
**The Protesting Voices of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar with special
reference to Polygamy**

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Abstract: *Iswar Chandra Bandhyopadhyaya (1820 –1891) was popularly known as ‘Vidyasagar’. He was pioneer of Renaissance in Bengal as well as India. Vidyasagar had set on an agitation of social reform namely the prevention of the practice of polygamy among the Hindus, particularly the Kulin Brahmanas of Bengal. But before initiative of Vidyasagar, public opinion against polygamy was attempted through the discussion of newspapers. The ‘Vidyadarshan’ magazine tried this. For polygamy, the main reason for the financial plight of the Kulin Brahmins of Bengal was due to their moving away from direct production. Polygamy was not scriptural approval. Maharaja Dasratha (Rama’s father) had many wives. Vidyasagar has said that Dasaratha married so many wives for the procreation of a male issue and that what he did was therefore, not uncanonical. Polygamy movement was not confined to Kolkata. This movement spread many places of East Bengal.*

Keywords: *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Kulin Brahmana, Polygamy, King Adisura*

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Introduction

Iswar Chandra Bandhyopadhyaya was born in the rural village of Birsingha in 1820. He was popularly known as ‘Vidyasagar’, which mean ocean of knowledge. Then, this village was under

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Hoogly district. In 1872, the Birsingha village was incorporated in Mednipore district. His father was Thakurdas Bandhyopadhyaya and his mother, Bhagavati Devi. Vidyasagar was the eldest of their seven sons and three daughters.¹ Later time, Vidyasagar was a great scholar. But he was not only great scholar, also he was known as a social reformer. He always protests against some social matter such as child marriage, widow not remarriage and polygamy.

Movement to end Polygamy before Vidyasagar

On 15th December, 1854, a meeting was held in the name of the *Suhrad Samiti* for the betterment of the society in Kashimpur building of Kishore Chand Mitra. Debendranath Tagore was the president of the meeting and the editors were Kishori Chand Mitra and Akshay Kumar Dutta. On behalf of all them, Kishore Chand Mitra sent an application for the first time to the Government in the early 1855 to end polygamy. From this time, the government took initiatives to eradicate polygamy. But before long, public opinion against polygamy was organized through the discussion of newspapers. In the year 1842, the '*Vidyadarshan*' magazine tried its best to make public opinion against polygamy. Akshay Kumar Dutta was one of the directors of this magazine.²

When a social custom became an institution and its abolition becomes desirable, it needs to be abolished by the government. The social reformers played an important role in curbing abuses. Vidyasagar sought to reform his society through Government law. From 1855, the movement for the prevention of polygamy became regular. But since 1842 onwards the *Vidyadarshan* magazine played a significance role in curbing this custom. They were the first to propagate state law and the need for Government intervention to prevent polygamy. Akshay Kumar Dutta, one of the Vidyasagar's best friend who was the chief planner of the polygamy prevention movement.³

Role of Vidyasagar, Kishore Chand Mitra and Akshay Kumar Dutta

In 1855, Kishore Chand Mitra, on behalf of the *Suhrad Samiti*, first appeared to the Government of India to stop polygamy. Akshay Kumar Dutta was one of the editors of this *Samiti*. *Suhrad Samiti* sent their application on 27th December, 1855. Vidyasagar also made a written request to

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Government of India. Vidyasagar's application was signed by the Maharaja of Burdwan. After this application, 127 applications were sent from Bangladesh with the signature of several thousand people and some applications were sent from Varanasi to the Government of India. On 7th February 1857, J.P. Grant promised to draft a bill in this regard. Ramaprasad Roy (son of Rammohun Roy) drafted a bill in collaboration with J.P. Grant but his work was disrupted for widow marriage and munity of 1857. Referring to this, The Bengal Government later wrote to the Government of India - "This petition of the maharajah's... was followed by no less than 127 others of the same tenor, very numerous signed, from all parts of Bengal, and one from Benaras. These together with one petition from certain inhabitants of Calcutta and its vicinity, in defense of Hindu polygamy were all order by the council to the printed; and on the 7th February 1857, Mr. (now Sir J.P.) Grant, then a member of the supreme government, promised very shortly to introduce a bill on the subject. It is known that a draft bill was prepared by the Late Ramaprosad Roy in communication with Sir J.P. grant, and that it was about to be introduced into the council, when the mutiny of Bengal native army and the events which followed, put a stop for a time to further action in the matter. Endeavour has been made to obtain a copy of Ramprosad's bill but without success."⁴

