

CONTRIBUTION OF PUNDIT ISWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR (1820-1891) AS A MESSIAH OF WOMEN EMANCIPATION IN 19TH CENTURY BENGAL

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Article Ref. No.:

19081120N1CLBA

Article History:

Submitted on 11 Aug 2019

Accepted on 30 Sept 2019

Published online on

Keywords:

Indelible Humanity, Bengali Mother, Female Education, Widow-Remarriage, Virtuous Act

Abstract:

Iswar Chandra Bondyopadhyaya (1820-1891), popularly known as Iswar Chandra 'Vidyasagar' (in Sanskrit 'Vidya means knowledge and Sagar means ocean', i.e. Ocean of knowledge), was a great socio-cultural and educational reformer of 19th century Bengal. As a symbol of 'invincible manliness and indelible humanity', he was strongly against any kind of wrong choice of tradition based on the local and regional rites (deshachar) and eternal religion (Sanatan Dharma) of ancient India. As a result of combination of 'the genius and wisdom of an Ancient Sage, the energy of an Englishman and the heart of a Bengali Mother' and out of profound love for humankind, he took the task of spreading education and threw his whole energy for emancipation of women. Man and well being of mankind was the central theme of Vidyasagar's life and activities. Looking at the miserable condition of women in the society and as a means to liberate them he became an enthusiastic supporter of female education (education alone could lead a man from darkness to light) till the last day of his life. Going against the then prevailing social system regarding the question of 'widow-remarriage' and lastly introducing the Act in favour of 'widow-remarriage' he considered this as the most virtuous act of his life.

Iswar Chandra Bondyopadhyaya was born on 26th September, 1820 in the village of Birsingha in the Hooghli district of Bengal. As this village was incorporated in Midnapore district in 1872, that's why it is widely known that he hailed from Midnapore. He was the eldest among ten children (seven boys and three girls) of Thakurdas Bandyopadhyaya and Bhagavati Devi.^[1]

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Education of Iswar Chandra and Obtaining Title of 'Vidyasagar'

Thakurdas wanted his son to learn Sanskrit and open a school at Birsingha in the traditional way of a pundit. Iswar was admitted into Sanskrit College, Calcutta (established on 1st January, 1824) on 1st June, 1829.^[2] After completing twelve years courses he got his final college leaving certificate on 4th December, 1841. At the same time he had also passed the Hindu Law Committee examination and received the title 'Vidyasagar' (In Sanskrit 'Vidya means knowledge and Sagar means ocean', i.e. Ocean of knowledge) from that College, Calcutta, due to his 'excellent performance in Sanskrit studies and Philosophy'. The title 'Vidyasagar', has almost replaced his name today.^[3]

Vidyasagar in Government Job

Thereafter Vidyasagar started his career as Sherishtadar of the Bengali department at Fort William College in December, 1841. The Fort William College was Wellesley's dream-child. He wanted to raise it as an "Oxford of the East".^[4] He left the Fort William College to join Alma Mater as Assistant Secretary on 6 April 1846. After joining Sanskrit College in 1845, he had disagreement with Russomoy Dutt, Secretary of the College, Vidyasagar tendered his resignation directly to the Council on 7 April, 1847. When Russomoy Dutt ironically asked him what he would do to live by, Vidyasagar's easy answer was, "by selling potatoes, if necessary, but never by a job that would not preserve my self-respect". Thereafter he got a job as Head Writer and Treasurer at the Fort William College on 1 March 1849.^[5]

Resignation of Vidyasagar from Government Job

With the efforts of the mediator F.J. Mouat, Secretary of the Council of Education, Vidyasagar joined Sanskrit College as a Professor along with the executive powers of a Principal.^[6] It was on 5 December 1850 when his great career at the Sanskrit College really began.^[7] He submitted soon a detailed report on the working of the College together with suggestions for reform. This report of 16 December 1850^[8] and his "Notes on the Sanskrit College" of 12 April 1852 formed his considered opinion on the role of Sanskrit in the scheme of modern education in Bengal.^[9] Thereafter, Vidyasagar was posted on many important govt. activities including assistant inspector of the Council of Education, but due to his disagreement with Gordon Young, first Director (the Council of Education was replaced by a Director of Public Instruction) he left the Government job. It is pleasing to note that the field of 'Vidyasagar's labours and his benevolent charities was widened after he retired from government service in 1858'.^[10]

Reformist Attitude

It is needless to mention here that at that moment of time a highly promising cultural revolution had already begun in Bengal^[11] and Vidyasagar did not lag behind from this trend of modernization. As Vidyasagar was born in a poor family and he had experienced what poverty was! Naturally he need not have learnt to rebel from the pages of Tom Paine like his affluent contemporaries. He was strongly against any kind of wrong choice of tradition based on the local and

regional rites (deshachar) and eternal religion (Sanatan Dharma) of ancient India.^[12] The life and activities of this exemplary figure i.e. Vidyasagar were summed up by Rabindranath Tagore in two precious phrases – “invincible manliness and indelible humanity”.^[13]

How far Tagore’s evaluation on Vidyasagar was logical and appropriate will be manifested in the following manner?

