

ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR: A SOCIAL REFORMER AND PIONEER OF HUMANISM

Abstract

Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, born Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay (1820–1891), was a significant figure in India's Renaissance in the nineteenth century. He was a polymath, an educationist, social reformer, philanthropist and pioneer of humanism. He was awarded the title of Vidyasagar, meaning "sea of knowledge," due to his vast erudition. Vidyasagar dedicated his life to women's empowerment and prosperity through education and social reforms. He was also known as "dayar sagar" in Bengali, meaning "ocean of kindness." He was the father of the modern Bengali school system, textbooks, and press. Despite being influenced by Western knowledge, rationalism, and Renaissance ideals, he remained true to his native identity and challenged colonizers when necessary. Vidyasagar is called the pioneer of the Indian Renaissance. Needless to say, the Indian Renaissance was influenced by the European Renaissance. The Renaissance began in Europe in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries. This renaissance or humanist movement began with the opposition to the concept of God and the Church and based on the judgment that "what is irrational, what is not supported by evidence is excluded". It was completely free from religion – secular His main point was people. His main focus was people. He sang the victory song of human values. Until then, the concept of social values that guided people, was the main theme – "Man is God's creation". So if you love people, you can love God, you can go to God. Human values are guided by these values. This is the common humanity. But the values by which humanism is guided are essentially secular, based on the denial of the supernatural. His main point was that "people are the truth, people are above all".

Keywords: educationist, social reformer, philanthropist and pioneer of humanism, Renaissance, rationalism

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a Bengali Sanskrit scholar, educator, social reformer, author, and philanthropist, was a prominent 19th-century intellectual and activist. He played a key role in the Bengal Renaissance. His ideas blended Indian and Western thought, emphasized moral values, humanism, and generosity towards the poor.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, born on 26 September 1820, was a Hindu Brahmin to Thakurdas Bandyopadhyay and Bhagavati Devi in Birsingha village, Paschim Medinipur District. At 9, Ishwar moved to Calcutta and lived with Bhagabat Charan in Burrabazar, where Thakurdas had been staying. He quickly settled in and was deeply influenced by Bhagabat's daughter Raimoni's affectionate feelings, which influenced his later revolutionary work towards women's upliftment and championing of female education.

Ishwar Chandra, a passionate student, studied under street lights due to financial constraints. He excelled in his studies and received numerous scholarships. He also worked part-time as a teacher at Jorashanko. He attended Sanskrit College, Calcutta for twelve years, graduating with a degree in Sanskrit Grammar, Literature, Dialectics, Vedanta, Smriti, and Astronomy. In the year 1839, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar successfully completed his graduation. After this, in 1841 he joined Fort William College as a head of the Sanskrit department at the age of 21.

Vidyasagar, after leaving Fort William College in 1846, became an Assistant Secretary at Sanskrit College. However, he was criticized for recommending changes to the education system, leading to a disagreement with College Secretary Rasomoy Dutta. In 1849, he resigned from Sanskrit College and returned to Fort William College as a head clerk.

Vidyasagar, a bengali philosopher, was a masterful, masculine personality who recultivated qualities of wisdom, conduct, self-imposed poverty, righteous indignation against moral wrong, generosity, and charity. He was an utopian for centuries, embodying qualities of the archetypal West Protestants, such as rationality, individuality, enterprise, devotion to worthy causes, leadership in critical situations, obstinacy of principle, courage of conviction, innate sense of justice, preference for work over words, and a concern for life. His simple appearance and masterful masculine personality made him a utopian for centuries.

Vidyasagar, in accordance with historical customs, was married at the age of fourteen to Srimati Dinamoyee Devi, chosen by his father, and had their only son, Narayan Chandra Bandyopadhyaya.

II. VIDYASAGAR AS A SOCIAL REFORMER

Vidyasagar, a social reformer and activist, was a pioneer in addressing social issues and bringing them to the attention of the ignorant mass and the perpetrators of misdeeds. He relied heavily on the British Government for redressal of these social issues, believing that changes from darkness, the ugly, evil, and ignorance could only be achieved through the intervention of the Britishers. This belief is reflected in Subhas Chandra Bose's book *An Indian Pilgrim*, which highlights that despite being men of high moral stature, Vidyasagar and Keshab Chandra Sen were not anti-government or anti-British. Vidyasagar was not eager

to shun himself away from the contact of the British, as he believed that changes from darkness, the ugly, evil, and ignorance could only be achieved through the intervention of the British.

Vidyasagar, a pragmatist, aimed to free his countrymen from two types of bondages: British rule that enslaved them and the orthodoxy of Hindu religious practices that reduced men, especially women, to mere objects of non-entity. He was able to defend himself against humiliations and indignities by welcoming Mr. Clarke imperiously and recognizing the importance of self-prestige and dignity. Vidyasagar recognized that only an erudite scholar with great strength of mind could guard himself against humiliations. He aimed to free his countrymen from the "dictates" of Hindu religion.