Kulinism and its Origin

Vidyasagar was in favour of legal recourse even in the case of the abolition of polygamy. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Bengali society witnessed an evil practice known as Kulinism, a practice specific to Bengal. At one stage Brahminism had reached low ebb, assailed by the dominant Budhhism. Bengali Brahmanas were playing less attention to the Vedic rites and caste restrictions on marriage.⁵

Story of King Adisura and Arrival of Five Brahmans from Kanauj

Although, there are an extensive literature in Bengal known as *Kulaji* or *Kula-Sastra*. There is one central theme in almost all the *Kulajis* which forms the pivot round which moves their entire conception of the social history of Bengal. It touches upon the origin of the *Radhiya* and *Varendra Brahmanas* who form the bulk of the Brahmin community in Bengal. All the *Kulaji* texts maintain

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that they were descended from the five Brahmanas who came to Bengal from Kanauj at the invitation of king Adisura. The outline of the story is given below-

King Adisura of Bengal requested the king of Kanauj to send him five *Brahmanas*, versed in the Vedas and Vedic sacrifices, for there were no such Brahmanas in Bengal. As the latter refused, Adisura declared war against him. To win an easy victory he decided to send to the battle field seven hundred Brahmanas of Bengal, seated on bulls, for an orthodox Brahmana, like the king of Kanauj, full of devotion to cows and Brahmanas, would not kill them. Then Brahmanas of Bengal at first refused to ride on bulls as it violated the injunctions of the scripture. But Adisura promised to free them from the guilt when they returned from their expedition. The king of Kanauj desisted from fighting these Brahmana soldiers, and sends the five Brahmanas asked for by Adisura. These five Brahmanas, equipped with bows and arrows, came on horseback to Bengal, accompanied by five attendants. Adisura did not show proper respect to them on account of their military dress, whereupon the Brahmanas threw the flower and herbs, with which they wanted to, bless Adisura, on a stump of wood, which immediately blossomed into a living tree. Adisura deeply impressed by this, begged for their pardon and gave them a proper reception. The Brahmanas performed a sacrifice and returned to Kanauj. But their kinsmen at home treated them as degraded on account of journey to Bengal and asked them to perform penances. The five Brahmanas, with their wives and servants returned to Bengal and Adisura granted them five villages to live in.⁶

The seven hundred Brahmanas who went to fight for Adisura came to be known as Saptasati or Satsati. According to some scholars that they were descendants of Brahmanas living on the bank of the Saraswati river, who were brought to Bengal by the Andhra king Sudraka for performing a sacrifice and settles in this country which till then had no Brahmanas. According to other these were people of low castes, but were recognized as Brahmanas by Adisura as a reward for their service. According to a third version, Vallala Sena got a boon from the goddess Chandi that within two *praharas* (six hours) he could make anybody he liked to be a Brahmana and the king thereupon created seven hundred Brahmanas who came to be known as *saptasati* (seven hundred). Some genealogical texts hold that all the Brahmanas in Bengal other the *saptasati*, were descended from the five Brahmanas brought by king Adisura and according to *Nirdosha-Kula-Panjika*, the five sons of one of the five Brahmanas were the progenitors of Radhiya, Varendra and *Vaidika Paschatya* and *Dakshinatya* sections of Bengal Brahmana.⁷

