



Contribution of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in the Arena of Social Geography: An Appraisal

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Abstract:

Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar played the most significant role in the reconstruction of modern society through Bengal Renaissance, when the Indian society especially in Bengal was stultified by both high rituals and superstitions. In the present research an attempt has been made to examine critically the role of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar as a social geographer. In this study it is highlighted how the way Vidyasagar influenced the peoples of India to become a part of Modern society and enlightened the then backward society. The present research paper has also tried to find out the relevance of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in the present socio-cultural scenario of Bengal and India.

Keywords:

Reconstruction of Modern society, Bengal Renaissance, Rituals and superstitions, Enlightened, Present socio-cultural scenario

1. Introduction:

Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is recalled today as being a great social and educational reformer of 19th century Bengal. He is a leading icon in Bengal and a great part of India. Being an Indian Bengali polymath and key figure of the Bengal Renaissance, Vidyasagar was terribly conscious of his country's weaknesses. Vidyasagar's attempt to lift his countrymen from the imprecation of illiteracy, ignorance, superstitions and gender biasness is praiseworthy (Ghosh, 1371 B.S.). He brought about a revolution in the Bengal education system and refined the way of writing and teaching in Bengali language. His thinking about women's life basically for their education, empowerment and social justice was incredible. He tried to alter the existing society through eradicating the social barriers like superstitions, polygamy etc. After the demise of Vidyasagar, the renowned personality Rabindranath Tagore well said about him – “*One wonders how God, in the process of producing forty million Bengalis, produced a man*” (Sikder & Halder, 2020).

2. Selection and Importance of the Study:

Social Geography examines the relationships of groups of people with one another. Ethnicity, tribe, dialect, language, caste systems, religion and concept of social well-being are also studied under social geography. Social geography concentrates on divisions within society. The Birth of great peoples always has made an impact on the society. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a philosopher, academic educator, writer, translator, entrepreneur and social reformer. Vidyasagar believed that only learning could help to make people independent with self-respect and confidence that could change a society. Vidyasagar was aroused like a sun to enlighten our society, as our society was full of superstitions, illiteracy, unconsciousness, and when British peoples were busy in their political conquests (Roy & Roy, 1971). He worked endlessly to transform our society and social environment of Bengal. However, one can say he was an unidentified social geographer.

3. Objectives:

The objectives of the present research are the followings:

- To recognize the Vidyasagar's thoughts and perception on the society.
- To distinguish his innovative expression towards rationalisation of Bengali language.
- To explore his activities regarding women's empowerment.
- To elucidate the impacts of his works on the social environment of Bengal and India.

4. Methodology:

Validity and reliability of any type of research depend on the adopted methods of the study. Hence, methodology plays an important role to bring out the major findings of the research. This paper is primarily descriptive in nature and is prepared based on collected secondary data from the various sources like books, journals, articles and periodicals etc. (Roy, 2018).

In this research work, standard methods of historical investigation have been used. The information has been collected from secondary sources and the relevant literature has been studied deeply. Then the analysis has been done in the light of our purpose, followed by logical inferences (Banu & Alam, 2016).

5. Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar - A Biography:

Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) was a great teacher, writer, scholar, polymath, philosopher, philanthropist, and educationalist as well. Born in a poor Brahmin family in the village of Birsingha in Midnapur district of West Bengal on 26th September 1820, Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay was honored with the title of 'Vidyasagar' (the word 'Vidyasagar' means 'Ocean of Knowledge') in 1839 for his mastery over Sanskrit and Philosophy. In 1839, he also successfully completed his law examination. He passed out from Sanskrit College of Kolkata in 1841 as a qualifier in Sanskrit grammar, literature, Dialectics, Vedanta and Astronomy. At the age of twenty-one, Ishwar Chandra joined as the head of the Sanskrit department in Fort William College. He joined the Sanskrit College in 1849 (Although Vidyasagar joined the Sanskrit College as 'Assistant Secretary' in 1846, but he resigned later) as a professor of literature and was made the principal of the College in 1851. In 1855, Vidyasagar was taking charge as Special Inspector of Schools for the Districts of Hooghly, Midnapur, Burdman and Nadia (Hatcher, 2014). This encouraged him to spread the light of education and establish more schools all over Bengal. He also established 30 schools particularly for girls. Among the Indian educationalists, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar has acquired an important place in the History

of Education in India for his contribution in the development of the education system of India specifically for Bengal. Michael Madhusudan had truly given him the epithet 'Dayasagar' or 'Ocean of Generosity' for his selfless humanity. On 29th July 1891, he passed away at the age of 70 years (Bandyopadhyay, 1929).

6. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar as Idealist, Naturalist and Pragmatist:

Vidyasagar was an idealist, naturalist and pragmatist (every type of theory or methodology has come from different philosophical views. Among all the theories three are most common and effective: Idealism, Naturalism, and Pragmatism. These three theories are mainly endowed with the general ideas about the world and lives) like Rabindranath Tagore. But he did not support idealism as blind follower. Basically, he was a realist who was not a supporter of Vedic Brahmins' education system. Being a pragmatist, he said that there is no other world except the present material world. He was not a supporter of spiritual education like Aurobindo. He tried to change Indian society with the implementation of ideas from modernism and scientific rationalism of the western world (Banu & Alam, 2016).

7. Contribution on Society and Social Environment:

Social geography has emphasized on the issues of social phenomena i.e., character and evaluation of Language, social behaviour, social inequality, social wellbeing through education, social space, women empowerment, and social transformation. It emphasizes how these social relationships affect the places where people live, work and entertain each other. Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was an icon of the Bengal Renaissance and one of the major architects of modern Bengal. His contribution towards society and social environment was remarkable (Umar, 1985).

a) Role as Gender Geographer:

Vidyasagar was the nineteenth century polymath reformer whose contribution towards changing the status of women in India is incredible. In the book of 'Bidhobabivah' on widow's right to remarry (1855), Vidyasagar introduced the practice of widow remarriage to mainstream of Hindu society. Vidyasagar also struggled hard to start the practice of widow remarriage in Bengal and proposed the Widow Remarriage Act. His untiring struggle forced the then Government of India to pass the Widow Remarriage Act XV in 1856. This immensely helped both the Bengal renaissance and consequent reforms in the whole country (Paroi & Sarkar, 2020).

[A] widow's life is one of endless suffering.....All her happiness ends the moment she loses her husband.... In the days of fasting cruel fate does not allow her dry, weary tongue a drop of water to quench her thirst or even allow an ailing widow to take medicine. Yet no compassionate person dissuades widows from such brutal custom in violation of the pitiless scriptures and lokachar (customs of people) (Sharma, 1972).

He fought for women education and vigorously challenged the barbaric practice of Child Marriage. He also fought a determined battle against the then prevailing social custom of Kulin Brahmin polygamy (Sarkar, 2017). Consequently, the marriage age for girls has increased along with the starting of the sheer right to life. In 1856, widow remarriage is legalised; in 1870 the ban on female infanticide and 1891 the raising of the age from ten years to 12. The Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929 defined the child and the minor in relatively liberal ways, whereas under eighteen for boys and fourteen for girls (Bhatty, 2002).

b) Reformer of Bengali Language:

Second important contribution of Vidyasagar was Bengali alphabet as we know it today. 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 (Vidyasagar, 1979). He further made a rhyme to introduce each to the child-learner. He published the alphabet accompanied by beautiful wood-cut illustrations. The renaissance period carried out 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. Even, Vidyasagar inspired Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta to create some of the most legendary literary works through writing poetry in Bengali language, after his returning to India (Mitra, 2001).

c) Social Wellbeing and Social Transformation through Education:

"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." (Paroi & Sarkar, 2020)

Vidyasagar was a supporter of cultural, social, intellectual and artistic movement in Bengal from the 19th century to the early 20th century. Vidyasagar's philosophy had emerged from his own life experiences and thoughts. He believed that there should be equal opportunity for every person in society. He took part to transform society from medievalism to modernism through various works. This modern outlook has been influenced by Vidyasagar's progressive thoughts regarding education (Narayan, 1990).

"Education does not only mean learning, reading, writing and arithmetic, it should provide a comprehensive knowledge. Education in geography, geometry, literature, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, physiology, political economy etc. is very much necessary. We want teachers who know both Bengali and English Language, at the same time are free from religious prejudices." (Roy, 2018)

Being a learned Sanskrit scholar and well acquainted of Western knowledge, he re-examined our age-old tradition, retained that was genuine in our culture and reformed what needed to be changed. He was absolutely free of any prejudice. His kindness, simplicity, honesty, fearlessness, courage and determination became legendary in his own lifetime. In an obituary note, the Indian Nation wrote on August 3 1891, Vidyasagar was great by a greatness that is rare in history (Roy, 2015).

d) Upliftment of Society through approaching of Western Knowledge:

Vidyasagar was not only the great man of India, but also became famous internationally for his diversified approaches. He favoured education according to western method, as European science and technology influenced him. He thought that progress would not come from a return to great ancient Indian civilization (Gupta, 2019). The idea that Vidyasagar believed in education was that, - *"the education of the Indians would be sufficient knowledge regarding Sanskrit and English which enriched our mother language by the western civilization and science"* (Sikder & Halder, 2020). He realized that, western education is very important for the development and progress of Indians. He not only imparted this knowledge from English knowledge and western science but simultaneously he understood the fact of mother language development in education. The influx of western knowledge, art and culture as well as advanced moral values enriched the mental horizon of

Bengal liberal intelligence. These were facts behind the occurrence of Bengal Renaissance, which later on enlightened and developed the then backward society. It influenced Vidyasagar to initiate social, religious and literary reformation to purge the evils from the then society (Ahmed, 2006).

8. Vidyasagar as a Social Geographer in the present context:

Poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta wrote about Ishwar Chandra: “The genius and wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman and the heart of a Bengali mother” (Chaturvedi, 2004). Basically, he lived for others and in others. He was really “dayasagar” or “karunasagar”. Sri Ramkrishna truly commented about him, “No lake, no puddle, the real sea” (Roy, 2018).

His ideas about nationalism, humanism, and democratic liberalism had influenced the colonial middle class in the 19th century. Reformation of Sanskrit College, development of women education, Barno Porichoy, widow re-marriage etc. are the surprising works of Vidyasagar. It is identified that the impact of his efforts on present Indian society is still significant for today. To simplify and modernize the Bengali language, Vidyasagar took significant efforts. He also rationalized and simplified the Bengali alphabet and type as an educator and scholar (Halder, 1972).

Now different committee, commissions emphasize equal education irrespective of caste, creed, religion, gender etc. Vidyasagar thought about these at that time. He established ‘Nari Shiksha Bhandar’ for financial assistance of girl’s education during that time (Sengupta & Chakravarti, 2003). At the present time, a lot of discussions on women’s education, women liberation, women empowerment, gender discrimination etc. are going on. Now we see several schemes initiated by the governments like *Kanyashree Prokalpo*, *Beti Bachao, Beti Parhao* (dignify girls, save girls, educate girls) etc. It is also observed that this great person received international acclaim in 2004, when BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) poll ranked him number 9 as the Greatest Bengali of all time (BBC, 2004).

9. Highlight of the facts:

Vidyasagar thought-out about the diffusion of modern education to be the first milestone on the path of social development, as it alone would generate humanism powerful enough to overcome the blind customs and rigid orthodoxy. His life’s mission towards the removal of ignorance, superstition and pernicious customs had been successfully done. He saw the principles of building a healthy society through learning and constructive knowledge, which promote a creative harmony between education and social responsibility, between knowledge and social conscience (Sen, 1977).

Vidyasagar devoted his whole life for reformation of the society as well as the education system of Bengal. He enriched Bengali language and wrote books on it to enliven it. At the same time, he realized the need of western rationalism and scientific knowledge through learning the English language. His philosophy of life which was influenced both by the western thinkers and the misery of his countrymen played a vital role in shaping his ideas on education (Ghosh, 2000). Vidyasagar was truly a remarkable educationalist.

He is still regarded as one of the founders of women education in Bengal. He truly realised that unless the women of the land could be educated it was impossible to emancipate and liberate them from the terrible burden of inequalities and injustice imposed on them by the cruel society of those days. So, he took the

initiative to set up girls' schools throughout Bengal to promote women education (Mukherjee & Chanana, 1988).

To revive the vernacular education system of Bengal, he felt the need of good books. He not only wrote a good many books for that purpose, but also set up his own printing press named the Sanskrit press in Calcutta to make the books available for the general public (Ahmed, 2006). He was a prolific writer in Sanskrit language as well as in Bengali language also. To modernise the Bengali language, he simplified the alphabet of the language.

10. Conclusion:

Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is no doubt an outstanding personality in the history of education and modern cultural society in India. He was the first who realised the need of improvement in the conventional education system to overcome traditional superstitions and gender discrimination. He was the man with the modern attitude of contemporary social well beings of Indian Society. Various decisions in the present education policy have also been influenced by his thoughts as he was also the pioneering figure in the education of our country. His sympathy for the poor students helped them so that they could continue their studies without financial disturbance. It can be said that Vidyasagar was a complete educator who exposed his thoughts on the various spheres of education like child education, higher education, mass education, women education, teacher education etc. He had changed Indian society as the reformer of society and education in respect of time and space. He will be remembered with great reverence in the ages to come for his social transformation of Bengal society. Therefore, he is one of the eminent social geographers of Bengal as well as India, in the discipline of social geography.

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