

# BENGAL RENAISSANCE, WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

Srikanta Chatterjee  
School of  
Economics and  
Finance, Massey  
University,  
Palmerston North.  
S.Chatterjee@  
massey.ac.nz

# BENGAL RENAISSANCE

## The Historical Background

Ideas of European Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries had come to Bengal (to India later) with the advent of British rule, and a wind of change started blowing across the land, challenging many age-old ideas and practices.

The Bengal Renaissance, starting with Raja Rammohun Roy (1772- 1833), had a social, economic, cultural and religio-spiritual dimension. All of these dimensions had implications for women in Bengal (and later in the rest of India).



# RENAISSANCE PERSONALITIES

Some significant 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance Personalities and the works they are most remembered for:

Raja Rammohun Roy (1772 – 1833): Abolition of widow-immolation (*satidaho*), initiation of the monotheistic, Upanishad-based Brahma religion (sect?).

John E. Drinkwater Bethune (1801-51): Women's education – founder of Bengal's first secular girls' school, The Hindu Balika Vidyalaya, in 1849, with Vidyasagar as its secretary.



Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891): Hindu widow remarriage, women's education, philanthropy, social reform generally.



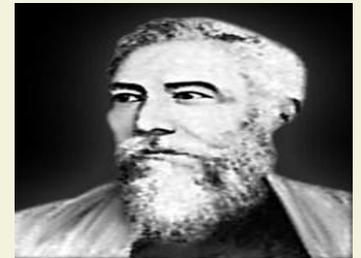
# CONTD.

Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-84):Brahmo Samaj activist, social reformer, founder of a 'Universal Religion'.



Keshab Chandra Sen

Debendranath Tagore ( 1817-1905):Ardent Brahmo, but sought to reconcile it with, and accommodate, some Hindu ritualistic practices.



Sri Ramakrishna (1818-86), religious reformer who, although himself a priest and a practitioner of orthodox Hindu rituals, asserted that (a) the essential message of all religions was the same, and (b) service to (suffering) humanity was service to God.

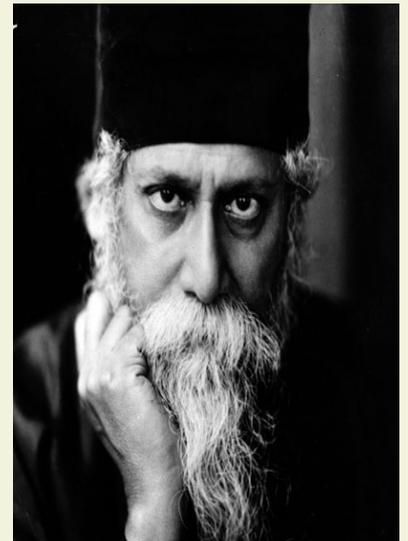


# CONTD.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838- 94): Bangla language and literature, re-affirmation of *Sanatan dharma* (orthodox Hindu faith), and (Hindu) patriotic-nationalistic thinking.



Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941): leading figure in art and literature; educational, social and economic thinker and activist (reformer)



# CONTD.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Vedantist thinker, social philanthropist, ardent defender of India's spiritual legacy and founder of the Ramakrishna order(Math) and Mission, the latter in line with Sri Ramakrishna's message of 'service to suffering humanity'.



Sister Nivedita (1867-1911): Women's education, social service and the Indian nationalist movement.



# SOME STEPS TOWARD WOMEN EMANCIPATION IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BENGAL (LATER INDIA)

Abolition of Suttee (Immolation of Hindus widows), 1829  
(Rammohun Roy and William Bentinck).

Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act 1856 (Vidyasagar and Canning )

Age of Consent Acts of 1860 (Canning) and 1891 (Lansdowne).  
Many individual Indians and groups had been active in  
promoting and opposing the ideas on which the law was based.

# VIVEKANANDA'S THINKING ON WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION

The Age of Consent Act of 1891, which raised to 12 years the minimum age at which a girl could be married off, was the first major event in the area of women's emancipation in India in Swami Vivekananda's lifetime. So, his reaction to it is of interest and significance. This is what he observed:

*The rulers passed the Age of Consent Bill prohibiting a man under the threat of penalty for life to live with a girl of twelve years and at once all these so-called leaders of your religion raised a tremendous hue and cry against it, sounding the alarm "alas, our religion is lost". As if religion consisted of making a girl a mother at the age of twelve or thirteen!*



# CONTD.

Vidyasagar died in 1891. There is no record of Vivekananda ever meeting Vidyasagar in person. Although Vidyasagar's achievements are many and varied, his reputation as a social reformer is firmly associated with his success in getting the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act passed, in 1856.

