

## Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's Vision and The Spirit of The Santals: A Historical Review

Dr. Emdadul Islam\*

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**Abstract:** *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was born in Brahmin family but he had good relationship various communities like Santals. Vidyasagar was physically and mentally broken during the last part of his life. In 19th century, Karmatar was in the region of 'Santals Parganas' where a huge number of people were Santals. Santals were one of the largest tribes in India. Santals people are found in various places in India such as Bihar, Assam, northern side of Orissa and Bengal. Vidyasagar spent most of the time of his life in Calcutta. But, at that moment of time he wanted a secluded area, where the environment and the behaviour of the people would be beautiful and simple minded. So he decided to stay in Karmatar. Vidyasagar built a small house in Karmatar there as per his requirement and the new house was known as 'Nandan Kanan'. The Santals of the Karmatar region were poor, simple minded, affectionate and sweet spoken people. But most of the men and women were very honest by their nature. Seeing the sweet words and kindness of Vidyasagar, the entire Santals people became his friend.*

**Key Words:** *Vidyasagar, Santals, Karmatar, Nandan Kanan, Physical Plight and Mental Plight.*

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\*SACT, Dept. of History, Malda College, Malda.  
e-mail: emdadulislam30@gmail.com

## Introduction

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (henceforth Vidyasagar) was born at Birsingha village in Midnapore district on 26<sup>th</sup> September, 1820 in Brahmin family. He was great educationist and social reformer in Bengal as well as India. He would to contact various communities like Muslims. He often contacted and touched non-Brahmin people.

After being disgusted by the activities of his close associates in Calcutta, Vidyasagar was mentally and physically broken during the last part of his life. He spent most of the time of his life in Calcutta. But, at that moment of time he wanted a secluded area, where the environment and the behaviour of the people would be beautiful and simple minded. In the meanwhile, a bungalow was advertised for sale at Deoghar in Karmatar (then Bihar, now Jharkhand state), which was located in upper Bengal and not only that this place was appropriate for a healthy environment. Vidyasagar offered to buy it but the price of that bungalow was so high, that the idea was given up by him. He decided that a plot of land be taken by rent nearness to Karmatar. After the Santals Rebellion in 1855, this place remained in Santals Pargana and a lot of tribal (especially Santals) belonged to this area. During that time, it had jungly appearance and encircled by dense trees. In India, Santals are one of the most aboriginal tribes.<sup>1</sup> Few discussions about Santals are given below—

## Settlement of the Santals

The people of Santals belonged to the Proto-Australoid which was one of the largest tribes in India. Santals people are found in various places in India such as Bihar, Assam, northern side of Orissa and Bengal. As linguistically they had been classified into as Kolarians. In India, Santals are one of the highest people among tribes, numbering about forty lac i.e. 4 million.<sup>2</sup> Santals Parganas, set up as a district which included Bhagalpur Division in the state of Bihar. This district was bounded on several places like the east by Malda; west by Munger, Hazaribagh and Bhagalpur; north by the districts of Purnea; south by Manbhum, Burdwan and also Birbhum and Murshidabad. Rajmahal Hills was one of the main extents to this district. A large part of the range was subordinate in the *Damin-i-koh* (hills's skirt). There are four subdivisions in the Santals Parganas like Rajmahal, Pakur, Godda and Dumka where the largest numbers of Santals live.<sup>3</sup>

## Origin of the Santals

It is very difficult to explore anything about the origin as well as beginning life of the Santals. There is no source, authentic data and written records to know about their own origin. To know about Santals origin, we have to rely mostly on their physical features, customs, traditions and language.

L.O. Skrefsrud has guessed that the Santals came from *Khande* to Afghanistan. After they crossed seven rivers (Saptasind, present-day Punjab), entered *Champa* where they lived for generations to generations and many of their organizations had been set up. Later traveling many places and they came to Nagpur, from where they shifted themselves to Shikhar which was located in the district of Hazaribagh and finally, they had gone to Santals Parganas.<sup>4</sup>

Colonel Dalton, a British soldier and an anthropologist, think that the Santals came from the north-east side of India and found their way through the pure stream Damodar River line to the Chota Nagpur plateau and the surrounding highlands. But W.W. Hunter accepted the theory of north-eastern origin of Santals in his book titled *Annals of Rural Bengal*.<sup>5</sup>

