

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar: RSTV – In Depth

Anchor: Teena Jha

Larger Background:

- - The election violence in Bengal has ironically centred attention on one of the greatest figures of social reform in the country and especially Bengal.
 - Revered as a Bengali icon, Ishwar Chandra 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.
 - Born on 26th September, 1820 to a Kulin Brahmin family at Birsingha in the Midnapore District in Undivided Bengal, Vidyasagar brought about some of the most far-reaching reforms against malpractices by his own community.
 - Vidyasagar made a difference in a period when few men tried to challenge the decadent traditions of the time.
 - This edition of In-Depth looks at the achievements and changes that Vidyasagar brought in society in the field of education during the 19th century in Bengal, his work for the emancipation of women, at a time when their status was less than that of second-class citizens and few people even thought about improving it.

Why in the news?

- The desecration of the statue of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, during the violent clashes that broke out in Kolkata recently have put the spotlight on the renowned philosopher and key figure of the Bengali renaissance.

Analysis:

A Brief Account of Vidyasagar's Life:

- - Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is considered as one of the pillars of Bengal renaissance.
 - In other words, he managed to continue the reforms movement that was started by Raja Rammohan Roy.
 - Vidyasagar was a well-known writer, intellectual and above all a staunch follower of humanity.
 - He brought a revolution in the education system of Bengal.
 - In his book, "Barno-Porichoy" (Introduction to the letter), Vidyasagar refined the Bengali language and made it accessible to the common strata of the society.
 - The title 'Vidyasagar' (ocean of knowledge) was given to him due to his vast knowledge in almost all the subjects.
- **Poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta while writing about Ishwar Chandra said: "The genius and wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman and the heart of a Bengali mother".**
- Ishwar Chandra Bandopadhyaya, was born on 26 September, 1820 in Birsingha village of Midnapore

district, West Bengal.

- His father Thakurdas Bandyopadhyay and mother Bhagavati Devi were very religious persons. Their economic condition was not that stable and subsequently the childhood days of Vidyasagar were spent in abject poverty. After the completion of elementary education at the village school, his father took him to Calcutta (Kolkata). It is believed that Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar learned English numbers by following the mile-stones labels on his way to Calcutta at the age of eight years.
- Ishwar Chandra was a brilliant student. He cleared all the examinations with excellence and in quick succession.
- He was rewarded with a number of scholarships for his academic performance.
- To support himself and the family, Ishwar Chandra also took a part-time job of teaching at Jorashanko.
- 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 a head of the Sanskrit department.
- After five years, in 1846, Vidyasagar left Fort William College and joined the Sanskrit College as 'Assistant Secretary'.
- In the first year of service, Ishwar Chandra recommended a number of changes to the existing education system.
- This report resulted into a serious altercation between Ishwar Chandra and College Secretary Rasomoy Dutta. Following this, Vidyasagar resigned from Sanskrit College and rejoined Fort William College but as a head clerk.
- Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar would start crying in distress whenever he saw poor and weak people lying on the footpath and street. He used to spend a part of his scholarships and salary for the welfare of those poor people. He would also buy medicine for the sick.
- One day, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and his few friends decided to collect donations to form Calcutta University. He traveled across Bengal and neighboring states asking people to donate for the foundation. While doing so, one day he reached outside the palace of an influential King. After hearing his plea the King, pulled one of his shoes and dropped into Vidyasagar's bag as donation. Vidyasagar thanked Nawab and left.
- The very next day, Vidyasagar organized an auction of the Nawab's shoe and earned Rs. 1000. The Nawab after hearing that his shoe had fetched such a high amount of money, himself gave a similar amount of money as donation.
- Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the great scholar, academician and reformer passed away on 29 July, 1891 at the age of 70 years. After his death Rabindranath Tagore said, "One wonders how God, in the process of producing forty million Bengalis, produced a man!"

