

# VIDYASAGAR: A PIONEER OF GENDER JUSTICE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

## Abstract

In India, women are believed to have enjoyed equal status with men during the Vedic period. The writings of *Katyayana* and *Patanjali* reflect the high value of education for women. The *Upanishads* and *Vedas* also mention women as sages and seers. However, their status declined significantly in later periods. The status of women gradually deteriorated and underwent significant changes during the *Dharmashastra* and *Purana* periods. Girls were denied the opportunity for formal education and were often seen as burdens. Women's freedom was severely restricted, and more importance was given to sons than daughters. Customs such as *Sati*, *Jauhar*, *Purdah*, *Devadasi*, child marriage and restrictions on widow remarriage emerged as a sharp reflection of the gender imbalance prevalent in ancient and medieval Indian society. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) was a prominent figure of India's 19th-century Renaissance, dedicated to the empowerment of women and the advancement of gender equality. He challenged Hindu bigotry and played a key role in the passage of the Widow Remarriage Act. Vidyasagar advocated for female education and relentlessly opposed the cruel practice of child marriage. In the present paper, I have discussed how Vidyasagar worked tirelessly for gender justice and women's empowerment. I have also underscored his challenges and the ingenious methods he uses to overcome those challenges.

**Keywords:** Justice, empowerment, widow remarriage, women's education, child marriage, polygamy

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Gender justice refers to eliminating gender-based inequalities that persist within families, communities, and the state. Empowerment is the process by which individuals gain control over their own lives, societies, and communities. Women are truly empowered when they are able to freely pursue opportunities in education, careers and lifestyles without facing limitations or restrictions. Empowerment of women involves encouraging them to become self-reliant and economically independent and develop positive self-esteem. This means building their confidence to face challenges and motivating them to actively participate in various socio-political development efforts. Growing awareness emphasizes the recognition of women as individuals capable of making rational and informed decisions about themselves and society. It focuses on increasing women's economic, political, and legal power to ensure equal rights with men, achieve globally agreed and sustainable development goals and improve the quality of life of their families and communities.

In India, women enjoyed equal status with men during the Vedic period. The freedom that women were given to participate in public activities indicates the elevated status enjoyed by women during the *Vedic* period. Women never observed '*purdah*'. They had the autonomy to choose their male partners and were allowed to pursue education. Widows were allowed to remarry, although divorce was not permitted for women. Men also did not have the right to divorce their wives. Although male children were given preference over female children, daughters were not mistreated and both girls and boys had access to education.

During the period of *Dharmashastra* and *Puranas*, the status of women gradually declined. Girls were deprived of formal education. Women's freedom was curtailed and sons were given more importance than daughters. *Manu said*, "*pitārakṣatikauṃārebhartārakṣatiyauvanellrakṣantisthavireputrānastrīsvātantryamarhati* ||"<sup>1</sup> That is, the father guards her during virginity, the husband guards her in youth, the sons guard her in old age; the woman is never fit for independence. In the social sphere, the practice of marrying girls before they reached adulthood began, widow remarriage was prohibited, the husband was given the status of God for women, women were completely deprived of education, '*sati*', the practice of *purdah*, and polygamy became increasingly common. In the economic sphere, a woman was completely deprived of her husband's share of the property. In the religious sphere, she was forbidden to perform sacrifices and prayers and to go on pilgrimages.

The condition of Indian women deteriorated greatly during the Middle Ages. The arrival of foreign invaders and the Brahminical iron law were the main reasons for such degradation. Women's freedom was completely curtailed. Caste law dominated the entire social life. Widow remarriage was prohibited. Women could not inherit property. Girls were considered more as burdens or liabilities than as human resources. Women faced many problems like child marriage, the practice of *purdah*, the practice of *sati*, etc. During the Middle Ages, the status of women was reduced to that of slaves.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) was one of the great figures of the 19th-century Indian Renaissance who worked earnestly for women's empowerment and gender justice. He was born on September 26, 1820, in a noble Brahmin family in the village of Birsingh in the Medinipur district. His childhood was marked by extreme poverty. But this

could not prevent him from reaching his goals. He was a student who was known for his dedicated studies, humble manners, utmost honesty, and great respect for his teachers.