Herbert Risley opposed the above theory, he writes in the connection of Santals origin, "A people whose only means of recording facts consists of tying knots in strings, and who have no bards to hand down a national epic by oral tradition, can hardly be expected to preserve the memory of their past long enough or accurately enough for their accounts of it to possess any historical value. If, however, the legends of the Santals are regarded as an account of recent migrations, their general purport will be found to be fairly in accord with actual facts."<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Herbert Risley wrote again, "If, the date of the taking of this fort by Ibrahim Ali were assumed to be about 1340 A.D., the subsequent migrations of which the tribal legends speak would fill up the time intervening between the departure of the Santals from Chai Champs and their settlement in the present Santals Parganas. Speaking generally, these recent migrations have been to the east, which is the direction they might prime! facie have been expected to follow. The earliest settlements which Santals tradition speaks of, those in *Ahiri Pipri* and *Chai Champé*, lie on the north-western frontier of the table land of Hazaribagh and in the direct line of advance of the numerous Hindu immigrants from Behar. That the influx of Hindus has in fact driven the Santals eastward is beyond doubt, and the line which they are known to have followed in their retreat corresponds on the whole with that attributed to them in their tribal legends."<sup>7</sup>

Rev. P.O. Bodding was well known for his important work about the life, tradition and customs of the Santals. He believed that the Santals entered in India from the flank of north-eastern gate. He wrote in his epilogue of their physical feature, customs, traditions and language. He noted that many of the customs as protected, the point to the east i.e. Assam. From their language, he further mentions that the Santals's relatives with the connection of linguistic matter are found to the east, in the Malay Peninsula and southern Burma.<sup>8</sup>

The opinion of L.S.S. O'Malley was very relevant and no doubt about the original habitat of the Santals race. He mentioned that when historical period began in India, they settled in various places especially Plateau of Chota Nagpur and in surrounding districts of Singbhum and Midnapore, not only that they started making their way in the side of northwards in eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

Montgomery Martin was an Anglo-Irish writer he was also a member of East India Association and statistical society of London. He collected some manuscript from Buchanan Hamilton and he mentioned, "The tenants of Behar in general transact their own business with the agents of the Zamindars, and it is only among the rude tribe called Saungtar, and in the Bengalese parts of the district that kind of chief tenant is employed to transact the whole affairs of the community."<sup>10</sup> Further he wrote, "It is only in Lakerdewani that some impure Taungtars have been permitted to work the cow, and the most violent opposition was at first made to such an atrocious innovation; but the obstinacy of the barbarians prevailed, chiefly, I believe, because they were thought powerful in witchcraft, and because disputes with such people were considered as dangerous."<sup>11</sup>

### **Santals's Ancestor and Their Traditional Belief**

Santals people tell a story about their traditional beliefs and constant travelling. A wild swan, which was coming from the great sea, came down at *Ahiri Pipri* and there had two eggs, out of which a male and a female were born, it was called the original ancestors of the Santals and it known as *Pilcu Haram* and *Pilcu Budhi*. They believe that the human race is born by it. The ancestors of the Santals migrated to Hara Duttie, their population increased a lot here, and this place was called as Kharwar.<sup>12</sup>

### **Origin of Name of the Santals**

The name 'Santal' was not given by the Santal tribe. The spelt 'Sontal' was used by the English but this word was adopted from Hindi. Bengali people used the word which corresponds with the 'Saontar'. People who did not belong Santals community, used both names to call as a tribe and Santals do not use their self-talk as a concession to foreigners; then they like the form the word Saontar. According to practice in the several languages and phonetic law, both names Saontar and Sontal have same origin. The Santals themselves say that they received this name from foreigners and that they lived in Saont, which had been pointed out with the modern place Silda Pargana in the District of Midnapore. There is nothing against this by etymologically but this name was used in Aryan languages and Hindi, not only that this word was also used by Bengali.<sup>13</sup>

### **Vidyasagar's Settlement in Karmatar**

Vidyasagar came to Karmatar in 1873 with ailing health and a broken mind to spend the rest of his life. He bought a house with three acres and nineteenth *Shatak* land from an English woman by five hundred rupees. Vidyasagar built a small house there as per his requirement and the new house was known as 'Nandan Kanan'. In those days Karmatar was in the region of 'Santals Parganas' where a huge number of people were Santal tribe. As region, Karmatar was an ideal place to exemption the dirt, disease and heat from the Calcutta city, although this place was three hundred kilometers away from Calcutta. For this reason, Vidyasagar chooses the pacific place which was the region of Karmatar. This was to be a useful place of vacation, somewhere to release the pressures, pessimism and frustrations of public life of Calcutta.<sup>14</sup>

### **Background of Vidyasagar's Coming in Karmatar**

To realize the background of Vidyasagar's approach to Karmatar we should have clear concept of his physical and psychological condition.

