

# THE ROLE OF VIDYASAGAR IN WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION

## Abstract

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a legendary educationist, a Sanskrit scholar, a philosopher and a social reformer. As Raja Rammohan Roy Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was also a social reformer in Bengal who played a vital role in the Bengal Renaissance to save women from many social illnesses of the society by the dawn of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The nineteenth century was an era of Renaissance, of all the thinkers who played a leading role in the renaissance that took place in Bengal and in the whole of India, *Pandit* Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was one of them who has always been remembered as the forerunner of a women's empowerment movement. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar struggled for women's freedom, women's education and vigorously challenged the barbaric practice of child marriage. This paper attempts to elucidate Vidyasagar's contributions and efforts to liberate women from social evils and try to evaluate whether he succeeded to empower them.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality, women's education, childmarriage, widow remarriage, social reforms.

## Author

**Dr. Bonani Sinha**

Associate Professor

Department of Philosophy

Malda Women's College

Malda, West Bengal. India.

bonanisinha@gmail.com

'Gender consciousness' and 'women's question' have had an ambiguous relationship with the nineteenth century social reform movement. The position of women in India, as maximum British colonial and missionary writings viewed, before their advent as one of the extreme degradations. In fact, the condition of women in India became one of the principal means for the empire to justify its 'civilizing mission' and to 'reform' the 'depraved' customs of India.<sup>1</sup> (Gupta, 2012) Here a question may arise: Why do women need equality in family or in society? and why did Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar struggle for women's emancipation? To search for the answer, we need to observe the status of women from the *vedic* period to the medieval age and then it will be possible to evaluate Vidyasagar's contributions for women's liberation.

India is the largest democracy in the world, where women are glorified as goddesses in the scriptures but they are considered inferior to men in actual life. From the ancient time to the present century, in the name of religious and other socio-cultural practices women are facing unbearable oppression in every form and every field, and thus women are tagged as one of the most vulnerable groups after the indigenous population.

Though it is not the scenario since ancient days, it is true that the status of erosion of women is a gradual phenomenon and this can be outlined back from the early Vedic period to the most recent post-feminism era. In the early Vedic age, women enjoyed all the rights and privileges which men possessed. Women had the right to property, education and Brahman knowledge or *Upaniṣadic* truth, the highest truth of *Upaniṣad* is: 'That thou art' (*tat tvam asi—Chāndogya Upaniṣads*, 6. 8-16.)<sup>2</sup> (Sinha, 1999) It means, there is nothing superior or inferior among beings, who in essence, is the same as the Self or Brahman. So, man or woman as Brahman is advised to be conscious of his real nature only. Woman as wife is the spiritual and physical companion of man, without whom he would be lonely and restless. She is essential for performance of religious acts, for begetting children, and for happiness. Whatever one has must be shared with her. Thus, in the early Vedic age, women enjoyed all the rights and freedoms which men possessed. So, like men; women are as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, equally honoured with glorious positions and places in Family, Society, and State alike. *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad* states that it is neither woman nor man, nor is it neuter...the *jīva* accepts many shapes, coarse or refined, in accordance with his virtue, and caused his union with them which is seen as dissimilar beings, through the qualities of the body.<sup>3</sup> (Nikhilananda, 1949)

The status of women changed completely in the later *Vedic* period. A mother, specially of male children, is praised as a goddess. It is stated as: When a woman becomes the mother of a male child, she is glorified as the mother of a hero (*Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣads*, 6.4.28.) Even forcible enjoyment of an unwilling woman seems to have been tolerated (*Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣads*, 6.4.7.). Thus exploitation in the name of gender discrimination is not something new in India.

In the middle ages, i.e. between 12<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the position of women deteriorated owing to political disturbances in India. Muslims conquered India and social evils like sati, infanticide, the voluntary self-immolation also known as *Sahagamana* or *Sahamarāṇa* etc. came into existence. But S.K. Ghosh claims that the archaic system of *Sati* prevailed at the beginning of the *Vedic* age.<sup>4</sup> (Ghosh, 1989) There are stray cases of *Sati* in *Mahābhārata*, e.g., *Mādrī* committed *Sati* on the funeral pyre of her husband, *Pāṇdu*. Most

