



Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar: Epitome of Humanism in 19th century India

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ABSTRACT

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar stands as the epitome of humanism in nineteenth-century India, embodying the values of compassion, rationalism, and secular reform. Deeply influenced by the European Renaissance yet rooted in Indian ethos, Vidyasagar represented a synthesis of Western liberal thought and indigenous moral consciousness. His vision of humanism transcended caste, creed, and gender, focusing instead on human welfare and social equality. Distinct from contemporaries like Raja Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar's reformism was grounded not in religion but in the ethics of service and humanity. His tireless efforts toward widow remarriage, women's education, and the eradication of social evils marked a new chapter in India's modern social consciousness. As a scholar, educator, and reformer, he redefined the role of education as a means of emancipation and enlightenment. Vidyasagar's life reflects secular humanism in practice—he worshiped no deity, yet served humanity as his religion. His philosophy remains a timeless inspiration, emphasizing that true religion lies in the moral and intellectual upliftment of humankind. Through his deeds, Vidyasagar transformed the moral and intellectual fabric of nineteenth-century Bengal, making him a central figure in India's humanist renaissance.



Introduction

'Humanism' is a nebulous term. In the year 1806 onwards the term HUMANISM was used to point out the classical curriculum which was taught at various German schools. The term 'Humanism' was used in English from 1836 onwards for the same. The German historian and Linguist George Voigt used Humanism to highlight the humanism of Renaissance in 1856. The term's specific use became popular in various countries especially among Italian History enthusiasts. Humanism comes from the Italian word – HUMANISTA meaning a person who is engaged in studying and research over Classical Greek and Latin literature in 15th century Italy. A different meaning of this word arrives in mid-18th century. At the same time left leaning Hegelianist in Germany used the same term to focus on Human centered philosophies. Though Arnold Ruiz and Karl Marx were highly critical about the side effects of the Church over the autocratic German administration. Though change in time brought before us various dimensions of the words 'Humanism' and 'Humanist' but the words share a deep connection with human welfare. Above all the meaning of Humanism rose to a new level when in 19th century world especially India a close relationship between secularism and humanism was established.

From time to time in this world legends were born who might have been associated with any religion. But their unconditional serviceability towards human kind didn't stop us from calling them Humanists. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is one such great human being. Though he was born in a conservative Hindu Brahman family but he was progressive Humanistic super human well above the narrow-minded caste based discriminations. He was a living symbol of 19th century Renaissance. Needless to say that the Indian Renaissance was deeply influenced by the European one. Renaissance began in Europe in 15th – 16th century. This reawakening alias Humanist movement started by opposing the concept of God and church and was based on the idea that everything irrational, can't be proven must be rejected. This whole idea was *actually* the slogan behind secular humanism. It was a voice for human beings and the awareness of their rights. The European Renaissance sung the song of human conscience only. Until Renaissance the social value system of human comprised only one entity that is God where human beings existed in traces. But it is the Renaissance induced Humanism which unrecognized the supernatural and was utmost secular. A neo consciousness developed among Indians when they came in contact with western culture and education after the establishment of British rule. It is this reawakening which is known as Indian Renaissance. Although there is much difference between the European Renaissance and its Indian counterpart. Because the Bengal or Indian Renaissance were highly sectarian and affected to specific communities. At the same time sponsored by the British regime. The English imperial forces wanted to Bengal and India to march forward although enslaved by colonialism. This resulted in unequal



and disproportionate changes and that's the reason behind the fact that Renaissance in India didn't reach every corner of the society. It existed within the bubble of middle class and learned. The rural Bengal remained unaffected by this City based middle class oriented Renaissance.

Keeping aside the lacuna of 19th century Bengal reawakening, it did bring various liberal ideas and theories in the forefront of the society. Humanism, Modernism, progressiveness, rationalism were among the basic tenets. It is with the help of the idea of humanism that it was felt to stop inhuman rituals. The 19th century rebirth led the way to stop the uncanny practices of Sati burning, child marriage, polygamy, girl child sacrifice and at the same time shown a path for female education, holistic development of women, and to use rationalism, progressive ideas to fight against social evils. The principal and first personality who was inspired by the European Renaissance in 19th century India was none other than Rammohan Roy. But he was not free from religious leaning. He never excluded religious beliefs from his thoughts. His struggle was against the patriarchal rites and pagan rituals developed in the name of religion. He was a Monotheist. He even practiced Vedantic philosophy. But unlike Sankaracharya had a different view of the world and mortal life. He never said the world is a lie like Sankaracharya. His main objective was to initiate religious reform for spiritual and holistic empowerment of humanity. He started the reawakening through religious reform by amalgamating the basic concepts of religion with the European bourgeois humanistic perceptions. But the **numero uno** Pundit of Hindu shastras Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was an exception from Rammohan Roy though they shared the same goal from the angle of religious beliefs and ideology. By remaining a monotheist, Rammohan Roy preached Vedantic philosophy based Brahma religion. Vidyasagar on the other hand opined Vedanta as a bogus philosophy and stressed on human welfare and humanism only.¹ There is no doubt that Vidyasagar's thought took the 19th century Renaissance to a new level.

