



## **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar on gender justice and women empowerment**

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### **Abstract**

In India, it is believed that women enjoyed an equal status as men in the Vedic Period. The education of women held considerable significance, especially from works of katayana and patanjali. The Upanishadas and the Vedas have cited women sages and seers. But the condition of women declined considerably afterwards. During the period of Dharmashastras and Puranas the status of women gradually declined and underwent a major change. The girls were deprived of formal education. Daughters were regarded as burden. Freedom of women was curtailed. Sons were given more weightage than daughters. Historical practices such as Sati, Jauhar, Purdah and Devdasi, child marriage, and restriction on widow remarriage were a few traditions reflective of the gender imbalance in ancient and medieval Indian Society.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) was one of the key figures of India's renaissance in the nineteenth century, who worked wholeheartedly for women's empowerment and gender justice.

Ishwar Chandra challenged Hindu orthodoxy by playing a pivotal role in passing the Widow Remarriage Act. He also fought for women's education and vigorously challenged the barbaric practice of child marriage.

**Keywords:** Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, women, widow, education etc

### **Introduction**

Gender justice meant ending the inequalities between women and men that are produced and reproduced in the family, the community and the state. Empowerment is the process that creates power in human being over his/her own lives, society, and in their communities. Women are empowered, when they are able to access the opportunities (such as in education, profession and lifestyle) guaranteed to them without limitations and restrictions. Empowerment of women would mean encouraging women to be self-reliant, economically independent, have positive self-esteem, generate confidence to face any difficult situation and incite active participation in various socio-political development endeavours. The growing conscience is to accept women as individuals capable of making rational and educated decisions about them, as well as the society; increasing and improving the economic, political and legal strength of the women to ensure equal-right as men, achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improve the quality of life for their families and communities. The various aspects of women empowerment are:

#### **Social Empowerment of Women**

- a. Authority to take decision on personal and family matters and also to take part in decision making on social issues in community level.
- b. Ability to exercise constitutional rights and opportunities equally with men in every spheres of life.

#### **Economic Empowerment of Women: It means**

- a. Economically Self-dependence or reducing the financial dependence of women on their male counterparts by making them a significant part of the human resource.
- b. Freedom to choose profession

- c. Availing a better quality of material life, within the family as well as for the overall society.
- d. Having Single Bank Account and ability of Bank transaction/ online banking/ using ATM etc.
- e. Freedom of spending her owned money.
- f. Exercising equal rights to ancestral property.
- g. Having fixed deposit and land property in her name.
- h. Freedom to purchase movable or immovable property for personal use.
- i. Exercising property right equal to men.
- j. Political Empowerment of Women: It contains-
- k. Freedom of political participation
- l. Freedom to choose political representatives
- m. Opportunity to contest in elections
- n. Opportunity to be elected in all level of decision-making bodies.

Socio-economic and political empowerment can be achieved through having equal opportunity to-

1. Exercise all kind of Human Rights.
2. Get convention as well as professional education
3. Ensure Health Security
4. Attain economic Self-dependence
5. Be secured in the family and society

In India, it is believed that women enjoyed an equal status as men in the Vedic Period. The degree of freedom given to women to take part in public activities indicates the nature of the status enjoyed by women during Vedic period. Women never observed "Purdah". They enjoyed freedom. They enjoyed freedom in selecting their male partner. They could educate themselves. Widows were permitted to remarry. Divorce was however not permissible to them. Even men did not have the right to divorce their wives. Daughters were never ill-treated although male children were preferred to female children. They also received

education like boys.

During the period of Dharmashastras and Puranas the status of women gradually declined and underwent a major change. The girls were deprived of formal education. Freedom of women was curtailed. Sons were given more weightage than daughters. According to Manu, women have to be under the guardianship of father during childhood, under her husband during youth and under her son during old age. At no stage shall she deserve freedom.

In the social fields, pre-puberty marriage came to be practiced, widow remarriage was prohibited, husband was given the status of God for a woman, education was totally denied to woman, custom of 'Sati' became increasingly prevalent, 'Purdah' system and Polygyny came into practice.

