporary multilingual education research strongly supports this position. Mohanty (2018) documents that mother-tongue-based multilingual education—where initial literacy and conceptual development occur in the learner's home language—produces significantly better outcomes in comprehension, cognitive development, and subsequent academic performance than submersion in a dominant language. The pedagogical logic Vidyasagar enacted in mid-nineteenth-century Bengal is thus confirmed by twenty-first-century empirical research.

5.2 The Teacher as Cultural and Epistemic Mediator

In Vidyasagar's educational vision, the teacher is not a passive transmitter of received knowledge but an active mediator between the learner's cultural world and the formal knowledge system. This conception of the teacher anticipates what sociocultural theory describes as the role of the more knowledgeable other: the person who scaffolds learning by operating within the learner's zone of proximal development, connecting new knowledge to existing understanding through culturally meaningful interaction (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978).

The mediating teacher in Vidyasagar's framework must possess two forms of competence: subject knowledge and cultural-linguistic awareness. The teacher must know not only what to teach but how to render it meaningful within the learner's experiential and linguistic world. This dual competence is the foundation of what Gay (2018) terms culturally responsive pedagogy—the capacity to design instruction that is not only academically rigorous but culturally relevant and affirming.

The implication for teacher education is substantial. If teachers are to function as cultural and epistemic mediators, their professional preparation must extend beyond content knowledge and generic pedagogical techniques. It must cultivate reflective awareness of the social and linguistic dynamics of learning, the capacity to navigate multiple knowledge systems, and the skills to create learning environments in which diverse epistemic perspectives are valued and engaged.

5.3 Pedagogical Implications for Teacher Education

Three primary implications emerge from Vidyasagar's language philosophy for contemporary teacher education programmes: First, teacher education curricula should explicitly address the role of language in knowledge construction, equipping prospective teachers with the conceptual tools to understand how medium of instruction shapes learning processes, identity formation, and cognitive development. This is not simply a

linguistic or methodological matter; it is an epistemological one.

Second, teacher education must incorporate multilingual pedagogies. In linguistically diverse contexts such as India, teachers routinely work across multiple languages and linguistic registers. Practices such as translanguaging—the flexible deployment of a learner's full linguistic repertoire in meaning-making—should be central to teacher preparation rather than peripheral (García and Wei, 2014). This requires not only practical language skills but a theoretical understanding of why multilingual pedagogies are epistemologically, not merely instrumentally, valuable.

Third, teacher education must include critical engagement with the knowledge systems embedded in local and vernacular contexts. This means designing curriculum that integrates community-based knowledge, oral traditions, and locally situated examples—not as supplementary additions to a Western-normative curriculum but as epistemically legitimate forms of knowledge in their own right.

These implications must, however, be pursued critically. The risk identified by Newman and Latifi (2021)—that theoretical frameworks are adopted in teacher education without adequate attention to their epistemological foundations or contextual relevance—applies directly here. Vernacular pedagogy must not be reduced to a surface-level methodological directive. It must be grounded in a sustained engagement with questions of knowledge, power, and cultural identity.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Vernacular Epistemology as Epistemic Resistance

The analysis demonstrates that Vidyasagar's vernacular project functioned as a form of epistemic resistance against colonial knowledge hierarchies. By insisting that Bengali could serve as an adequate—indeed, superior—medium for education, he implicitly contested the colonial premise that legitimate knowledge must be mediated through English. The evidence from Barnaparichay and his prose reforms shows that this was not merely a pragmatic accommodation but a principled epistemological claim: that the learner's own language is not a barrier to knowledge but its most natural vehicle.

This finding aligns with decolonial scholarship's characterisation of colonial education as an epistemic project (Mignolo, 2011; de Sousa Santos, 2015). Vernacular education, in this light, is not simply a methodological alternative but a counter-epistemological stance. It asserts the legitimacy of knowledge forms that colonial education marginalised and creates conditions for what de Sousa Santos (2015) calls 'ecology of knowledges'—a pluralistic engagement with multiple knowledge traditions rather than the imposition of a single, hegemonic one.