For his whole life he was aloof from the question of God and religion. He never associated himself with any established religion even though he was born in a Hindu Brahman family. Though he had good relations with the members of Brahmosamaj, but there is absolutely no evidence of his participation in Brahma prayers. Again he never said that he was an atheist. Although Professor Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya declared with much confidence that Vidyasagar was an atheist.² It is a well-known fact that Vidyasagar shared a cordial relationship with professor Bhattacharya. But it is not certain that whether Vidyasagar was truly an atheist. The author of the book 'Puratan Prasanga' Bipinbihari Gupta talked about the same like professor Bhattacharya with Dwijendranath Thakur, the eldest son of Maharshi Debendranath Thakur. Dwijendranath Thakur agreed with the view of professor Bhattacharya partly by stating, "He was a kind of atheist who is called an agnostic".³ In reality it will not be rational to show



him as an atheist or as an agnostic because he never spent any time in thinking about God and its existence neither of its existence nor because it is non existing. In that sense it will not be wrong to say that he was an agnostic. Actually his religious beliefs were entangled with his work beliefs. His religion was actually his deeds. Khudiram Basu's observation is no doubt recommendable here, "It can said about his religious life that his religious life was his work life. Work was religion to him. He was a monotheist. We can find its instance in his 'Bodhoday'. But he wrote his first book 'Baudebcharit'. He used see idol worship as a human action. Because he never saw idol worship in his house. In a balanced manner he can be said an agnostic. ⁴ Though agnostic and monotheistic have different meanings but it works in case of Vidyasagar. He never worshiped any deity. He never participated in any evening prayer. However, he wrote that God is a formless consciousness in the second edition of 'Bodhoday'. In relation to this, Amiya Kumar Samanta in the chapter titled 'God, Religion and Vidyasagar' in his book 'Prasanga Vidyasagar' commented, "After analyzing all the evidences it will not be correct to call Vidyasagar an atheist, in the same way it will totally untrue to think him as a believer of God. He was an agnostic will be the nearest to truth in this case." ⁵ But he never prevented his family members, relatives and friends from practicing any religion neither he made any foul comments. His brother cum first biographer Shambhuchandra Vidyaratna stated that Vidyasagar's parents were God to him. His mother was the greatest influence over him.

While engaging himself in the battle of social and educational reforms , he observed that prevalent religious orthodoxy, ritualistic and luxurious lifestyle have turned his fellow Indians into still, immovable, lazy, lifeless commodities. Blind beliefs transformed the public into still-life and short sighted. They fear to think anew. He observed how conservative Brahmanical hegemony in the name of religion have consumed the whole society. He came in contact with western culture and education and saw that at a time when India is lagging due to illiteracy, blind beliefs, orthodoxy the western world is progressing by using modern science and rational approach. He concluded that in order to make Indians earn the respect of human kind they have to be educated in modern education to shed darkness from their thoughts and develop a scientific and rational mindset otherwise they can never be freed. Traditional knowledge of Shastras and western knowledge system and unconditional love for the downtrodden inspired him to serve humanity throughout his life. His aim of emancipating the oppressed led him to the truth that there is no scope of freedom in ancient religious customs and only modern science based progressive ideas can bring salvation. It will not be an exaggeration to state that Vidyasagar was the greatest individual who aroused new sense of justice and life in the psych of Bengalis during the 19th century humanistic discourses. ⁶



Throughout his life Vidyasagar remained on the path of secular humanism. He was free from every religious beliefs. He never associated himself with Shastra based religious ideas. He never believed casteism and untouchability. There was no difference between Brahman, Chandal Muslim or Santhal to him. He could engage with everyone very easily and quickly used become their friend. Though he was sarcastic about Christian Fathers but provided ample support to the converted soul of Michael Madhusudan Dutt. It is also heard that often a handicapped Muslim Fakir used to sing for him. ⁷ Such a liberal secular soul was beyond imagination at that point of time when the society was diseased with casteism, sectarianism, religious orthodoxy, untouchability, inhuman customs and narrow mentality. It's a highly strange matter that how Vidyasagar fought as a one man army against the social conservatism ideologically guided by secularism and humanism. He was highly modern and realistic in his attitude which is why he never expressed himself fiercely. Many of his contemporaries like the members of Young Bengal movement tried to become free from religious leanings and progressive, voiced against orthodox nature of Hinduism, even disagreed to take oath in the name of God in court but never understood the social connection to religion which is why they tried to break the monopoly of customs forcefully. As a consequence of this public had mixed reactions for the actions of Young Bengal Movement. Vidyasagar had an in depth connection to his stand on religion, works and thought process. That's why the socially influential people never succeeded in socially exclude Vidyasagar. One of the prime reason was that his knowledge were never bookish or for flaunting and that is why he had the ability to think independently fundamentally keeping his mind free and focused unlike the new Bengalis who floated with western culture. He was truly modern, rational like the British yet had a profound knowledge over Indian classical languages, literature and philosophy.

