

ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR: A SOCIAL REFORMER IN COLONIAL BENGAL AND HIS RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

Abstract

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), the great neo-humanist of Bengal, was a towering, venerated personality of the Bengal Renaissance, next to Raja Rammohun Roy. His charisma in the annal of history has been much more than that of Akshaya Kumar Datta. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar belonged to an Indian enlightened community. His ideas of education and enthusiasm were really fruitful and influential to countless Indian people. His contribution, for the salvation of his countrymen is really praiseworthy. In fact, he has inspired his countrymen in many ways adopting several strategic measures. Along with Raja Rammohan Roy, he was the pioneer of the Bengal Renaissance. Meanwhile, his theoretical and practical efforts helped to break the long-standing superstitions and bad practices that were devastating the society. His social and political ideas clearly impacted the 19th and early 20th century Indian society. Above all, European science and technology influenced him and as a result the Bengal Renaissance occurred, which later on enlightened and developed the then backward society. He was not only the great man of Indian soil, at the same time he was also famous internationally. The purpose of the article is to highlight the influence of Western knowledge and culture upon Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and to bring out his relevance in contemporary times.

Keywords: Early Life and Education, Social Reformation, Psychology, Literary works, Relevance

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Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a great person and great human being. He is known not only for his contribution in the vast field of education and social reformation, but also for his mammoth literary works and contribution to the development of the modern Bengali language. He was the pioneer who understood the problem of the then readers in understanding the complicated Bengali language, whose origin was purely Sanskrit. Hence, he took initiatives for simplifying and modernizing this language. It is a fact that, before him there was no such simple, easy and systematic text books for the learners. A large number of books have been written by Ishwar Chandra and he has memorable contribution in the development of modern Bengali language and one of his popular creations is *Barna Porichay*. It is also found that he had done many activities during his lifetime like, writing of text books, grammar books, and biographical books and was actively involved in the writings of some popular magazines. However, his report regarding the reformation of the educational system of Sanskrit college is considered as the first Educational Plan by any Indian. In a nutshell, his works and activities regarding language development and literature support in order to upgrade the educational philosophy of Bengal and psychology were indeed admirable. This paper looks at Vidyasagar's programme for widow marriage while also discussing his campaign against Kulin Brahmin polygamy, child marriage and prostitution—some of the evils that plagued 19th century Bengali society. The latter's diligent efforts for the legalization of widow marriage ultimately paid off in 1856 as the British colonial administrators drafted widow marriage into law. Surprisingly, the two tracts that Vidyasagar published in 1856 in favour of widow marriage have been looked into some detail as well as opposition to his programme from none other than Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, arguably the greatest Bengali novelist till date. A new era was instigated in the 19th century Bengal. This time the Western liberal ideas and socio-political thoughts entered into Bengal. The influx of Western knowledge, art and culture as well as advanced moral values enriched the mental horizon of Bengal liberal intelligence. It abundantly influenced Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar to initiate social, religious and literary reformation to purge the evils from the then society, which arose from the ignorance and superstitious beliefs. Moreover, it also influenced him to improve the condition of common people in the light of Western liberal knowledge and lofty ideals. He remained the key figure amongst the then humanitarian intellectuals. Consequently, he purely dedicated himself towards setting up the education system of the country and tried to reform the traditional mode of education. His attempt was to remove the veil of ignorance and darkness from the minds of his countrymen.

Vidyasagar played a ground-breaking role in expanding modern education and social mobilization during the 19th century Bengal. In the 19th century colonial Bengal, various patriarchal ideologies governing the lives of women were gradually challenged, despite stern social disapprobation, by the likes of Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) and the radical Young Bengal. Thanks to these pioneers, the 19th century is now generally regarded as the time when a number of reform movements geared towards the emancipation of women were undertaken. Subsequently, there was however, a marked difference between the approach adopted by the Young Bengal and that followed by Rammohan and Vidyasagar. In short, while the former wanted to startle and refashion Bengali Hindu society through their maverick words and deeds, which included feasting on beef or naming and shaming Kulin Brahmins for polygamy etc. Later on, Rammohan and Vidyasagar opted for changing the society from within through activist politics, strengthened by their tracts on prohibition of widow immolation and sanctioning of widow marriage. His stupendous work was widow marriage, commonly known as *Bidhaba Bibahain* in Bengal. He

also argued strongly in favour of women's education, thus contributing to the emergence of what came to be known as the Bengali *bhadramahila* (i.e. gentle woman). However, it was his concern for Bengal's widows that largely defined his life, work and achievement for succeeding generations. In fact, his almost crusade-like efforts to have widow marriage legalized proved to be the most divisive act of his career, generating a large body of writings and petitions from various religious and ideological quarters, both for and against widow marriage. Importantly, he presented detailed re-readings of the *Shashtra* or Hindu religious scriptures not merely to refute conventional wisdom against widow marriage but also to find support for it

I. EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES: A BRIEF OUTLINE

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar not merely confined himself to the role of a preacher towards spreading education within the superstition engrossed Hindu community through native language, but also thoroughly engaged himself in the practical field of social changes like the initiation of widow marriage. He was a teacher, reformer, educator and philanthropist. Several times he argued against the then government's decision about education and many things. His philosophy of education was solely based on humanity and he deeply observed the problems and weaknesses in the then education system of Bengal. And he knew from the beginning that to change the fate of countless Indians, education is the only weapon. In the course of time, he introduced Western languages and subject matter in the ambit of Indian education system and that broadly helped for the awakening of the Bengal middle class of today. He was the first Indian who tirelessly gave importance to the applicability of Western science and philosophy besides Eastern *Shastras*. As a result, he established twenty model schools and many girls' schools for the expansion of girls' education. Therefore, he also established a normal school for making competent teachers for these schools. In the annals of Indian education system especially for women, he opened thirty-five girls' schools between 1857 and 1858. One of his major contributions was the establishment of the Calcutta Metropolitan institution for Higher Education. Now, it is called Vidyasagar College. And he also was directly involved in the establishment of the Calcutta Female School with the help of Bethune in 1849. Now, it is called Bethune School. He also made his valuable contribution to education through his numerous writings. And he wrote many text books, translated books, biographical books and so on.

The 19th century is very much important for the people of the Indian subcontinent. From the beginning of the 19th century India experienced a total socio-cultural and intellectual awakening, which laid the foundation for the movement that transformed India to a modern nation. Most importantly, the liberal tradition of Europe filtered through the prism of Bengal; this time deeply influenced the so-called process of modernization in Bengal. This flowering manifested itself in various spheres which questioned and shook the very foundation of tradition in various spheres of social reformation movement in the course of religion, education, women's role and status, social practices, philosophy, art etc. Subsequently, this European scientific knowledge and ideas began to influence the people of India. In the Bengal Renaissance movement a number of intellectuals displayed a significant enthusiasm to absorb this knowledge. Some remarkable intellectuals were Raja Rammohan Roy, Akshay Kumar Datta, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Keshab Chandra Sen, Rabindranath Tagore and many other intellectuals of 19th century who absorbed this scientific knowledge and Western tradition of Europe. Vidyasagar acquired

Western knowledge and tried his best to implement it in his own society. His great effort was to enlighten the then medieval superstitious nation. And he did not try this in a single work at once. Rather he tried in different ways to modify the nation. He never recognized on the question of spirituality, but he moved freely in the field of paying attention to human mind. Some of his books like, *Bornoporichay* (1855), *Kathamala* (1856), *Charitabali* (1856), *Jivancharita* (1849), *BanglarItihaas* (1848), his literary translations include romanticism of *Sakuntala* (1854), depth of sorrow in *Sitarvanavas* (1860), sense of humour in *Bhrantivilaas* (1869). He was an active person and had made himself distinguished from others through his literary works. Ironically, he had said nothing special about himself. On the other hand, in literary criticism, he was logical, an avid reader and a stark critic.

II. SOCIO-POLITICAL IDEAS OF VIDYASAGAR: A BRIEF OUTLINE

Ishwar Chandra had made his valuable contribution not only in the educational field but also, he assiduously spread his wisdom, love and sympathy among all the poor, downtrodden, sick and ignored people. And he was utterly upset to witness that the superstitions and darkness of Hindu culture had kept them blind to all applying situations. He had got pain to see the then plight of women. In the coming years, he explained widow remarriage with taking examples from Indian various *Shastras* and finally on 26th July 1856 he legally passed the Widow Remarriage Act 1856. Not only that, to stop polygamy among the Kulin Brahmins and child marriage, the Civil Marriage Act was passed in 1872. However, it was not an easy task to understand the orthodox Hindu authorities to accept this sudden radical change in Indian society. For this he had written many books and articles in the magazines to create a large amount of people's support in favour of him. He always served others from his own paid salary. In many aspects he did not get any support from the government or from others, but he continued his sole journey and reached his ultimate aim. His contribution in the upliftment of women by eradicating blind superstitions and tortures in the name of rituals would always be in the heart of women.

