

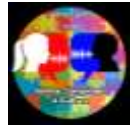
200 years of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

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Revolution is an extreme form of change. Since it is not gradual, it is different from evolution. Revolution is also different from concepts such as revolt, rebellion, mutiny, uprising and insurrection. It means modernization and not restoration. It aims at emancipation of man as well as women from social, political and cultural bondage. Bengal, was thus not alienated from this concept during the 19th century, which saw a unique blend of social reformers, scholars and literary giants. While Raja Rammohan Roy was one of the pioneers of this time, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was at the helm of revolutionizing Bengal with his strong influence and by dedicatedly working towards the upliftment of women's status in India. A philosopher, academic educator, entrepreneur and philanthropist, Vidyasagar's passive contribution to Bengali literature was Michael Madhusudhan Dutta, later who's Meghnad Bodh Kabya Grantha, the first piece of Bengali literature, instigated people to revolt against the established order, just the very essence of what Vidyasagar did.

VIDYSAGAR AS A SOCIAL REFORMER

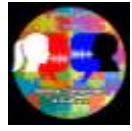
If we trace back to the 19th century colonial Bengal, various patriarchal ideologies governing the lives of women were gradually challenged, despite stern social disapprobation, by Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and the Radical Young Bengal. Thanks to these pioneers, the 19th century is generally regarded as the time when a number of reform movements geared towards the emancipation of



women were undertaken. While talking about Vidyasagar's contribution, mentioning Rammohan's role becomes inevitable. Both of them opted for changing the society from within through activist politics, strengthened by their tracts on prohibition of widow immolation and sanctioning of widow remarriage. Instead of being radical and dismissive of the contemporary society, they tried to engage their compatriots with a view to changing long-held beliefs about the condition of women in Bengal. They were often labeled as half liberals by the young Bengal due to their "slow go policy". But their efforts gradually paid off as the year 1829 saw widow immolation being banned by the British colonial India. The following year witnessed the passing of the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act XV and intercourse with wives below the age of twelve was also criminalized.

Rammohan Roy's relentless struggle may have saved the widows from the burning pier, by banning sati in 1829, but their harmonious coexistence in the society became a complete myth. After becoming widows, they were sent to Kashi, only to get sexually exploited by the Purohits, which led to the rise of religious prostitution. But the only way to stop these young girls from becoming widows was to stop child marriage altogether. For this Vidyasagar campaigned against Kulin Brahmin polygamy, child marriage and prostitution. But the process had never been smooth for him, since he never got the full support from neither the society, nor the contemporary media. In fact instead of appreciating his efforts as a social reformer, various literary plays were made ridiculing his steps.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar along with many other active reformers had opened schools for girls. This was because, for him, educational reform was much more

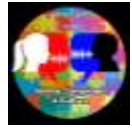


important than any other reform. He believed that the status of women and all kinds of injustice and inequalities that they face could be changed only through education. Vidyasagar worked endlessly to provide equal education to all men and women irrespective of their caste, religion and gender. He did this since he believed that without education, there was no point of having legitimized laws if the women do not know about it, let alone access it. He also allowed people from lower castes in his Sanskrit college that was meant only for upper caste men.

VIDYASAGAR'S CONTRIBUTION IN BENGALI LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a great person and a great human being. He is known not only for his contribution in the field of educational and social reformation, but also for his literary works and contribution in the development of modern Bengali language. He is the pioneer who understood the problem of the then readers in understanding the complicated Bengali language, whose origin was purely Sanskrit. Thus he took initiatives for simplifying and modernizing this language. Before him, there were no simple, easy and systematic text books for the learners. His contribution to the alphabet, translation of several Sanskrit books, including Kalidas's Shakuntala has enriched Bengali literature. He also wrote two volumes on the mistreatment of widows, which set the tone for major social reform in the state.

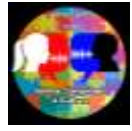
Vidyasagar's Bengali writings can be thus divided into five main categories viz., translations or adaptations, textbooks for students from the first primer to higher standards, original literary works and satires in different pseudo names. Most of the major Bengali works of Vidyasagar, are translations or adaptations. A critical analysis of



the language developed in his four major translation works, viz., Vetal Panchavingsati (Twenty five Tales 61 of Betal; based on Hindi Vaital Painchisi), Sakuntala (based on famous Sanskrit play by Kalidasa), Sitar Banavas (based on Uttarcharita by Bhababhuti) and Bhrantivilas (based on Comedy of Errors by Shakespeare) reveals a mature yet musical style and form. It is also apparent from these translations that Vidyasagar borrowed from Sanskrit and English what could be harmoniously blended with Bengali and all that was necessary to strengthen and clarify the original writings. In his translations we experience the grace and depth of the original language and style of the presentations. Vidyasagar's Sakuntala, Sitar Banavas and Bhrantivilas are considered as masterpieces of translation work even today.