Vidyasagar, a Sanskrit scholar, deciphered Shastras and identified deviations from the religion. He declared war on social aberrations, campaigning against Kulinism, Kulin Polygamy, child widows, and child marriage. He ensured the Acts were translated into reality, remaining within his religion. This led to social ostracization in many circles for his attempt to eliminate age-old practices.

Vidyasagar, Bengal's most knowledgeable Sanskrit scholar, was a successful social reformer who was a rationalist, largely justifying it from Hindu texts. Despite identifying as a good Hindu, he was also a dedicated humanist and atheist.

Vidyasagar, a prominent social reformer, criticized Hindu customs such as prohibiting widow re-marriage, child marriage, and polygamy among upper caste Hindus. His first essay, "Balyobibahar Dosh", argued against the evils of child marriage, focusing on the health and education of future mothers. He highlighted the dangers of early widowhood and the need for mature minds and bodies to fulfill the conditions of true marital love. Vidyasagar wrote against child marriage without invoking the authority of the Shastras, but instead argued that senseless customs and outmoded Shastras were responsible for the evil of child marriage. He argued that sincere marital love was rare in India and was merely a part of household routine.

In 1855, Vidyasagar published his first tract on widow remarriage, which sparked controversy among the upper caste Hindu gentry. He faced criticism from pamphlets and later published a second tract, "Whether Widows Ought To be Married or Not", to address these objections. Vidyasagar's arguments were based on ancient Sanskrit authorities and he logically supported his scriptural interpretation. However, he realized that Desachar was responsible for inhumane practices against women, and he renounced the existing customs. He argued that disregarding the Shastras and observing mere usages and external forms led to the irreversible stream of vice in the country. Vidyasagar's reforms did not necessarily require equality of sexes, but rather aimed to affirm the legitimacy of re-marriage to save widows from their sufferings and the social vices of adultery and foeticide.

Vidyasagar, a prominent Indian lawyer, sent a petition to the government with nearly a thousand signatures requesting a suitable enactment of a bill to remove legal obstacles to the marriage of Hindu widows. The bill was moved in the Legislative Council, receiving numerous memorials from all over India. The opposition was much larger, with about 56,000 opponents against the bill, while Raja Radhakanta Dev of Calcutta organized a petition of about 37,000 persons against it. Despite oppositions and critical reports, Vidyasagar

continued with his work, ensuring that widow-marriages took place in leading towns and villages. He had to bear a large part of their expenses and supported families who were victimized for their participation in widow re-marriages. The bill was introduced into the Legislative Council on November 17, 1855, and was read for the second time on January 19, 1856. It was passed into Act XV of 1856, which received the Governor-General's assent a week later and became a law of the country.

Vidyasagar, a prominent Hindu reformer, fought against Kulinism, a custom prevalent in Bengal where Kulin Brahmanas were considered the highest grade of the Brahmanas. According to the Kulinism system, high caste Brahmana parents were required to marry their daughters into Kulin families, leading to a lucrative trade and paving the way for polygamy. The practice was considered auspicious, forcing girls of tender age to marry bridegrooms as old as their fathers, often leading to lifelong suffering and strict social commitments.

In 1855, Vidyasagar submitted a petition to the government, which was subscribed by 25000 people, including influential personages. Despite unsuccessful attempts, Vidyasagar continued his efforts, and on February 1, 1866, he submitted a petition for the prevention of polygamy again. His strong mental strength, fixed purpose, and perseverance led him to submit a petition for the prevention of polygamy again nine years later.

In 1871, Vidyasagar published a paper on polygamy, arguing against it according to the Hindu Shastras. He cited Manu's works and argued that taking multiple wives was unconstitutional under other circumstances. Vidyasagar attributed the weaker female sex to society's evil customs, leading to degradation and humiliation. He deemed polygamy the most pernicious social custom, causing immense suffering to women. He argued that the weaker female sex relied on the male sex, leading to a life of degradation and humiliation.

III. EDUCATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF VIDYASAGAR

Ishwar Chandra was a renowned figure known for his unwavering determination and courage, despite facing adversities. He resigned from his college after a skirmish with Dutta. In 1850, Vidyasagar returned to Sanskrit College as a Professor, requiring permission to redesign the education system. In 1851, he became the Principal of the college.

Vidyasagar, a prominent figure in Indian education, was known for his intense protests against Education department officials and his commitment to education reform. He favored English and Bengali as mediums of learning alongside Sanskrit, aiming to offer students a wider range of subjects and broaden their horizons in examining European and Indian concepts and practices. He was open to discovering the truth and reality, discarding erroneous beliefs of Indian Shastras and preferring European science when appropriate. Vidyasagar's famous "Notes on the Sanskrit College" proposed a comprehensive scheme to create an elegant Bengali style based on sound knowledge of both Sanskrit and English languages. He also stressed the three branches of English — History, Mathematics, and Natural Philosophy. Vidyasagar also achieved success by opening the gates of the Sanskrit College to castes other than Brahmins, introducing admission and tuition fees, and establishing the Normal School for Bengali teacher training. These measures expanded enrollment and strengthened student commitment, rescuing classical education from medieval scholasticism.