## II. MOVEMENT FOR WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's name is written in golden letters in the history of the expansion of women's education in India. He realized that women's education was the first step towards women's freedom. The efforts of Christian missionaries to spread women's education in India were also significant. The first female juvenile school was established in Gauribari area of Ultodanga under the auspices of the Calcutta Baptist Mission and due to the initiative taken by a European women's organization called 'Female Juvenile Society'. Within two years three more schools were established. Historically, the establishment of these four schools have been called the first initiative of modern women's education, but due to various reasons, these schools did not attract special attention in Hindu society. “...মিশনারী স্কুলে ধর্মান্তকরণের আশঙ্কা এবং হিন্দু সমাজের অস্পৃশ্য শ্রেণির মেয়েদের সঙ্গে একসঙ্গে পড়ার সমাজিক বাধা ছিল খ্রীষ্টিয়ান প্রভাব প্রতিবন্ধক।”<sup>2</sup> At that time, the British rulers of the country never realized the need for the education of Indian women. They believed that Indian women were not worthy of modern western education. Vidyasagar was the first to think of modern education for women by subverting the British ideas. He also understood that it would never be possible to undermine the religious beliefs and superstitions of the common people by writing books and by delivering speeches. It was possible only by spreading education and lighting the lamp of knowledge; for this purpose, he thought about bringing education to women. He observed that religious prejudice was the main obstacle to the education of most housebound women in Bengal. It was a great sin to think that a girl would go out of the house and go to school to get education. In the early 19th century, the status of women's education was very poor. According to the report of a gentleman named Adam, he did not see many girls' schools in Bengal during this time. According to him, the women of this country were drowning in the darkness of ignorance. In 1813, the Company's charter also did not provide any funds for the education of women.

In 1839, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar successfully passed his law examination. In 1841, at the age of 21, Ishwar Chandra joined Fort William College as head of the Sanskrit department. Five years later, in 1846, Vidyasagar left Fort William College and joined Sanskrit College as 'Assistant Secretary'. After joining Sanskrit College, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar recommended several changes in the existing education system. This report led to a serious quarrel between Ishwar Chandra and college secretary Rasomaya Dutta. In 1849, he resigned from Sanskrit College and rejoined Fort William College. Simultaneously, the government appointed him in 1855 as Inspector of Special Schools for the districts of Hooghly, Burdwan, Medinipur, and Nadia in the then undivided Bengal of pre-independence India. He was also an honorary officer of several organizations including the Asiatic Society and the Bethune Society.

Vidyasagar travelled all over Bengal as a school inspector. This allowed him an opportunity to witness the darkness and superstition prevalent among the uneducated masses of Bengal. He was deeply distressed by all the misdeeds he saw, especially the exploitation of women in the name of religion. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar analyzed the root causes of the pitiable condition of women in India and felt the need for the emancipation of women from the adversities of social evils and customs. He realized that unless women were educated, it

was impossible to free them from the terrible burden of inequality and injustice imposed on them by the Hindu society, blinded by false beliefs and superstitions. He worked wholeheartedly for women's education.

According to Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, education is an invaluable resource. He started his social movement in Bengal for the education of women and their liberation from social evils. Vidyasagar felt that mass education was needed irrespective of caste, religion, and gender to bring about real change in society. And to ensure that the spread of education among women was very important. Bengali society was still clinging to medievalism. Along with the commoners, many highly educated men were also against any change in the status of women, especially in the sphere of their education. Before 1850, the government was not much interested in creating educational opportunities for Indian women. However, the Christian missionaries and some eminent persons like Raja Radhakanta Dev moved in that direction.