In the economic field, a woman was totally denied a share in her husband's property by maintaining that a wife and a slave cannot own property. In the religious field, she was forbidden to offer sacrifices and prayers and undertake pilgrimages.

The Medieval period (Period between 500 A. D to 1500 A.D) proved to be highly deteriorating of the status of Indian women. The influx of foreign invaders and the Brahmanical iron laws were main causes for such degradation. Freedom of women was curtailed. Caste laws dominated the entire social life. Widow remarriage disallowed. Women could not inherit property. Girls were treated more as burdens or liabilities than as human resource. The women faced many problems such as child marriage, Purdah system, and practice of Sati etc. The status of women reduced to the status of slaves during medieval period.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) was one of the great figures of India's renaissance in the nineteenth century, who worked wholeheartedly for women's empowerment and gender justice. He was born on 26th September, 1820 to a Kulin Brahmin family at Birsingha in the Midnapore District of Pre-Independence, Undivided Bengal (now in West Bengal, India). He spent his childhood in extreme poverty. But this did not discourage him to reach his goal. He was a student known for his dedicated learning, modest manners, supreme honesty and great respect for teachers.

### **Movement for women education**

In the year 1839, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar successfully cleared his law examination. In 1841, at the age of twenty-one years, Ishwar Chandra joined the Fort William College as head of the Sanskrit department.

After five years, in 1846, Vidyasagar left Fort William College and joined the Sanskrit College as 'Assistant Secretary'. After joining, Ishwar Chandra recommended a number of changes to the existing education system. This report resulted in a serious altercation between Ishwar Chandra and College Secretary Rasomoy Dutta. In 1849, he resigned from Sanskrit College and rejoined Fort William College.

Simultaneously, the government appointed him as the Special Inspector of Schools for the districts of Hooghly, Burdwan, Midnapore and Nadia in the then Undivided Bengal of Pre-Independence India, in 1855. He was also an honorary office bearer of several organisations including Asiatic Society and Bethune Society.

Vidyasagar travelled all over Bengal in the capacity of

Inspector of Schools. This gave him the opportunity to witness the pervading darkness and superstition amongst the illiterate, uneducated masses of Bengal. He was so distressed by all the malpractices he saw and especially the exploitation of women in the name of religion.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar analysed the root causes of pathetic condition of women in India and felt necessity of freedom of women from the adversity of social evils and malpractices. He realised that unless women were educated, it was impossible to release and liberate them from the terrible burden of inequalities and injustice imposed on them by the repressive Hindu society blinded by false beliefs and superstitious customs. He worked insistently for women education.

According to Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, education is the priceless wealth. He started his social movement in Bengal for women's education and releasing them from the grab of social evils.

Vidyasagar felt that mass education, irrespective of caste, creed and sex, was required to bring about a real change in the society. And to ensure it, spread of education among women was very much essential. The Bengali society was still holding on to medievalism. Besides the commoners, many highly educated men too were against to any change in women's status, particularly to their education. Prior to 1850, the government was not too eager to create opportunity of education for Indian women. But, some reputable men like Raja Radhakanta Deb and the Christian Mission moved in that direction.

Vidyasagar devoted himself for reformation of the existing system of education with consistent determination. On the other hand, he kept his focus on the need for spreading education among women. In 1849, a day school for girls named Hindu Female School, later renamed Bethune Female School, was opened in Calcutta by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune. He was a renowned barrister and law member of the Governor General's Council. As the president of the Council of Education, Bethune had known the highly talented and untiring Vidyasagar. He introduced Vidyasagar into the school as its honorary secretary. In 1856, Vidyasagar was elected Secretary of the school committee. Bethune convinced a number of prominent families to extend their support in running of the school. By 1850 the school enrolled 80 pupils.

