

## Rereading Iswarchandra Vidyasagar's Feminine Enlightenment

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*Nineteenth century is noted for women oriented reforms and campaigns in India. Equally important was the male leadership of women oriented reforms. Men were depicted as the saviors of women's liberation. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar's role in the women oriented campaign stood unique due to his selfless devotion to the campaign for legalising widow marriage. The paper deconstructs the above image of Vidyasagar, as constructed by historians and places his 'unique stance' in the broad ideological framework of social reformation of nineteenth century India.*

**Keywords:** Emancipation, caste, sati, knowledge, gender.

### Introduction

Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) was instrumental in the Nineteenth century campaign for women's cause in India. He was not projected as the champion of women's emancipation like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, often called as the pioneer of modernisation process carried under the guise of colonial masters . But a perusal of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar's public and private life, demonstrates his dedication to the cause of women driven by his humanly values rather than inspired by the idea of the modernisation of India. He was seemed and projected by biographers and historians as the lone figure in the general clamouring for women's upliftment as he was not carried away by western values nor by any selfish motives. His sole purpose

was to lift women from miserable condition. He neither denigrated women nor espoused them for upholding the Indian tradition. The above description is the reflection on the historiography of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar's life as a social reformer. The history of his life and his involvement in social cause is depicted so far, centering on his personality. The paper locates Iswarchandra Vidyasagar in the broad ideological framework of social reform of Nineteenth century.

No reformer stands outside the social milieu which shapes it's individuals. In the case of India, caste permeates the material, spiritual and intellectual life of people who belonged to both affluent and deprived castes. Vidyasagar's views, for that matter, the life of a Nienteenth century Indian, was not devoid of caste. No matter, the views are for the social upliftment or political awakening. In the case of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, it was not that difficult to address an upper caste issue of widow marriage though, not sidelining the protests against it from among the Brahmins. Being a Brahmin, he has less social hurdles to confront to approach the society with his arguments in favour of widow marriage. For a deprived caste reformer, convincing the society with his arguments and effecting a change is more difficult. Caste related injustices did not bother an upper caste reformer like Vidyasagar. For a deprived caste reformer, the groundwork for initiating the reform was full of hurdles. He has to challenge first the discrimination being a deprived caste before step into any kind of social reform. It was mainly due to the existence of the knowledge system, that is antagonistic to the deprived castes and in favour to the privileged castes.

Nineteenth century knowledge system was centred on sastras and the Nineteenth century life was regulated by it. Knowledge was disciplined and administered through caste consciousness. It was designed by the upper caste, through which, the Upper caste Brahmins kept the hold of the society in their hands. This caste consciousness controlled the Government and Administration. The entangled knowledge system became the norm and convention. The knowledge system was allowed to percolate to the lower strata of the caste to the extent that lower caste life was brought under upper caste knowledge system and caste values. The Upper caste spread it as

the culture and the system continued without much changes in the Nineteenth century. For upper caste social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Vidyasagar, convincing the society with their arguments did not seem an herculean task, rather it was easy like turning a page to back and forth for finding out some lines to support their arguments.

Nineteenth century was particularly noted for women oriented reforms in India in view of the British critique of Indian Society. The British depicted Indian society as backward with a long history of women's oppression, which, they argued, continued unabated in the Nineteenth century. Women are subjected to a number of evil practices like sati, ban on widow marriage, child marriage and ban on women's literacy during the Nineteenth century. Among the four social maladies mentioned above, the most heinous spectacle was the practice of the self immolation of wife in the funeral pyre of the dead husband called sati. Naturally, this gruesome public spectacle attracted the British first and they written it off as inhuman and; informally, the colonial masters were in favour of banning the practice. A formal ban, the British afraid would turn the Indian crowd against their rule. Native support is required for a legal ban on the practice. The campaign against sati under Raja Ram Mohan Roy, was mostly looked upon as the response of the western inclined Indian intellectuals to the British critique of Indian society. The anti-sati campaign, led by Raja Ram Mohan, Roy, and the consequential British ban on the practice in 1829 created the favourable condition for social reform in India. Legal ban on Sati naturally, raised the question of what to do with the widows who were not given the choice to commit Sati. It forecasted the overcrowding of widows in the society in the coming years. The Nineteenth century women reformers like Pandita Ramabai Saraswati and Parvati Athavali expressed their concern on high caste widows falling to prostitution. The condition of the widows was so disgraceful that Pandita focussed her social reform on widows' well being only. Moreover, the existence of widows, especially young widows, threatened the family organization of upper castes. The upper caste society looked at the unfulfilled and unsatiated sexuality of widows a grave threat to their respect and caste-class status. Thus legal ban on

sati gave rise to new issues to the upper caste society. The society itself prop up issues on its own and men of prominence or interest take them up for a solution. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, to a great extent, was a tool of the upper caste to save them from the peril of disgrace. Thus, widow marriage was a natural solution to the legal ban on sati and the only job of Vidyasagar was to convince the society with sastric interpretation.