Vidyasagar humanism can be observed especially through his reform movements. Basically there were two modes of his reform efforts – social reform and reform through education. The very first step he took under social reform was to end caste based discrimination and stopping evil practices. Vidyasagar engaged himself in the upliftment of the helpless widows under the instructions of his mother Bhagabati Debi. On one hand he was working hard to educate women and on the other he was fighting a battle for remarriage of widows. It was not an easy task at a time when the society was conservative. He had to fight social resistance and indomitable attitude of the shastra known pundits. He took the help of Parashar Sanhita to prove that widow remarriage is possible according to Hindu Shastras. He for the first time spoke in favor of widow remarriage and against child marriage by writing an article 'Balya Bibaher Dosh' in the journal 'Sarbashubhakari' in 1850. On one hand he wrote foundational works ('Bidhaba Bibaha Chalita Hawa Uchit Kina Etadwibashayak Prastab') in favor of widow remarriage and on the



other hand wrote against polygamy ('Bahu Bibaha Rachita Hawa Uchit Kina Etadwibashayak Prastab'). Not only by writing books but he even sent a petition including signatures from one thousand strong public to British parliament to make widow remarriage legally possible. In the long run Lord Dalhousie passed widow remarriage into an act in 1856. He also sent a petition signed by fifty thousand people to the English parliament to make polygamy illegal. But the British government was not ready to interfere in the socio religious matters as in the meantime Sepoy mutiny started. Vidyasagar did not stop by making widow remarriage legal, he invested all his energy into making it socially acceptable. He established widow remarriage socially by marrying off Professor Shrish Chandra Vidyaratna of erstwhile Sanskrit college of Kolkata with the widow Kalimati. Though Raja Radhakanta Deb led conservative public tried to resist such marriage but Vidyasagar was not ready to be defeated. In 1872 he founded 'Hindu Family Annuity Fund' to promote widow remarriage financially.

Apart from social reforms one will surely observe his humanistic perspective in his efforts to usher reform through education. Immediately after assuming the charge as the principal of Sanskrit college in 1851, he rose against caste based prejudices. Till 1851, it was only the wards belonging to Brahman and Baidya households had access to learning there. Vidyasagar opened the college's door to everyone irrespective of their caste by abolishing the earlier norm. Before Vidyasagar took the charge holidays at Sanskrit college were used to be determined according to Hindu lunar calendar and auspices. He abolished it and made Sunday as the only day for holiday. He was very stringent about the attendances of the professors. He even brought reforms in curriculum of the college by removing Sanskrit grammar, Sakhya and Vedantic philosophy and introducing English at the same time. He even pioneered in the process of removing traditional concepts of mathematics and brought instead mathematics the way it is taught in the western universities. All his life he fought for public education and women's education. With the help of Lord Harding he established schools in various villages and towns among which thirty three exists permanently. Throughout Bengal he founded twenty model schools among which he used to run a few on his own finances. One of his greatest achievements was the Metropolitan College at Kolkata which is known as Vidyasagar College today. One has to separately mention his contribution towards women's education. He founded nearly thirty five schools for spreading female education. Among them one such school named 'Hindu Female School' was established with the help of Englishman Bethune which we know as Bethune school today. It was Vidyasagar's empathetic heart that wished to liberate the women folk. Still now his books are read and felt and significant which he wrote for developing girls and boys into knowledgeable, learned and matured citizens.



Vidyasagar is that highly progressive, liberal minded legend who as the product of 19th century Bengal Renaissance ushered novelty in the Bengali psyche along with European Renaissance ideals and humanism. He kindled new aspirations in the 19th century Bengal with his liberal secular humanism when the society was sick with meaningless rituals. His every deed, every effort showcases his humanistic nature and that is the only reason which made him immortal in this great nation even after a century passed after his death. Whatever might be his religious affiliation, might use to believe in God or not but throughout his life he kept it secret and very personal. He always drew an imaginary boundary between his personal life and his social one. He never gave up from his aim of serving the humanity in all capacity for a single day. This discussion can be concluded by mentioning Ramendra Sundar Tribedi's words for this legend, "It was not in his nature to lecture on the goodness of this world by living in the center of wildfire of sorrow and misery . Perhaps that is the reason why he never expressed his opinion about God and afterlife. He used to walk that path only which his instinct used to allow him. He used to live a life by fulfilling his responsibilities by serving the human kind only. He never had the luxury of free time to indulge in unnecessary controversies. " 8

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