

The Saint Ravidas

(The Social and religious reformer of medieval India)

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The age of Ravidas was also the age of Bhakti movement in medieval India which was started from south India by great saint Shankaracharya.¹ Which had been moved further by Ramanujacharya, Nimbarkacharya, Madhvacharya etc.² The most prominent saint Ramanand of Bhakti movement had made very popular of this, in northern India which was the bridge between the Bhakti movement of the south and the north.³

Ramanand was born at Prayag (Allahabad) in a Kanyakubja Brahmin family. He was educated partly at Prayag and partly at Benares. His first teacher was a Vedantist of the monist school, but he became later the disciple of Raghavananda who belonged to Ramanuja's Sri sect. He had an independent mind, he travelled about the country broadening his outlook, and, according to Macauliffe, "It is certain that Ramananda came in contact at Benares with learned Muslims."⁴

The result of his experience and discussions was that he made a bold departure from the doctrines of the school to which he belonged. In theological belief he substituted the worship of Rama for that of Visnu and his consort, and he taught the doctrine of Bhakti to all the four castes without prejudice. He rejected the regulations of Ramanuja with regard to the preparation and partaking of meals, and admitted to his new sect disciples from all castes, from both sexes and even from among the Muslims. The names of his twelve disciples who became famous were Anantananda, Kabir, Pipa, Bhavananda, Sukha, Sursur, Padmavati, Narhari, Ravidasa, Dhana, Saina and the wife of Sursura.⁵

The main contribution of Ramananda was to preach the bhakti doctrine of love in the language of the people, bringing Hindu lower castes in contact with direct religious experience as distinct from religious ritual. Most of the eclectic Bhakti poets rose from lower castes.⁶ Ravidas, one of the disciples of Ramananda, a chamar (shoemaker) of the lowest Hindu caste, wrote verses condemning Brahmanical ritual and caste inequality⁷, and used some pseudo-Persian vocabulary. The followers of the Bhakti movement gave themselves the name avadhutas (the emancipated ones) as they had freed themselves from the fetters of caste.⁸

The details of Ravidas' life are not well known. Most scholars said that he was born about 1450, and died about 1520.⁹ Ravidas was born in the village of Seer Goverdhanpur, near Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, India. His birthplace is now known as Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Asthan. His father was Raghram, and his mother was Mata Ghurbinia.¹⁰ His parents belonged to leather working Chamar community, whose profession involved processing dead animals and their skins, which made them untouchable.¹¹

While his original occupation was leather work, but he was not interested in this occupation because his nature was like saints and devotees from his childhood he was influenced from Bakhti movement which was tried to end of many evils of society, which was spread in society of that time. Besides, he was interested in the service of sadhus and saints and needy person of society. So, he spent his money on them.¹² He began to spend most of his time in spiritual pursuits as a Vaishnava Hindu in the Ramananda tradition.¹³ Thereafter he spent most of his life in the company of Hindu saints, sadhus and ascetics.¹⁴

The text Anantadas Parcai, one of the earliest surviving biographies of various Bhakti movement poets, introduces the birth of Ravidas as follows.¹⁵

In Banaras, that best of cities, no evil ever visits men.

No one who dies ever goes to hell, Shankar himself comes with the name of Ram.

Where Sruti and Smriti have authority, there Ravidas was reborn,

in the home of a low-caste Shakta, his father and mother were both Chamars.

In his previous birth he was a Brahmin,

he listened all the time to religious recitation, but did not give up meat.

For this sin, he was born into a low-caste family.

but he remembered his previous birth.

Medieval era texts, such as the Bhaktamal suggest that Ravidas was one of the disciples of the Brahmin bhakti sant- poet Ramananda.¹⁶ He is traditionally considered as Kabir's younger contemporary.¹⁷ His ideas fame grew over his lifetime, and texts suggest Brahmins (members of priestly upper caste) used to bow before him.¹⁸ He travelled extensively, visiting Hindu pilgrimage sites in Andhra Pradesh, Maharastra, Gujrat, Rajasthan and those in the Himalayas. He abandoned saguna with attributes, image forms of supreme beings, and focused on the nirguna form of supreme beings.¹⁹ As his poetic hymns in regional language inspired others, people from various background sought his teachings and guidance.²⁰

There is no any evidential fact related to the early life of saint Ravidas. As the tradition was in medieval society, that people generally opt heredity profession to spend their life. Saint Ravidas also opted his heredity profession of leather working.²¹ There is indication of leather working of Ravidas in his own lines.²²

Kah Raidas khalas Chamara,
Aisi meri jaati vikhyat chamar.