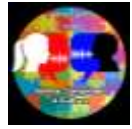
Among the Bengali text-books written by Vidyasagar most notables were Varna-Parichaya (a book in two parts for beginners in Bengali alphabet), Kathamala (an adaptation of Aesop's Fables), Nitibodha (an adaptation of Chamber's Moral class book), Charitabali (life sketches of persons who though born among difficulties, rose through hard labor and strength of character to great attainments in learning), Bodhodaya (an adaptation of Chamber's Rudiments of Knowledge the book conveys elementary instruction on the nature of the physical and animal world, about the human body and its principal organs, about units of time and measurements, about agriculture, and on the nature of industry, trade, exchange and society) and Akhyanmonjari in three volumes (adoption of English narratives, stories etc, for advanced Bengali readings). In all these textbooks Vidyasagar endeavored for the creation of Modern Bengali prose.

Varnaparichaya Part I and Part II were published in 1855 and since then these two primers are being used by millions of Bengali children. Radical changes in the



conceptual basis of the Bengali alphabets were introduced. In all the available primers before Vidyasagar, there were 16 vowels (Swara) and 34 consonants (Byanjana). But Vidyasagar changed to 12 vowels and 40 consonants, which were later endorsed by Rabindranath and are still in vogue. Vidyasagar gave strong emphasis on language skills through rigid learning of the spelling of the words by heart. To facilitate this he carefully selected the words of increasing complexities but with metrical rhythm which were easy to memorize. Rabindranath eloquently acknowledged the great impact of versified sentences of Varnaparichaya on the development of his poetic imagination. Most of the literary critics consider that "even after more than a century, a better primer than that of Varnaparichaya has not been created by any". Rabindranath in the preface of his Bengali Primer 'Sahaj Path' commented that "the book is not a substitute of Varnaparichaya, but to supplement it and should be used along with it".

Bodhodaya was written for girl students of Bethune School in 1851. In this book Vidyasagar as a humanist educator pragmatically attempted to present a rational concept of the material world to the young minds. In the first edition of the book he dealt only with matter perceptible with our five senses but later on introduced a paragraph on the God. Very few textbooks have yet surpassed the simplicity of language and conceptual depth of the subject matter presented for the beginners. In all his text books for children, he introduced short narratives with moral teachings. Many of these narratives though are adaptations, have characteristics of short stories. Vidyasagar's profound command over the Bengali language is best exemplified in his original write-ups such as the essay on Sanskrit language and Sanskrit literature and articles on widow remarriage, polygamy and child marriage. In each of these writings

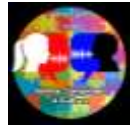


he developed the Bengali language capable of expressing scholastic treatise on literary or social problems and fulfilled the task earlier set by Rammohan. The two books on widow marriage are classical examples of his deep knowledge of the Sanskrit scriptures, power of critical analysis and elegant presentation of the evidences in favor of his thesis. Vidyasagar indeed was the first successful essayist with high precision and expressiveness.

VIDYASAGAR AS AN EMANCIPATOR OF WOMEN

Apart from his kindness, Vidyasagar was an extremely humble individual, a characteristic through which he constantly inspired people. He was so moved by the cruel poverty people were living under, that as a student he would use his scholarship proceeds to feed and buy medicines for the sick. In him India saw an individual who's own interests took a backseat as he constantly worked for the betterment of society.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar had truly been a “messiah” for the Indian women, without whom they would not have seen the lights of education nor had they got equal status in the society like men. If we are to analyze the effect of these reforms in the contemporary society, we see that every day the newspapers are filled with new cases of atrocities committed against Indian women. But today, 200 years after Vidyasagar's time, the Indian Penal Code has brought in front of the public eye, reforms that Vidyasagar had envisioned for the Indian women long back. It had introduced stricter laws against sexual harassment, increased justice for acid attack survivors, harsher penalties for child marriage, tougher laws against domestic violence, promising higher representation for women in parliament, greater protection for children and of course the Triple Talaq Bill. Apart from this, Bollywood has taken the initiative to inform, activate and educate the mass regarding the accounts of gender-based injustice and atrocities. They have led to the growth and encouragement of women- centric movies like Mom, Mardaani, Chak De India, Queen, English Vinglish, Kahaani and many more. Here, film as a medium of mass communication thus caters to the cognitive need of



the target audience. Thus in a way today, we can see the envisions of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar back in the times of widow remarriage, getting a shape and recognition.

However, a whole lot of women have suffered brutally under a host of crimes and continue to suffer even today. While these laws are certainly a welcome move to boost the deteriorating position of women in India, there's a lot more that needs to be achieved. It is due to Vidyasagar that today, 200 years later, Indian women not only have legitimized rights, but also representation in the parliament. Thus after his death Rabindranath Tagore had rightly said," One wonders how god, in the process of producing forty million Bengalis, produced a man".

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