



In Depth - Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

The election violence in Bengal has ironically centred attention on one of the greatest figures of social reform in the country and especially Bengal: Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar was a Bengali Sanskrit pundit, educator, social reformer, writer and philanthropist. **He was one of the greatest intellectuals and activists of the 19th century (century of social-religious reforms in the modern history).**

Early Life and Education

- Born as Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay on 26th September, 1820 in West Bengal, he was **bestowed the title of Vidyasagar in 1839** for his mastery over Sanskrit and philosophy.
 - The word 'Vidyasagar' means 'Ocean of Knowledge' in hindi.
- In 1839, he successfully cleared his law examination. He passed out of Sanskrit College in Kolkata in 1841 qualifying in Sanskrit grammar, literature, dialectics, Vedanta, Smruti and Astronomy.
- At the age of twenty one, Ishwar Chandra joined the Fort William College as the head of the Sanskrit department.
- He helped revered Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta to relocate from France to England and study for the bar. He also felicitated his return to India and inspired him to write poetry in Bengali creating some of the most legendary literary works in the language.
 - **Michael Madhusudan is understood to have given him the epithet 'Dayasagar' or 'Ocean of Generosity' for his selfless altruism.**
- He passed away on 29th July, 1891 at the age of 70 years.

An Educationist

- In 1846, Vidyasagar joined the Sanskrit College as 'Assistant Secretary'. Within a year, he brought number of changes to the existing education system.
- During his tenure as the Principal of Sanskrit College from 1851 to 1858, Vidyasagar initiated unprecedented changes in both administration and education.
- At the time when there was no concept of universal education, **Vidyasagar strongly believed that everyone irrespective of caste or gender, had the right to education.**
- He even opened up the premises of the Sanskrit college for people from lower castes.
- He also encouraged scholars to study ancient sacred texts and interpret them for contemporary usage.
- **He established 20 model schools in Hooghly, Midnapore, Burdwan and Nadia.**
 - He supervised the schools, recruited teachers and formulated their syllabus.
 - He revised the exam pattern by introducing monthly exams instead of annual ones.
 - He also introduced the study of English, Western Sciences and Mathematics.
 - He initiated the acceptance of admission fees and tuition fees. **He also introduced 'Sunday' as the weekly holiday and summer vacation in the months of May and June.**
- He brought about a revolution in the Bengali education system by changing the way Bengali language was written and taught.

“Education is the priceless treasure of life. Just its arrival not only ascertains welfare at individual level but paves the way for large scale development of the society.”

The Linguist

- He is credited with **reconstructing the Bengali Alphabet**. He simplified Bengali typography into an alphabet of 12 vowels and 40 consonants eliminating the Sanskrit phonemes.
- **His book ‘Borno Porichoy’ meaning ‘introduction to the letter’ is still used as the introductory text to learn Bengali alphabet.**
- He was also a **key figure in Bengal Renaissance** - a cultural, social, intellectual and artistic movement in Bengal from the 19th century to the early 20th century.
 - The Renaissance period saw a magnificent outburst of Bengali literature with Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar being the pioneer. Vidyasagar wrote nearly ten books on Bengal’s history and literature, all of them being considered classics in today’s times.

A Social Reformer

- He was the **nineteenth century polymath reformer** whose contribution towards changing the status of women in India is remarkable.
- His study of ancient texts convinced him that the status of Hindu women of his time was not sanctioned by the scriptures and was because of the existing power relations in the society.
- **It was the result of his untiring struggle that the then Government of India passed the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856.**
 - With the purpose of gathering people’s support for the implementation of the provision of remarriage of widows, he encouraged his own son Narayan Chandra Bandyopadhyaya to marry a widow.
- **Unlike other reformers who sought to set up alternative societies or systems, Vidyasagar sought to transform society from within.**
 - Due to his courageous entrepreneurship, widow remarriage was ushered in the conservative Hindu Brahmin society of Bengal.
- **He fought for women education and vigorously challenged the barbaric practice of Child Marriage.**
 - He founded 35 schools for girls throughout Bengal. The Metropolitan School of Calcutta was one of the institutions. The sole purpose of these schools was to make women self-sufficient and empowered.
- He also fought a **determined battle against the then prevailing social custom of Kulin Brahmin polygamy.**
 - Such was the nature of this horrible practice that some men ended up marrying as many as eighty women.
 - This practice ensured that aged persons married teenage girls and even children.
 - The unfortunate girl who would be widowed by the death of her elderly husband was condemned to a life of misery.
 - From discrimination to deprivation, these widows were subjected to severe restrictions and had to dress in plain white cotton sarees and remain with their shaved-off heads.
 - Some widows would even be thrown out of their houses ending up as prostitutes, rape victims and unsupported mothers.
- Standing tall against the conservative power centers of the Hindu society, **Vidyasagar was the man who was way ahead of his times.**
- His work for the upliftment of women, their self-sufficiency, prosperity and empowerment along with his untiring efforts for ‘nari shiksha’ remains unique.

Significant Works

- He wrote **biographical notes on numerous noteworthy personalities** in the history of the world so that the young generation can get inspired by reading the great examples of endurance, hard work, honesty, patience, perseverance, courage, determination and philosophy of life.
- Some of his works are : **Betaal Panchavinsati (1847), Banglar Itihaas (1848), Jivancharita (1849), Shakuntala (1854), Mahabharata (1860), Seetar Vanavas (1860), Bhrantivilaas (1869), Oti Alpa Hoilo (1873), Aabaar Oti Alpa Hoilo (1873), Brajavilaas (1884), Ratnopariksha (1886).**
- Vidyasagar's work on social reforms include **'Bidhobabivah' on widow's right to remarry (1855), 'Bahubivah' on banning of polygamy (1871) and Balyabivah on the flaws of child marriage.**

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