Man and well being for mankind was the central theme of Vidyasagar’s life and activities. Observing the miserable condition of the people specially the women of Bengal as well as India he realized that education alone could lead a man from darkness to light. Out of profound love for humankind he took the task of spreading education and threw his whole energy into the cause of emancipation of women.

Question of Women Emancipation

At the time of commenting on Charles Fourier, Fredrick Angles once said it was he (Charles Fourier) who first declared the freedom of common people may be measured on the basis of how much women there are enjoying freedom and respect of a particular society or country. On the basis of that measurement it was found that the Bengali society where Vidyasagar was born and brought up was not at all a civilized one. In that society the male persons were allowed to marry many times according to their wish and capacity. With the death of husband, widows were burnt alive and if under any circumstances they managed to save their lives the question of their re-marriage was never raised.^[14]

Vidyasagar and his Predecessors

But then the question of emancipation of women came up prior to Vidyasagar. With regards to this Raja Rammohun Roy and Young Bengal group had created a stir in the society from their respective positions. But in the second half of the 19th century Vidyasagar became the first and foremost mouthpiece of the movement of women emancipation in Bengal. The main objectives of the movement were –women education, introduction of widow re-marriage and the abolition of polygamy and child marriage.^[15]

State of Female Education

Considering spread of female education as a source of progress and development, Vidyasagar gave his utmost priority for disseminating scientific as well as progressive education among the higher classes. As the British authorities were also in favour of spreading modern education because of that Vidyasagar was very much loyal to them.^[16] It is worth mentioning that Lord Dalhousie provided the first official support for Female education in British India. It was presumed that the scheme of female education would be unpopular and would be “looked upon by the mass with fear and dread irrespective of Hindus or Mahommedans”. it was also a traditional belief that a girl taught to read and write would become a widow soon after marriage.^[17]

Contribution of Dalhousie-Bethune

In that context, it was not an easy task to spread education among the women breaking their long cherished traditional beliefs. Spread of female education by the Missionaries through the setting up of girls school would not be appropriate– this truth was realized by Sir J.E.Drinkwater Bethune, president of Education Council and Law Secretary of Dalhousie's Council. Dalhousie took up the suggestion from Bethune and acted promptly. With the help of Vidyasagar , Ramgopal Ghosh , Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay- Bethune founded a female school in Calcutta named 'Hindu Balika Vidyalaya' on 7th May 1849 with a view to impart secular education to girls from upper class families. Vidyasagar was appointed secretary of the school. It was Dalhousie who by supporting Bethune's female school in Calcutta closed an era of official non-interference, and marked "the beginning of that of open encouragement" in "the annals of female education in India"^[18] After the death of Bethune in 1851 the 'Hindu Balika Vidyalaya' came to be known as Bethune School.^[19]

Setting up number of Girls' Schools by Vidyasagar

Lord Dalhousie, Governor General of India was enthusiastic supporter of spreading female education as per the advice of Bethune. Presupposing the mentality of the British Government in India , Vidyasagar felt that it was the most suitable environment for spreading the female education and thereby he himself established a number of model girls schools. In the year 1857-58 i.e. only within one year the number of girls students admitted in the schools were 1300.^[20] We find him applying for government grant for female schools from May 1857.^[21] In anticipation of Government sanction, he went on blithely opening one female school after another and finished with a record opening of 40 schools with 1,348 pupils between November 1857 and June 1858.^[22]

But, the irony was that the settings up of schools for spreading female education were severely criticized by most of the educated Bengalee. In that context, Hindu Patriot, the most popular Daily of that time started propagating in favour of female education.^[23] With the aim of getting govt. help Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar established nearly 50 girls school in the district of Burdwan, Hooghly, Nadia and Midnapore during 1857-58.^[24] Vidyasagar was wholly enthusiastic as well as supporter of female education till the last day of his life.^[25]

Widow Remarriage

It may be noted here that 'the history of our national work in the nineteenth century is full of encouragement and hope; and that history connects itself with the story of Vidyasagar's life more intimately than with the life of any other man'.^[26] It is a fact that Rammohan highlighted the appalling condition of Hindu women through his various activities particularly abolition of Sati. It is pertinent to mention here that Vidyasagar's soft heart cried out on seeing the most distress and miserable condition of the widows.