It is said that earlier the father had involved him in his profession but later on his father separated him because he was not taking interest in his work and spending more money and time in service of saints. Then he started to live in slum behind his home. Now the Raidas was more free and remained pegged in the hymns of God.²³ It is also said that Ravidas never make shoes by killing animals instead he purchased the leather of dead animal to make shoes. It is also famous that he put on shoes to saints without taking its cost.²⁴

People were attracted to him by his life of simplicity and contentment, and it is said that a Rajput queen accepted him as her Guru. His hymns breathe a sprit of humility and self-surrender. He did not indulge in high philosophic speculation about the nature and essence of God and his relation with the world and man. His cardinal doctrine are not different from those of Kabir, and like him he uses Rekhta, even the Persian language, and Sufi terms to show the identity of Hinduism and Islam, He believed in a God who was the Absolute Lord of all.²⁵

“Govind is immovable, fromless, unborn, unique, of fearless gait, unlimited,
beyond sight and reason, indivisible, unqualified, extreme joy.”²⁶

“Hari is in all and all is in Hari.”²⁷

And identical with self.

“Thou art I, and the difference between me and thee
is like water in a vessel of gold and in the wave.”²⁸

Thus although he is one he is yet many,

“One is many and many is one Hari,
how am I to say that there is a second,” and

“He is one, and only two by illusion.”²⁹

But God is not identical with any of the incarnation,

“The Rama in whom the people recognize Him,
they are in error about it, O brother.”³⁰

Raidas looks upon the world as the play of God, and is inclined to the view that it is illusory or at any rate not worth paying attention to,

“He arranges it like a player (Bazigar),
no one knows the secret of his play.
The play is false, only the player is true,
by knowing this the mind is satisfied.”³¹

Again,

“The body is empty, the maya (nature) is empty,
emptily hast thou wasted life without Hari.
The temple and luxurious living are empty,
empty is the dependence on other gods.”³²

Raidas has complete faith in his grace:

“For did he not come to the help of Ajamila,
the elephant, the prostitute,
and if he broke their chains,
undoubtedly he will do the same for him.”

Yet there is a pleasing conceit in his attitude:

“Thou hast bound me by chains of illusion (moh),
I have bound Thee with the ropes of love.
I am making an effort to emancipate myself,
but when I attain freedom then who will adore Thee?”³³

The other attitude, of complete surrender and humility, is him.

“O Rama, Thou alone art wise, thou art eternity without guise,
Thou art King (sultan) of kings. I am thy ignorant broken (shikasta) servant (banda).
I have no manners, no fortune. I am senseless, foolish and given to evil.
I am a sinner, an alien (gharib), heedless, cowardly and black-hearted.
Thou art powerful (Qadir) and capable of taking me across the ocean.
I am greedy and cunning.

This body of mine is shattered and broken, and my mind is full of many apprehensions.

Raidas the slave begs his lord (Sahib) vouchsafe to me a sight (didar) of Thee,”³⁴

And therefore he calls upon him out of the depth of his heart.

“Save me, save me, O holy Lord of three worlds.”³⁵

It is necessary then to give up all external rites, the pilgrimages, fasts, shaving of head, singing and dancing in temples, offering of leaves to idols, and to betake to the devotion of One only, by losing the self on him, as the river loses itself in the sea.

Although,

“My caste is low, my action are low, and even my profession is low,
Says Raidas, yet the Lord has raised me high.”³⁶

Most scholars believe that Ravidas met Guru Nanak Dev ji, the founder of Sikhism.³⁷ He is revered in the Sikh scripture, and 41 of Ravidas’ poems are included in the Adi Granth. These poems are one of the oldest attested source of his ideas and literary works.³⁸ Another substantial source of legends and stories about the life of Ravidas is the hagiography in the Sikh tradition, named Premambodha.³⁹ This text, composed over 150 years after Ravidas’ death in 1693, includes him as one of the seventeen saints of Indian religious tradition.⁴⁰

The 17th century Nabhdas’s Bhaktamal, and the Parcais of Anantadas, both contain chapters on Ravidas.⁴¹ Other than these, the scriptures and text of Sikh tradition and the Hindu Dadupanthi tradition, most other written sources about the life of Ravidas, including by the Ravidasi (followers of Ravidas), were composed in the early 20th century, or about 400 years after his death.⁴²

Anantadas, a writer who belonged to the bhakti poet-saint Ramananda group, wrote a biography of major bhakti poet-saints about 1600 C.E.⁴³ This text, called the Parcais or Parchais, included Ravidas among the saint whose biography and poems were included. Over time new manuscripts of Parcais of Anantadas were reproduced, some in different local languages of India.⁴⁴ Winnand Callewaert notes that some 30 manuscripts of Anantadas’s hagiography on Ravidas have been found in different parts of India.⁴⁵

Of these four manuscripts are complete, collated and have been dated to 1662, 1665, 1676 and 1687. The first three are close with some morphological variants without affecting the meaning, but the 1687 version systematically inserts verses into the text, at various location, with caste-related statements, new claims of Brahmins persecuting Ravidas, notes on the untouchability of Ravidas, claims of kabir giving Ravidas ideas, ridicules of nirguni and saguni ideas, and such text corruption.⁴⁶

Examples of inserted verses in the 1687 version of Anantadas’s hagiography on Ravidas, that are not found in the older versions of Ravidas’ biography:

Then the king called Raidas, who went to see him along with his companions,
The king said: Listen Raidas; the Brahmins are disturbed and make a lot of noise. (inserted
before Chapter 5, verse 1)

