

MCQ Question · mcqquestion.com

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar: Scholar and Reformer

Free · Share

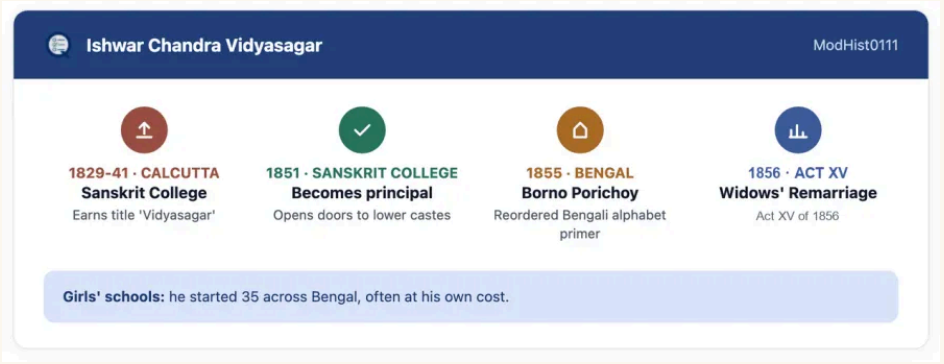
Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar: Scholar and Reformer

Every Bengali child who learns the alphabet uses a primer he reordered in 1855. The same man pushed through a law that let Hindu widows remarry.

He earned the name Vidyasagar, “Ocean of Learning”, before he became a reformer. This lesson covers his studies, his schools, his script reform and the 1856 Act.



Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Scanned from a Vidyasagar University prospectus, public domain (published before 1891), via Wikimedia Commons.



Four milestones in the life of a scholar and reformer.

Born. 26 September 1820, at Birsingha village, Midnapore district, Bengal.
Name. Born Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay. “Vidyasagar” is a title.
1851. Becomes principal of Sanskrit College, Calcutta.
1855. Publishes the primer *Borno Porichoy*.
1856. The Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act, Act XV of 1856, is passed.
Died. 29 July 1891, aged 70.

Vidyasagar: “Ocean of Learning”. Sanskrit College gave him this title.

Parashara Samhita: an ancient Hindu law text. He used it to argue for widow remarriage.

Bethune School: grew out of the Hindu Female School of 1849. Its college, founded in 1879, became India’s first women’s college.

1 How did he earn the name Vidyasagar?

He studied for 12 years at Sanskrit College and earned the title there.

- He was born Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay on **26 September 1820**.
- His village was Birsingha, in Midnapore district of Bengal.
- He studied at **Sanskrit College, Calcutta**, from 1829 to 1841.
- He covered Vedanta, grammar, literature, rhetoric, law and ethics.
- The college gave him the title **Vidyasagar**, meaning “Ocean of Learning”.
- Exams ask where he earned the title. The answer is Sanskrit College, not Presidency College.

- From 1841, he taught at Fort William College in Calcutta.
- He died on 29 July 1891, at the age of 70.

> **Quick check 1.** Vidyasagar earned his title at Sanskrit College, Calcutta. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 What did he change at Sanskrit College?

He opened it up and brought in new subjects.

- In **1851**, he became principal of Sanskrit College.
- As principal, he opened admissions to students from **lower castes**.
- This challenged who traditional scholarship was meant for.
- It was quieter than his widow remarriage campaign. It was just as important in its own way.
- He also pushed for English to be taught alongside Sanskrit.
- In **1855**, he published ***Borno Porichoy***, or “Introduction to the Alphabet”.
- It simplified and reordered the Bengali script.
- The primer is still used to teach Bengali today.
- He is seen as the father of modern Bengali prose.
- Few reformers change the building blocks of a language. Vidyasagar did.
- In 1855 he also became a Special Inspector of Schools in several Bengal districts.

3 How did he win the widow remarriage law?

He used scripture to make his case.