The philanthropist heart and a benevolent helper of the poor and needy a Brahman of Brahmins, and a Pundit of Pundits, Vidyasagar started looking for the way out so that Hindu Widows could get some relief.

Widow Marriage Approved by Sastras

At this period of his life, he devoted ‘all his thoughts on this subject’. He passed his days and nights in the rooms of the Sanskrit Collage, studying all the ancient Sastras of the Hindus. Lastly, after a world full of toil and pains, one night, he suddenly cried out loudly, ‘I have, at last, found it’. The cause of his excessive delightedness was a passage of the Parasar-Sanhita, which is mentioned bellow for the better understanding of the readers/ spectators.

“নষ্টে মৃত্যে প্রব্রজিতে ক্লীবে চ পতিতে পতৌ।
পঞ্চস্বপং সুনারীণাং পতিরন্যোবিধীয়তে।।
মৃত্যে ভরিয়ানারী ব্রহ্মচার্য্যে ব্যবস্থিতা।
সাম্ভালভতে স্বর্গং যথাতে ব্রহ্মচারিণঃ।।
তিস্রঃ কোট্রোঙ্গুকোটীচ যানিলোমানিমানবে।
তাবৎকালং বসেৎ স্বর্গং ভর্তারং যানুগচ্ছতি”।

পরশরসংহিতা।

It appears that “Parasar prescribes three rules for a widow (i) Marriage, (ii) the observance of the Brahmacharya, and (iii) burning with deceased husband. Among these the custom of becoming Sati i.e. burning with deceased husband has been abolished by order of the ruling authorities. Only two ways were now left open for the widows—they have the option of marrying or observing the Brahmacharya. But in the Kali Yuga, it had become extremely difficult for widows to pass their lives observing the Brahmacharya; and it is for this reason the philanthropic Parasar has, in the first instance prescribed marriage. Therefore, it is found that Parasar plainly prescribes marriage as one of the duties of women in the Kali Yuga in accordance with Sastras”.^[27]

Before devoting himself for the cause of widow remarriage Vidyasagar secured his parents’ permission.^[28]

First Pamphlet

‘Having thus armed himself with the weapons of his parents’ permission and blessings’ Vidyasagar entered the arena. First of all he published his paper on the ‘Validity of the Remarriage of Hindu widows.’ The publication of this pamphlet created a great stir throughout the city of Calcutta. The orthodox Hindu community naturally was very much angry and protests started from all sides against Vidyasagar’s innovative move. Among these, the name of Gangadhar Kaviraj of Murshidabad, the best Vaidya-native physician of the time, stands foremost. Protests were also issued by some associations namely ‘Jessore Hindu Dharma Rakshini Sabha’ and the ‘Calcutta Dharma Sabha’. In the meantime in order to defame Vidyasagar two pamphlets i.e. ‘Braja Bilas’ and ‘Ratna Pariksha’ were published in the pseudonyms of Bhaipo and Bhaipo-Sahachar (nephew and nephew-associate). At that time Vidyasagar tried his best to secure the support of Raja Radhakanta Dev, but failed.^[29]

Second Pamphlet

After the appearance of numerous protest papers against the remarriage of Hindu widows, Vidyasagar as a man of steady firmness and self-reliance published in October, 1855, his 'second pamphlet of 22 pages in Bengali with the title "Whether widows ought to be married or not'. In this pamphlet, attempts were made to refute the arguments of the antiparty and he displayed his great abilities of using easy and plain language. It testifies his vast erudition and faculties of research. But most of the illustrious pundits of the different parts of Bengal, and even of Benares, protested against it.^[30]

Three sections of Hindu society

At that time the Hindu society was divided into three sections. "The first section was the orthodox community who was guided by the Sastric pundits and were avowed opponents of the remarriage of Hindu widows. The second was the English educated old class who from their innermost hearts was in favour of widow remarriage, but had not the courage to advocate its cause openly". The third section was the English educated young communities who were inspired by the European ideas, manners and civilization, were the real advocates of widow marriage.^[31]