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Radhiya and Varendra

There is general agreement among the Kulajis that all the Radhiya and Varendra Brahmanas were descendent from the five Brahmanas brought by Adisura. But there are two main versions of the events that led to their division into these two sections. According to the version current among the *Radhiyas* the descendants of the five Brahmanas settled in Bengal by Adisura moved in the course of time to various parts, either on account of internal dissensions or under royal orders. Ultimately they were definitely classified by Vallala Sena into Radhiya or Varendra according as they lived in Radha or Varendra at that time. The version of the Varendra Brahmanas is quite different. Adisura, we are told though that if the Saptasati Brahmanas of Radha gave their daughters in marriage to the five Brahmanas settled in Gauda, the latter would have no inducement to return to Kanauj. The Saptasatis, under royal command, married their daughter to these Brahmanas who thereupon lived in Radha. When they died their sons (by previous marriages) who were still in Kanauj, performed their *Sraddha* ceremony but the other Brahmanas refused to take part in it. Humiliated at this they came to Adisura with their family. Not liking to live with their step brothers in Radhiya they settled in Varendra and came to be known as *Varendra*, while the former were called Radhiya. In that context, it may be mention here that Vidyasagar himself was belonged to Radhiya.⁸

Differentiation among the Brahmanas

According to the Radhiya Kulajis, the descendents of the five Brahmanas brought by Adisura number fifty-nine during the reign of his grandson Kshitisura. To each of them this king gave a village for residence and hence originated the *gami* (belonging to a village) of the Radhiya Brahmanas. In other words, each Brahmana and his descendents were known by the name of the village in which they lived- which became their *gami* and later developed into surname. For example, the residents of Mukhati village had Mukhati *gami*, and had the surname Mukhati or *Kukh-opadhyaya* by the addition of *upadhyaya* (teacher) to the village name. The other well known titles *bandy-opadhyaya* and *Chatt-opadhyaya* originated in the same way. The Varendra Brahmanas also had one hundred *gamis*. The Kulajis differ about the number of these *gamis* and

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their names. King Dharasura, the son of Kshitisura made further innovation by dividing the Radhiya Brahmanas of fifty-nine *gamis* into three grades, viz., Mukhya-Kulina Gauna-Kulina and Srotriya.⁹

Role of Vallal Sena for rise Kulinism

The Varendra *Kulajis* on the other hand, Vallal Sena as the founder of Kulinism. According to Vachaspati Misra, the king laid down nine virtues as the criterion and assigned the rank of Kulina to those Brahmanas who possessed all of them. Those who possessed eight or seven of them were called, respectively, *siddha-srotriya*, and remaining Brahmanas were called *kashta-srotriya*. There is however nothing in older *Kulajis* to indicate that Kulinism was based on such a test. Various silly stories are told about the motive of Vallala Sena in creating the Kulinas and the rough and ready method he adopted in selecting them. The *Kulajis* are however unanimous rather a rare thing that the rank of Kulina was personal and the distinction was conferred was only 16 or 19. Besides Vallala placed all these Kulinas in the same grade and they could marry daughters of non Kulinas. It was Lakshmana Sena who deviated from both these practices and made the system a complex one, by introducing, among the Radhiya Brahmanas, restriction of marriage and classification of the Kulinas into different grades according to their faithful observance of the marriage rules. This process of periodical classification is known as *samikarana*, the first two of which are said to have taken place during the reign of Lakshmana Sena, and the next four in that of Danujamadhava. Dhruvananda refers to 117 *samikaranas* up to his time abstruse philosophical ideas were also introduced into the system of Kulinism during the reign of Lakshmana Sena. But there was still one saving grace. Kulinism had not yet become a hereditary rank.¹⁰

Adisura dynasty was destroyed and Sena dynasty became the king of Bangladesh. King Vallala Sena of this dynasty established Kulinism among the Brahmins. In order to prevent the decline of education and culture based on scriptural knowledge during his reign among the descendants of the Brahmins who came from Kanauj, he invented the concept of Kulinism. Vallala Sena considered that the Brahmins must be careful to maintain those qualities if they were given special social status, such as conduct and humility. Accordingly he fixed nine qualities of Kulinism such as i. Behavior, ii. Modesty, iii. Education, iv. Establishment, v. Visit to Pilgrimage, vi. Devotion, vii. Recitation, viii. Austerities and ix. Charity.¹¹

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It is said to have that once upon a day King Vallala Sena had fixed a day at the aim of introducing official Kulin system and accordingly ordered all the Brahmins to attend the *Raj Sabha* i.e. royal court. As per the order of the king some Brahmins attended the royal court at early morning, some attended prior to noon and another branch of Brahmins attended the same at after the noon. It is found that those Brahmins who came lastly came to be known as 'Kulin' as because the kulin need more time than any other section of the people to perform rituals. Those who came middle time, are known as *Sratreya* and who came very early, known as *Gouna Kulin*. Thus the Kulinism was established. The rule was that can be exchange with Kulin.¹²