cases of *Sati* occurred in Bengal.<sup>5</sup> (Ghose, J. C., 1887) Following the frequent Muslim invasions the practice of child marriage developed as the parents of the female children could not safeguard them from the barbarous Muslim invaders, so, *women's freedom also became affected*. Women were not permitted to move freely and this led to the further deterioration of their status. These were the problems related to women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Female children needed extra care, whereas a boy child would not need such extra care and instead would be helpful as an earning hand. All these reasons gave rise to some new evils such as Child Marriage, *Sati*, *Jauhar* and restriction on girls' education. So, parents sought to dispense with the responsibilities for their daughters by getting them married before they reached marriageable age, which brought some more problems such as the girl child from the moment of her birth to her death underwent continuous lifelong suffering as a child wife, as a child mother and very often child widow. Thus, owing to child marriage and lack of opportunity for education, women lost all their identity and personality. Missionaries and the British officials from the very early days tried to stop these evil practices from time to time. To oppose the practice of *Sati*, Raja Rammohan Roy established *Brāhmo Sabhā* in 1828, later it came to be known as *Brāhma Samāj* in 1843.

Vidyasagar realized that the real advancement of Bengali as well as Indian society and culture was through the improvement of women's recovery. Let us see the contribution of Vidyasagar for women's empowerment.

Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay (1820-1891) is one of the great thinkers of India's renaissance in the nineteenth century, Vidyasagar was extremely hurt by the immense degradation of women during the 19th century. The gender inequality in medieval India displayed many foreign conquests, which stemmed in the decline in women's status. Certain surroundings were needed to be fulfilled for accomplishing gender justice. Gender justice for women, is fundamentally an unwritten, unspoken human right; every woman, every girl, every female, every girl child is entitled to live her life with full dignity and in complete freedom, but without any fear.<sup>6</sup> (Rich, A. (1995). Gender Justice is an obligatory regime for evolution and is essential to achieving human progress. The term 'gender justice' signifies that every person has the same liability, without any differences. Each gender will be treated with equivalent equality, justice and impartiality and will not be differentiated in the name of gender. It has become a global concern because it is very essential to put forward women in the mainstream. It is very critical and important for attaining gender equality and the most important idea of Global Gender Justice. It is becoming significant for achieving development goals together. It is always important to put women's empowerment at the forefront of policy making agenda. The women community is an essential part of the society for overall balanced development for growth of families, community and the nations. It is very essential for self-worth, decision-making power, in conferring access to the opportunities, resources, power etc. For this reason, Vidyasagar worked enthusiastically for women's empowerment and gender justice in two ways, through his writings and by spreading women's education.

He had some pre-eminent aspects about education, for this reason, Vidyasagar always took a scientific method for his planning of education to construct education as more purposive and pleasurable. He actively helped women like a bright sun when they were unheeded. He believed that education would bring dignity for women into society, removing the traditional superstitions. He advised from door to door, entreating heads of families to

allow their daughters to join schools. He opened 35 schools for girls through Bengal and was efficacious in enrolling 1300 students. He even initiated *Nāri Sikshā Bhāṇḍar*, a fund to provide support for the cause. Thus, the most notable contribution of Vidyasagar to women's development is the prosperity of women's education in Bengal in the context of the 19th century. Vidyasagar developed *Bornoporichoy*, an elementary level book for learning the Bengali alphabet, where he rebuilt the Bengali alphabet for new learners at school. He wrote many books out of which two books *Upakramonika* and *Byākaraṇ Koumudī* are interpretations of complex notions of Sanskrit grammar in easy readable Bengali language. After joining Sanskrit College as a Professor, he included English and Bengali as the medium of learning, besides Sanskrit, and introduced courses of European History, Philosophy and Science alongside Vedic scriptures, and encouraged students to pursue these subjects and take away the best from both worlds.

He reformed the rules of admission for students to Sanskrit College allowing non-Brahmin students to enrol in the prestigious institution. He brought the ideas of admission fee and tuition fee for the first time in Calcutta. Vidyasagar set up the Normal School for training teachers allowing uniformity in teaching methods. Thus, Vidyasagar was the leading fighter for womankind during his time, realized that the only way to remove the humiliation and deprivation of women is through education which makes them independent, self-decisive and free from all social evils.

Marriage is one of the sixteen *Saṃskāras* of life stated in the inscriptions. It is a sacrosanct as well as secular observance. It is also the foundation of the family life of an individual. It enables a man to perform religious rites and ensures continuation of the family through progeny.<sup>7</sup> (Padma, A. 2001). In India it is a necessary ritual in one's life and gives a certain status to women.<sup>8</sup> (Subramanian, N. 1966) But, for Vidyasagar, child marriage was a social evil. The practice of child marriage had its roots in the medieval ages in India. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar did not support the practice of child marriage, so, he not merely restrained himself to the role of a preacher towards spreading education within the superstition occupied Hindu community through their native language, but also engaged himself in the practical field of social changes like the enactment of widow-marriage as he fought against child marriage.

