

ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR'S LEGACY IN WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND EDUCATION

Abstract

In the 19th century, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was one of the pioneers of the Bengal Renaissance. Vidyasagar worked tirelessly to improve the social conditions of women and the underprivileged. He opposed polygamy and did much to promote the education of girls, but his reforming zeal met with much opposition from orthodox Hindus. Vidyasagar was a staunch advocate for the rights of widows. He played a crucial role in the passage of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, which legalized widow remarriage and provided legal protection to widows who chose to remarry. He is known for his work on reforming the Bengali language and education system. Vidyasagar was well-read in English literature and was influenced by Western ideas. He advocated for the education of women and women's rights and individual's liberty and freedom and also fought against child marriage and the practice of dowry. He thought that women's education was very important to get rid of the superstitions of the society of that time. Vidyasagar also made significant contributions to Bengali literature by simplifying and modernizing Bengali prose and the alphabet. He wrote numerous books and articles to spread his reformist ideas. His legacy as a social reformer continues to inspire generations, and his contributions have left an indelible mark on Indian society. And he realized that education was the only tool to free the country and the nation from the handcuffs of superstition. Vidyasagar's relevancy for women education as a measure of social progress and his thought about women's empowerment in the present society is a remarkable achievement for any time for womanhood.

Key Words: Pioneer, individual's liberty, child marriage, superstitions, women empowerment, womanhood.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a pioneering social reformer whose efforts significantly impacted Indian society in the 19th century. In 1820, he was born into a Bengali Hindu Brahmin family in Birsingha village of Hooghly district. His father's name was Thakurdas Bandyopadhyay, and his mother's name was Bhagavati Devi. In 1839 he successfully cleared his law examination. He passed out of Sanskrit College in Kolkata in 1841 qualified in Sanskrit grammar, literature, Vedanta, astronomy and dialectics. He was a brilliant student at Sanskrit College, Calcutta, where he received the title Vidyasagar (Ocean of Learning), and in 1850 he was appointed as head Pandit of Fort William College, Calcutta. He is known for his work on reforming the Bengali language and education system. He was well-read in English literature and was influenced by Western ideas. He advocated for the education of women and women's rights and individual's liberty and freedom and also fought against child marriage and the practice of dowry. He thought that women's education was very important to get rid of the superstitions of the society of that time. Vidyasagar also made significant contributions to Bengali literature by simplifying and modernizing Bengali prose and the alphabet. He wrote several books and articles to spread his reformist ideas. His legacy as a social reformer continues to inspire generations, and his contributions have left an indelible mark on Indian society. And he realized that education was the only tool to free the country and the nation from the handcuffs of superstition. Vidyasagar's relevancy for women's education as a measure of social progress and his thought about women's empowerment in the present society is a remarkable achievement for any time for womanhood.

II. CAMPAIGN AGAINST POLYGAMY

Vidyasagar worked tirelessly to improve the social conditions of women and the underprivileged. His efforts included advocating for the rights of lower casts and promoting social equality. Although an orthodox high-caste Brahman, he took a leading part in social reform movements, notably a successful campaign to legalize remarriage of widows, many of whom had been married for the first time in childhood. He championed the upliftment of the status of women in India, particularly in his native Bengal. Unlike some other reformers who sought to set up alternative societies or systems, he transformed society from within. He opposed polygamy and did much to promote the education of girls, but his reforming zeal met with much opposition from orthodox Hindus. Such was the nature of this horrible practice that some men ended up marrying as many as eighty women. This practice ensured that aged persons married teenage girls and even children. The unfortunate girl who would be widowed by the death of her elderly husband was condemned to a life of misery. From discrimination to deprivation, these widows were subjected to severe restrictions and had to dress in plain white cotton sarees and remain with their shaved off heads. Some widows would even be thrown out of their houses ending up as prostitutes, rape victims and unsupported mothers. Unable to tolerate the ill-treatment, many of these girls would run away and turn to prostitution to support themselves. In 1853 it was estimated that Calcutta had a population of 12,700 prostitutes and women. They led a deplorable life and Vidyasagar thought it was unfair and sought out the changes. Standing tall against the conservative power centers of the hindu society. Vidyasagar was the man who was way ahead of his times. His social reform efforts were centred on empowering women, and he dedicated his life to ending child marriage and promoting widow remarriage. Vidyasagar's social reform works are

‘Bidhobabivah’ on widows’ right to remarry in 1855, ‘Bahubivah’ on the prohibition of polygamy in 1871, and ‘Balyabivah’ on the flaws of child marriage. The greatest contribution of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was for his fervent push for the introduction of widow remarriage and girls’ education in Indian society. It is due to his efforts that the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was enacted. He also fought a determined battle against the prevailing social custom of Kulin Brahmin polygamy. In 1857, the Maharaja of Burdwan led a petition to the government asking for the restriction of multiple marriage among Kulin Brahmins, which received 25,000 signatures. The sepoys’ revolt forced a postponement of action on this petition, but Vidyasagar prompted a new petition in 1866, this time with, 21,000 signatories. The renowned rationalist Vidyasagar authored two outstanding critiques of polygamy in the 1870s. He argued to the government that since polygamy was not sanctioned by sacred texts, there could be no objection to eliminate it by legislation.

III. CAMPAIGN AGAINST CHILD MARRIAGE

He fought for women’s education and vigorously challenged the barbaric practice of child marriage and worked towards raising the minimum age of marriage. His efforts contributed to the passing of the Age of Consent Act in 1891, which raised the age of consent for marriage to 12 years. Vidyasagar’s social reform efforts were centred on empowering women, and he dedicated his life to ending child marriage. He was a pioneer in women’s empowerment who realized way back in the 19th century that unless and until resurrection and empowerment of women is done reform or renaissance was impossible to bear fruit in the society.