Vidyasagar devoted himself to reforming the existing education system with unwavering determination. On the other hand, he focused on the need to spread education among women. On 7th May 1849, John Eliot Drinkwater Bethune, the President of Education Council of Bengal Government, opened a school for girls called the *Hindu Balika Vidyalaya* in Calcutta. During this time Bethune became friends with Madanamohan Tarkalankar and Vidyasagar and Bethune was impressed by Vidyasagar's erudition. He entrusted Vidyasagar with the responsibility of running this school as an unpaid editor. Madanmohan Tarkalankar's two daughters Kundabala and Bhuvanbala were enrolled in this school. There was also a horse-drawn carriage to bring distant girls to school. Vidyasagar engraved a quote from *Manu* on the car – “*kanyāpevaṃpālamīyāḥśikṣānīyāti yatnataḥ*”<sup>3</sup> meaning daughters should also be taught and nurtured carefully. Bethune persuaded several prominent families to extend their support for running the school. By 1850 the school had an enrollment of 80 students. After the death of Bethune in 1851, Vidyasagar named the school he founded 'Bethune School'.

Vidyasagar realized that mass education cannot exclude women's education. So, he planned to open more schools for girls. In 1854–55, the first lieutenant governor of Bengal, Frederick James Halliday, verbally assured that the government would bear the cost of maintaining the schools if the locals provided suitable schoolhouses. So, Vidyasagar established 40 girls' schools in the four districts of Hooghly, Burdwan, Medinipur, and Nadia within a short period between November 1857 and May 1858, with a total enrollment of 1370 girls. These schools were established not in prosperous towns but in villages. The fact that these schools became quite popular can be gauged from the number of female students attending the school. The problems of Bethune school did not afflict these schools in the villages. Rural society was very much a pioneer in the question of women's freedom. But out of the 40 girls' schools he set up, 35 girls' schools did not receive government grants-in-aid. He ran them at his own expense. To keep women's schools running, he formed a fund called ‘*Nari Shiksha Bhandar*’. Many prominent Indian academics, including Raja Pratap Chandra Singh, came forward to contribute to the fund. Even after Cecil Bidon became the governor of Bengal Presidency, he regularly paid 50 rupees every month. In an 1862 letter to Sir Beatle Friar, the Governor of the Bombay Presidency, Vidyasagar writes, “যে সকল বালিকা বিদ্যালয়ের জন্য আপনি চাঁদা দিয়াছিলেন, সেগুলি ভালোই চলিতেছে। নিকটবর্তী জেলাগুলির মানুষও ব্রীশিক্ষার সমাদর করা আরম্ভ করিয়াছে।”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Vidyasagar paid much attention to the improvement and welfare of Bethune school. In 1869, Bethune School was completely handed over to the

Department of Education and when the Bethune School Government Committee was formed, Vidyasagar naturally had to resign and the same year the paper regarding the Bethune School was handed over to Inspector Henry Woodrow. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar opened a school for Santal girls while staying at Karmatar (now in Jharkhand) among the Santal tribes.

Vidyasagar's critics say that while being sympathetic to women's education, he neglected the education of his wife and daughters. Despite these criticisms, it can be said that he became a pioneer in the expansion of women's education in this country due to his common sense and foresight. He supported the cause of women's education till his death, as he realized that it was only through women's education that a subjugated India can rise again. His drive to promote women's education took a new wing when in 1878 the University of Calcutta allowed girls to take the entrance examination for higher education, and in the same year, Kadambini Bose passed the entrance exam from the Bethune School. “১৮৮৪ সালে চন্দ্রমুখী বসু কলিকাতা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় থেকে এম.এ. পরীক্ষায় পাশ করলে তিনি উপহার স্বরূপ সেক্সপীয়রের একখণ্ড রচনাবলী পাঠিয়ে যে চিঠি লিখেছিলেন তাতে আশা প্রকাশ করেছিলেন, “সজ্জন সমাজে প্রতিষ্ঠাভাজন হও”।”<sup>5</sup> From various contemporary events, he understood that education can bring light to women's lives by pushing away the darkness. So, he devoted his entire life to the spread of women's Education.