A Perspective on Vidyasagar's Contributions:

- Vidyasagar is a towering figure in Bengal. He is revered for engineering far-reaching social reforms in Bengal. His contribution towards the fields of philosophy, and education was no less significant.
- Vidyasagar was a renowned educationist of his time.
- His social reforms brought about deep-seated changes and triggered Bengal's renaissance.
- Vidyasagar's book, 'Borno Porichoy' is still used as an introductory text to learn Bengali alphabets.
- Vidyasagar authored many books that greatly helped the Bengali education system.
- He championed the cause of education, especially for girls.
- Along with fellow reformers Ramgopal Ghosh, and Madan Mohan Tarkalankar, he founded several schools for girls in the early 19th Century.
- He strongly believed that everyone, irrespective of their caste or gender had the right to education. He thus opened up the premises of the Sanskrit College for people from lower castes.
- He was particularly vocal about the cause of Widow Remarriage and introduced the practice and pushed for the Widow Remarriage Act XV of 1856. He also reconstructed the Bengali alphabet and reformed Bengali typography into an alphabet of 12 vowels and 40 consonants.
- Vidyasagar spent most of his salary to pay for the expenses of poor students. He helped

Bengali poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutta to relocate from France to England and study for the Bar. He also facilitated his return to India and inspired him to write poetry in Bengali, creating some of the most legendary literary works in the language.

A Note on the reformatory work that Vidyasagar did in the social sector:

- Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar initiated the concept of widow remarriage and raised concern for the abolition of child-marriage and polygamy.
- He also opened the doors of the colleges and other educational institutions to lower caste students, which was earlier reserved only for the Brahmins.
- For his immense generosity and kind-heartedness, people started addressing him as "Dayar Sagar" (ocean of kindness).
- The focus of his social reform was women — and he spent his life's energies trying to ensure an end to the practice of child marriage and initiate widow remarriage. Vidyasagar's Bengali primer, Borno Porichoy, remains, more than 125 years after his death in 1891, the introduction to the alphabet for nearly all Bengali children.
- Vidyasagar followed in the great reformist tradition of Raja Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833), and argued, on the basis of scriptures and old commentaries, in favour of the remarriage of widows in the same way as Roy did for the abolition of Sati.
- His earliest effort at social reform, however, came in the second half of 1850 when, in a paper on the evils of child marriage, he launched a powerful attack on the practice of marrying off girls aged 10 or even younger, pointing to social, ethical, and hygiene issues, and rejecting the validity of the Dharma Shastras that advocated it.
- In January and October 1855, Vidyasagar wrote his two famous tracts on the Marriage of Hindu Widows, basing his argument entirely on reason and logic, and showing that there was no prohibition on widows remarrying in the entire body of 'Smriti' literature (the Sutras and the Shastras).
- In the second tract, he gave a crushing reply to his critics who had sought to counter him after the first tract. Underlining the rationalism of his thought and the difficulties of his reformist project, Vidyasagar wrote:
- "But how is this to be done? By reasoning alone? No. For it will not be admitted by our countrymen that mere reasoning is applicable to such subjects. The custom must have the sanction of the Sastras; for in matters like this, the Sastras are the paramount authority among Hindus, and such acts only as are conformable to them are deemed proper."
- While stating that he did feel compassion for "our miserable widows", Vidyasagar stressed "that I did not take up my pen before I was fully convinced that the Sastras explicitly sanction their remarriage. This conviction I have come to after a diligent, dispassionate and careful examination of the subject and I can now safely affirm that in the whole range of our original Smritis there is not one single text which can establish anything to the contrary."
- From a high moral pedestal, he implored the people of India to end this cruel and illogical custom: "Countrymen! How long will you suffer yourselves to be led away by illusions? Open your eyes for once and see that India, once the land of virtue, is being overflowed with the stream of adultery and foeticide... Dip into the spirit of your Sastras, follow its dictates, and you shall be able to remove the foul blot from the face of your country...Habit has so darkened your intellect and blunted your feelings, that it is impossible for you to have compassion for your helpless widows."
- He exercised his power and lobbied hard for opening of school for girls and even outlined suitable curriculum that not only did educate them, but also enabled them to be self-reliant through vocations like needlework.
- Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar went door to door, requesting heads of families to allow their daughters to be enrolled in schools. He opened 35 schools for women throughout Bengal and was successful in enrolling 1300 students. He even initiated Nari Siksha Bhandar, a fund to lend support for the cause.
- He maintained his support to John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune to establish the first permanent girls' school in India, the Bethune School, on May 7, 1849.
- He disseminated his ideals through regular articles he wrote for periodicals and newspapers.

- Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was associated with prestigious journalistic publications like 'Tattwabodhini Patrika', 'Somprakash', 'Sarbashubhankari Patrika' and 'Hindu Patriot'.
- He wrote a number of books that hold primary importance in Bengali culture.
- Vidyasagar's lasting legacy remains with 'Borno Porichoy', an elementary level book for learning Bengali alphabets, where he reconstructed Bengali alphabets and reformed it into typography of 12 vowels and 40 consonants.
- Further, he established the Sanskrit Press with an aim to produce printed books at affordable prices so that common people could buy them.

Impact of his reformist zeal:

- Vidyasagar's first pamphlets in Bengali on widow remarriage created a tremendous stir in Hindu society. Two thousand copies were sold out in a week, and a reprint of another 3,000 copies also did not last. These were unprecedented sales figures for a book at that time.
- On October 14, 1855, Vidyasagar presented a petition to the Government of India praying that "your Honourable Council will take into early consideration the propriety of passing a law (as annexed) to remove all obstacles to the marriage of Hindu widows and to declare the issue of all such marriages to be legitimate".
- On July 16, 1856, The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, known as Act XV, was passed. Inspired by Vidyasagar, a number of literary men produced dramas advocating the remarriage of widows, both in Bengal and elsewhere. In 1864, Jyotiba Phule succeeded in persuading a Saraswat Brahmin widow to remarry. In 1866 Vishnu Shastri Pandit translated Vidyasagar's book on widow remarriage into Marathi.

Contribution in the field of Education:

- Vidyasagar is credited with the role of thoroughly remodelling medieval scholastic system prevailing in Sanskrit College and bring about modern insights into the education system.
- The first change that Vidyasagar made when he came back to the Sanskrit College as a Professor was to include English and Bengali as the medium of learning, besides Sanskrit.
- He introduced courses of European History, Philosophy and Science alongside of Vedic scriptures. He encouraged students to pursue these subjects and take away the best from both worlds.
- He also changed the rules of admission for students in Sanskrit College allowing non-Brahmin students to enrol in the prestigious institution.
- He wrote two books 'Upakramonika' and 'Byakaran Koumudi', interpreting complex notions of Sanskrit grammar in easy legible Bengali language.
- He introduced the concepts of Admission fee and tuition fee for the first time in Calcutta. He set up the Normal School for training teachers enabling uniformity in teaching methods.

Campaign against polygamy:

- Alongside the campaign for widow remarriage, Vidyasagar campaigned against polygamy. In 1857, a petition for the prohibition of polygamy among Kulin Brahmins was presented to the government with 25,000 signatures, led by the Maharaja of Burdwan. The mutiny of the sepoys resulted in the postponement of action on this petition, but in 1866, Vidyasagar inspired another petition, this time with 21,000 signatures.
- In the 1870s, Vidyasagar, the great rationalist, wrote two brilliant critiques of polygamy, arguing to the government that since polygamy was not sanctioned by the sacred texts, there could be no objection to suppressing it by legislation.

The college bearing his name:

- Today's Vidyasagar College in North Kolkata grew out of the Calcutta Training School that

Vidyasagar conceptualised in 1859, and which came to be known as Metropolitan Institution in 1864.

- The efforts of Vidyasagar and the brilliant performance of its students led to the college gaining affiliation with the prestigious Calcutta University in 1872. The college was named after Vidyasagar in 1917.