Vidyasagar realised that mass education could not exclude female education. So he planned to open more schools for females. He discussed the matter with the lieutenant-Governor of Bengal Sir Frederick James Halliday (1854-1859). Halliday verbally assured that if the inhabitants would provide suitable school houses, maintaining costs of the schools would be met by the government. So Vidyasagar went ahead with opening 35 female schools in 4 districts namely, Hughly, Burdwan, Medinipur and Nadia, in a brief space of time between November 1857 and May 1858. His plan was to set up the female schools in the same manner as he set Model Vernacular schools for boys, as the government's stand on the female education appeared to him to be encouraging. Vidyasagar made door to door calls, requesting parents to send their daughters to schools, in order to promote the education of girls. The average total attendance of girls in the schools was 1300. But, in the next year the government refused sanction to the establishment of schools. He had incurred a huge expense for opening and running the female schools. In disgust he resigned from the

post of principal of Sanskrit College, as well as all other official posts in November 1858.

In order to keep female schools running, he opened a "Female School Fund" and many distinguished Indians, including Raja Pratap Chandra Singh of Paikpara, came forward to contribute to that fund. Even lieutenant-Governor contributed Rs. 330. Vidyasagar sent a letter to the lieutenant-Governor mentioning that "... the Mofussil Female Schools...are progressing satisfactorily. Female education has begun to be gradually appreciated by the people of districts contiguous to Calcutta, and schools are being opened from time to time." At the same time Vidyasagar took great care of the welfare of Bethune School. While staying at Karmatar (Now in Jharkhand) among the Santhal Tribals, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar opened a school for Santhal girls.

### **Movement for Hindu Widows Remarriage**

The established social custom of polygamy of 18<sup>th</sup> century India, allowed aged Kulin Brahmins (even at the verge of death) to marry teenage girls and even children. The unfortunate girl used to be widowed very soon because her elderly husband died in old age. The life of such widow girls was full of miseries like abstinence, torture, discrimination and deprivation for the rest of their lives.

These ill-fated widows were prohibited (as spiritual sanction) from consuming meat, fish, onion and garlic. They had to rise before dawn to conduct religious rituals, bathe in icy cold water and wrap a clean white sari around their wet bodies without drying themselves, and pick fresh flowers with dew-drops, to offer prayers to God every day. By custom, they were the last ones to eat in the household, or went without food observing various religious fasts.

They had to dress in plain white cotton saris and remain with their shaved off hairless heads for the rest of their lives to make themselves unappealing to other men. Most of them were deserted soon after their husband's demise and sent to their parental homes, with their parents bearing the entire expenses of their maintenance in addition to the financial burden of the wedding and dowry.

Some widows would even be thrown out of their houses or sent to religious places like Varanasi or Vrindavan supposedly to pray and purify themselves, but in reality, they frequently ended up as prostitutes, rape victims and unsupported mothers.

Vidyasagar deeply felt the difficulties of these hapless widows. Vidyasagar's heart melted at the pain and suffering imposed by the society on Indian women, often in the name of religion. Malpractices of Polygamy, ban on widows from remarrying, child marriage, gender inequalities, keeping women away from the light of education, depriving them from property rights etc. deeply upset him.

He took up his pen, called discussion meetings, ran seminars and met Government officials to eradicate measurable condition of widows. All these efforts were directed to wipe out the evil traditions of the country. But his call fell on deaf ears. So, He conducted extensive research into Hindu Scriptures and Puranas to search out any sanction against these evil practices. His study of these texts convinced him that the perverted status of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindu society, the bias in law against female inheritance, wealth and property, and the social prejudice against female autonomy and education was not sanctioned by the Scriptures.

Ishwar Chandra Believed that change should come within. In 1954, Ishwar Chandra started a campaign for widow remarriage by writing in Tattvabodhini Patrika, a progressive Journal. He tried to explain that there was nothing against widow's remarriage in scriptures and why polygamy was unacceptable. He quoted a sloka from PARASHAR DHARMA SAMHITA, a set of Hindu Laws for Kali Yuga, said to be written by Sage Parashar. The Sloke States:

*"ate Mrite Pravagite pleevacha patite patau Panchsavapatsu narinam patiranyo bidhiyete"*

Which means, women are at liberty to marry again, if their husband be not heard of, die, retire from the world, prove to be impotent or be an outcast.