### III.MOVEMENT FOR HINDU WIDOW REMARRIAGE

One of the greatest achievements of Vidyasagar was the introduction of widow marriage. On August 11, 1860, Vidyasagar wrote in a letter to Shambhuchandra Vidyaratna- “বিধবাবিবাহ প্রবর্তন আমার জীবনের সর্বপ্রধান সংকল্প। ... এ বিষয়ের জন্য সর্বস্বান্ত হইয়াছি এবং আবশ্যক হইলে প্রাণান্ত স্বীকারেও পরাঙমুখ নাই।”<sup>6</sup> His biographers mainly cite two reasons behind Vidyasagar's initiative of introducing widow marriage. First, the hardships of Vidyasagar's childhood companion inspired him to fight for widow marriage. He had a childhood companion with whom he often played games. After Vidyasagar's return to his village from Calcutta where he went to study, he found out that his beloved friend's marriage had been consummated. A few days after this incident, he received the news that the girl's husband had died. As a result, a number of restrictions were imposed on the young widow. Vidyasagar was deeply saddened by this incident and since then resolved to promote widow marriage. The biographers also point out a possible role played by Vidyasagar's mother Bhagwati Devi: she once described the sufferings of a widow to her son and asked him, 'Is there no relief for the widows according to the scriptures you have read so far?' Vidyasagar's father Thakurdas Bandopadhyay also told him about the need to introduce widow marriage for the betterment of Hindu society. However, it was not because of two incidents only that he came forward to introduce widow marriage. He had seen the practice of child marriage, polygamy, and caste from his childhood. He knew very well how Hindu women, widowed at a young age, had to live through extreme austerity.

Vidyasagar used to say, ‘*hē dharma tōmāra marma bujhā bhāra / kisē tōmār rakṣā haya, ār kisē tōmār lōbha haya, tā tumi jāno*’. He firmly believed in his heart that in a country where the male race has no mercy, no religion, and no justice, where only worldly protection is the main action and the ultimate religion, no more unfortunate women should be born. He felt in every aspect of his life that without women the real welfare of society was impossible. This human spirit is strongly expressed in Vidyasagar's actions.

That is why he considered the introduction of widow marriage as the greatest good deed of his life. He became a proletariat in the performance of this great work and was ready to make the sacrifice that was required. Vidyasagar followed Rammohan's path in introducing widow marriage in his society. He first sought to legalize widow marriage through the interpretation of scriptures. He refers to a verse from the *Parashara Samhita*- "*Naṣṭe mṛte pravrajite klībe ca patite pataui I / Pañcamvāpatsu nārīṇām patiranyo vidhīyate II*"<sup>7</sup> that is, when a husband is lost, dead, has renounced the world, is impotent, or has fallen (become unworthy), a wife is permitted to take another husband. He believed that widow marriage should be practiced for moral, social, and humanitarian reasons. Yet in two chapters of his Proposition, 'Whether Widow Marriage Should Be Practiced' (1865), he argues that widow marriage is permitted according to the scriptures. The reason behind this was that he felt society would give more credit to the re-introduction of widow marriage through scriptural discussion than to the re-introduction of widow marriage based on moral and social reasons. Vidyasagar made moral and social arguments in his proposal, appealing passionately to the humane and not the scriptural sense of his countrymen. In his words- “যদি যুক্তিমাত্র অবলম্বন করিয়া ইহাকে (বিধবাবিবাহকে) কর্তব্যকর্ম বলিয়া প্রতিপন্ন কর তাহা হইলে এতদ্বৈশীয়া লোকে কখনই ইহা কর্তব্যকর্ম বলিয়া স্বীকার করিবেন না। যদি শাস্ত্রে কর্তব্যকর্ম বলিয়া প্রতিপন্ন করা থাকে, তবেই তাহার কর্তব্যকর্ম বলিয়া স্বীকার করিতেও তদনুসারে চলিতে পারেন। এইরূপ বিষয়ে এদেশে শাস্ত্রই সর্বপ্রধান প্রমাণ এবং শাস্ত্রসম্মত কর্মই সর্বতোভাবে কর্তব্যকর্ম বলিয়া পরিগৃহীত হইয়া থাকে।”<sup>8</sup> That is, he put the scriptural law above all arguments in introducing widow marriage, yet he accepted the scriptural law in the context of western scientific views. Like an unbiased historian who writes history with an unbiased view without showing bias towards any event of his era, Vidyasagar also accepted the scriptural law with an unwavering commitment to truth. He published a book in 1855 in support of widow marriage. Two thousand copies of the book were sold within a week, causing uproar across the country. After that, the book was translated into Sanskrit and English and was circulated all over India. Conservatives were outraged by this incident, while progressives supported Vidyasagar's new initiative. After this incident, several petitions with the signatures of many people from different provinces of India were sent to the management meeting. Among them, the application letter sent by Rajnarayan Bose from Medinipur, the application letter signed by 54 people from Ahmedabad, the application letter sent by prominent Hindus of Chittagong, the application letter of Madanamohan Tarkalankar, etc. were particularly important. Interestingly, many petitions were sent to the management meeting expressing opinions against the introduction of widow marriage. But in the end, after Vidyasagar's efforts and many arguments, Act XV of 1856 dated 26th July, an act to remove the legal obstacles to the marriage of Hindu Widows, was passed.