- Hindu widows faced a hard life, and many were barred from remarrying.
- In two pamphlets of **1855**, he argued that ancient scripture allowed widow remarriage.
- He cited the **Parashara Samhita**.
- He did not rely on modern ideals alone. He argued from the tradition itself.
- Supporters sent petitions to the government.
- The **Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act**, Act XV of 1856, followed.
- The Act is **Act XV of 1856**.
- The Act made the remarriage of Hindu widows legally valid.
- The first widow remarriage under the Act took place in Calcutta in December 1856.
- For an earlier reform, see Lord William Bentinck: Sati and English Education Reform.

4 What did he do for girls' schools?

He gave his time and his own money.

- He personally started **35 girls' schools** across Bengal.
- He often paid for them out of his own pocket.
- He was known for personal generosity.
- He regularly spent a large share of his salary on poor students.
- John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune founded the **Hindu Female School** in 1849.
- Vidyasagar served as its Secretary.
- It later grew into Bethune School and College.
- Its college, founded in 1879, became India's first women's college.
- Exams mention this. UPSC 2021 asked who served as Secretary of the school that became Bethune Female School.

5 Why was his method unusual?

He reformed the tradition from inside.

- Vidyasagar was not an outside critic of Sanskrit learning.
- He earned his authority from deep inside that tradition.
- He then used that authority to challenge parts of it.
- That is why his scripture-based case for widows carried weight.
- Exams test his real titles. He was Principal of Sanskrit College, Special Inspector of Schools and Secretary of the Bethune School.
- He never founded a group formally named a "Widow Remarriage Association".
- The earlier Bengal reformer was Raja Ram Mohan Roy. See Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj.

- For a reformer from western India, see Jyotirao Phule.
- Do not confuse him with Vishnushastri Pandit. He started a widow remarriage society in Maharashtra in 1866.

> **Quick check 2.** The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: Born 1820, Birsingha. Sanskrit College, 1829 to 1841, title Vidyasagar. Principal, 1851. Borno Porichoy, 1855. Act XV of 1856. 35 girls' schools. Secretary of the Bethune School. Used the Parashara Samhita.

> **Think it through:** Why might a scripture-based argument win more support than a purely modern one?
>
> Many people trusted the old texts. If a text itself allowed widow remarriage, opponents had to argue against their own authority. It was harder to dismiss the case as foreign.

> **Quick check 3.** Vidyasagar argued for widow remarriage using the Parashara Samhita. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Asked before

PYQ 1 · NDA & NA (II) 2025, Q80

Which one of the following statements about Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is NOT correct?

(a) He was the Principal of Sanskrit College, Calcutta
(b) He was a Government Inspector of Schools
(c) He was a Secretary to the Bethune School
(d) He was the founder of Widow Remarriage Association

mcqquestion.com/nda-na/nda-na-2-2025-general-ability-full-question-paper/#q80

Practice these questions with instant scoring on mcqquestion.com →

Asked before

PYQ 2 · UPSC CSP 2021, Q46

Who among the following was associated as Secretary with Hindu Female School which later came to be known as Bethune Female School?

(a) Annie Besant
(b) Debendranath Tagore
(c) Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar
(d) Sarojini Naidu

mcqquestion.com/upsc-pre/upsc-csp-2021-general-studies-paper-i-full-question-paper/#q46

Practice these questions with instant scoring on mcqquestion.com →

Practice MCQs

1. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's campaign for social reform led directly to which 1856 legislation?

A. The Age of Consent Act

B. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act (Act XV of 1856)

C. The Native Marriage Act

D. The Special Marriage Act

See answer ↓

2. In 1855, Vidyasagar published 'Borno Porichoy.' What was it?

A. A translation of English grammar texts into Bengali

B. A legal handbook on widow inheritance rights

C. A collection of Sanskrit devotional poetry

D. A Bengali alphabet primer that reordered and simplified the script

See answer ↓

3. As principal of Sanskrit College from 1851, what admissions change did Vidyasagar introduce?

A. He restricted admissions to Bengali-speaking students only

B. He made English the sole medium of instruction

C. He introduced entrance examinations for the first time

D. He opened admissions to students from lower castes

See answer ↓

4. Vidyasagar earned the title 'Vidyasagar,' meaning 'Ocean of Learning,' after completing 12 years of study at which institution?

