

Unveiling The Legacy: Vidyasagar, Bethune School and the Impact of Some Remarkable Women of That Period

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Abstract: Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Bethune Saheb played an important role in the spread of Bengali women's education. The Bethune School founded by Bethune Sahib with the help of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, played a decisive role in the spread of education of education in Bengal. Several female students of the Bethune school played an important role in the spread of women's education in Bengal at that time and later. Moving beyond conventional reformist discourse, Vidyasagar envisioned education as a revolutionary tool capable of dismantling patriarchal hierarchies and reconstructing gender roles within Indian society. Through an analysis of his writings, advocacy for female literacy, and engagement with colonial educational policies, this study situates Vidyasagar within broader debates on modernity, humanism, and social justice. 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. He viewed education as a tool for empowering women to challenge the prevailing societal norms and also to actively contribute to the progress of the society. The paper also explores how his initiatives prefigured later feminist and nationalist movements in Bengal, reflecting a synthesis of indigenous values and Enlightenment rationality.

Keywords: Women's Education, Missionaries, Discrimination, Primary Education, Bengali Literature, Empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar played a leading role in the education reform in 19th-century Bengal, particularly emphasizing women's education. During that era, women faced societal constraints and lacked

freedom, often getting married at a young age. Widows, in particular, struggled due to prevalent social norms. Vidyasagar, recognizing the root cause of these issues in the lack of education, spoke against practices like polygamy and advocated for widow remarriage. He established numerous schools for women's education across various districts in Bengal, personally overseeing their administration. The most notable among them was the Bethune School, which significantly contributed to social transformation. Many accomplished women emerged from Bethune School, enriching Bengal with their talents. The primary objective of this article is to discuss Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's crucial role in promoting women's education and establishing Bethune School, acknowledging the impact of these efforts on the progress of women's education in Bengal.

II. A VISIONARY EDUCATION REFORMER

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was born on September 26, 1820, in the undivided Medinipur district in the village of Birsingha. Reflecting on his own birth, Vidyasagar wrote, "During my birth, my grandfather jokingly said, 'You were born under the constellation of Taurus according to astrology, and at times, you exhibit characteristics similar to a bull.' Observing the signs mentioned by my ancestors and my distinctive behavior, I was indeed unique." Rabindranath Tagore, describing Vidyasagar's childhood, stated, "In the first section of his book, 'Barnaparichaya,' Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar illustrates the character of a well-mannered boy named Gopal.. He attributes his qualities to his parents, but when Vidyasagar himself was of Gopal's age, he mostly resembled a shepherd

rather than Gopal."In essence, Vidyasagar contradicted his father's expectations and identified more with the traits of a shepherd than those of Gopal. At the age of five, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar began his education at the village school in Gurumshayra. He studied there for eight years, engaging in reading and writing. Later, he moved to Calcutta with his father and enrolled in the Sanskrit College in 1829. Until 1839, he pursued his studies at the Sanskrit College and obtained the title of Vidyasagar. Upon completing his education, he initiated his professional life as the Chief Pundit at Fort William College from 1841 to 1846. In the year 1849, after spending two years there, he was appointed as the Principal and Treasurer at Fort William College. In 1850, he joined the Sanskrit College again as a professor of literature and, within a short period, assumed the role of Principal of the college in the year of 1951. Vidyasagar believed that education and awareness could eradicate societal malpractices. This philosophy is evident from his tenure as a teacher at the Sanskrit College, where he implemented educational methods and curriculum reforms. Notably, he introduced English as a medium of instruction, considering it crucial for the progress of education. He advocated for teaching in the mother tongue, contributing to the development of the Bengali language and literature. His efforts allowed non-Brahmin students to enter Sanskrit College, breaking the Brahmin monopoly. Vidyasagar emphasized the importance of teaching mathematics and science in the Bengali language, translating several English books to facilitate learning. In a letter to Dr. Mayer, Vidyasagar expressed his approach:

"My statement is, let our Sanskrit education mainly aim at the improvement of the Bengali language. Alongside, provide opportunities for acquiring modern knowledge through the medium of the English language. If given support and encouragement by the government, I am confident that within a few years, I can produce educated youth who, through their writings and education, can help spread knowledge among the general population more effectively than traditional pundits or those proficient only in English."

Vidyasagar considered this work as his most beloved objective.

