



## PANDIT ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR – A SOCIAL REFORMER AND EDUCATIONIST PAR EXCELLENCE

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### ABSTRACT:

*Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was one of the pioneers of Renaissance in modern India. He was an ideal blend of the best of the East and the West. To uplift the conditions of the women was one of his major objectives. He began to fight for widow remarriage. Vidyasagar married his son Narayan Chandra to a widow. He appealed to the government in 1855 to abolish this evil practice of polygamy. Vidyasagar opened the gates of the Sanskrit college to non-Brahmin students. At the Sanskrit College he introduced the subjects like Mill's logic and mathematics and English education was compulsory. He established thirty-five schools for girls and he funded the expenses of most of these schools from his own pocket. He was also a champion of women education. There were almost 1300 girls in the schools that were established by Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar played the most important role in all the fields of education – mass education, higher education, and women's education.*

**KEY WORDS:** - widow remarriage, women education, child marriage, polygamy

### INTRODUCTION

Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was one of the pioneers of Renaissance in modern India. He was one of the greatest social reformers and educationists that India has ever produced. He was an ideal blend of the best of the East and the West. He was born to a poor Brahmin family but through his struggle and scholasticism, he rose to the position of the Principal of the Sanskrit College in Kolkata (then Calcutta). Though a Sanskrit scholar, he was still open to the Western ideas.

To uplift the conditions of the women was one of his major objectives. He was shocked at the tragic conditions of the child widows. It might be mentioned that child marriage was in vogue in the then India. He began to fight for widow remarriage. In 1854, Vidyasagar published his first pamphlet where he pleaded for widow remarriage. He even quoted from the scriptures to establish that widow remarriage is sanctioned by Hindu religion also. He published two booklets in 1855 and translated them in 1856 to argue his points of widow remarriage. In 1855 he took the leading role to sign an appeal to send it to the Indian Board of Law. This appeal was signed by thousands of people including the leading personalities of the time namely Debendranath Tagore, Rajnarayan Basu, and Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee. Petitions followed from Bombay now Mumbai), Madras (now Chennai), and Nagpur. Finally on 26 July 1856, Lord Dalhousie passed the Widow Marriage Act. There were obstructions from the orthodox Brahmins. More than thirty thousand people had sent a petition against this Act to the government. So it was not an easy task for Vidyasagar. 7 December 1856 is a historical day as the first widow remarriage took place in Calcutta. Sri Shrischandra Vidyaratna was the groom and Kalimati Debi was the bride. The marriage took place under the supervision of Vidyasagar himself. It is worth mentioning that Vidyasagar married his son Narayan Chandra also to a widow. Many more widow remarriages were arranged at his own expense. Historical records say that twenty-five widow remarriages were performed between 1856 and 1860. Polygamy was also practiced in

the then India and Vidyasagar protested against this social malady also. He appealed to the government in 1855 to abolish this evil practice of polygamy. More than fifty thousand people signed the appeal this time including Mahatab Chand, the Maharaja of Burdwan. Because of the Revolution of 1857 the government did not take any action on this issue, as the government had by then decided not to interfere in any socio-religious matters that involved the upper caste orthodox Hindus. But Vidyasagar published two booklets in 1871 quoting from the religious texts to establish that Hindu religion does not sanction polygamy also. Vidyasagar also protested against child marriage.

Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was not only one of the greatest social reformers but also one of the greatest educationists that India has ever produced. He is also regarded as the father of Bengali prose style. He was an able academic administrator and held the posts of Head Pandit of Fort William College, Assistant Secretary and Principal of Sanskrit College, and the Assistant Inspector of Schools for the districts of Midnapore, Hooghly, Burdwan, and Nadia. As the Principal of the Sanskrit College he took an epoch making decision. At that time Sanskrit College was open to the Brahmin students only. None other than Brahmins were admitted there. Vidyasagar “opened the gates of the Sanskrit college to non-Brahmin students for he was opposed to the monopoly of Sanskrit studies that the priestly caste was enjoying at that time” (Chandra, 136). In spite of himself being a Brahmin, he was bold enough to raise his voice against the monopoly of the Brahmins to the knowledge of the religious texts and the scriptures. As he was a perfect blend of the best of the East and the West, at the Sanskrit College he introduced the subjects like Mill’s logic and mathematics and English education was compulsory. For the first learners he wrote the Sanskrit grammar in Bangla and included that too in the syllabus. Vidyasagar noticed that during the mid-forties the graduates of Sanskrit College were finding it difficult to get jobs. Vidyasagar intervened and advised Hardinge in 1846 that the teachers should be appointed totally from among the graduates of Sanskrit College for the one hundred and one vernacular schools which the Governor General had decided to start soon. Vidyasagar firmly believed that a nation can never prosper if the masses are not educated. So he took a leading role to spread education throughout the length and breadth of Bengal. Lord Hardinge helped him in opening a number of schools in the different villages of Bengal. He established thirty-five schools for girls and he funded the expenses of most of these schools from his own pocket through the Sanskrit Press Depository, a printing press cum bookshop which he had established in 1846-47 to establish his financial independence. Finally he gave up his government job. He was also a champion of women education. He helped Drinkwater Bethune to establish the Bethune School in 1849 and Vidyasagar was the Secretary of the school. There were almost 1300 girls in the schools that were established by Vidyasagar. But the journey was not easy for Vidyasagar as the young girls “were shouted at and abused and sometimes even their parents were subjected to social boycott” (Chandra, 138). The upper class orthodox Hindus began to preach that these educated girls after receiving Western education would turn their husbands to slaves and thereby the harmony of Indian society would be lost. Today’s Vidyasagar College at Kolkata is actually the Metropolitan Institution which was established by Vidyasagar and later on which was upgraded to a college. He had shown the courage to appoint Indian professors in his college and “proved that the Indian professors were no inferior to the English ones” (Palit: *Colonial*, 126-27). Vidyasagar had set up his Metropolitan College mainly as the college fees were exorbitantly high for the ordinary men. Depending upon the combination of subjects, Presidency College charged around rupees ten to twelve per month. Vidyasagar wanted to provide quality education at an affordable price so that the common people also gain the fruits of education. The income from the textbooks written by Vidyasagar was quite high but all the amount was spent for running the schools for girls set up by him, for his philanthropic activities and for the widow remarriages. It is said that none went empty handed if appealed to Vidyasagar and that is why he often used to run in debt in spite of his huge income of three thousand five hundred to four thousand rupees per month. His textbooks *Barnaparichay* and *Kathamala* are used even today. Vidyasagar played the most important role in all the fields of education – mass education, higher education, and women’s education – for the awakening of

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Bengal in particular and India in general. Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a social reformer and an educationist par excellence.

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