The campaign for widow marriage was thus formed the second major woman issue debated in the public followed by sati in the Nineteenthth century. Though sufferings of widows were highlighted in the debates, the attempt was to form public opinion in favour of sastric validity for widow marriage. It is obvious why the male reformers placed the issue of widow marriage within the sastras. Because the debate should be within the precincts of upper caste-male constructed knowledge system. They used both print and platform for creating a favourable public opinion in favour of lifting the ban on widow marriage. And male reformers in the Nineteenth century worked day and night to ease the sufferings of widows - that is the kind of impression the documentary evidence induces one to believe. It might not be otherwise as the system was already fixed and operational around upper caste-male constructed knowledge. Men organized the debate on widow marriage, played a prominent role in the debate and fixed the method of action to be taken for removing the ban on widow marriage. As opined by Lata Mani in the debate on sati, women were absent in the debate on widow marriage too. Indian society always tried to objectify women. That is the reason why women were sidelined in the knowledge construction. They were made to engage in household chores and men brought them under the impression that women are not supposed to come in the public space. World, in common shared the view that public space is meant for men. It came from the thought that women are the workers of ignorance; and men tried their best to abstain women from acquiring knowledge. The purpose was to impose man's control on society and violence was used to bring women under their control. Indian male reformers, in the name of social reformation, made frantic efforts to repair the social system when it was alleged by the British as

backward. The purpose was to rectify certain anomalies in the society and obviously not to emancipate women nor recognizing women's role in knowledge construction.

To a reader, among the reformers Iswarchandra Vidyasagar seemed stood above his contemporaries through his selfless devotion banning the widow marriage, his erudition in sastras and command on Sanskrit, and his convincing interpretation of sastras. Ram Mohan Roy, his contemporary and leader of anti-sati campaign and very much influenced by modern West, expressed his ambiguity about the legitimacy of banning the practice. In his tract PathyaPradhan (1823). Ram Mohan has taken the stance that since all Hindu sects rejected the practice, it could not be regarded as a good practice. (Cited in Nema Sadhan Bose. Indian Awakening and Bengal. Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1990)p.43. On the other hand, moved by the sufferings of widows Iswarchandra Vidyasagar plunged deep into the debate and the struggle for banning widow marriage. However, both Ram Mohan Roy and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, though their stance differ on the widow marriage, belonged to the same knowledge system, their stance had the same impact on changing the overall women's condition in the Nineteenth century.

Various interpretations of the scriptures on widow marriage turned it into a lively public issue of the Nineteenth century. Vidyasagar was a renowned Sanskrit scholar. And his erudition in sastras has given much legitimacy to his sastric interpretations of widow marriage. His knowledge as well as the familiarity of upper caste people with sastras made Vidyasagar's efforts less strenuous. He had the accessibility to Brahmin houses and his convincing arguments had more credibility among the upper castes being a Brahmin. Had it been a Deprived caste who approaches the society with the same arguments raised by Vidyasagar, it would not have been accepted with such receptivity by the Indian public.

Vidyasagar argued that widow marriage was permitted in the sastras. He rejected the arguments based on Manudharma sastra which was accepted as the authentic text for the code of conduct of Nineteenth century Indian society. He said that Manudharmashastra

was not relevant to Kali Yuga. Each Yuga practices code of conduct given in the particular text assigned to the particular Yuga. Among the four yugas, viz., Satya, Treta, Dvapara and Kali respectively, the dharma practiced by the prior yugas cannot be practiced by the succeeding yugas. This decline in dharma was inevitable. And the human power decreases in every successive yugas. For this reason, Manudharmasastra ascribed to Satya Yuga only and it was not applicable to Kali Yuga. The Dharmasastra prescribed for the Kali Yuga is the one written by Parasara. The Dharma assigned to the Kali Yuga only have been accredited in the Parasarasamhita and, among those dharmas, widow marriage has been prescribed in the clearest manner, it can never be admitted that widows have been forbidden to marry in the Kali Yuga<sup>1</sup>.