Kulinism in Bengal

It is a fact that after the establishment of the status of Kulinism in the society, the Brahmins of Bangladesh were divided into five categories viz- *Kulin*, *Srotriya*, *Bangsaj*, *Gouna-Kulin* and *Saptashati*. There were the necessities of nine qualities for becoming a Kulin Brahmins. But, interestingly it is found that when the said qualities were disappeared in course of time among the Kulin Brahmins –they again divided into as many as 36 Melas as per the concept of *Debibar*.. One of the communities name was "*Melas*". The word 'Melas' was originated from 'Coalescence'. Before the *Melas*, The Kulins were engaged themselves in matrimonial relations. Community marriages were approved in the society. It is found that generally a person could marry a girl i.e. there was monogamy system in practice. But, in later times, a person started marrying more than one woman i.e. the practice of polygamy introduced in the society of Bengal.¹³

Curse of Polygamy and Teacher of Vidyasagar

There was an individual case of Kulin polygamy which incensed Vidyasagar. The wife and daughter of his teacher at the village school had been turned out of the house by the teacher on his second marriage.¹⁴ Vidyasagar had an experience about polygamy. Two unidentified women were sitting while Vidyasagar was having lunch in his home. One was almost 60 years old and other was 18-19 years. Vidyasagar asked his mother; Mother! Who are they? Why are they sitting here? Vidyasagar's mother said that they are one mother and daughter. They are your childhood teacher's first wife and his daughter. They are sitting here to tell you their plight. Vidyasagar's

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teacher was Kulin who enjoying polygamy. But he did not keep any wife at his home. He lives in his home with his two sisters and his nephew. His two sisters were very loquacious. Teacher of Vidyasagar was very afraid of his sisters. The wives of the teacher could not stay home for his sisters. The name of his teacher's daughter was Prasannamayi. She married to a Kulin Brahman. But this kulin Brahman married almost forty. But the Kulin Brahman wanted to keep his wife at home in exchange for money. As a result, the girl lived with her mother. The teacher's wife lived in her father's house. Her days were passing with extreme hardships. Her son had to run the family. One day, her son said that he couldn't give rice and cloth both of them. Her son said, 'I can give rice and cloth to you because you are my mother'. But I can't feed my sister. So, the women went to Vidyasagar for help. Vidyasagar heard of their sadness and went to his teacher. Vidyasagar forced his teacher's wife for exchange money in his home. Vidyasagar agreed to pay four rupees a month to his teacher. He paid twelve rupees for three months at that time. Vidyasagar returned from Kolkata to Birsingha and searched for Prasannamayi and her mother. Upon searching, Vidyasagar came to know that the teacher had driven them away at the words of the sisters. Mother and daughter left for Kolkata without getting any options. As a result, the beautiful girl took the prostitute profession.¹⁵

Vidyasagar's Movement against Kulinism

Vidyasagar had set on an agitation of social reform namely the prevention of the practice of polygamy among the Hindus, particularly the Kulin Brahmins of Bengal. He engaged himself heart and soul to that cause and on 27th December, 1855 submitted to Government a petition subscribes by 25,000 persons, among whom there were Maharaja Mahatap Chand Bahadur of Burdwan and a number of influential and leading personages praying for legislation for the prevention of the practice of polygamy among the Hindus.¹⁶

In the course of one year, a number of similar petitions were submitted to the government by Maharaja Satis Chandra Ray Bahadur of Nadia, The Raja of Dinajpur and some influential bodies of the several districts of Bengal. Among these, one submitted on 22nd July, 1856, by Babu Raj Mohan Ray, a zamindar of Dacca was subscribed by many pundits and professors of Sanskrit, besides a great number of laymen. A small extract from this petition were as follows:

“The female children married under the circumstances commonly continue after the marriage to live with their parents, their nominal husbands generally taking no notice of them and having no