After the passing of the much-discussed Widow Marriage Act, he tried to implement widow marriage with redoubled enthusiasm. Vidyasagar's perseverance led to the first widow marriage in modern India on 7 December 1855; the groom was Srishchandra Vidyaratna, a former student of Sanskrit College, and the widow was Kalimati Devi. Even after this many widow marriages were performed under his initiative; he even convinced his son Narayan Chandra to marry a widow. He also incurred many debts for the performance of this good deed. Even though he was a proletarian, he never stopped from this honest attempt to perform widow marriage. Later in his life, Vidyasagar realized that widow marriage would become universal only if it were recognized as a classical marriage. He also realized that many men married widows for the sake of money and then abandoned their wives. Thereafter, whenever

a proposal for a widow marriage came, he would not accept it without checking the intentions of the groom. During the time of this verification, the widow would be staying at Vidyasagar's house. So, it can be said that Vidyasagar's contribution to the formulation and implementation of the Widow Marriage Act was undeniable.

#### IV. MOVEMENT AGAINST CHILD MARRIAGE

Vidyasagar also tried to prevent child marriage, another evil practice of Hindu society. Child marriage was a burning curse of the society at that time. In August 1850, Vidyasagar's first article on social reform was published in the newspaper '*Sarbshubkari*'. The title of that paper was '*Bālyabibāhēra Dōṣa*'. In this article, he discussed about the active role of society in preventing child marriage. “তিনি বলেন বাল্যকালে বিবাহ হওয়াতে বিবাহের সুমধুর ফল যে পরস্পর প্রণয়, তা দম্পতির কখনই আশ্বাদ করিতে পারেনা...। বাল্যবিবাহে বালিকাদের স্বাস্থ্য নষ্ট হয় এবং শারীরিক ও মানসিক দিক থেকে দুর্বলতা প্রকাশ পায়। বাল্যবিবাহ জাত সন্তান-সন্ততিগন স্বাস্থ্যের দিক থেকে দুর্বল হয়; তারা অধিক কাল বাঁচিতে পারেনা। অনেক সময় মায়ের গর্ভে বা প্রসবের সময় বাচ্চা মারা যায়।”<sup>9</sup> Vidyasagar felt that child marriage has led to premature deaths of many women and deprived women of their right to education. Moreover, the greatest evil of child marriage was early widowhood. A Parsi reformer from Bombay, Behramjee Merwanjee, discussed possible steps to prevent child marriage in detail in Malabarir's pamphlet 'Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood', such as (a) Married boys will not be allowed to appear in university examinations. (b) The government will give job preference to unmarried candidates. (c) A high-powered organization for the development of women can be constituted. Many discussions took place among various organizations, including the Congress, on these proposals. The government did not agree to interfere in this matter.