III. ISHWARCHANDRA VIDYASAGAR AND WOMEN EDUCATION

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's another notable achievement was the promotion and expansion of female education in Bengal. In the first half of the 19th century, the spread of Western education in Bengal led to a positive attitude among Bengali elites towards women's education. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's efforts in this regard are noteworthy. He wrote, "Why test the intelligence of women harshly, calling them of limited intellect? Because if they are given education and intellectual training and still cannot feel and understand, then only can they be considered of limited intellect." During this time, female education in Bengal was initiated by Christian missionaries. The Female Juvenile Society established several girls' schools. Mary Cooke's efforts led to the establishment of around 22 girls' schools in various regions of Kolkata. However, the Hindu society viewed the missionary efforts with suspicion, as they believed that promoting female education was a tactic to spread Christianity. Despite being a supporter of female education, Radhakanta Deva was also an adherent of traditional values. The women's education movement took a more organized form due to the efforts of Derozio, a teacher at Hindu College, and the activities of the Young Bengal group. Akshay Kumar Dutt, another member of the Young Bengal group, initiated the advocacy for female education in the press. In 1847, the first Bengali-initiated girls' school was established in Barasat. Many believe that Bethune Sahib visited the school in Barasat and thought of setting up a girls' school. We know that in 1851, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was appointed as the principal of the Sanskrit College. At that time, many people started writing in newspapers in favor of women's education there were many people who spoke against women's education. Vidyasagar actively supported the expansion of female education. At that time, the Bengal government also took several initiatives to promote female education. He believed that his efforts for education would have the support of the Bengal government. Through his own efforts, from 1857 to 1858, Vidyasagar personally established a total of 35 girls' schools in Bengal. Despite his aspirations, Vidyasagar faced disappointment as he did not receive any assistance from the government for these schools. Nevertheless, he did not lose hope and continued to

sustain the schools through his hard work, efforts, and personal financial contributions. Despite social and economic obstacles, Vidyasagar persevered; overcoming challenges to successfully advance the cause of female education, unwaveringly upholding his commitment to societal progress. Vidyasagar found a supportive friend in Bethune Saheb for the expansion of female education. In 1849, on May 7th, Bethune Saheb established a girls' school in Calcutta, initially named Calcutta Female School. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar assisted Bethune Saheb in founding the school. After the establishment of the school, Bethune Saheb requested Vidyasagar to take on the responsibility of school management. In 1850, Vidyasagar assumed the role of school superintendent and was appointed as the editor. Within two years of founding the school, Bethune Saheb passed away in 1851. In his memory, the school was renamed Bethune School for Girls.

IV. BETHUNE SCHOOL AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Bethune School in Bengal played a pioneering role in the advancement of women's education. The founder, Bethune Saheb, in his inaugural speech at the school's establishment, emphasized that religious education should not be part of the government's responsibilities. He also expressed concern about the mockery some still make regarding higher education for girls, stating that educating women in their mother tongue can bring transformative changes in their lives. According to him, women should learn both their mother tongue and English to attain a well-rounded education, including practical skills like sewing and arithmetic. Bethune Saheb believed that if women receive education in this manner, they can contribute significantly to their personal development and the progress of their families. However, it's worth noting that Bethune Saheb's discussion on women's education was limited mainly to Hindu women during that time. In essence, he did not explicitly consider providing education to all women regardless of their religious background. In 1850 AD, Vidyasagar joined Bethune School. In 1856, Bidon Sahib formed a managing committee for Bethune School. Bidon appointed Vidyasagar as the honorary editor of that managing committee. Despite being involved in various activities, Vidyasagar was always diligent for the progress of Bethune School. In

1862 AD, Vidyasagar sent a report to the contemporary government regarding Bethune School. From that report, we can understand his keen interest in women's education. The report said that Reading and Writing, Arithmetic, Biography, Geography, History of Bengal, etc., will be taught through oral lessons, along with which suchikarya (Good practice) should be learned.. Five individuals, including a headmistress, two assistants, and two pandits, served as teachers. However, it's worth noting that there is no mention of Vidyasagar agreeing with Miss Mary Carpenter on opening a teacher training center within Bethune School. He believed that the goal of Bethune School might differ in this aspect. Nevertheless, he acknowledged the need for female teachers in the field of girls' education.

