

Vidyasagar's Social Reform Movement And The Cultural Hegemony Of British Colonial Power

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Abstract

In today's world, despite living through the era of capitalism and post-capitalism, and having reached a post-modern stage, one still encounters stark proclamations on newspaper pages demanding a 'fair, slim, beautiful, and domestically skilled bride.' Standing at such a juncture, one must question whether we truly possess the right or the capacity to invoke the name of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Even after one and a half centuries since the passage of the Widow Remarriage Act, we continue to harbor narrow-mindedness and patriarchal attitudes – prompting the question that circles back repeatedly: have we truly become the heirs of Vidyasagar's legacy? To what extent did the Renaissance usher in a 'new age'? While it is true that the Renaissance did disrupt entrenched social and cultural structures, it is equally pertinent to ask whether we have simply become captive to a new form of rigidity.

Introduction

Another thought that emerges is how the British colonial power labeled the plight of widows, the ill effects of child marriage, and the lack of women's education in India as signs of our 'barbarism'. They sought to convince us that a country plagued by such issues was incapable of governing itself and therefore required the control of the so-called civilized and educated British colonizers. Was this attempt at securing consent, this cultural hegemony, an insidious aspect of British colonial strategy? With these questions in mind, I intend to bring Vidyasagar's social reform movement into the light of discussion.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was one of the foremost pioneers of the Bengali Renaissance. He brought light to a stagnant, dark society like Prometheus. Vidyasagar realized that the advent of a new era for Bengali society could only be initiated through the spread and promotion of women's education. Just as a bird need both wings to fly, society in the 19th century could only progress through the education of both men and women.

Vidyasagar, soft at heart yet firm on the outside, struck a blow at the conservative society, introducing movement into its rigid framework. He seamlessly blended European ideals with his own Bengali identity and embodied the principle of "think globally, act locally" throughout his life.

A deep analysis of the time and society of the 19th century reveals that Vidyasagar's emergence was not sudden but had a historical backdrop. Before Vidyasagar, the debates of Raja Rammohan Roy's 'Atmiya Sabha' and the reformist discussions and movements of Derozio and the Young Bengal group paved the way for Vidyasagar's arrival. Before evaluating Vidyasagar's contributions to women's education, it is worth discussing the historical context of other individuals and organizations that contributed to its promotion at the time.

Vidyasagar was born in 1820, and just a year prior, in 1819, the 'Female Juvenile Society' was established. To convey the importance of women's education to the general public, the society published a book titled *Stri Shiksha Bidhayak* in 1822. In 1821, Miss Mary Anne Cooke came to India from England to advance women's education. Within a year of her efforts, eight girls' schools had been established in Kolkata, with 200 students enrolled in 1822, increasing to 400 by 1823. However, these efforts did not resonate strongly with the elite and affluent Hindu society of the time, as they feared that Christian missionaries, under the guise of promoting education, would penetrate the inner quarters and propagate their religion, causing collective upheaval in familial and social life.

Raja Radhakanta Deb played a pioneering role in promoting women's education. His contributions to education in the mother tongue, the spread of women's education, and universal primary education are undeniable. He also significantly contributed to the success of institutions like Hindu College, the Calcutta School Book Society, and the Calcutta School Society. The 'Young Bengal Group' also made notable contributions to the spread of women's education, advocating for it intellectually and raising awareness among the public about its benefits through various writings. Key figures in the group included Krishnamohan Banerjee, Kashi Prasad Ghosh, Radhanath Sikdar, and Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay. The central figure of the Young Bengal Group was Derozio, and one of their significant contributions was the founding of the 'Academic Association,' which was likely the first student organization in the country. The association once held a meeting to discuss 'the rationale for women's education,' where they argued that women's education was not forbidden by any religious scripture. Some conservative priests and individuals have blocked the path of women's education by instilling fear through various scriptures. Through debates, counterarguments, and different interpretations of religious texts, they tried to prove that nowhere in the sacred texts was there an objection to women's education. It is worth