In 1860, when the marriageable age of girls was fixed at 10 years through the passing of '*Sahabāsa Sanmati Āina*', Vidyasagar strongly opposed this act. Later, the age of marriage for girls was fixed at 12 instead of 10, but Vidyasagar rejected this law, preferring the classical law. According to him, “যে বিধি স্ত্রী দ্বাদশ বর্ষে পদাপর্ণ করলেই তাহার প্রতি নৃশংস আচরণের পথ প্রশস্ত করিয়া দিতে উদ্যত , সে বিধির সমর্থন আমি কোনো প্রকারেই করিতে প্রস্তুত নই।”<sup>10</sup> Vidyasagar mentions pregnancy reform as essential according to the scriptures. For this reason, he wanted to keep the age of consent for cohabitation unspecified, as the age of menarche varies. So, he wrote, “The protection which the Bill proposes to give to child wives is very small. In the majority of cases the first occurrence of menses is from 12 to 15.”<sup>11</sup> So he wanted to legalize postmenstrual intercourse according to Sharia law, keeping the age of consent for intercourse unspecified. In fact, according to the prevailing custom at that time, if the girls were menstruating after marriage, the husband and wife were given consent for intercourse after performing religious rituals. So, he laid greater emphasis on the issue of menstruation for girls than on the law regarding consent to intercourse. His argument in this matter was scientific and humane. Not only that, as in the case of widow marriage, he married his son to a widow, similarly while he was protesting against child marriage, he fixed his daughters' marriages after they turned sixteen.

Vidyasagar's respect and compassion towards women were unquestionable. He came forward in working for women's welfare not driven by any emotion, but from the response of his heart. This movement was not successful during his lifetime; however, he was able to

show the Bengalis a new direction. Today, after almost two hundred years, one can only wonder about his foresight. We are still reaping the benefits of the expansion of women's education. His ideal of education has spread all over Bengal today. Child marriage stopped, polygamy legally stopped, and female feticide was reduced. The women of this country are now highly educated and have the opportunity to work in important positions. And that is why I think Rishi Aurobindo commented about Vidyasagar's role as the shaper of Bengal's social renaissance- "Vidyasagar, scholar, sage and intellectual dictator, labored hugely like the Titan he was, to create a new Bengali Society."<sup>12</sup>

