

UPSC
Old NCERT Summary (Bipan Chandra)
Social & Cultural Awakening in the First Half- 2

DEBENDRANATH TAGORE AND ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR

- The Brahmo Samaj had in the meanwhile continued to exist but without much life till Debendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath Tagore, revitalized it. Debendranath was a product of the best in the traditional Indian learning and the new thought of the West. In 1839 he founded the Tatvabodhini Sabha to propagate Rammohan Roy's ideas. In time it came to include most of the prominent followers of Rammohan and Derozio and other independent thinkers like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Akshay Kumar Dutt. The Tatvabodhini Sabha and its organ the Tatvabodhini Patrika promoted a systematic study of India's past in the Bengali language. It also helped spread a rational outlook among the intellectuals of Bengal. In 1843 Debendranath Tagore reorganised the Brahmo Samaj and put new life into it. The samaj actively supported the movement for widow remarriage, abolition of polygamy women's education improvement of the ryots condition and temperance.
- The next towering personality to appear on the Indian scene was Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the great scholar and reformer. Vidyasagar dedicated his entire life to the cause of social reform. Born in 1820 in a very poor family, he struggled through hardship to educate himself and in the end rose in 1851 to the position of the principal ship of the Sanskrit College. Though he was a great Sanskrit scholar, his mind was open to the best in Western thought, and he came to represent a happy blend of Indian and Western culture. His greatness lay above all in his sterling character and shining intellect. Possessed of immense courage and a fearless mind he practised what he believed. There was no lag between his beliefs and his action, between his thought and his practice. He was simple in dress and habits and direct in his manner. He was a great humanist who possessed immense sympathy for the poor, the unfortunate and the oppressed.
- In Bengal, innumerable stories regarding his high character, moral qualities and deep humanism are related till this day. He resigned from government service for he would not tolerate undue official interference. His generosity to the poor was fabulous. He seldom

possessed a warm coat for he invariably gave it to the first naked beggar he met on the street.

- Vidyasagar's contribution to the making of modern India is many sided. He evolved a new methodology of teaching Sanskrit. He wrote a Bengali primer which he is used till this day. By his writings he helped in the evolution of a modern prose style in Bengali. He 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 enjoy at the time. He was determined to break the priestly monopoly of scriptural knowledge. To free Sanskrit studies from the harmful effects of self-imposed isolation, he introduced the study of Western though in the Sanskrit College. He also helped found a college which is now named after him.
- Above all Vidyasagar is remembered gratefully by his country men for his contribution to the uplift of India's down trodden womanhood. Here he proved a worthy successor to Rammohun Roy. He waged a long struggle in favour of widow remarriage. His humanism was aroused to the full by the sufferings of the Hindu widows. To improve their lot he gave his all and virtually ruined himself. In 1855, he raised his powerful voice, backed by the weight of immense traditional learning in favour of widow remarriage. Soon a powerful movement in favour of widow remarriage was started which continues till this day.
- Later in the year 1855, a large number of petitions from Bengal, Madras, Bombay, Nagpur and other cities of India were presented to the Government asking it to pass an act legalising the remarriage of widows. This agitation was successful and such a law was enacted. The first lawful Hindu widow remarriage among the upper castes in our country was celebrated in Calcutta on 7 Dec ember 1856 under the inspiration and supervision of Vidyasagar. Widows of many other castes in different parts of the country already enjoyed this right under customary law. An observer has described the ceremony in the following words.
- For his advocacy of widow re-marriage, Vidyasagar had to face the bitter enmity of the orthodox Hindus, At times even his life was threatened. But he fearlessly pursued his chosen course. Through his efforts, which included the grant of monetary help to needy couples twenty-five widow-remarriages were performed between 1855 and 1880.
- In 1850, Vidyasagar protested against child-marriage. All his life he campaigned against polygamy. He was also deeply interested in the education of women. As a Government Inspector of Schools, he organised thirty-five girls schools, many of which he ran at his own

expense. As Secretary to the Bethune School he was one of the pioneers of higher education for women.

- Some even believed that educated women would lose their husband. The first steps in giving a modern education to girls were taken by the missionaries in 1821, but these efforts were marred by the emphasis on Christian religious education. The Bethune School had great difficulty in securing students. The young students were shouted at and abused and sometimes even their parents were subjected to social boycott. Many believed that girls who had received Western education would make slave of their husbands.

PIONEERS OF REFORM IN WESTERN INDIA

- The impact of Western ideas was felt much earlier in Bengal than in Western India which was brought under effective British control as late as 1818, Bal Shastri Jambekar was one of the first reformers in Bombay. He attacked Brahmanical orthodoxy and tried to reform popular Hinduism. In 1832, he started a weekly, the Darpan, with the objective of chasing away the mist of error and ignorance which clouded men's minds, and shedding over them the light of knowledge, in which the people of Europe have advanced so far before the other nations of the world". 1849, the the Praramahansa Madali was founded in Maharashtra. Its founders believed in one God and were primarily interested in breaking caste rules. At its meetings members took food cooked by low-caste people.
- They also believed its permitting widow remarriage and in the education of women. Branches of the Mandalis influence on young people, R.G. Bhandarkar, the famous historian, later recalled: "When we went for long walks in the evening. we talked about the evils of caste distinctions, how much damage was done by this division between high and low, and how true progress for this country could never be achieved without removing these distinctions". In 1848, several educated young men formed the Students Literary and Scientific Society, which had two branches, the Gujarat and the Marathi Dnyan Prasarak Mandalis.
- The Society organised lectures on popular science and social questions. One of the aims of the society was to start school at Poona and soon many other schools came up. Among the active promoters of the these schools were Jagannath Shankar Seth and Bhau Daji. Phule was also a pioneer of the widow remarriage movement in Maharashtra. Vishnu Shastri Pundit founded the Widow Remarriage Association in the 1850s. Another prominent worker in this field was Karsondas Mulji who

started the Saiya Prakashm Gujarati in 1852 to advocate widow remarriage.

- An outstanding champion of new learning and social reform in Maharashtra was Gopal Hari Deshmukh, who became famous by the pen-name 'Lokahitawadi'. He advocated the re-organisation of the Indian society on rational principles & modern humanistic and secular values. Jotiba Phule, born in a low caste Mali family, was also acutely aware of the socially degraded position of non-Brahmins and untouchables in Maharashtra. All his life he carried on a campaign against upper caste domination and Brahmanical supremacy.
- Dadabhai Naoroji was another leading social reformer of Bombay. He was one of the founders of an association to reform the Zoroastrian religion and the Parsi Law Association which agitated for the grant of a legal status to women and for uniform laws of inheritance and marriage for the Parsis. From the very beginning, it was, in the main, through the Indian language press and literature that the reformers carried on their struggle. To enable Indian languages to play this role successfully, they undertook such humdrum tasks as preparation of language primers, etc.
- For example, both Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Rabindranath Tagore wrote Bengali primers which are being used till this day. In fact, the spread of modern and reformist ideas among the mass of people occurred primarily through Indian languages. We should also remember that the significance of the 19th century reformers lay not in their number but in the fact that they were the trendsetters—it was their thought and activity that were to have decisive impact on the making of a new India.