In 1955 he filed a petition before the government for the passing of a law that would eliminate such cruel customs and permit widow remarriage. His great initiative was supported by the then Maharaja Bardhaman, Mahatabchand Bahadur (1832-1879) and by reformers of different regions. But equally strong was the opposition from the conservatives. Several petitions with more than 30,000 signatures were sent to the government opposing widow remarriage.

The first pamphlet with the heading 'Should widow remarriage be instituted' came out in January 1855, and according to Vidyasagar's elder brother Sambhuchandra, was sold 2,000 copies in a week.

The second pamphlet came out in October that year, and in between, there was flow of counter-pamphlets by a large number of Pundits. The question of widow remarriage did not remain confined to Bengal.

When the widow remarriage Bill was placed at the legislative council in November 1855, there were petitions from all over India both for and against the Bill. Support for the Bill came from Brahmins from Secunderabad and 46 inhabitants of Pune. In January 1856, a petition opposing the Bill bearing nearly 37,000 signatures was submitted to the government.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar took his authentic arguments about widow's remarriage to the British authorities. His appeals were heard and arguments were accepted by the Administration of the East India Company. The 26 July marks a major milestone in the history of the country. After years of campaigning, it was on this day, 161 years ago in 1856, that the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act was passed. This Act legalised the marriage of Hindu widows in all territories ruled by the British East India company and marked one of the greatest achievements of Bengal Renaissance.

The Act declared that "No marriage contracted between Hindus shall be invalid, and the issue of no such marriage shall be illegitimate, by reason of the woman having been previously married or betrothed to another person who was dead at the time of such marriage, any custom and any interpretation of Hindu Law to the contrary notwithstanding."

While 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 at Vidyasagar's initiatives and expenses, on December 7, 1856. The marriage was between a child widow Kalimoti Devi who was only eleven and Siris Chandra Vidyaratna. He also married his son Narayan Chandra to widow to make an example of social reforms.

He took measures to arrange several matches for widows within respectable families.

He published two volumes of books on remarriage of widows and another two volumes on polygamy citing quotes from scriptures and explaining the validity of his arguments.

### **Movement against Child Marriage**

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar started campaign to abolish child marriage in 1870s. The revolt of 1857 had created an unbridgeable gap between Indians and colonial rulers. The British had lost their reformist motives. Following India's first war of Independence in 1857, power transferred from the East India Company to the British Crown, and for a few decades, the colonists decided not to interfere in Indian personal laws. Due to this, the Bill against child marriage could not be passed for a very long time.

In 1890–91, Hindu social reformers continued to appeal to rise the age of marriage for girls. This was due to the reported death of the child bride Phulmani. She died after forced sexual intercourse by her several years older husband, Hari Maiti. The upper-caste Hindu society was in a state of near revolt, when the British-Indian government decided to rise the age of legal cohabitation from 10 to 12. From the orthodox perspective, this proposal violated the custom of *garbhadhan*, the customary ritual process leading to conception in married women. In orthodox Hindu believe, it was a responsibility upon the father that his daughter was married off before she went into her menstrual cycle, failing which would be a gravest sin. Since in Bengali upper-caste society, it was customary to get daughters married between the ages of eight and ten. The proposed amendment was viewed with the greatest alarm. The amendment stipulated that sexual cohabitation with a child bride below the age of twelve, would amount to a criminal offence. The orthodox objection here was premised on the belief that a girl commonly had her first menses around the age of nine or ten.

When asked to deliver his legal opinion, Vidyasagar opposed the very idea of fixing the age of consent, arguing that this would bring more harm than good. In substance, his argument was simple: under the proposed amendment, the child bride could be protected only up to the age of 12, beyond which the adult husband would be legally and socially free to indulge in the sexual exploitation of the child-bride. He, therefore, proposed that the age of consent be tied to the girl's first going into menses. In this, he believed that he had the backing of Hindu Shastras, which ruled that a husband could sexually cohabit with his wife only post menses.

The 'Age of Consent Act, 1891', also known as 'Act X of 1891', was a legislation enacted in British India on 19 March 1891 which raised the age of consent for sexual intercourse for all girls, married or unmarried, from ten to twelve years in all jurisdictions, its violation subject to criminal prosecution as rape. The Child Marriage Restraint Act was enacted in 1929 and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act was formulated in 2006.