Initiators of Widow Remarriage Prior to Vidyasagar

It must be said here that Vidyasagar's attempt to introduce remarriage of widows in Hindu Society, he was not the first person to move in this direction. It is said that more than a century ago, Raja Raj Ballabh of Vikrampur, Dhaka, tried to introduce this system into Hindu society. He had in his house a young widowed daughter and he was determined to give her away in marriage. But due to the opposition of the pundits of Krishnagar in Nadia district he had to give up his project. 'Some 19 or 20 years before Vidyasagar's agitation, a Mahratta Brahman of Nagpore started a movement on the subject without success. About the same time, a Madrased Brahman made attempts to get a law passed on the subject, but failed'. Some times after Babu Mati Lal Sil, one of the greatest millionaires of Calcutta, made strenuous attempts in this direction and declared to present Rupees 10 thousand to the first man who would lawfully marry a widow. 'Some two years before the publication of Vidyasagar's pamphlet, one Syama Charan Das, a wealthy man of the ironsmith caste tried to give his widowed daughter in marriage but failed due to the opposition of pundits. At that time the chief of Kota in Rajputana tried to introduce widow marriage into his state, but was equally unsuccessful'.^[32]

English Translation and submission of Petition

After the publication of his second paper, Vidyasagar now published an English translation of two papers with the title, 'Marriage of Hindu Widows'. It is said that 'Vidyasagar gave a copy of this English pamphlet to the British Indian Association for forwarding it to Government with its recommendation to convince the European officials that the Hindu widows were really leading miserable lives and that legislation was necessary to mitigate their sufferings'.

It was under the instruction of these officials, that Vidyasagar submitted the petition with the signature of 987 persons of the Province of Bengal to the Hon'ble 'Legislative Council of India on 4th October, 1855'.^[33]

It is worthy to mention that after filing petition for the introduction of widow marriage the weavers of Santipur wove songs about the remarriage of widows in the borders of sarees worn by the women of Bengal in the following way

সুখে থাকুক বিদ্যাসাগর চিরজীবী হয়ে
সদরে করেছে রিপোর্ট বিধবাদের হবে বিয়ে।^[34]

Passing the Act

A draft Bill of 'An Act to remove all legal obstacles to the marriage of Hindoo Widows' was introduced into the Legislative Council to the Govt. of India on 17th November, 1855'. In that case the name of the Hon'ble Mr. J .P. Grant, one of the members of the Council, who first moved the Bill and criticized the traditional customs.^[35]

In the meantime, as many as 40 petitions against the Bill signed by from 50,000 to 60,000 persons and in favour of the Bill, there were 25 petitions signed by more than 5,000 persons were submitted to the Government. However, after careful examination of the merits of the petitioners and after the clearance from the select committee consisting of Sir James Colvile, Mr. Eliott, LeGeyt and Mr. Grant, the Bill was read for the third time on 19th July, 1856 and passed into an Act No. 'XV of 1856 to remove all legal obstacles to the marriage of Hindu Widows'. After receiving the assent of the Governor-General on 26th July, 1856, it became a Law of the country.^[36]

Despite Radhakanta's larger support-base, the bill was passed, and Vidyasagar announced that the "introduction of widow-remarriage" "is the most virtuous act of my life". On the same occasion he wrote to his brother Sambhu Chandra, "I am not a slave of my country's customs or prejudices. I shall do what I consider to be right and necessary for the good of myself and society. I shall never hesitate for fear of the people or any relatives".^[37] It is notable that Srishchandra Nayaratna, Pundit of Murshidabad Judge Court, first engaged matrimonial relation with one widow named Kalimati, only 11 years old girl. ^[38]

Abolition of Polygamy and Widow Remarriage

In the two pamphlets relating to widow remarriage, Vidyasagar clearly understood the fact that due the existence of Kulinism in Bengal, a Kulin Brahmin throughout his life could marry a number of girls during their very tender ages. It was fact that 'due to early marriage almost all these girls, after marriage, remain at home one, two or three years; and during this time number of them are left widows without having enjoyed the company of their husband a single day. These young widows are being forbidden to marry, almost without exception, become prostitutes.' In that context Vidyasagar wrote two books on this in order to sensitize the society in the year of 1871 and 1873 respectively^[39] for the abolition of polygamy in order to modernize the society.^[40] It is worthy to mention that the government passed the Act-III of 1872. By this Act early marriage of girls and polygamy were abolished and widow remarriage and inter-caste marriages were legalized.

Conclusion

On the basis of above discussion a genuine question comes to mind that how was it possible for a man to accomplish this herculean task by going against the powerful opponents and long cherished deep rooted social rites. It becomes agreeable with the memorable comment of Michael Madhusudan Dutta, who found in him “the genius and wisdom of an Ancient Sage, the energy of an Englishman and the heart of a Bengali Mother”, it may be said that without the combination of these great virtues it would not have been possible for him to reach his goal. Therefore, lastly we may conclude that whatever Vidyasagar did for the cause of women, he will be remembered as a messiah of women emancipation in the pages of history.

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