IV. CAMPAIGN FOR WIDOW RE-MARRIAGE

Vidyasagar was a staunch advocate for the rights of widows. He played a crucial role in the passage of the Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act of 1856, which legalized widow remarriage and provided legal protection to widows who chose to remarry. We know that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the most resplendent period in the history of India. During this period, India witnessed the holistic reawakening of the people in the world of new ideals, new thoughts and aspiration in every dimension of life. The regeneration of India got its expression in Bengal and so this resurgence is called the Bengal Renaissance Movement. He was the most prominent campaigner for Hindu widow remarriage, petitioning the Legislative Council despite severe opposition, including a counter petition (by Radhakanta Deb and the Dharma Sabha) which had nearly four times as many signatures. Even though widow remarriage was considered a fragrant breach of Hindu customs and was staunchly opposed, Lord Dalhousie personally finalised the bill and the Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act, 1857 was passed. He realized that educated women are the weapons who yield positive impact on the Indian society through their contributions of home and professional fields. Education as means of empowerment of women can bring about a positive attitudinal change. His social reforms are of great historical importance and contributed significantly towards the shaping of modern Indian society.

V. CONTRIBUTIONS OF ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR TO EDUCATION

In 1846, Vidyasagar joined Sanskrit College as Assistant Secretary. Within a year, he brought number of changes to the existing education system. During his tenure as the

principal of Sanskrit College from 1851 to 1858, Vidyasagar initiated unprecedented changes in both administration and education. After returning to Sanskrit College, the very first step Vidyasagar took was to include English and Bengali besides Sanskrit for the students. At the time there was no concept of universal education. He also encouraged scholars to study ancient sacred texts and interpret them for contemporary usage. He strongly believed that everyone irrespective of caste or gender had the right to education and opened up the premises of the Sanskrit College for people from lower castes. He also introduced science, European history, and philosophy so that students could explore other cultures as well, along with the knowledge of Sanskrit. He established twenty model schools in Hooghly, Midnapore, Burdwan and Nadia. He supervised the schools, recruited teachers, and formulated their syllabus. He also changed the exam pattern by introducing monthly exams instead of annual ones. He also introduced the study of English, Western science and mathematics. Vidyasagar initiated the acceptance of admission fees and tuition fees. He also introduced 'Sunday' as the weekly holiday and summer vacation in the month of May and June. He brought about a revolution in the Bengali education system by changing the way the Bengali language was written and taught. He opened the door of education to the people of the country from primary education to higher education. He was not only a great writer but also played a significant role in the construction of the Bengali language. He even wrote a book on the rules of Sanskrit's grammar, which has been in use to this day. Two major books, such as *Upakramonika* and *ByakaranKoumudi*, were written to emphasize the complexity of Sanskrit grammar in trouble-free Bengali language. Around thirty five schools for women were opened across Bengal. The sole purpose of these institutions was to make women aware, independent, and educated. The Calcutta Metropolitan School is one of these schools built by Vidyasagar. He is credited with reconstructing the Bengali alphabet. He simplified Bengali typography into an alphabet of 12 vowels and 40 consonants eliminating the Sanskrit phonemes. His book *BornoPorichoy* meaning 'introduction to the letter' is still used as the introductory text to learn the Bengali alphabet. The renaissance period saw magnificent outburst of Bengali literature with Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar being the pioneer. He wrote nearly ten books on Bengal's history and literature, all of them being considered classics in today's times. According to him "*Education is the priceless treasure of life. Just its arrival not only ascertains welfare at individual level but paves the way for large scale development of the society.*"

VI. VIDYASAGAR'S EFFORTS FOR WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Vidyasagar believed in the importance of education for women and beyond education, Vidyasagar was a strong advocate for social reforms, including the promotion of widow remarriage and the abolition of child marriage. Vidyasagar's work on social reforms include 'Bidhobabivah' on widows' right to remarry, 'Bahubivah' on banning of polygamy and Balyabivah on the flaws of child marriage. It was the result of his untiring struggle that the then Government of India passed the widow Remarriage Act in 1856. With the purpose of gathering people's support for the implementation of the provision of remarriage of widows, he encouraged his own son Narayan Chandra Bandyopadhyaya to marry a widow. He was a keen advocate of education for women. He rightly viewed education as the primary way for women to emancipate themselves from all the social oppression they had to face at the time. He supported Drinkwater Bethune to establish the first permanent girls' school in India, the Bethune School. Vidyasagar spent the last 18th years of his life living among Santhal tribals in present-day Jharkhand, where he started what is possibly India's first school for Santhal

girls, and realized that education was the only tool to free the country and the nation from the handcuffs of superstition. Vidyasagar's relevancy for women's education as a measure of social progress and his thought about women's empowerment in the present society in a remarkable achievement for any time for womanhood.

VII. CONCLUSION

He was also a key figure in the Bengal Renaissance—a cultural, social, intellectual and artistic movement in Bengal from the 19th century to the early 20th century. He dreamed and tried hard to make it come true to spread the same education for all without any discriminations among the children of the society. However, he devoted himself more to educating women because he understood that all the members of the place where women would be educated are more likely to be educated. He wrote biographical notes on numerous noteworthy personalities in the history of the world so that the young generation can get inspired by reading the great examples of endurance, hard work, honesty, patience, perseverance, courage, determination and philosophy of life. Some of his works are: *Betaal Panchavinsati* (1847), *BanglarItihas* (1848), *Jivancharita* (1849), *Shakuntala* (1854), *Mahabharata* (1860), *SeetarVanavas* (1860), *Bhrantivilaas* (1869), *OtiAlpaHoilo* (1873), *Brajavilaas* (1884), *Ratnpariksha* (1886).

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