### **Vidyasagar's Physical Plight**

Vidyasagar had much health deterioration due to excessive hard work and endless labour relating to social reformation, the establishment of educational institutions and various works. Besides, on his way back from a girl's school inspection at Uttarpara in 1866, he was greatly hurt in his liver by a car accident. Vidyasagar immediately lost sense. After the accident, Vidyasagar came back to his residence at Cornwallis Street in Calcutta. On hearing of the accident, many of his friends' and relatives came to see him. One of his dearest friends Mr. Rajkrishna took

Vidyasagar to his home at Sukia Street. Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar (famous Homoeopathic Physician) began to treat him. With severe wound his thigh area swelled. After a month's treatment he recovered, but at last the fatal disease carried him till his death. According to his physician, his liver condition was not suitable. Since then, his health started to demotion, later he had frequently started suffering from various disease. In order to keep his health sound, he had to stay at Forasdanga and Burdwan very often.<sup>15</sup> Not only that, he likes Karmatar region for its suitable environment.

### **Vidyasagar's Mental Plight**

Vidyasagar always came forward to help his family, kith and kin, friends and neighbours in distress. But being disgusted with the cheating, lie and in gratitude of the house hold members, kith and kin, friends and neighbours he deserted his native village i.e. Birsingha in 1869. There after he never turned back to Birsingha. Noteworthy, before leaving Birsingha village, Vidyasagar wanted to stay with his friend Rajnarayan Basu. But his friend could not manage a house due to it was high price. Although, Vidyasagar was not happy in his family life too. He became averse to his only son Narayan. In a letter to his son, he referred to him as arbitrary and deviate. He cut off his relation with him. He also had a demotion of relationship with his wife Dinamayee Devi for his son Narayan. Besides, he had to suffer a lot of tragic pain. As a result of various disturbances, he felt frustration, despair and apathy. Notable, he came to Karmatar, a beautiful rural health place, with the intention of spending the rest of his life in solitude, completely free of worries. In the meantime, he got two hundred *cottas* (a measure of land) with a Bungalow at Karmatar. There were dense forests around the Bungalow and the place was tranquil. In this place, tribal Santals live around it. Vidyasagar had a great likeness for the place. He bought the house with the then five hundred rupees and named the Bungalow 'Nandankanan'.<sup>16</sup>

### **Vidyasagar's Cordial Relationship with Santals in Karmatar**

Vidyasagar was a special supporter of the Santals people in Karmatar and always praised their simplicity. A story was often heard in his mouth. Once a clever Bengali bought some land in Santals Pargana and tried to usurp the land of five people nearby. On that occasion, a lawsuit was filed against him. The Bengali showed many temptations and made an old Santal stand to testify for himself. He was taught that he would say that the boundary starts from such and such a *Shimul* tree. Santal agreed and started trial, when the magistrate asked, Santal first lied- it was such a *Shimul* tree; after a while, he could not hold back the real world; he said to himself 'but that was the tree', and showed another tree. Vidyasagar used to tell this story and laugh; he used to say, look how simple they are still; the truth cannot be kept secret in any way.<sup>17</sup>

Vidyasagar gave everything to Santals whatever they wanted such as medicine, clothes, rice etc. Once Vidyasagar as soon as reached at this area, little Santal children surrounded Vidyasagar and talk to him, grandpa, what did you bring for us? They had ordered to Vidyasagar before. Items according to their orders had arrived? There are some items missing like comb, belt etc. so they through the question to Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar smiled and said,

'I have brought everything. I am giving everything.' He gave it to everyone one by one. Then Vidyasagar brought roses from the garden. He put roses on the heads and ears of all the girls. The joy of Vidyasagar their joy too.<sup>18</sup>