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communication with them, but that, in the event of the death of their husbands, they are subject to all the disabilities which law and custom impose upon Hindu Widows.” But, the irony is that the attempts of the petitioners were failed. The government had already passed the Widow Marriage Act in spite of the opposition of the majority of the Hindus.¹⁷ Moreover, the historic event Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 has brought about many changes in the system of governance in India. The British Government wanted to keep themselves away from the religious and social debates of the Indians for strategic reasons. So the British Government had no intention of stopping polygamy.¹⁸

Scriptural Approval on Polygamy and Vidyasagar

In July, 1871, Vidyasagar issued a paper on polygamy, the subject of discussion being whether polygamy was consonant to the Hindu scriptural. In the first portion of the pamphlet, Vidyasagar has admitted that in certain cases the taking of more wives than one is canonical. Maharaja Dasaratha, Rama’s father had many wives. Vidyasagar has said that Dasaratha married so many wives for the procreation of a male issue and that what he did was therefore, not uncanonical.

If the wife is given to drinking or is unfaithful or if she always acts contrary to the wishes of the husband or if she is ever-diseased or is of the malicious turn of mind, or is given dissipation of money, under any of these circumstances the husband may take another wife. If the wife is sterile then at the eighth year, if her male issue dies then the tenth year if she gives birth only to female issue then at the eleventh year and if she is given to speaking unpleasant things then without loss of time the husband may marry another wife.¹⁹

Vidyasagar’s Pamphlets against Polygamy

Vidyasagar’s first pamphlet on polygamy had been out protest were issues by Tara Nath Tarkavachaspati, Dvaraka Nath Vidyabhushan, Kshetranath Smritiratna, Gangadhar Kaviratna, the renowned native physician of Murshidabad and some others. The whole of Bengal was in a perturbed state at the time. Tarkavachaspati’s paper was composed in Sanskrit language, and the rest were all in Bengal. To refute the objections of these opponents, Vidyasagar issued his second pamphlet against polygamy in March, 1872.²⁰

In the two papers relating to polygamy, Vidyasagar clearly understood the fact that due the existence of Kulinism in Bengal, a Kulin Brahman throughout his life could marry a number of

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girls during their very tender ages. It was fact that due to early marriage almost all these girls, after marriage, remain at home one, two or three years; and during this time number of them are left widows without having enjoyed the company of their husband a single day. These young widows are being forbidden to marry almost without exception, become harlot.²¹

During the controversy on polygamy against appeared the 'component *Bhaipo*' (nephew) mentioned before with a paper in support of Vidyasagar which he named 'Ati Alpai haila' (only a very little is given). It was the attack on Taranath Tarkavachaspati. Its language is lowly satirical and is not consonant to good taste. The paper begins with a most scurrile piece of poesy, very like those given utterance to by the fishwives of Calcutta. Some attribute its authorship to Vidyasagar. But it is improbably that he should indulge in such foul language. Taranath Tarkavachachapati again issued a pamphlet of twenty pages in reply to the paper of the nephew but it is not so piercingly satirical. Shortly afterwards appeared another anonymous paper of twenty-five pages, titled 'Prerita Tentul'(Tamarind Forward), attacking Vidyasagar most virulently. Besides these many odes song and short lays were also issued. In the correspondence columns of the Education Gazette appeared a short poem, with the heading, '*Kulin Kaminir Ukti*' (the saying of a Kulin Women).²²

Vidyasagar had given the names of some prominent person who belong to Kulin in Hugli District with their marriage number, age and resident:²³

Name	Number Marriages	Age	Resident
Volanath Bandhapadhyaya	80	55	Baso
Bhagaban Chattapadhyaya	72	64	Deshmukho
Purnachandra Mukhopadhyaya	62	55	Chitrashali
Madhusudan Mukhopadhyaya	56	40	Do
Tituram Ganguli	55	70	Do
Ramamay Mukhopadhyaya	52	50	Tajpur
Baidyanath Mukhopadhyaya	50	60	Bhuipara

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The numbers of marriages were higher in the other district. These names provided by Vidyasagar but not possible to provide the whole district's the marriages number of Kulin. Perhaps these names were aristocrat or famous person.

