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The educational legacy of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar: Promoting accessible and inclusive education

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Abstract

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, born on September 26, 1820, was a prominent social reformer, educationist, and philosopher of 19th-century Bengal, India. He dedicated his life to the cause of education, particularly in the field of vernacular education, and played a pivotal role in shaping modern education in India. Vidyasagar's contributions in promoting vernacular education and advocating for the rights of women have left an indelible mark on Indian society. His relentless efforts to promote education and bring about social change have earned him a revered status as an educator. Vidyasagar's role as an educator is remarkable. Let's explore the educational legacy of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, focusing on his remarkable contributions in promoting accessible and inclusive education.

Keywords: Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, vernacular education, inclusive education, rights of women, educator, native languages, education system, Bengali language, social injustice, marginalized sections, underprivileged communities

Introduction

Born in a poor Brahmin family, Vidyasagar faced numerous challenges during his early years. However, his passion for learning and his determination to bring about societal change led him to overcome these obstacles. He received his early education in a village school and went on to study at the Sanskrit College in Calcutta, where he excelled in various subjects. He left an enduring legacy in the field of education. His tireless efforts and visionary approach revolutionized the education system, promoting accessibility and inclusivity for all.

Promotion of Vernacular Education

One of Vidyasagar's most notable contributions was his relentless advocacy for vernacular education. He firmly believed that education should be accessible to all, regardless of their social or economic background. Vidyasagar emphasized the importance of educating the masses in their native languages, such as Bengali, rather than relying solely on Sanskrit or English. He emphasized the importance of vernacular education, whereby education is imparted in the local language, to ensure wider accessibility and inclusivity.

Vidyasagar's efforts led to the establishment of numerous schools and colleges that offered education in the vernacular language. His most significant contribution was his role in promoting the Bengali language and making it the medium of instruction in schools. This not only empowered the local population but also played a crucial role in preserving and promoting Bengali literature, culture, and identity.

He made significant contributions to the development and simplification of the Bengali alphabet and typography. Recognizing the need for a more accessible and standardized writing system, Vidyasagar undertook the task of reconstructing the Bengali alphabet. His efforts led to the simplification of Bengali typography, creating an alphabet of 12 vowels and 40 consonants with each character representing a distinct sound, while eliminating the complex Sanskrit phonemes. This initiative had a profound impact on the standardization of Bengali typography, enabling greater accessibility and understanding of written material as well as on the promotion of vernacular education and the preservation of Bengali language and culture.

Prior to Vidyasagar's intervention, the Bengali alphabet contained numerous Sanskrit-derived characters and complex phonemes that posed challenges for learners. Vidyasagar recognized that simplifying the alphabet would not only make it easier for individuals to learn and read Bengali but also promote its usage as the medium of instruction in schools.

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He meticulously analysed the existing characters and phonetic elements, streamlining the alphabet to make it more concise, logical, and user-friendly. The simplified alphabet allowed for the accurate representation of Bengali phonetics and paved the way for the development of Bengali literature, poetry, and literary traditions.

Some of his publications show his dedication to promoting education and knowledge in the vernacular language.

Barnaparicaya (Introduction to the Alphabet): This book is a primer that Vidyasagar wrote to introduce the Bengali alphabet and basic reading skills to children. It became widely popular and played a crucial role in promoting vernacular education.

Samskṛta vyākaraṇer(ā) Upakramaṇikā is a significant work by Vidyasagar where he provides an introduction and commentary on the intricacies of Sanskrit grammar. He breaks down the complex concepts of Sanskrit grammar and presents them in a simplified manner using Bengali language. By translating and interpreting these grammatical principles, Vidyasagar made the subject more approachable for Bengali-speaking individuals who were interested in understanding and learning Sanskrit.

Byākaraṇakoumudī is another notable book authored by Vidyasagar that focuses on Sanskrit grammar. In this work, Vidyasagar delves into the fundamental aspects of Sanskrit grammar, explaining them in clear and concise Bengali. By providing explanations and examples in the vernacular language, Vidyasagar aimed to make the study of Sanskrit grammar more accessible and comprehensible for a broader range of learners.

These books showcase Vidyasagar's dedication to simplifying complex subjects and bridging the gap between Sanskrit and the Bengali language. Through his interpretations and explanations, Vidyasagar made the study of Sanskrit grammar more inclusive and encouraged a wider audience to engage with this ancient language.

Educational Reforms and Women's Empowerment

Vidyasagar strongly believed in women's empowerment and their right to education. He advocated for the education of girls and women, which was a radical idea during that time. Vidyasagar established schools exclusively for girls and actively campaigned for their right to education. He argued that educating women would not only uplift them but also have a positive impact on society as a whole. He believed that educating women was crucial for the progress and development of society altogether. His efforts in promoting girls' education laid the foundation for a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

Moreover, Vidyasagar worked tirelessly to eradicate social evils like child marriage and widow remarriage. He fought for legal reforms that would protect the rights of women and promote gender equality. Vidyasagar's efforts in the field of women's education and social reform paved the way for a more progressive and inclusive society.

He made significant contributions to various fields through his writings and publications. Some of the notable books, in this connection, written by him include:

Vidhavāvivāha pracalita hāoa ucit kinā etadviṣayak(a) prastāv (a): In this publication (in 2 parts), Vidyasagar vehemently criticized the prevailing practice of child marriage and advocated for widow remarriage. The book helped generate awareness about the social injustices faced by widows and called for reform.

Sītār vanabās (a): Vidyasagar authored this book to challenge the prevailing orthodox practices that imposed restrictions on women and denied them education. It discussed the importance of educating women and empowering them to lead independent lives.

Innovations in Teaching Methodologies

Vidyasagar introduced several innovative teaching methods to enhance the learning experience of students. He emphasized the importance of interactive teaching and the use of practical examples to make education more engaging and relatable. He advocated for the use of visual aids, storytelling, and hands-on activities to stimulate students' curiosity and facilitate effective learning. Vidyasagar's emphasis on student-centric education fostered critical thinking, creativity, and holistic development.

Focus on Moral and Character Development

For Vidyasagar, education went beyond academics. He believed in holistic education that aimed to develop the character and moral values of students. He emphasized the importance of instilling virtues such as honesty, compassion, and respect for others in the educational process. Vidyasagar believed that education should mould individuals into responsible citizens who contribute positively to society.

Promoting Social Equality through Education

Vidyasagar saw education as a powerful tool for social transformation and equality. He actively worked towards dismantling societal barriers and prejudices by promoting education for marginalized sections of society, including lower castes and underprivileged communities. Vidyasagar's inclusive approach ensured that education became a means to bridge social gaps and uplift individuals, regardless of their background.

Conclusion

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's contributions in the field of vernacular education were revolutionary and instrumental in shaping the modern education system in India. His dedication to promoting education in native languages, particularly Bengali, made education accessible to a wider population and fostered a sense of cultural identity and pride. His unwavering commitment to promoting education, advocating for vernacular education, and empowering women through education left an enduring legacy that continues to inspire generations. Vidyasagar's innovative teaching methods, focus on moral development, and educational reforms continue to influence the educational landscape in India. As an educator, Vidyasagar played a pivotal role in shaping modern education and inspiring

generations to strive for knowledge, equality, and social progress. He will forever be remembered as a trailblazer, a visionary, and a champion of education for all.

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