mentioning that a significant conflict arose between Eastern and Western scholars concerning the education system. There was intense debate over whether the education system in this country should be based on Eastern traditions or Western influences. The 'Young Bengal group' nurtured Western ideologies. However, the British promoted English education primarily to create a class of middle-class clerks. Lord Macaulay, in his famous Minute, mentioned that they aimed to create a generation of Indians who would be Indian by blood and race but European in taste, opinions, morals, and intellect. In his 1835 Minute, Macaulay wrote: "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." The spread of English education was a primary policy of colonial governance. Although the British established some indigenous schools, they were largely neglected due to a lack of sufficient aid and government support. The middle class and influential members of society began to be educated in English. Consequently, they started distinguishing themselves ideologically and mentally from others. This led them to become an elite class, the urban 'babus,' and they became isolated from the larger masses of common people. The fundamental aim of the British education policy was to create a class in this country that would be loyal to them, protect their interests, and fulfill their objectives.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, embodying this aspect of the cultural politics of the British education expansion, emerged as an influential figure. Considering the context of Vidyasagar's emergence allows for a proper assessment of his social contributions. At a time in the 19th century when everyone was enthusiastic about the women's education movement, Vidyasagar was the Principal of Sanskrit College. He was engaged in overall development and educational reform activities at the college. Vidyasagar deeply realized the necessity of education for everyone. He also recognized that unless education was expanded simultaneously in both rural and urban areas, comprehensive societal development and change would not be possible. Before Vidyasagar, education was primarily limited to the urban rich and middle-class families. In 1854-55, Vidyasagar dedicated himself to promoting Bengali education in various villages. He received substantial support and assistance from the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Halliday. Despite being born into a poor Brahmin family in a village, Vidyasagar's intellect earned him a place on the policymaking committee concerning the education system of that time. Vidyasagar profoundly understood that education for the common people was essential. He also realized that the contemporary government was quite enthusiastic about the promotion of women's education. In 1857-58, Vidyasagar established 35 girls' schools in various places. He understood that just as education for all was necessary, so was the need for textbooks in the mother

tongue. At that time, there were no textbooks for teaching Bengali. Hence, he wrote books for primary education and for adults. His book 'Barnaparichay' is still taught to children for learning the alphabet. He even wrote 'Kathamala' for teaching moral lessons to children.

The contributions of Drinkwater Bethune in the spread of women's education in India are significant. In 1849, Bethune established the first girls' school in Kolkata, which later became famous as 'Bethune School.' This school was notable because no representative of the British government had previously founded such a school. The British representatives feared that the introduction of women's education might disrupt the social customs and traditions prevalent in the country. This could anger the conservative sections of society. However, the establishment of Bethune's girls' school allowed the then Indian government to convey to the intellectuals that the government was keen on promoting women's education and was making impartial and sincere efforts in this regard. Through the spread of women's education, the British government sought to win the approval and acceptance of the intellectuals for British rule.

Alongside the British government, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar tirelessly worked to establish schools by traveling from village to village. Many locals took the initiative to provide land for the schools. However, the government's policy at that time required that the land, school buildings, and necessary infrastructure be fully provided by the local community. Only when everything was complete at the local level would government funding be granted. Most villages lacked the financial resources to build complete infrastructure. Vidyasagar personally funded the establishment of many schools. Yet, it was impossible for one man, with limited resources, to set up schools in every village. This vision of education for all faced significant setbacks at the time. The Company's government, driven by self-interest, aimed to create an elite class through limited educational opportunities. A large segment of society developed trust in the Company's government. The primary objective of the British government's educational efforts was to garner public support for their rule. While Vidyasagar's aim was the progress of the country, the British government's aim was superficial, focused on creating favourable public opinion for their rule. The British government sought to make people believe that they were doing commendable development work in India. The main aim behind their educational efforts was to secure approval for British rule. Additionally, a large section of society began to think that the British were a highly civilized nation, far ahead of Indians in education. This attempt to win public consent aligns with Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony.' The British understood that India could

not be governed solely by force; they wanted Indians to realize that they were backward and living in darkness in the field of education. This would lead a large section of society to develop trust in the British government's educational policies. It would also make it easier to convince the public that the British were working for their progress. This effort to secure consent was one of the main objectives behind the British government's spread of education in India.

It is impossible to write the history of women's progress in India without Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Despite not studying in elite foreign institutions, he nurtured progressive thoughts throughout his life. Coming from a simple, poor family and living a modest life, Vidyasagar relentlessly campaigned against child marriage and for the promotion of widow remarriage. Aware of the dire consequences of child marriage, polygamy, and the Kulin system, Vidyasagar spent his life protesting against these practices, resisting them, and striving for social reform. Vidyasagar did not limit himself to intellectual writing and debates; he actively led a social movement for the eradication of child marriage and the promotion of widow remarriage. The conservative society of that time viewed him with contempt, and he was attacked in various social arenas. Vidyasagar tried to explain to everyone that child marriage led to the physical deterioration of girls and increased the likelihood of becoming widows at a very young age.