A. Fort William College, Calcutta

B. Sanskrit College, Calcutta

C. Hindu College, Calcutta

D. Presidency College, Calcutta

See answer ↓

5. Beyond his famous reform campaigns, Vidyasagar personally founded how many girls' schools across Bengal, often using his own money?

A. 100

B. 5

C. 35

D. 12

See answer ↓

6. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, appointed principal of Sanskrit College in 1851, is particularly remembered for his campaign that directly led to which piece of legislation?

A. The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856

B. The Special Marriage Act of 1872

C. The Age of Consent Act of 1891

D. The Sharada Act of 1929

See answer ↓

7. Who among the following social reformer started a society for the encouragement of widow remarriage in 1866 in Maharashtra?

A. Bal Gangadhar Tilak

B. Jyotirao Phule

C. Pandita Ramabai

D. Vishnushastri Pandit

See answer ↓

8. Consider the following statements about the condition of widows in the 18th century India:

1. Raja Sawai Jai Singh of Amber promoted widow remarriage.

2. Maratha General Parshuram Bhau promoted widow remarriage.

3. Raja Ram Mohan Roy opposed Sati.

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856, is the answer. It was Act 15 of 1856. It made widow remarriage legally valid and the children legitimate. The Age of Consent Act came in 1891. The Special Marriage Act came later. Memory hook: widows' remarriage, 1856. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** 'Borno Porichoy' reordered and simplified the Bengali script, and is still used to teach Bengali today. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** As principal, Vidyasagar opened Sanskrit College's admissions to students from lower castes, alongside promoting English study. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** He studied at Sanskrit College, Calcutta, from 1829 to 1841, and the college conferred the 'Vidyasagar' title on him there. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** He personally founded 35 girls' schools in Bengal, often funding them from his own salary. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** Vidyasagar's sustained advocacy for widow remarriage -- despite fierce orthodox opposition -- was instrumental in securing the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, which legalised remarriage for Hindu widows previously condemned to lifelong social ostracism. As Sanskrit College principal, he also opened its doors to non-Brahmin students and introduced Western learning into its curriculum, and later founded the Bethune School to promote women's education in Calcutta. His significant contributions to standardising and enriching Bengali prose writing further cemented his standing as one of 19th-century Bengal's most versatile reformers. ↑ Q6
7. **D.** Vishnushastri Pandit founded the Punar Vivahottajak Mandali (Society for the Encouragement of Widow Remarriage) in 1866 in Maharashtra, campaigning against the ban on widow remarriage. Jyotirao Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (1873), and Pandita Ramabai worked for widows' welfare a generation later. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** All three statements are correct: Sawai Jai Singh and Parshuram Bhau both supported widow remarriage, and Raja Ram Mohan Roy campaigned against the practice of Sati (which Bentinck later abolished in 1829). ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1

2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

Previous year answers

1. **(d) He was the founder of Widow Remarriage Association** Vidyasagar was Principal of Sanskrit College, a Government school inspector and Secretary of the Bethune School. The Widow Remarriage Association was founded by Vishnu Shastri Pundit in Bombay. Vidyasagar's work led to the Widow Remarriage Act, 1856.
2. **(c) Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar** Vidyasagar served as secretary of the Hindu Female School founded by Bethune in 1849. The institution later grew into Bethune School and College.

Practice these questions with instant scoring on mcqquestion.com →

Curated by Arsalan Zuberi · mcqquestion.com

Scan to read online

https://mcqquestion.com/articles/modhist0111-ishwar-chandra-vidyasagar/