Gandhi's Tribute to ISWARCHANDRA VIDYASAGAR

There is no gainsaying the fact that a nation's rise or fall depends upon its great men. The people who produce good men cannot but be influenced by them. The main reason for the special distinction that we find in Bengal is that many great men were born there during the last century. Beginning with Rammohan Roy,¹ one heroic figure after another has raised Bengal to a position higher than that of the other provinces. It can be said that Iswarchandra Vidyasagar was the greatest among them. "Vidyasagar", which means an ocean of learning, was an honorific of Ishwarchandra, conferred on him by the pandits of Calcutta for his profound Sanskrit learning. But Ishwarchandra was not an ocean of learning only; he was an ocean of compassion, of generosity, as well as of many other virtues. He was a Hindu, and a Brahmin too. But to him, Brahmin and Sudra, Hindu and Muslim, were all alike. In any good deed that he performed, he made no distinction between high and low. When his professor had an attack of cholera, he himself nursed him. As the professor was poor, Ishwarchandra called in the doctors

¹ (1774-1833). A great social and religious reformer, founder of the Brahma Samaj, supported abolition of Sati and worked hard for the spread of education.
at his own cost and himself attended to the patient’s toilet.

He used to buy *luchi*\(^2\) and curds and feed the poor Muslims at his own cost, in Chandranagar,\(^3\) and helped with money those who needed it. If he saw a cripple or anyone in distress by the roadside, he took him to his own house and nursed him personally. He felt grief at other people’s sorrows and joy at their joys.

Himself he led a very simple life. His dress consisted of a coarse *dhoti*, a shawl of a similar kind to cover his body, and slippers. In that dress he used to call on Governors, and in the same dress he greeted the poor. He was really a *fakir*, a *sannyasi* or a *yogi*. It behoves us all to reflect on his life.

Ishwarchandra was born of poor parents in a small village in the Midnapur *taluka*.\(^4\) His mother was a very saintly woman, and many of her virtues were inherited by Ishwarchandra. Even in those days, his father knew some English, and decided to give his son a better education. Ishwarchandra began his schooling at the age of five. At the age of eight, he had to walk sixty miles to Calcutta to join a Sanskrit College. He had such a prodigious memory that he learnt the English numerals by looking at the figures on the milestones while walking along the road. At sixteen he became well versed in Sanskrit, and was appointed a Sanskrit teacher. Rising step by step, he at last became the Principal of the college where he had studied. The Government held him in great

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2. A kind of unleavened and fried bread made from flour.
3. In West Bengal, then a French possession.
4. In West Bengal.
respect. But, being of an independent nature, he could not adjust himself to the Director of Public Instruction and resigned his post. Sir Frederick Halliday, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, sent for him and requested him to withdraw his resignation, but Ishwarchandra flatly declined.

His nobility and humanity had their true blossoming after he had given up his job. He saw that Bengali was a very good language, but appeared poor for want of fresh contributions. He, therefore, began writing books in Bengali. He produced very powerful books, and it is mainly due to Vidyasagar that the Bengali language is at present in full bloom and has spread throughout India.

But he also realised that merely writing books was not enough; and so he founded schools. It was Vidyasagar who founded the Metropolitan College in Calcutta. It is staffed entirely by Indians.

Considering that elementary education was quite as necessary as higher education, he started primary schools for the poor. This was a stupendous task in which he needed Government help. The Lieutenant-Governor assured him that the Government would bear the cost; but the Viceroy, Lord Ellenborough, was opposed to this and the bills preferred by Vidyasagar were not passed. The Lieutenant-Governor was very sorry and suggested that Ishwarchandra might file a suit against him. Brave Ishwarchandra replied: “Sir, I have never gone to a court of law to get justice for myself. How, then, is it possible for me to proceed against you?” At that time other European gentlemen who used to help Ishwarchandra in his work rendered him good financial aid. Not being very rich himself, he often ran into debt by helping others out of their difficulties; nevertheless, when a proposal was made to raise a public subscription for him, he turned it down.

He did not rest satisfied with thus putting higher and elementary education on a sound footing. He saw that, without the education of girls, the education of boys alone would not be enough. He found out a verse from Manu which said that the education of women was a duty. Pressing it into service, he wrote a book on the subject and, in collaboration with Mr Bethune, founded the Bethune College for imparting education to women. But it was more difficult to get women
to go to college than to establish it. As he lived a saintly life and was very learned, he was respected by all. So he met prominent people and persuaded them to send their womenfolk to the College; and thus, their daughters began to attend the College. Today there are in that College many well-known and talented women of sterling character, so much so that they can by themselves carry on its administration.

Still not satisfied, he started schools imparting elementary education to small girls. Here food, clothing and books were supplied free of charge. Consequently, one can see today thousands of educated women in Calcutta.

To meet the need for teachers he started a Teachers’ Training College. Seeing the very pitiable condition of Hindu widows, he advocated the remarriage of widows; he wrote books and made speeches on the subject. The Brahmins of Bengal opposed him, but he did not care. People threatened to kill him, but he went on undaunted. He got the Government to pass a law legalising remarriage of widows. He persuaded many men and arranged the remarriage of daughters of prominent men widowed in childhood. He encouraged his own son to marry a poor widow.

The kulin or high-born Brahmans were given to taking a number of wives. They were not ashamed of marrying as many as twenty of them. Ishwarchandra wept to see the sufferings of such women; and he carried on his efforts till the end of his life to eradicate this wicked custom.

When he saw thousands of poor people in Burdwan suffering from malaria, he maintained a doctor at his own cost and personally distributed medicines among them. He went to the houses of the poor and gave them the necessary help. In this way he worked ceaselessly for two years, secured Government help and called for more doctors.
In the course of this work, he saw the necessity of a knowledge of medicine. So he studied homoeopathy, attained proficiency in it, and began to prescribe medicines to the sick. He did not mind travelling long distances in order to help the poor.

He was equally a stalwart in helping big princes out of their difficulties. If any of them had injustice done to him or was reduced to poverty, Ishwarchandra used to help him with his influence, knowledge and money, and mitigate his distress.

While he was engaged in these activities, Vidyasagar passed away in 1890, at the age of seventy. There have been few in this world like him. It is said that, had Ishwarchandra been born among a European people, an imposing column, like the one raised by the British for Nelson, would have been erected as a memorial to him. However, a column to honour Ishwarchandra already stands in the hearts of the great and the small, the rich and the poor of Bengal.

It will now be clear to us how Bengal provides an example for the other parts of India to follow.