6.2 Language as a Mediation Tool

The analysis confirms that language functions as a mediational tool in knowledge construction, with significant implications for how the choice of instructional medium affects learning outcomes. Vidyasagar's textual practices in Barnaparichay

demonstrate an intuitive grasp of this principle: his use of familiar vocabulary, culturally resonant examples, and simplified syntax is designed to support the cognitive journey from familiar to unfamiliar, from vernacular to formal knowledge. This is mediational scaffolding in the Vygotskian sense, achieved through careful linguistic design rather than technological means.

The contemporary evidence from multilingual education research strengthens this finding. Mohanty's (2018) research on multilingual reality in India documents that when learners are educated in their home language before transitioning to a dominant or national language, they develop stronger conceptual foundations and higher levels of academic achievement. The mediational function of language is not merely cognitive but also affective and social: learning in one's own language affirms identity, builds confidence, and strengthens the learner's sense of belonging within the educational community.

6.3 Teacher as Cultural and Epistemic Mediator

The figure of the teacher as cultural and epistemic mediator emerges as a central conceptual contribution of the analysis. Teachers in Vidyasagar's framework are not simply instructors but brokers between knowledge systems, linguistic worlds, and cultural contexts. This role is particularly salient in multilingual classrooms where learners bring diverse linguistic and epistemic resources to the learning encounter.

The implications for teacher education are clear: teacher preparation must equip educators not only with subject knowledge and generic pedagogical skills but with the cultural and linguistic awareness necessary to function as effective mediators. This requires a reconceptualisation of what counts as professional competence in teaching, moving beyond technical skill to include what Darling-Hammond (2012) describes as responsive expertise—the capacity to adapt practice to the complex cultural and linguistic realities of specific learning communities.

6.4 Theory-Practice Gap

A persistent finding across the analysis is the gap between the theoretical aspirations of vernacular pedagogy and its implementation in teacher education. Policy frameworks and academic discourse increasingly endorse mother-tongue instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy, yet teacher education programmes continue to orient toward standardised, dominant-language curricula. As Newman and Latifi (2021) argue, this reflects a broader tendency in teacher education to invoke theoretical constructs without adequately interrogating their epistemological foundations or translating them into contextually specific practice.

The Vidyasagar case illuminates both the promise and the difficulty of bridging this gap. His reforms succeeded in part because they were grounded in concrete textual production—the actual creation of accessible, culturally resonant learning materials—rather than remaining at the level of policy aspiration. Contemporary teacher education must similarly

move from rhetorical endorsement of vernacular approaches to concrete curricular and pedagogical implementation.

6.5 Tensions Between Vernacular Education and Globalisation

The analysis identifies a genuine tension between vernacular educational values and the demands of globalisation, particularly the continued dominance of English as a language of economic mobility, higher education, and international communication. This tension is not resolvable by simply privileging one pole over the other. A binary opposition between vernacular and global language education is, as Mohanty (2018) argues, both theoretically inadequate and practically unhelpful.

The more productive framework is multilingual pluralism: an educational model in which vernacular and global languages are cultivated simultaneously, each serving distinct but complementary functions. Local languages ground identity, enable deep conceptual learning, and carry culturally embedded knowledge; global languages open access to international intellectual and economic communities. Teacher education must prepare educators to navigate this complexity with both theoretical sophistication and practical skill.

7. Critical Analysis: Limits and Reinterpretations

7.1 The Problem of Romanticising Vernacular Education

The most significant critical risk in engaging with Vidyasagar's vernacular project—and with vernacular epistemologies more broadly—is romanticisation: the idealisation of local knowledge systems as inherently egalitarian, authentic, and emancipatory. This tendency must be firmly resisted. Vernacular languages and practices exist within social structures that may be deeply unequal, and their educational promotion does not automatically redress these inequalities.