### **Movement against Polygamy**

Vidyasagar attacked the practice of polygamy among high-caste Hindus alongwith his campaign for widow remarriage. The passing of Hindu widow Remarriage Act (1856) was indeed followed by the widespread demand for the abolition

of polygamy. On the 27th December of 1855, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar submitted to the Government a petition signed by nearly 25,000 persons, among who were many influential men, praying for a law against polygamy.

In the year 1856, Ramaprasad Ray (1818-62), the second son of Rammohan Ray, took the opportunity to reprint the Article (1825) of his father on abolition of polygamy to encourage and help the petitioners for abolish polygamy. In February, 1857, R.P.Ray also took active part to put an end of polygamy and in this regard he urged the Government to prevent it by invoke Article 43 of Indian Council Act 1861. Sir J.P. Grant, a member of Legislative Council, promised in 1857 to introduce a Bill on the subject, but the Sepoy Mutiny (1857) stopped all further action, and also changed the attitude of Government regarding social Legislation. During the sixties of the nineteenth century the question of suppression of the practice of polygamy was, however, renewed. Thus, in 1862, the Raja Deonarayan Sing of Benares, a member of the Legislative Council of India, had tried to bring in a Bill for this purpose, but he had been prevented by a suggestion of Governor General, Lord Elgin (1862-64), that some further expression of public opinion was desirable before a law was enacted. Therefore, in 1863, on behalf of the Bharatavarsiya

Sanatan Dharma-raksini Sabha' a petition signed by twenty one thousand persons was sent to the government for the abolition of the practice of polygamy by an enactment of a Law.

On the 1st February, 1866, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, further submitted to the government a petition also signed by twenty-one thousand persons for the same purpose. Furthermore, on the 9 March, 1866, a deputation which included Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Krishna Daspal, Raja Satysaran Ghoshal, Pandit Bharat Saramani, Justice Dwarakanath Mitra, Jagadanath Mukhopadhyay, Peary Charan Sarkar, Prasanna Kumar Sarbadhikari, Durga Charan Laha and fifteen other respectable men waited upon Sir Cecil Beadon as representatives of petitioners for reconsideration of the former petition.

In view of the above proposal for legislation made by the Maharaja of Burdwan and Vidyasagar, on the 5th April 1866, an application was made by the government of Bengal to His Excellency the Governor-General, under section 43 of the Indian Council Act for permission to introduce into the Bengal Council, a Bill for the prevention of polygamy among Hindus in Bengal, except under certain specified circumstances. The Lieutenant Governor added that it was his intention to take as the basis of his measure, a draft Bill which was prepared about three years ago by Raja Deonarayan Sing, as mentioned above. The Bengal government also pointed out the scope of the proposed measure which was, further, indicated by the statement that, 'as regards Bengal', there is ample evidence to show that the feeling of the great bulk of the intelligent and thinking portion of the Hindu community is strongly in favour of bringing the practice of polygamy strictly within the limits prescribed by ancient Hindu law.

On the 12th June-of 1866, the Bengal government further forwarded to the Governor-General in Council a petition from certain inhabitants of Mymensingh District (now in Bangladesh), praying for the suppression of polygamy.

On the 8th August of 1866, Governor-general in council refused to introduce a Bill as recommended by the Government of Bengal, as it, however, doubted whether the



popular feeling in Bengal was sufficiently prepared for legislation on the subject. The Governor-General in Council seemed it desirable that the Lieutenant Governor should further consult some of the leading Native gentlemen in Bengal, and with their assistance carefully mature the plan which they would recommend for adaptation. Acting under these instructions the Lieutenant Governor Cecil Beadon appointed a committee in 1866, which comprised Mr.C.P.HobHouse, Mr.H.T.Princep, Raja Satyasan Ghoshal, Bahadur, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Ramnath Tagore, Jaykrishna Mukherjee and Digambar Mitra. The committee submitted its report on the 7th February, 1867. It could not suggest an enactment of any Declaratory law or of any legislative measure sufficient for the suppression of abuses of polygamy.