Chandramukhi Basu: Chandramukhi Basu was born in 1860 AD in Dehradun, Bangladesh. When her father, Bhuvan Mohan Basu, converted to Christianity, the family moved from Bangladesh to Dehradun. There, Chandramukhi received primary education from missionaries. Later, she came to Kolkata to enroll in Bethune School. However, at that time, Bethune School did not admit any Christian female students. Therefore, Chandramukhi Basu enrolled in Alexander Duff's Free Church Institution, which later became Scottish Church School. From there, she passed the F.A. examination under the University of Calcutta as the first special female candidate. But due to special permission to sit for the examination, her name was not published in the list of successful candidates by the university authorities. However, two years later, in 1878 AD, Chandramukhi Basu and Kadambini Ganguly passed the entrance examination for F.A. or undergraduate from Bethune School. In 1882 AD, they became the first Indian women to pass the undergraduate examination from the University of Calcutta. In 1884 AD, Chandramukhi Basu passed the M.A. examination from the University of Calcutta as the first Indian woman. In 1886 AD, she joined Bethune School as a teacher. When Bethune College was established separately in 1888 AD, she joined as its first principal. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar presented Chandramukhi Basu with the complete works of Shakespeare for passing the M.A. examination in English as the first female from South-East Asia to become the principal of any college. During her time at Bethune College, she faced

criticism from conservative Hindu society for advocating for extra uniforms and shoes for girls to play tennis and badminton. She even applied to the British government for additional funds for the college. In 1891 AD, she retired and went to Dehradun, where she passed away in 1944 AD.

Kadambini Ganguli: Kadambini Ganguly is remembered as a notable figure, serving as a political and women's rights activist and as a successful Indian physician. She paved new paths for Indian women, disregarding the conservative patriarchy of her time, through her own talents and work ethic. She was born in Bhagalpur, Bihar, in 1861. Her father, Brajakishore Basu, was a teacher. Encouraged by her father, she enrolled at the Girls' Institute Hindu Boarding School in Bhagalpur and later at Bethune School. In 1878, she passed the Entrance Examination from the University of Calcutta, becoming the first female graduate in 1882. In 1884, she became the first female student to start studying at the Calcutta Medical College, although she faced discrimination during her final exams and was failed for one mark. However, her husband, Taraknath Ganguli, always encouraged her. The Chancellor of the University of Calcutta praised Kadambini Ganguly at the time, saying, "another example on the side of progress is the Nobel organization set on foot by the greatest lady in the land, to bring female medical and calling into existence a body of highly trend women devoted to one of the most sacred of human employments." She was the first Indian woman to pursue medical education in Western style. Before going abroad, in 1888, she worked as a physician at Dufferin Hospital in Calcutta. However, a Bengali weekly newspaper, named '*Bangonibasi*' made derogatory remarks against her. Her husband, Taraknath Ganguli, stood by her side, filed a case against the newspaper, and the newspaper was fined by the court. She wasn't just a physician; she was involved in various political and social activities. In 1889, she was a member of the Women's Representative Team at the Bombay Congress. In 1890, she participated in the Congress session in Calcutta and was praised for her eloquence in English. In 1892, she went abroad to study medicine. Her medical expertise became so renowned that in 1895, she was called to Nepal to treat the queen. In 1906, she was one of the leading activists at the Women's Conference in Calcutta. Not only that, she

advocated against the exploitation of laborers in tea gardens in Assam. She also worked for the development of women laborers in the coal mines of Bihar and Odisha. This multifaceted woman passed away in 1923.

Kamini Roy: In the second half of the nineteenth century, among the eminent women of Bengal, Kamini Roy is one of them. She is renowned as poet Kamini Roy in Bengal. This great woman was born in 1864 AD. Her father was the renowned litterateur and magistrate Chandicharan Sen. In 1880 AD, she passed the Entrance Examination from Bethune College with first division. In 1886 AD, she became the first woman in India to pass the B.A. examination with Sanskrit Honors from this school's college section. During the time of the Ilbert Bill agitation, Kamini Roy led the nationalist movement at Bethune College. In 1886 AD, she joined the teaching profession at Bethune College and started teaching when the college section was started there. Her classmate Sarala Devi Chaudhurani reminisced, "Under the leadership of how many girls in the school, my sense of nationality gradually increased. Among them, Kamini Didi and Abala Didi were prominent leaders." She was particularly influenced by poet Hemchandra Bandopadhyay and discussed his first poem "*Alo O Chhaya*" extensively. We can consider Kamini Roy as a feminist writer. The subjects of her poetry are love, nature, and patriotism. In addition to literary discussions, she actively engaged herself in cultural and welfare activities, especially in women's welfare work. In 1922 AD, she was elected as one of the members of the Women's Labor Investigation Commission. She worked as the convenor of the Literature Branch of the Bangiya Sahitya Sammelan and as the Vice President of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. For her extraordinary contribution to Bengali literature, she received the Jagattarini Medal from the University of Calcutta in 1929 AD. This illustrious woman passed away in 1933 AD.