Vivekananda described Vidyasagar as "the hero of widow remarriage and of the abolition of polygamy" On Vidyasagar's death, Vivekananda paid tribute to him with the observation: *"there is not a man of my age in Northern India on whom his shadow has not fallen"*.



# CONTD.

These comments seemingly reflect Vivekananda's whole-hearted support for the major steps taken in the 19<sup>th</sup> century toward women's emancipation.

The women who most influenced Vivekananda:

His mother: Bhuvaneshari Devi (1841-1911)



Holy Mother: Sarada Devi, Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual consort (1853-1920).



## CONTD.

Sister Nivedita (1867 – 1911), his disciple and torch-bearer of Sri Ramakrishna's message of service to the poor.

The influence of both Sarada Devi and Nivedita had been mostly of a spiritual nature. Only in his mother's life had Swami Vivekananda observed the human aspects of suffering and pain, especially as they affect a widowed Hindu woman. Also, the tragic incident of one of his sisters, Yogendrabala, committing suicide had a profound impact on him.



# VIVEKANANDA'S OWN IDEAS ABOUT WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION

It would be fair to say that Vivekananda's scheme of things regarding the uplift of Indian women was a mixture of traditional (Hindu) attitude to women in society and modern liberal ideas.

His ideal of Indian womanhood was "Sita, Savitri, Damayanti", especially Sita. ("I know that the race that produced Sita – even if only dreamt of her – has a reverence for women that is unmatched on earth").



## CONTD.

He observed: “the ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood – that marvellous, unselfish, all-suffering, ever-forgiving mother”. He considered ‘purity’ and ‘chastity’ to be the supreme attributes of a ‘perfect mother’.

[Contrast this idealised view of Indian womanhood with Vidyasagar’s lament on the daily life of women in India: *let not the unfortunate weaker sex (abala) be born in a country where the men have no pity, no dharma, no sense of right and wrong, no ability to discriminate between beneficial and harmful. Where preservation of what has been customary is considered the only duty, the only dharma ..... By what sin do you, women, come to be born in Bhartavarsha at all?*]



# EDUCATION AS THE PATHWAY TO SOCIAL UPLIFT FOR WOMEN

“Education”, to Vivekananda “is the manifestation of the perfection already in man..... Therefore the only duty of the teacher ... is to remove all obstructions from the way”.

Education was not just gathering and storing of information, but promoter of mental concentration and builder of Character, according to Vivekananda

“Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them”.



## CONTD.

To Vivekananda, sex discrimination is unfair because “Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious Self is present in all beings”.

So, while he prescribed “religion, arts, science, housekeeping, cooking, sewing, hygiene – the simple essential points in these subjects ought to be taught to our women”, Vivekananda emphasised religion to be the centre of female education so that chastity and loyalty to husband become the principal aims of educating women.



## CONTD.

Vivekananda wanted Indian women to have an education that would create “great fearless women – women worthy to continue the tradition of Sanghamitra, Lila, Ahalya Bai and Mira Bai – women fit to be mothers of heroes....”.

He reminded his countrymen that ancient India had produced women philosophers and scholars like Maitreyi and Gargi, and was capable of producing similar characters again, with proper education for women.



# CONTD.

As a pioneering leader of 'resurgent India' Vivekananda's championing of India's ancient glory, above everything else, is perhaps understandable.

While, on the one hand, he rejects a religion that cannot 'wipe the widow's tears', on the other, he is less eloquent about allowing women to receive 'modern education' that could empower them to be assertive themselves, without having to be just chaste and loyal to their husbands.



## CONTD.

Likewise, while he admired Western (American) women and was impressed by 'the social dignity and status' they enjoyed, he also spoke of their femininity as being 'outlandish'.

He observed "every American woman had far better education than can be conceived of by the majority of Hindu women. Why cannot we have the same education? We must". He however went on to say "morality and spirituality are the things for which we strive. Our women are not so learned, but they are more pure".



# CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Swami Vivekananda is one of 'the makers of modern India'.

As a renaissance figure, Vivekananda's contributions to India's national life extended beyond religion and spirituality with which his name is perhaps most associated.

He identified education, fitting with India's culture, as the way to rejuvenate India's national life.



## CONTD.

He was conscious of the low social position Indian women occupied, and emphasised education as the pathway to women's emancipation.

His prescription for women's education however was one that encouraged them to value 'chastity and purity', more than any other aims of education.

While some of his ideas are controversial, he was in many ways ahead of his time in recognising the many deficiencies of India's national life and Character. He was fearlessly scathing in criticising them and constructive in seeking solutions to them.



In this season of paying tribute to one of modern India's greatest thinkers and spiritual stalwarts, I do not feel apologetic being somewhat critical of his thinking in respect of Indian women's education and emancipation. After all, Swami himself taught India to develop a critical outlook on life.