Even more important than this decision was the opinion expressed by R.N.Tagore, J.K. Mukherjee and D. Mitra. They held that the evils had been too much exaggerated and were already on the wane and that this question may, without injury to public morals, be left for settlement to the good sense and judgment of the people. The third member J.K.Mukherjee also held that the state should not interfere in the matter. The non-interference of the state in the matter was also demanded for other considerations. It was that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century the practice of unlimited polygamy had been on the decrease owing to the spread of education and enlightened ideas and also, according to J.N. Bhattacharyya, owing to material considerations.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, was the only member to submit a note of dissent. He maintained that the evils were not 'greatly exaggerated' and that the decrease of these evils was not sufficient to do away with the necessity of legislation. He was, therefore, in favour of passing a Declaratory law. In support of Vidyasagar, W.W.Hunter points out that the practice of polygamy was still common in lessore, Dacca and the backward Eastern Districts of Bengal. The Secretary of state, however, decided against legislation as a large majority of people even in Bengal were not against the practice of polygamy. The question of the prevention of the practice of polygamy was, further, moved during the seventies of the 19th Century.

Thus, on the 3rd August, 1874, R.B.Mukherjee and other residents in the district of Dacca waited upon Lord Northbrook (1872-76), the Governor-General of India, when he visited Dacca, with a petition praying that legal measures may be adopted for the abolition of the system of polygamy prevalent among the Hindus in Bengal more especially among the kulina Brahmanas. In the said memorial the following paragraph among others was made: The most detestable system of polygamy which obtains among Hindus more especially among the Koolin Brahmins of Bengal has been the cause of great mischief to the community and of distress and misery to the poor and helpless females whose condition makes them to be the object of your lordship's pity. On the 20th January, 1875, M.N.Raychoudhury and other residents in the district of Bukhergung (Barisal) also sent a petition to the Governor-General for the same purpose.

On the 7th June, 1875, the Governor-General in Council, while entirely sympathising with the object considers that it is one which must mainly be attained by social action among all classes of the Hindus, and that legislation on subject would only be mischievous, if it were not in

accordance with the feelings and practice of a large majority of the people. In other words, the Government did not deem it wise to interfere with the social system of the Hindus.

It may be noted that although no Declaratory Law was enacted or legislative measure adopted, the agitation brought some good to Kulina wives. The Bamabodhinipatrika of 1870 narrates a case in which a kulina wife sued for husband in Court and received a maintenance decree of Rs.15/- a month. The husband could not pay it and was imprisoned. Further, it is found that failing to secure a legal prohibition Iswarchandra Vidyasagar in West Bengal and R.B.Mukherjee in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) started forming public opinion against polygamy. On the 16th July, 1871, Vidyasagar published his monograph on whether polygamy should be stopped or not, and Mukerjee began to rouse sentiment against polygamy by singing sarcastic songs from village to village.

After independence, in 1955, The Hindu Marriage Act was enacted which prohibited polygamy among Hindu community.

### Conclusion

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar adopted the integrated model of social transformation to address the women's issues in India. He designed a unique solution: an intelligent mix of participative and command/control techniques to combat women's problems. The society and the state were conferred with activist's role – to educate or create public opinion, to legislate and enforce laws against social evils that violated Indian women's life and human dignity.

Vidyasagar challenged religious dogmas and social norms by: first, drawing evidences and proofs to support their arguments against social and religious evils from historical and scriptural sources so as not to offend practitioners of the religion and also to gain greater appeal among them; second, by translating religious texts in various languages to highlight the erroneous ideas that people held and to introduce them to the true spirit of their religion.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's endeavours for women's upliftment, welfare, empowerment and elevation proved to be a milestone, and he became a great source of inspiration for people in general and women in particular.

After independence, the Constitution of India has provided equal opportunities for men and women. The Central and State governments has taken several welfare measures for women's socio-economic and political empowerment and development. Two major conditions of women empowerment, i. e. eradication of injustice and discrimination against women and provision of equal opportunity for women are addressed by the Government. Women in India are now rendering their services to the growth and development of our society.

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