In his two subsequent tracts on widow marriage, both published in 1855, Vidyasagar shifted his focus away from *pronoy* to emphasise the sexual need of the widow, a bold subject to tackle in his days. He singled out *deshachar* as the mother of all ills. Knowing that he would not be able to bypass the *Shashtra*, Vidyasagar blamed *deshachar* alone for producing a skewed reading of the *Shashtra*. The development of modern Bengali language began from the 19th century with the contribution of the Bengali Pandits of Fort William College. Their translated works, text book publication, publication of magazines and periodicals started to give the platform for the evolution of Bengali language and literature. Before this era, Bengali language and literature appeared to the Bengalis most difficult to read as it was built up with the ancient language Sanskrit. After Vidyasagar the era of modern Bengali language thoroughly started. It can be said, he is the pioneer of the modern Bengali language. As he translated many books from their original version to Bengali, it appeared to the Bengalis very easy to understand. He translated Sanskrit, Hindi and English books mainly for the aim of mass education. He is considered The Father of Modern Bengali Prose. And he had a deep knowledge of Indian philosophy also. In colonial Bengal he vehemently rejected Halliday's proposal of Downward Filtration Theory and had given stress on the mass education by one's own mother language. He took part to transform society from medievalism to modernism through various works, such as policy making in education and establishing schools. To make proper teachers he established the Normal School, solved the

problems of text books and many others. He struggled against illiteracy as well as prejudice throughout his life. He was firm minded, argumentative confident in the way of modern thinking. Western scientific education as well as Mill's *Logic*, Bacon's *Novum Organum* were introduced to the curriculum of Sanskrit College. He meant by "education" social, realistic and scientific education. Humanistic aspects should be considered more than spiritualistic aspects to develop the social and moral values.

Vidyasagar's socio-political philosophy was not based on the principles of spirituality. Rather he believed in the practical application of these philosophical principles in the lives of the students or people. Like Herbert, Vidyasagar, always gave importance towards the moral development of the student mind. This was one of the major educational aims of Idealism. For the moral development of the student mind, he always added moral talks at the end of every short story in the books of *Kathamala*, *Bdhodaya* etc. Most importantly, he was influenced by the educational philosophy of John Mill, John Locke and John Dewey, who believed students should learn from simple to complex. His realistic philosophy again can be found in his writings on *Bodhodaya* where he introduced children with the naturalistic world and the world with simple noble virtues. His other translated book like *Jibanacharita* was the reflection of his realistic and pragmatist philosophical beliefs. Contextually, Vidyasagar was not blindly influenced by the whole teachings of Idealism except ethical values. Western Philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle were well known to Vidyasagar, but he did not accept everything blindly in this own thought. He was a realist as well as a pragmatist. His views were reflected in educational thought, personal attitude and above all social behavior. And he did not believe in rebirth and said that there is no other world except the present material world. Vidyasagar felt that the aim of education was to discover and develop each individual's abilities and full moral excellence in order to provide better service to society.

III. CONCLUSION: RELEVANCE OF VIDYASAGAR IN THE 21ST CENTURY

What was the contribution of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar to the making of modern India? The greatest contribution of Vidyasagar can be 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 raised concern for the abolition of child-marriage and polygamy. He also opened the doors of the colleges and other educational institutions to lower caste students, which was earlier reserved only for Brahmins. He played an iconic role in the Bengal Renaissance. He was an enormous social reformer of the 19th century. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in his so many literary creations and language developmental activities not only followed the principle of different Eastern and Western philosophical thoughts, but many psychological principles which he followed to structure and organize the subject materials and books for the readers. He was poignantly influenced by the Indian *Vedanta* and *Sankha* philosophy. Above all, many Western philosophical thoughts and the so-called educational ideas of Western philosophers influenced him greatly. Western philosophies like Idealism, Pragmatism and Realism—these three philosophical ideas were vastly combined in Vidyasagar's philosophy of Education. Very well known Western philosophers like John Mill, John Dewey, Johann Herbert, and John Locke had great impact on Vidyasagar's socio-political thought. But he never blindly accepted these ideas at all. The theory of Moral development by Kohlberg had great gradual impact on his socio-political thought process. He is also called "Sind River of Kindness" because of his sympathy and

pain for the poor and downtrodden people. He was also influenced by the outlook and liberal thoughts of the famous Ramkrishna Paramhansa Dev. They both had respect for each other. He was the pioneer of the present form of Bengali literature. As he was a Sanskrit scholar, he had deep understanding in this discipline which made him understand the underlying problems of Bengali literature. He had a Bengali heart with combined knowledge of Eastern and Western education. He was the first Indian who understood that only education through mother tongue can make people educated. He had made unforgettable contribution in the social reformation, educational reformation and development of Bengali literature. He was a man of contradicting characters and was an obstinate man who defined his own path of action. He was never swayed by others' insistence or arguments and took decisions based on his own judgment. On the other hand, he had a soft heart that melted into empathy for other's plight. As a good educator, his thoughts were revolving around the women's status in the society. Especially, the orthodox customs made him vex at the beliefs. He wanted to bring the reforms in the status of women in those days. Vidyasagar was a Bengali polymath who played a key role in the Bengal Renaissance. Most noteworthy, he was an academic educator, philosopher, printer, entrepreneur, reformer, philanthropist, translator and publisher.

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