

Revisiting Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's Educational Thoughts on Women's Education: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) remains a towering archetype of the Bengal Renaissance, whose pedagogical and social interventions laid the foundational architecture for modern Indian education. This research employs a qualitative, historical-interpretive methodology to revisit Vidyasagar's educational thoughts, specifically centering on his revolutionary advocacy for women's education. By analyzing primary documents, including his correspondence with colonial administrators, legislative petitions, and seminal Bengali primers like *Barnaparichay*, the study explores the synthesis of Western liberal humanism and indigenous moral consciousness that defined his "practical humanism". The thematic analysis identifies five core themes: (1) education as a mechanism for female intellectual liberation; (2) the democratization of knowledge through vernacular pedagogy; (3) the institutionalization of girls' schooling against severe societal resistance; (4) the interplay between legal reform (widow remarriage) and educational access; and (5) a vision for progressive, holistic education. The findings suggest that Vidyasagar's emphasis on maternal education as the root of societal progress and his commitment to equitable access directly prefigure the inclusive mandates of the National Education Policy 2020. The study concludes that Vidyasagar's legacy provides a robust framework for addressing contemporary challenges such as gender-based literacy gaps and the rural-urban digital divide, advocating for a sustained, empathetic approach to educational reform in modern India.

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KEYWORDS: Women's Education, Educational Philosophy, Vidyasagar, Qualitative Study, Gender Equality, Bengal Renaissance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century in colonial India was an era of profound socio-intellectual transformation, characterized by the confrontation between decaying feudal structures and the burgeoning influences of European Enlightenment ideas. Within this context, the condition of women was particularly bleak; they were often relegated to a status lower than second-class citizens, subjected to practices such as child marriage, Kulin polygamy, and forced asceticism in widowhood. Denial of formal education was used as a structural tool to maintain this subjugation, often reinforced by superstitions that educated women were "doomed to widowhood".

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar emerged as a luminous figure who recognized that no society could progress while leaving half of its population in "the dark world of society". Known polymathically as a scholar, educator, and activist, his approach was unique: he

did not seek to replace Indian traditions entirely with Western models but aimed for a "harmonious mingling" of what was best in both. While earlier reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy focused on high-level philosophical and legislative changes, Vidyasagar was a "brave entrepreneur" who took the reform movement to the grassroots, personally traveling from door to door to persuade families to enroll their daughters in schools.

Rationale and Significance

This study is significant because it moves beyond a mere biographical account to provide a methodical theoretical critique of Vidyasagar's pedagogical vision. As India navigates the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), revisiting Vidyasagar's efforts offers critical insights into how vernacular instruction and gender equity can be operationalized in a diverse, federal nation.

Research Gap and Objectives

While historical literature on Vidyasagar is abundant, there is a distinct lack of qualitative inquiries that synthesize his pedagogical strategies—such as the creation of the *Barnaparichay*—with his sociological critique of patriarchal norms. This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring:

1. The philosophical foundations of Vidyasagar's commitment to women's education.
2. The thematic significance of his institutional and legislative efforts.
3. The lasting relevance of his educational thoughts in the contemporary Indian context.

2. Conceptual / Theoretical Framework

Liberal Humanism and Indigenous Modernity

Vidyasagar's philosophy is best described as "practical humanism"—a secular outlook that prioritized human welfare over religious dogma. While he was a master of the Sanskrit *Shastras*, his temperament was akin to a "Mill-esque liberal," believing in individual dignity and the rational potential of all beings. His reforms represented a form of "indigenous modernity," where gender equality was derived not merely from colonial influence but from a reinterpretation of Indian values through reason and justice.

The Rights-Based Perspective

Vidyasagar challenged the functionalist perspective that relegated women to purely domestic roles. He viewed education as a "weapon" for positive attitudinal change and female autonomy. This aligns with modern theories of "Transformative Education," which posit that learning should empower marginalized groups to challenge structural inequalities.

Resonance with Modern Pedagogy

His ideas prefigure the 4E approach (embodied, enacted, embedded, extended) by emphasizing that learning is most effective when it is situated in a child's cultural and linguistic context. His belief that "daughters also are to be reared up and educated with care together with sons" (*kanyapyebam palaniya sikshaniyaiti yatnatah*) serves as the conceptual bedrock for gender inclusiveness in modern Indian policy.

3. Review of Literature

Recent scholarly discourse (2015–2025) has increasingly shifted from purely historical accounts to feminist and sociological interpretations of Vidyasagar's legacy. Proponents like Paul, Chatterjee, and Das (2023) highlight that Vidyasagar viewed the denial of education to women as the "root cause" of many societal problems.

Feminist Critiques

Tanika Sarkar (2008) provides a critical lens, using phrases like the "wicked widows" to describe how 19th-century society viewed these marginalized women. Scholars note that while some early emancipatory attempts had patriarchal underpinnings, Vidyasagar's strategy of "changing society from within" using scriptural authority was more effective than the radical, dismissive approach of the "Young Bengal" group.

Pedagogical Reinterpretations

Research into *Barnaparichay* (1855) identifies it as a deliberate "epistemological intervention"—an early form of epistemic decolonization that stripped the Bengali language of its medieval scholasticism to make it a tool for rational knowledge. However, recent studies also identify persistent "systemic barriers" into the 21st century, such as high dropout rates and gender bias in curricula, suggesting that Vidyasagar's mission remains unfinished.

4. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, historical-interpretive approach**. This design is uniquely suited for revealing the "hidden stories" of those marginalized by historical policies and for uncovering the inner meanings of pedagogical texts.