Abala Bose: Abala Bose, a prominent figure in the history of Bengal, is remembered for her contributions to the education of marginalized and neglected women in society. Born in Barishal, Bangladesh, in 1864, to father Durgamohan Das, a social reformer who always emphasized his daughter's education, Abala completed her primary education in Barishal and then moved to

Kolkata for further studies. She enrolled in Bethune School and successfully passed the Entrance Examination in 1881. Her aspiration was to study medicine, but due to the absence of provisions for women to study medicine in Kolkata Medical College, she enrolled in Madras Medical College. However, due to health issues, she couldn't complete her medical studies. In 1887, she married the renowned scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose and stood by his side throughout her life, contributing significantly to the establishment of the "Bose Institute of Science." Abala Bose became a beacon of women's education, establishing the "Bidyasagar Bani Bhavan" to promote education for women. From 1910 to 1936, she skillfully managed the "Brahmo Balika Shikshalaya" with utmost dedication. In 1919, she founded the "Nari Shiksha Samiti" to spread education among girls in rural Bengal, establishing numerous schools through this voluntary organization. Collaborating with her sister Sarala Ray, she founded a school named Gokhale Memorial School, even after her husband's death, she didn't cease her efforts. She established the "Sister Nivedita Women's Education Fund" with a donation of one lakh rupees, providing primary education for adult female students. Not only that, noticing the lack of female teachers in established schools, she founded the "Bani Bhavan Training School" in 1925. Additionally, in 1926, she established the "Mahila Shilpa Bhavan" to empower widowed women, providing training that led many to self-reliance. Abala Bose was a multifaceted personality, notable as a female writer in Bengali literature. She traveled extensively with her scientist husband both domestically and internationally. Drawing from her travel experiences, she authored *"Bengali Women's World Travels."* Besides, she wrote numerous articles advocating women's education and economic empowerment, published in various newspapers and journals both nationally and internationally. This illustrious woman, dedicated to the cause of education and women's welfare, passed away in 1951.

V. LEGACY AND IMPACT

The influence of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and the Bethune school was far reaching. All the social reform activities of Vidyasagar were women centric. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar realized that if female education is spread among women, women will

understand their own good and bad. In the 19th century version of society in Bengal, many educated men realized that if education did not expand, the inequality between men and women in the society would remain. Bethun Saheb and Bethune School played a significant role in removing the equation. Because of Bethune School, girls from upper caste families started crossing the four walls to come to school. Despite initial reluctance at Bethune School, the number of students gradually increased. However, it was not a very easy task for them to receive this exact women education. Although the family agreed, the larger society was not in their favor. Overcoming the adversity, the girls of that time came forward, interested in getting higher education. It can be said that the door of higher education for women was opened in this way. A new life pulse was awakened within the society. This vibe did not fall particularly among the girls of other communities who were backward in the society at that time. But despite these difficulties, the results of the efforts of women's education were far-reaching. Finally it has to be said that 19th century was the century of transition in the life of girls and 20th century certainly brought new messages in the life of girls. Women of the 20th century made themselves equal to men in all spheres of society, starting with the freedom movement. And in the 21st century, women are moving forward with the capital of the 19th century and 20th century, but in many cases, they have left men behind.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, we say that Vidyasagar was the greatest fighter for womankind in his time. He was one of the earliest entrepreneurs of Bengal who brought a new era in Bengal. He was a reformer, not a rebel. It is true that his personality was the greatest contribution of his century. Vidyasagar worked within the mainstream of Hindu life, but retained his unique self-reliant individualism. Vidyasagar's influence transcended mere literary achievements; he illuminated Bengali language, literature, and socio-cultural norms, bridging the gap between medieval obscurity and modern enlightenment. His humanitarian ethos was evident not only in advancing higher education but also in his pioneering efforts in children's literature. His writings for children were marked by simplicity and clarity, fostering intellectual

growth and linguistic development. Vidyasagar was the most important of all the secular humanists of the time. In a sense, Vidyasagar was the boldest representative of the renaissance ideas, perhaps, unparalleled in the history of Indian renaissance. He set up a standard, a height in the realm of thinking and philosophy, an embodiment of uncompromising secular humanism, that remains the boldest and highest ever reached in our past. He set up an example of character that speaks of an ideal people long for. His was a unique towering personality who stood above all others like the Everest. He is not to be compared to any one; he is a 'class-by itself' - a 'sui generis'.

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