In 1853, Vidyasagar established an Anglo-Sanskrit free school in Birsingha village. He advocated for non-official, popular institutions for higher education with an Indian teaching staff. The Metropolitan Institution, originally founded in 1859, was managed by Vidyasagar and maintained by him in 1864. The college aimed to provide higher collegiate education for Bengal youths without government financial aid. It became a first-grade college in 1879 and introduced courses in Law, BA Honours, and MA courses in 1884. In 1854, he was appointed to the Board of Examination for ICS candidate selection, served as a member of the University Committee in 1855, and became a Calcutta University fellow in 1857.

Vidyasagar's primary goal was to educate girls, as it was crucial for their emancipation from societal inequalities. However, conservatives opposed this, and Vidyasagar used Sanskrit scriptures to defend girls' education. He used his literary talent to explain the meaning of Hindu Shastras, upholding women's right to education, and spread this truth among his countrymen. Vidyasagar's efforts included writing books, pamphlets, and articles supporting female education, demonstrating the importance of education in emancipating women from societal injustices.

Vidyasagar, a Bengali organization, has been instrumental in promoting girls' education in the country. They have opened 35 schools, enrolled 1300 girls, and provided financial support to some schools. They have also appealed to the government for grant-in-aid benefits and initiated a fund called "NARI SHIKSHA BHANDAR" to provide financial assistance to girls' education.

Vidyasagar played a significant role in the spread of mass education in Bengal. He sought local support and participation in the education system, appealing to those who responded positively. He decided to establish schools in chosen localities, with the financial burden coming from the locality. This approach resulted in the construction of numerous schools in areas under Vidyasagar's jurisdiction.

IV. IDEAS OF NATIONALISM

Vidyasagar, a prominent Indian nationalist, aimed to spread education within the common masses, using enlightenment and knowledge to modernize the social mind. He rejected Dr. Ballantyne's recommendation to introduce Bishop Berkley's "Inquiry" into a class book, arguing that Berkley's book had similar conclusions to Vedanta or Sankhya and was no longer considered a sound philosophy in Europe. Vidyasagar believed that a vernacular language was the only medium of instruction that could percolate the benefits of education to the lowest stratum of society, including the working class and tribal people. He agreed with the Bengali Christian Rev. Lal Behari De's statement that the vernacular language of a country is the guardian of its improvement and foster parent of its genius.

Vidyasagar's national pride was evident in his simple dress, which he wore as silent weapons against the British Sahibs. His pride was the obverse of his love for his Motherland, which was at its peak during British Colonial rule in India. He zealously guarded the "human dignity" of his countrymen, despite the British's political domination.

V. IDEAS OF LIBERALISM AND HUMANISM

Vidyasagar, a Bengali poet, was deeply rooted in Indian culture and was known for his individualism, rationalism, scientific temperament, and objective reality. He attempted to create a new literary language with the help of Sanskrit and European virtues, but never converted to Western ideas. Vidyasagar had a deep sympathy for the helpless and poor, and his life was filled with instances of helping men in distress. He was a living practitioner of the highest lore of the Geeta, valuing all creatures and human beings as beloved as they are beloved of Lord God.

Vidyasagar's natural instinct led him to care for ill and ailing women suffering from infectious diseases, forgetting his own food, bath, household, and work. His life was filled with instances of service to humanity, and he was known for his generosity and willingness to mortgage his own dwelling house for good work. His greatness of heart was coined by Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta as Karunasagar, who described him as the first man among us with the genius and wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman, and the heart of a Bengali mother.

VI. CONCLUSION

Vidyasagar's contribution to Indian political thought and society is criticized for its limitations. Critics estimate his movement of widow remarriage in terms of number, but it was not socially acceptable and could not be enforced with the help of the police force. Vidyasagar had to rely on social consent rather than the power of the state, which led to his defeat. Legitimization of widow remarriage was only taken among educated sections of the community and was not widespread. It was also strictly forbidden among the upper castes and most middle-ranking castes in the nineteenth century.

Recent feminists have criticized Vidyasagar's paternalistic bias and patriarchal control over private spheres of life, female sexuality, and family discipline. They argue that this reform was undertaken to provide a legitimate channel for marriage for widowed women, reinforcing social discipline and patriarchal control over women's bodies and desires.

Despite being aware of the ideology of hierarchy, Vidyasagar did not offer a radical alternative and put great faith in colonial rule. His personal life, including his daughter returning home as a widow and his wife Dinamoyee Devi, remains mostly unanswered. His policy of educating the masses has also been put to question. Despite the limitations of Vidyasagar's ideas and reform activities, his exemplary role in Indian society remains.

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