The social reforms and religious movements, such as the *Brahmo Samāj* (1828) founded by Ram Mohan Roy, and the *Arya Samāj* (1875) founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati, worked for against the child marriage. The contribution of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in curbing the ill practices of marriage cannot go ignored. He was anxious to put a curb on child marriages and considered an early marriage to be a curse on society and stigma on women. Marriage was imposed upon them. At that time even the women belonging to upper castes and wealthy families made a noteworthy contribution in improving the well-being of the family and society. They were providing educational opportunities, they were engaging in teaching professions and also to develop their skills and abilities in carrying out the administrative and political functions.

The enactment of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856 was a foremost social emendation to improve the condition of the widows in India. The draft of the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act, 1856 was prepared and passed by Lord Dalhousie. In India, widow women in various parts of India had to live their life like a saint. Their life was completely changed

after the demise of their husbands, such as they were not allowed to spend their life like they did before their husband's death, they are compelled to follow asceticism. They were not authorized to wear any colourful clothes, they had to wear white *saree*, i.e., an Indian cloth, with rough materials. They were not allowed to keep their hair long. At the time when the legal Act was passed, a challenge that Vidyasagar faced was to make widow remarriage a socially acceptable custom, the first widow remarriage was performed in Calcutta, between a child widow eleven years' girl Kalimoti Devi and Siris Chandra Vidyaratna, at Vidyasagar's initiatives and expenses, on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1856. Even later, Vidyasagar encouraged his own son Narayan Chandra Bandyopadhyay to marry a widow in order to gather public support for the implementation of the widow remarriage provision.

Besides, Vidyasagar, unlike other reformers who sought to establish alternative societies or systems, sought to transform society from within. He struggled hard against the prevalent social custom of *Kulin Brahmin* polygamy at the time. As of the nature of this shocking practice, some old men, specially *kulin Brahmins* ended up marrying as many as eighty women. He worked for women's empowerment, self-reliance, and empowerment. His untiring determination for '*Nāri Shikshā*,' remains unique.

Thus, Vidyasagar is that man who reformed the conservative power centres of Hindu society, prevents the polygamy, and child marriage.

From the above discussion and observation, we may come to the conclusion that Vidyasagar succeeded in bringing a new era of Bengal Renaissance, though his highest contribution to society in his contemporary century is a right step for society. His great contribution and effort for liberating women make us understand even today that achieving women's empowerment becomes a strong need for our societies, families, looking at the requisite for self-respect, self-confidence, decision-making ability, and of course, providing access to opportunities, resources, and power to women. Gender is about social construction of roles and responsibilities. In India, gender is not natural, but things that societies assign are considered appropriate for men and women. Biologically men differ from women, in terms of physical appearances but that surely calls for that men and women must have equal power and equal opportunities. Women and girls represent half of the world's population; this is why gender equality becomes vital. Equal contribution by women and men is needed for both the social and economic development. Justice opinions for rule of law, deficiency of unpredictability, a structure of equal rights, freedom and opportunities for all in a society.<sup>9</sup> (Goetz, A. M. (2007))

Vidyasagar's visions regarding education with his multidimensional personality makes the social reform, educational reforms for a better education an ideal for even today. We think that we may call him a real maker of society. He opened the gateway of education to all. He has made a great contribution in the field of social reform, educational reform bringing the self-confidence and liberation of women. His thinking about nationalism, humanism, and democratic liberalism influenced not only the colonial middle class in the 19th century but continues till today.

He will forever be remembered for his notable steps to whole nations.<sup>10</sup> (Das, T. (2021)) Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's contribution for girl-child as well as women's upliftment, welfare, empowerment and promotion proves to be a milestone, and thus

Vidyasagar becomes a great source of inspiration, a social reformer for people in general and women in particular. For his active contribution, after independence, the Constitution of India has provided equal opportunities for men and women, now the Central and State governments have taken numerous welfare measures for women's socio-economic and political empowerment and development. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women in India are rendering their services to the growth and development of our society.

But it is also true that, still today, women have a long way to go to reach gender justice and real freedom. Though women are permitted equal constitutional and legal rights, they cannot truly enjoy them due to ignorance, superstition, inferiority complex and discrimination in a patriarchal society. So, we think that the ideology of Vidyasagar should be followed in the present era.

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