One noteworthy incident was when a professor of the Sanskrit College arranged to marry a young girl immediately after his wife's death. Vidyasagar objected to the marriage between the elderly professor and the young girl. Although the marriage took place against Vidyasagar's wishes, the professor died a few days later, leaving the girl a child widow. Many critics believe that this incident deeply moved Vidyasagar, inspiring him to fight for the rest of his life to eradicate such harmful practices.

In the first half of the 19th century, Bangladesh witnessed significant social and cultural upheaval. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and his 'Atmiya Sabha,' Derozio and the 'Young Bengal' group, and Debendranath Tagore and the 'Tattwabodhini Sabha' collectively sparked a wave of change throughout society. Through a process of breaking and rebuilding, the dawn of a new era emerged in the 19th century. A popular 21st-century song captures the essence of this period: "What is uncertain today will surely be certain tomorrow; life means ups and downs, life means breaking and building."¹

In January 1850, Vidyasagar's work titled 'Proposition on Whether Widow Remarriage Should Be Established' was published, in which he presented arguments in favor of widow remarriage. In October of that year, he published a second

book on the topic, 'Should Widow Remarriage Be Established.' Alongside publishing these works, Vidyasagar drafted a petition advocating for a widow remarriage law, which was signed by 987 people and submitted to the then-government of India. Notable signatories included Dakshinaranjan Majumdar, Akshay Kumar Dutt, Rai Bahadur Kailash Chandra Mukhopadhyay, Keshab Chandra Nyayaratna, Neelmani Mitra, and others. However, another petition opposing the proposal, bearing about 25,000 signatures, was also submitted. Nevertheless, as the government of that time showed interest in introducing widow remarriage, the Widow Remarriage Act was passed on July 26, 1856, in the Legislative Council of India. Subsequently, Vidyasagar arranged the remarriage of many young widows, which left him burdened with debt. For these reasons, Vidyasagar's name will be inscribed in golden letters in the history of women's progress in India.

Now, let us turn to the main focus of our discussion: why did the British government, which oppressed and exploited the Indian population so severely and set India back economically, suddenly support and aid the social reform movements in India during that time?

Antonio Gramsci of Italy, in his world-renowned book **Selections from the Prison Notebooks**, has said: "If one has to rule a society, it is not possible to do so solely through force. The ruler must obtain consent from the people whom they rule. Without this consent, ruling through force alone is not feasible. I call this construction of consent hegemony."²

Standing at the present moment, it seems to us that the British colonial power in India, particularly in Bengal at that time, did exactly this. To gain support for their rule, they carried out various social reform activities. They identified social issues such as the plight of widows, the harmful effects of child marriage, and the lack of women's education as signs of our "barbarism." Their goal was not to make us civilized. Rather, the British had a hidden agenda within their government that in countries with such barbarity, the people were unfit to govern the country in a civilized manner. Therefore, the colonial British would have to take control of the administration of those countries. In their attempt to prove that our intellectual heritage was insignificant and inferior compared to Europeans, Lord Macaulay did not hesitate to utter a highly insulting statement on February 2, 1835: "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."³

In exploring the reasons behind the British's apparent sympathy and compassion towards the Bengalis, Rangon Chakraborty writes: "At first glance, it may seem right – indeed, the banning of **suttee** (sati), polygamy, the promotion of widow remarriage, all of these should have happened, they

were speaking the right words. We have no disagreement with this. Our question is different – these foreign rulers who could enslave millions of men and women, who could hang and burn those slaves on trees, who were indifferent when malaria ravaged entire villages, who caused famines and killed millions for their own interests, why did they suddenly feel so distressed over the death of an Indian woman in *suttee*? In other words, how genuine was this compassion towards the widows? Or was it simply an excuse for seizing power?"⁴

The answer to the last two questions in the quoted passage lies in the context provided. The British were indeed involved in social reform work in India, but their true motive was to create cultural hegemony in our thoughts and minds. It would not be an exaggeration to say that while Vidyasagar's social reform efforts aimed to advance Indian society, particularly the society of Bengal at that time, the British social reforms were intended to gain consent from the Indian masses for British rule and to establish cultural hegemony on a psychological level.

References:

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