The Santals of the Karmatar region were poor, simple minded, affectionate and sweet spoken people. But most of the men and women were very honest by their nature. Seeing the sweet words and kindness of Vidyasagar, the entire Santals people became his friend. Vidyasagar used to read and write almost during his stay in Karmatar. If he saw somebody are coming and standing, he would leave his study and come to him thereafter ask what they lacked. If there was a disease, he would arrange medicine and give clothes, food and money he used to give whatever they wanted such as material of cook. Though Santals had ten hands of cloth to wear, they would ask for twelve hands of cloth, even some would take 13/14 hands. Vidyasagar would love Santals so much that he would to bring various sweets from Burdwan for them. Bound by the affection of Vidyasagar, the Santals of Karmatar got a taste of *Sitabhog* and *Rasogolla* of Burdwan. One Vidyasagar bought some dates and took them away. They wanted more by eating these dates, so once more he took 10/12 sacks of dates and gave to each of them. They think of Vidyasagar as own man in such a way that they would not be reluctant or afraid to snatch food from his hand. Due to agility of the girls and young Santals women, he had, sometimes to be pushed during the distribution of such goods. They used to fall on the body of Vidyasagar. The Santals would come to give good news, to take shelter in danger and to seek advice for being quarrelling among themselves and to settle disputes and come to take medicines for ailment and to take foods and clothes in need. During puja festivals, he would give new clothes to all of them. When many people came and clashed, he would separate them all and distribute clothes by name as soon as they arrived. There were no fish traders in Karmatar because there were few people to buy fish so Vidyasagar would say if anybody brought fish, he would buy it. When he lived in the area, fishing was an away of earning money. He used to by all the fish brought by the fisherman. He would send the rest to the officers of the station and to the post master as per his need. If he had stayed there, the expatriate Bengali officers located for work would have benefited a lot from the food. Occasionally there would be invitations to various events.<sup>19</sup>

When Vidyasagar lived in Karmatar, he always had medicine with him; that's why many times people thought it was safe to be with him. Vidyasagar would to treat Homeopathy if any of the Santals people were affected by disease. Not only that he always kept a large number of bottles to dispense medicine to them.<sup>20</sup> Vidyasagar could not stand still when he saw someone misery. One memory in Karmatar a scavenger came to him crying and said, '*methrani* influenced by cholera in my house. Father if you don't do anything there is no way.' At that moment he left. He was accompanied by a servant with a medicine box and a wrapper. Vidyasagar stayed with the patient all day and gave him medicine as much as he could. Vidyasagar returned home in the evening and take a bath after the patient's condition improves.<sup>21</sup>

Nilmani Nyayalankar was a close friend of Vidyasagar being seriously ill, he went to Karmatar for the development of his sick health. Vidyasagar overlooked and nursed him with lovely care. He used to dispel the discharges of the sick man's kidney and bowels his own hands.



Nilmani Nyayalankar perceived ugly and ashamed that so illustrious a man should heartbreak himself with such service of men. But the philanthropic Vidyasagar said with smile, 'Never mind, my dear, I pay you in earnest,' meaning of this statement that Naylankar would likewise serve him, if he himself fall diseased.<sup>22</sup>

In the house where Vidyasagar lived, he hired a young man named Abhiram Mandal, a Santal, was employed by Vidyasagar to chief guard his house and garden in Karmatar. The man became his constant favorite because of his behavior and unwavering faith; he often sent money and clothes to the man in every month.<sup>23</sup>

During Vidyasagar's stay at Karmatar, he used to walk in every morning. On this occasion many would return him with the news. He always walked on the straight path, where the path turned; he went straight, ignoring the shrubs, high and low. If shoe was immobile, he would walk barefoot, he would not care if his legs were injured. The Santals loved him so much that when the news of his passions was spread, they would wait anxiously for the news to arrive in the morning. Every time when they first came to see him, they would bring gifts for him whatever they had. The amount of curry and vegetables was too much. When a man had nothing but a chicken, Vidyasagar pointed it at him and said, 'I will not take it'. After that the man shocked at this and began to cry. Vidyasagar became helpless and took the hen in his hand, the person's crying stopped. He was able to become favourite of all people with such openness and generous behavior.<sup>24</sup> one day a Santal went to his cousin to visit Vidyasagar. The Santal met with Vidyasagar and said that you should to give him clothes. Vidyasagar said with the intention of making a little joke, there are no clothes. Vidyasagar said, 'why should I give it to him? The santal said, 'it won't happen, you have to give clothes.' At that moment, Vidyasagar replied that there are no clothes. The Santal said, 'give me your key. I will open the lock and look at the chest'. Vidyasagar laughed and gave key of the chest to Santal. The Santal opened the chest with the key and saw a lot of clothes. The Santal said, 'this is the clothes'. The Santal took out a nice piece of cloth and gave it to the woman. This was the immense joy of Vidyasagar.<sup>25</sup>