## V. MOVEMENT AGAINST POLYGAMY

Another disturbing practice of Hindu society like child marriage was polygamy. At that time various newspapers especially '*Vidyadarsan*' and '*Samachar Darpan*' tried to highlight the absurdity of polygamy so that public opinion against polygamy could be developed. Long before Vidyasagar, Kishori Chand Mitra and Akshay Kumar Dutta's '*Samajonnati Vidhayini Sabha*' appealed to the Indian Governing Body to stop polygamy. Later, during Vidyasagar's time, some progressive people of the Hindu society supported Vidyasagar in his attempt to stop polygamy; at the same time, many people also spoke against the intended ban on polygamy. All those conservative people intended to maintain polygamy in the society. They believed that by carrying on with these evil practices they would reach heaven after death. So, they placed their superstitions above everything else. Vidyasagar's initiative led to thousands of people signing 127 petitions against polygamy in 1855. On the other hand, Radhakanta Dev also sent several petitions to protect this practice. J.P. Grant promised to draft a bill for the prohibition of polygamy, and a draft bill was also prepared due to the efforts of Ramaprasad Ray. But in the end, Vidyasagar's initiative failed as the British government, after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, adopted the policy of refraining from interfering in the religious practices of the Indians. "এই হতভাগ্য দেশের দুর্ভাগ্যক্রমেসেই সময়রাজবিদ্রোহ উপস্থিত হইল। রাজপুরুষেরা বিদ্রোহ-নিবারণ বিষয়ে সম্পূর্ণ ব্যাপৃত হইলেন, বহুবিবাহ বিষয়ে আর তাঁহাদের মনোযোগ দিবার অবকাশ রহিলনা।"<sup>13</sup> All kinds of social reform movements came to a halt when sepoy mutiny started in 1857 AD, but after sepoy mutiny, the movements gained a new dimension. On August 10, 1871, Vidyasagar once again protested against polygamy by publishing a two-volume pamphlet titled 'Should polygamy be abolished?' According to Vidyasagar, "বহুবিবাহ প্রথা প্রচলিত থাকাতে অশেষ প্রকারে হিন্দুসমাজে অনিষ্টই হইতেছে। সহস্র সহস্র বিবাহিত নারী, যারপরনাই যন্ত্রনাই ভোগ করিতেন, যে উপায়ে হউক, এই প্রথা রহিত হইলেই সমাজের মঙ্গল ভিন্ন অমঙ্গল ঘটিবেক তাহার কোনো হেতু বা সম্ভাবনা দেখিতে পাওয়া যায়না... আমরা নিজেই সমাজের সংশোধনকার্য সম্পন্ন করিতে পারিতাম, ইচ্ছা নাই, চেষ্টা নাই, ক্ষমতা নাই, সুতরাং সমাজের দোষ সংশোধন করিতে পারিবে না। কিন্তু তদর্থে রাজদ্বারের আবেদন করলে অপমানবোধ বা সমালোচনা এরূপ লোকের সংখ্যা বোধকরি অধিক নহে এবং অধিক না হইলে দেশের ও সমাজের মঙ্গল।"<sup>14</sup> The data presented by Vidyasagar to highlight the dangers of polygamy shows that the total number of wives of 197 noble Brahmins in 86 villages in Hooghly district was 1288. From other sources, it is known that the number of wives of 652 elite Brahmins in 117 villages of Barisal and Faridpur districts was 3588. Among these Brahmins, Ishwar Chandra Mukhopadhyay, a 55-year-old resident of Kalashkathi village in Barisal district, had married 107 times. From all these statistics, it can be inferred that polygamy was a curse in the lives of many Bengalis in the society of that time. The extreme consequences of polygamy were unbearable emotional pain and widowhood. Vidyasagar felt that polygamy could be abolished only by enacting a specific



law like widow marriage. At that time, many people in society thought that polygamy would disappear from society if society was modernized as a result of the introduction of western education. But Vidyasagar knew that no matter how much modern the social system became, religion would always be more important than human responsibility in a patriarchal society. Vidyasagar therefore wanted to keep his reform program within the bounds of government support as far as possible. On the other hand, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay did not support Vidyasagar's initiative. According to him, “বহুবিবাহ এদেশে সত্যিই নিবারণিত হইয়া আসিতেছে; অল্পদিনে একেবারেই লুপ্ত হইবার সম্ভাবনা রহিয়াছে। তজ্জন্য বিশেষআড়ম্বর আবশ্যক বোধ হয় না। সুশিক্ষার ফলে উহা অবশ্য লুপ্ত হইবে।”<sup>15</sup> Despite Vidyasagar's sincere efforts, the Polygamy Act was not passed until public opinion was formed in favor of the law prohibiting polygamy. Despite that, it can be said that Vidyasagar's efforts were undeniable. His argument against polygamy refuted the arguments of the elites of the society, but it could not ultimately break through the barricades of the ancient system. However, the results of his humanitarian efforts came after his death when the Government of India passed the 'Hindu Code Bill' in 1955, declaring polygamy illegal.

## VI. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, we can say that Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is one of the pioneers of the Renaissance of Bengal in the nineteenth century. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's contribution was fundamental behind women's progress in the nineteenth century. Along with Bethune Vidyasagar played a vital role in expanding the scope of women's education by establishing schools, providing education for women in remote villages, building women's education fund, etc. He promoted widow remarriage and revitalized the lives of women by challenging superstitions and opposing practices like child marriage and polygamy.

Finally, we can say that after independence, the Constitution of India has ensured equal opportunities for both men and women. Central and state governments have implemented numerous welfare initiatives for women's economic and political empowerment. These efforts primarily focus on two key areas of women's empowerment: eliminating injustice and discrimination against women and providing equal opportunities for their growth. Today, women in India actively contribute to the progress and development of society.

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