Bourdieu's (1991) analysis of language and symbolic power is instructive here. Bourdieu argues that the legitimisation of particular language varieties within educational institutions is inseparable from the reproduction of social hierarchies. The dominant regional language in a given context—in this case, standardised Bengali—carries its own symbolic capital, and its promotion can marginalise minority and tribal languages just as English marginalised Bengali under colonial rule. This is precisely what Mohanty (2018) documents in the Indian context: within Bengal itself, dominant Bengali speakers benefit disproportionately from Bengali-medium education, while speakers of minority languages such as Santali, Kurukh, or Munda continue to face linguistic exclusion.

The Vidyasagar case illustrates this tension well. While his promotion of Bengali challenged colonial linguistic hierarchies, it simultaneously standardised a particular, literate-class variety of Bengali, inevitably privileging those whose linguistic practices were closest to this norm. His primer *Barnaparichay*, despite its pedagogical accessibility relative to Sanskrit-heavy alternatives, was nonetheless written in a standardised Bengali that reflected the cultural and linguistic norms of the educated

Bengali middle class. This does not invalidate his contribution—it contextualises it.

The lesson for contemporary teacher education is clear: the adoption of vernacular epistemologies must be accompanied by critical awareness of which vernacular is being privileged, whose knowledge systems are being validated, and who remains marginalised even within vernacular frameworks. De Sousa Santos (2015) calls for an 'ecology of knowledges' that engages multiple epistemological traditions without essentialising any single one; this principle must guide any genuine attempt to vernacularise teacher education.

7.2 Theory-Practice Gap in Teacher Education

As noted in the findings, the gap between theoretical advocacy for vernacular pedagogy and its actual implementation in teacher education is substantial. This gap is not simply a matter of institutional inertia or resource constraints; it reflects deeper structural and epistemological contradictions. Teacher education systems are typically organised around standardised curricula, measurable competencies, and dominant-language norms. These structural features actively resist the contextual, culturally embedded, and linguistically diverse orientations that vernacular pedagogies require.

Moreover, when vernacular approaches do appear in teacher education, they are frequently introduced as methodological add-ons—'use mother tongue in early grades'—rather than as substantive epistemological commitments that would require reconsidering the entire architecture of teacher preparation. This superficiality is precisely what Newman and Latifi (2021) critique in their analysis of Vygotskian applications in teacher education: the concepts are borrowed but their deeper implications for knowledge, power, and pedagogy are avoided. Addressing this gap requires more than policy advocacy; it requires the kind of concrete curricular work that Vidyasagar himself modelled. Just as he did not merely argue for Bengali-medium instruction but actually wrote the textbooks that made it possible, contemporary teacher educators must develop the actual pedagogical materials, assessment frameworks, and professional development programmes that make vernacular epistemological approaches workable in multilingual classrooms.

7.3 Language, Power, and Globalisation

The global dominance of English as a language of economic opportunity, higher education, and international communication presents a structural constraint on vernacular education that Vidyasagar did not face in the same form. In the contemporary context, the tension between linguistic identity and global competitiveness is not merely an educational debate but a lived dilemma for millions of learners and their families. Denying the real economic value of English-language competence in the name of vernacular authenticity would be both intellectually dishonest and socially irresponsible.

The appropriate response is not to abandon vernacular education but to reconceptualise the relationship between vernacular and global languages. Translanguaging theory

(García and Wei, 2014) offers a productive framework here: rather than treating languages as separate, bounded systems, translanguaging recognises that multilingual speakers draw on an integrated linguistic repertoire, moving fluidly between languages in the service of meaning-making. This framework dissolves the binary opposition between vernacular and global languages and opens space for pedagogical approaches that honour both without subordinating either.

However, as Phillipson (1992) insists, the structural inequalities that underlie linguistic hierarchies cannot be resolved by pedagogical innovation alone. Language policy, resource allocation, and political commitment to linguistic justice are equally necessary conditions for the realisation of genuinely multilingual education. Teacher education must prepare educators to be not only multilingual practitioners but advocates for the structural conditions that make multilingual education possible.