Vidyassgar, in fact, helped to bring the campaign for widow marriage into caste and male centred world through his scholarship in sastras. He gave proper direction, as envisaged by the upper caste, to the debate in favor of widow marriage through his wide knowledge in Sanskrit texts. He defined the primacy of Vedas the legitimate source book thus: where variance is observed between the Vedas, the Smriti and the Puranas contradict each other there the Veda is the supreme authority. When the Smriti, and the Purana contradict each other, the Smriti is the superior authority<sup>2</sup>. This effective statement was most appropriate at the time when the anti-widow marriage group based their arguments on Brihadaranya Purana and the Aditya Purana.

Inspite of his sincere efforts, more than half a decade of social reform left Vidyasagar an unhappy soul. His involvement in social cause estranged his friends and relatives alike from him. Though this kind of experience is same to all those who upheld the social cause or reform, the craving for self esteem in the society for being an adherent of reform boosts any reformer. Vidyasagar was not an exception. His name was closely connected to the movement for widow marriage. He even confronted physical violence for encouraging marriage of widows. The decision of his son, Narayanachandra to marry a widowed girl in 1870 estranged his family. His wife, Dinamoyee Devi, refused to attend the marriage ceremony. His mother was the one

who encouraged Vidyasagar to take up the cause of widow marriage, but under utter frustration, she left for Banaras.

He himself considered the introduction of widow marriage as the most virtuous deeds of his life. The trauma of Vidyasagar was shared in a letter written to his brother Shambu. A tormented Vidyasagar wrote thus: “On Thursday, 27th Shraavan, Narayan has been married to Baghasundari. Communicate this news to your mother and others. Being the propagator of movement for widow marriage how could I appear before the public in case my son took a wife who was not a widow?”<sup>3</sup> It indicates that Vidyasagar also valued his status as a social reformer like any ordinary reformer of his period.

The cause of public figure like Vidyasagar did not influence his family. Though historians share the view that he did not have the least intention to offend his family with his unorthodox views, the achievement of a reformer is to convince successfully his arguments for social change. If Vidyasagar failed to convince even his family members about the need of widow marriage, one has to think twice about how much he influenced his society with his views on widow marriage. There is another instance of him being succumbed to the pressure of family members.

Before he launched his campaign for widow marriage he sought his father's permission. His father, Takurdas queried thus: “If I do not give the permission, will that stop you?” The sober answer was. “Yes. I shall do nothing as long as you are alive. After your death. I shall feel free to take up my decision”.<sup>4</sup> His reply demonstrates that society should wait till he fulfills his familial commitments. Should a social reformer make the society wait for a change? It does because, the upper caste society should be convinced when a Sanskrit scholar with Brahmanical identity interprets the widow marriage has a sastric sanction.

Male reformers appeared as the saviors of women when they recognised the gender discrimination in the knowledge construction during the Renaissance. Male reformers became their liberators through ban on sati, campaign for widow marriage etc. Though it can be considered as social change, it demurred the self awareness of

their emancipation supposed to be acquired by women themselves. It was indeed the patriarchal conception that men's assistance was undeniable in liberating women. Women, in the Nineteenth century mistaken male reformers role as the necessary social mechanisms for their liberation. This mistaken mode for women's liberation was reckoned as the justice that upper caste men had to undertake for women's emancipation. Later, women recognized male participation in their liberation campaign as jeopardizing the very aim of their liberation. Reading Vidyasagar from feminist perspective amply demonstrates that his reform initiative for women was very much within the patriarchal and upper caste norms.

## **Conclusion**

Women who belonged to various caste, class and creed were not addressed in the reform led under the upper castes. Later, when these women realized it on their own, Dalit women, women in the unorganized sector, marginalized women and transgenders started exerting their presence in the modern period. Confrontation against the conventions was only peripheral. That too among the uppercastes women only. Its intension was mainly to ensure 'Manuism' of upper caste men in the name of the women's protection. Therefore, it is necessary to deconstruct the women's movements with the values of real women's liberation. The deconstruction should be based on the caste issues raised by Ambedkar and realizing the caste and subcastes within Hindutva. Women's liberation can not be achieved by assimilating Semitic values of non Hindu religions because Semitic religions in Indian condition imitates upper caste values and trying to become upper castes. There is a greater need to free women from religions and the new ideas and perceptions on women's liberation should emanate from the condition of women being liberated from religion too. At the same time, it is necessary to realise that women's liberation in the past were the work of men.

## **End Notes:**

1. Eshwar Chandra Vidyasagar, *The practice of widow marriage among Hindus. Nineteenth Century Studies*. Quarterly, Calcutta, bibliographical Research Center 1975. p.174.
2. Ibid.,178



3. Santhosh Kumar Adhikari. *Vidyasagar and the Regeneration of Bengal*. Calcutta, Subarnarekha, 1980.p.52.
4. Syamal Chakrabarty. *Vidyasagar*, NCERT New Delhi, 1971, p.21

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