Data Sources

The inquiry relies on **secondary and primary sources**, including:

- Vidyasagar's autobiography (reminiscences of childhood) and his Bengali primer *Barnaparichay*.
- Archival letters and reports from his tenure as Principal of Sanskrit College and Special Inspector of Schools.
- Scholarly books and journal articles published between 2018 and 2026 to ensure contemporary academic rigor.

Method of Analysis

The study employs **Thematic Interpretation** and **Document Analysis**. Primary texts were coded for recurring conceptual markers such as "intellectual liberation," "democratic accessibility," and "familial empowerment." These codes were then clustered into overarching themes that illustrate the "Ocean of Knowledge's" vision.

5. Vidyasagar's Educational Thoughts on Women's Education

Advocacy for Female Literacy

Vidyasagar believed that mass education was incomplete without the education of girls. He famously argued that an educated mother is a child's

first and most important teacher, thus linking women's education to the holistic development of the next generation.

Institutional Efforts: The Bethune School and Beyond

His collaboration with John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune led to the establishment of the **Hindu Female School (1849)**, the first secular school for girls in India. Vidyasagar served as its honorary secretary for nearly two decades, managing it through a period of intense social backlash.

The Expansion of 1857–1858

While serving as the Special Inspector of Schools, Vidyasagar established **35 girls' schools** across the districts of Nadia, Midnapur, Hooghly, and Burdwan. These schools enrolled over 1,300 students at a time when educating girls was considered "heresy" by the orthodox gentry.

Vocational and Holistic Curriculum

Ahead of his time, Vidyasagar designed a curriculum that included not just reading and writing, but also arithmetic, geography, history, and vocational skills like **needlework and sewing**. This reflected his belief that education must lead to self-sufficiency and empowerment.

6. Findings / Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Education as Empowerment and Agency

Vidyasagar viewed educated women as "weapons" capable of yielding a positive impact on both home and professional fields. Narrative evidence from his writings suggests he aimed to create the *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman) who was an autonomous individual capable of making informed decisions.

Theme 2: Equality and Social Justice

His vision of humanism transcended gender and caste. By opening the premises of the Sanskrit College to non-Brahmins and advocating for equal educational facilities for girls "in cities, towns, as well as villages," he pioneered the concept of **Universal Access** in India.

Theme 3: The Synergy of Education and Social Reform

Vidyasagar correctly identified the interconnection between "social deaths" (child marriage/sati) and educational lack. His campaign for the **Widow Remarriage Act (1856)** was technically an educational reform, as it aimed to restore dignity and a future to young girls who would otherwise be relegated to a life of misery.

Theme 4: Resistance and the "Nari Siksha Bhandar"

Reform did not come without a price. When the colonial government refused to modify grants-in-aid rules for girls' schools, Vidyasagar bore the expenses out of his personal salary. To sustain this mission, he established the **Nari Siksha Bhandar** (Female Education Fund), receiving contributions from sympathetic bureaucrats like Sir Cecil Beadon.

Theme 5: A Progressive Vision for Indigenous Education

His "democratic" teaching methods aimed to make literacy reachable for first-generation learners. By simplifying the alphabet in *Barnaparichay*, he broke the "intellectual stagnation" of the colonial system and created a "culturally responsive" model that valued the mother tongue.

7. Discussion

Interpreting Findings through Educational Philosophy

Vidyasagar's work represents a **Burkean approach** to gradual reform—using scriptural authority to justify modernist changes. He did not argue from a purely Westernized perspective but used "vichara" (critical analysis of scriptures) to prove that widow remarriage and female study were scripturally sanctioned. This "internal reform" strategy made his changes more sustainable within the conservative Hindu fabric.

Comparison with Modern Perspectives

The findings show a striking conceptual convergence between Vidyasagar's "man-making" (and woman-making) education and the goals of **NEP 2020**. Both emphasize:

- **Vernacular Empowerment:** NEP's focus on the mother tongue mirrors Vidyasagar's vernacular pedagogy.
- **Holistic Learning:** Integrating ethics and vocational skills with academic theory.
- **Inclusivity:** Bridging the gaps for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs).

Relevance in Contemporary Context

While enrollment parity is largely achieved today, the "digital divide" and "stereotypical thinking" noted in recent articles suggest that women are still marginalized in advanced STEM fields and leadership roles. Vidyasagar's insistence on **self-sufficiency** remains a vital lesson for a society grappling with high unemployment and underutilized female potential.

8. Implications

For the Modern Education System

Vidyasagar's legacy suggests that "Access" is insufficient without "Acceptance." Modern schools

should adopt his door-to-door approach by engaging with local communities in regional languages to dismantle persistent stigmas against marginalized children.

For Gender Equality

Policy should move beyond enrollment metrics to "**Persistence Equity**." The creation of the "Gender Inclusion Fund" in NEP 2020 should be seen as a successor to the *Nari Siksha Bhandar*, requiring sustained funding to provide bicycles, sanitation, and digital devices for female and transgender students.

For Policy and Curriculum Development

Curricula must be "linguistically readable" and "pedagogically understandable". Following the model of *Barnaparichay*, instructional materials should be available in multiple Indian languages, including tribal dialects, to ensure that no child is excluded due to a language barrier.

9. Conclusion

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was more than a reformer; he was the "real maker of society" who recognized that the education of women is the prerequisite for national enlightenment. By synthesizing ancient wisdom with modern reason, he created a unique Indian paradigm of progress that has stood the test of time.

His life stands as a testament to the belief that education is the "only tool to free the nation from the handcuffs of superstition". As India marches toward its vision of "Viksit Bharat" by 2047, the principles of the Vidyasagar era—equity, vernacular empowerment, and character building—remain the most powerful weapons for change.

Future Research

Future qualitative studies should conduct **longitudinal analyses** of the impact of vernacular primers on first-generation learners in rural tribal areas, continuing Vidyasagar's final mission among the Santhal people in Karmatar.

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