Bankim Chandra's Stand on Polygamy

Polygamy had been in this country for a long time. It is unlike to disappear in a short time. But it can be vanished for good education. Following this argument, Bankim Chandra made the following argument about Vidyasagar's application for government law enforcement to end polygamy:

“Polygamy was difficult to break through the law because of half Hindus, half Musalman in the country. If there should be a law for the prevention of polygamy, then it should be the law for both Hindus and Muslims. Polygamy is bad for Hindus, not good for Muslims. How can it be forbidden for Muslims by penal code? How do those who make the law say that polygamy is contrary to the Hindu Scriptures, so any Muslim who professes polygamy will be imprisoned for the seven year. If they do not say so, we must say that we are big philanthropic managers; For the sake of the people, we will make polygamous misconduct; but we will have benefit from half the species. The Hindu scriptures are good for their grammar, both *kromoshobra and Kromosobra* may go on together. So I would batteries for them. The rest of our people are Muslims because of their evil fate, their propaganda is not good, the Arab rule is not shaken off, there is no scholar among the Muslims, so there is no urgency to batteries, the half of the people's interests. It seems to us in the small sense that the managerial society will not consider such a statement as justified in this dichotomy.”²⁴

Polygamy as a Business and Means of Livelihood

The main reason for the financial plight of the Kulin Brahmins of Bengal was due to their moving away from direct production. So their financial woes had reached the extreme point. They wanted to earn by the Polygamy. Polygamy had become a very easy way to get rid from poverty and dearth. The Kulin Brahmins started marrying like a business. So in the context of Kulin,

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Vidyasagar writes in his pamphlet: “In this country, perhaps the Kulin are the most heretics and sinners. There is no kindness and religion. Some time when one asked a Kulin, *Thakurdada*, you have marriages numerous girls, do you manage to visit all the places? that Kulin replied, ‘those who gave me fees, I only visit those places. During the time of previous famine one Kulin underwent through many marriages and he survived out of the fees from those marriages.’”²⁵

Movement against Polygamy - Outside of Kolkata

The Polygamy movement was not confined only within Kolkata. This movement spread about many places of East Bengal such as Dhaka Bikrampur, Faridpor etc. Shashibhusan Mukhopadhaya, Durgacharan Bandhupadhaya, Rasbihari Mukhopadhaya, Brajasundar Mitra Kaliprasanna Ghosh were the main leader of this place. But they did this movement despite being Brahmin. Rasbihari Mukhopadhyay worked tirelessly against Polygamy in Dhaka. Rasbihari was in touch with the Vidyasagar on Polygamy prevention movement. He was Vidyasagar’s special favorite vessel for his sincerity.²⁶

Effects of Polygamy as Reflected in the Society

20 years later, a polygamist Kulin gentleman was in danger when he went to his father-in-law house. He could not recognize the house. A woman was standing in the front of the house. Kulin gentleman said, Mother! How can I go to Biswanath Vhaduri’s house? I came to that house about twenty years ago. I remember there was a betel nut garden on the north side of the house like this one. The woman asked, what you needed in that house? The man answered, ‘I married his daughter’. Upon hearing this, the woman fainted and went into the house. Seeing his attitude, Kulin realized, in ruin, that he has called his wife a mother. Kulin gentleman left that place in shame.²⁷

While the movement for prohibition of Polygamy gathered momentum in the area round about Calcutta under the initiative of Vidyasagar, he found a worthy supporter like the personality of Rashbehari Mukherjee of Dacca, who initiated a simultaneous drive in East Bengal and being a prominent man in this region, he attracted a lot of public attention. By that time the Sepoy Mutiny had been suppressed and the company’s rule had ended. Queen Victoria had directly assumed the

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charge of administration as the Empress of India and decided not to interfere into the popular beliefs and customs of the Indians. Although, Campbell, the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, was sympathetic to the movement.²⁸

Conclusion

The success which followed the drive for validating widow remarriage showed that the public mind was progressive in outlook and ready to lend support to movements for removal of disabilities of women in society. Although, during the life time of Vidyasagar the official ending of polygamy did not occur, but the movement towards the end of polygamy which he started that became momentum and in course of time it was ultimately ended.

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