8. Implications for Contemporary Teacher Education

8.1 Decolonising Curriculum and Pedagogy

The analysis supports a substantive—not merely rhetorical—decolonisation of teacher education curriculum and pedagogy. Decolonisation, in this context, means actively challenging the historical supremacy of Western knowledge paradigms within teacher preparation, recognising the plurality of knowledge systems, and integrating vernacular and indigenous epistemologies as epistemically legitimate foundations of educational practice (Mignolo, 2011; de Sousa Santos, 2015). This requires not only adding culturally relevant content to existing curricula but rethinking the epistemological assumptions that organise what counts as valid pedagogical knowledge in the first place.

8.2 Multilingual Teacher Preparation

Teacher education programmes in linguistically diverse societies must be redesigned to develop genuine multilingual competence. This extends beyond proficiency in multiple languages to include theoretical grounding in why multilingual approaches are epistemologically valuable, practical skills in translanguaging and code-switching, and critical awareness of the socio-political dimensions of language use in education (García and Wei, 2014; Mohanty, 2018). Vidyasagar's example suggests that this preparation must be grounded in concrete curricular materials and teaching resources, not only in theoretical frameworks.

8.3 Context-Sensitive Pedagogy and Reflective Practice

Finally, the study underscores the importance of context-sensitive pedagogy: instructional approaches designed for the specific cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic realities of particular learner communities, rather than generic international models. This requires teachers who are reflective practitioners—capable of critically examining their own assumptions, adapting their practice to specific contexts, and developing the responsive expertise that Darling-Hammond (2012) identifies as the hallmark of effective teaching. Teacher

education must create the conditions for this kind of reflective development, through extended fieldwork in diverse community settings, mentoring by experienced multilingual educators, and ongoing professional learning communities focused on contextually grounded practice.

9. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's philosophy of vernacular language in education constitutes an epistemological intervention of continuing relevance to contemporary teacher education. Through primary textual analysis of Barnaparichay and his prose reforms, and through theoretical engagement with sociocultural, decolonial, and indigenous knowledge frameworks, the paper has demonstrated that Vidyasagar's promotion of Bengali was not a mere pedagogical preference but a principled challenge to colonial epistemic hierarchies and an early instantiation of what we now call vernacular epistemology.

The analysis has identified three core contributions of this legacy to contemporary teacher education: vernacular epistemologies as mechanisms of epistemic resistance; the teacher as cultural and epistemic mediator; and the necessity of multilingual, pluralistic models that navigate the tension between local identity and global competence. At the same time, the paper has insisted on a critical, reflexive engagement with vernacular approaches—one that resists romanticisation, acknowledges internal hierarchies, addresses the theory-practice gap, and recognises the structural constraints imposed by globalisation and language policy.

Vidyasagar's legacy is not a historical curiosity but a critical resource for rethinking what teacher education can and should be in postcolonial, multilingual societies. The challenge for contemporary educators is to translate his epistemological insights into concrete curricular and pedagogical practices that are genuinely inclusive, contextually grounded, and epistemically just.

10. Directions for Future Research

This conceptual study opens several lines of empirical and theoretical inquiry:

1. Classroom-based ethnographic research examining how teachers in West Bengal and other multilingual Indian states actually deploy vernacular pedagogies—and what structural, institutional, and cultural factors facilitate or obstruct this deployment.
2. Systematic curriculum analysis of teacher education programmes across India to assess the degree and quality of vernacular and multilingual content integration, with attention to differences between state, central, and private institutions.
3. Intersectional studies examining the relationship between vernacular education and social hierarchies of caste, gender, and class, particularly in communities where dominant regional languages marginalise tribal and minority language speakers.

4. Comparative analysis of Vidyasagar's approach with parallel vernacular reformers in other postcolonial contexts—such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o's language activism in Kenya—to develop a more globally grounded theory of vernacular epistemology in education.
5. Investigation of how digital and technology-mediated education can be designed to support vernacular learning, particularly for communities where digital content is predominantly in dominant languages.

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