While Vidyasagar was in Karmatar, the Santals there worshiped Vidyasagar as a deity. Shambhuchandra, brother of Vidyasagar, writes, 'on the advice of relatives, friends and doctors, he bought a Bengalee house very close to the railways station in Karmatar in the heart of Santals Pargana. Sometimes he would go there and stay healthy; that's why he used to stay there. Gradually he got acquainted with the neighboring Santals. Many of Santals came to his garden to work for wages; he began to pay more than their daily salary. The reforms of Santals were that the people of Bengal were not good men; but seeing Vidyasagar's generosity and kindness, they all rejoiced. He set up a school there to educate the local people; they used to spend twenty rupees a month in this school. Every year during the festival like Durga puja, he used to purchased cloths and distribute among the tribe. In winter, there was a very cold in Jungle area. Seeing that the Santals had no winter clothes but Vidyasagar used to buy thick sheets and blankets every year and distributed among Santals. In winter, he used to buy enough oranges and dates from Calcutta and give out them.'<sup>26</sup>

Vidyasagar called some Santals to prepare a garden at Karmatar. Vidyasagar told them to give some fixed amount of money for their hard work and efficiency. The Santals know the common people of Bengal as a 'False Bengalee' because time to time people of Bengal would to misbehaviour and treacherous. They thought Vidyasagar was friends of them. But it was true that none of them understood him except a woman. She called to Santals and said that he would give double wages. The Santals came to work. Seeing the rain, they began to work with double enthusiasm in the hope of a double pay. Vidyasagar asked them to leave their work. Seeing the rain, they started working but Vidyasagar repeatedly told them to refrains from action. They said, "If we don't do the whole work, will you give the money? If you don't get money, what will we eat today? Vidyasagar explained that he would not cut their money; then they returned home from the rain. That day there was no more work for the rain. The Santals thought they would have to return home with no pay but soon Vidyasagar gave them money for the day.<sup>27</sup>

Vidyasagar invited some Santals for dinner at his home but at first they did not agree to eat. A meeting was held between them and it was decided that food was allowed in his house for Vidyasagar's generous character. Vidyasagar arranged a variety of good food. The Santals had never seen such food before especially they would get to eat a little food only one in a day every 8/10 days. Vidyasagar began to give the best food in their plates. While eating, they were overjoyed; they began to talk each other, perhaps angel was coming down from heaven to feed them! When the meal was over, they prostrated themselves and said to him, 'who are you gentleman? Tell us? You understand our sorrow; we will not leave you.' He made satisfaction to everyone with his sweet words and said goodbye. The Santals knowing to Vidyasagar as own man; they invited him for dinner one more day. Vidyasagar was seen of mercy; he presented at Santals cottage for their invitation.<sup>28</sup>

Vidyasagar had friendly nature towards the Santals. One day an old woman come out and saw him and took care of him. In a moment, the Santal association appeared in front of the cottage. They all surrounded Vidyasagar. When Vidyasagar finally returned, an old woman went to give him some food and fruits. Vidyasagar saw that an old woman tried to give the one-day meal of a Santal family in her scarf. He said to an old woman in sweet words, 'mother why do you give me so much? Your sons will one day live by eating this.' An old woman once looked at Vidyasagar and soon tears rolled down from her eyes. An old woman understood that they got a man who understood their grief. Vidyasagar understood how much the Santals love him with a simple mind.<sup>29</sup>

### **View of Haraprasad Shastri**

Haraprasad Shastri was an eminent Historian. He took shelter in Vidyasagar's house at Karmatar while he went to Lucknow. When Vidyasagar lived at Karmatar, he was an eyewitness. Haraprasad Shastri was attracted the readers by his writing about Karmatar where Vidyasagar stayed. According to him, "The word 'Karmatar' means a tar or plot of flood resisting high-level land owned by a Santal boatman named *Karma*. Now it has become a station of the



East Indian Railway. It is in between two other stations- Jamtara and Madhupur. In 1878, Vidyasagar's bungalow stood beside it. The bungalow comprised two halls, four bedrooms and two verandahs. The surrounding tract of land, four or five *bighas* square, served as orchard. In it he planted mango grafts culled from various lands. Some were of the creeper type. He took jolly good care of them. The orchard contained trees of other kinds too, outside it; there were a few ancient *aswaththa* trees. The then Station Master exercised his authority over the domain. He seemed to proclaim 'I am the monarch of all I survey'. Vidyasagar's arrival in Karmatar made a dent in his supremacy and so excited his displeasure. At the outset Vidyasagar tried to be on good terms with him; but finally, all attempts having miscarried, adopted the policy of non-cooperation....."<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion

The cordial relationship between Vidyasagar and the Santals can be called as one of empathy, where Vidyasagar's reformatory work extended beyond the conventional boundaries of caste and class, reaching out to indigenous and tribal communities especially Santals, with the goal of progressing their educational and social status.

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