We organize donations and worship, but Raidas replied: Listen to me Brahmins,
You deceive the king and the people, you leave the right path and take them on the wrong
path. (inserted into Chapter 5, verse 6)

In a low caste you were born, you have no right to perform rituals. (inserted into Chapter 5,
verse 12)

Since the earliest times Brahmins have been respected, and even more so in this Kaliyug,
Nobody will touch an untouchable, how can he become like a Dahma Brahmin. (inserted into
Chapter 5, verse 15)

This nirgun devotion concentrating only one the Name, could not at all appeal to the queen.
(inserted into Chapter 6, verse 12)

---Winnand Callewaert, *The Hagiographies of Anantadas: The Bhakti Poets of North India*⁴⁷

Winnand Callewaert considers the 1676 version as the standard version, his critical
edition of Ravidas's hagiography excludes all these insertions, and he remarks that the
cleaner critical version of Anantadas's parcais suggests that there is more in common in the
ideas of bhakti movement's Ravidas, Kabir and Sen than previously thought.⁴⁸

Ravindra S Khare similarly has questioned the textual sources on Ravidas, and mentions
there are few "readily available and reliable textual sources on the Hindu and Untouchable
treatment of Ravidas."⁴⁹

The Adi Granth of Sikhs, and Panchvani of the Hindu warrior-ascetic group
Dadupanthis are the two oldest attested sources of the literary works of Ravidas.⁵⁰ In the Adi
Granth, forty of Ravidas's poems are included, and he is one of thirty six contributors to this
foremost canonical scripture of Sikhism.⁵¹ This compilation of poetry in Adi Granth responds
to, among other things, issues of dealing with conflict and tyranny, war and resolution, and
willingness to dedicate one's life to the right cause.⁵² Ravidas's poetry covers topic such as
the definition of a just state where there are no second or third class unequal citizens, the need
for dispassion, and who is real Yogi.⁵³

Jeffery Ebbesen notes that, just like other bhakti sant-poets of India and some cases of
Western literature authorship, many poems composed by later era Indian poets have been

attributed to Ravidas, as an act of reverence, even though Ravidas has had nothing to do with these poems or ideas expressed therein.⁵⁴

Peter Friedlander says that Ravidas' hagiographies, though authored long after he died depict a struggle within the Indian society, where Ravidas' life gives a means to express a variety of social and spiritual themes.⁵⁵ At one level, it depicts a struggle between the then prevalent heterodox communities and the orthodox Brahminical tradition. At another level, the legends are an inter-communal, inter-religious struggle with an underlying search and desire for social unity. At yet another level, Peter Friedlander says, the stories describe the spiritual struggle of an individual unto self.⁵⁶

There is no historical evidence to verify the historicity in these hagiographies, which range from Ravidas's struggle with Hindu Brahmins,⁵⁷ to his struggle with Muslim Sultan Sikander Lodi.⁵⁸ Peter Friedlander says that the stories reflect the social dynamics that influenced the composers of the hagiographies during the 17th to 20th century. These are legends where Ravidas is victorious because God intervened with miracles such as making a stone float in water or making river Ganges to reverse course and flow upstream.⁵⁹

David Lorenzen similarly says that poetry attributed to Ravidas, and championed by Ravidasi (his followers) from the 17th through the 20th century, have a strong anti-communal theme.⁶⁰ The legends, suggests Lorenzen, cannot be separated from the power and political situation of this era, and they reflect a strong element of social and religious dissent by groups marginalized during a period when Indian society was under the Islamic rule and later the colonial rule.⁶¹

The songs of Ravidas discuss Nirguna-Saguna themes, as well as ideas that are at the foundation of Nath Yoga philosophy of Hinduism.⁶² David Lorenzen says Ravidas's poetry is imbued with themes of boundless loving devotion to God, wherein this divine is envisioned as Nirguna.⁶³ In the sikh tradition, the theme of Nanak's poetry are very broadly similar to the Nirgun bhakti ideas of Ravidas and other leading north Indian sant-poets.⁶⁴ Most postmodern scholars (Karen Pechilis) consider Ravidas's ideas to belong to the Nirguna philosophy within the bhakti movement.⁶⁵

Ravindra khare says that there are two divergent versions that emerge from the study of texts relating to Ravidas's philosophy.⁶⁶ The 17th century Bhaktamal text by Nabhadas provides one version, while the 20th century texts by Dalits⁶⁷ provide another.⁶⁸

According to Bhaktamal text, Ravidas was to pure speech, capable of resolving spiritual doubts of those who held discussions with him, was unafraid to state his humble

origins and real caste.⁶⁹ Further, the Bhaktamal text states that Ravidas's teachings agreed with Vedic and ancient scripture, he subscribed to nondualism, discussed spiritual ideas and philosophy with everyone including Brahmins without gender or caste discrimination, and his abilities reflected an individual who had reached the inner content state of the highest ascetic.⁷⁰

The 20th century version, prevalent in the texts of Dalit community, concurs with the parts about pure speech and resolving spiritual doubts.⁷¹ However, they differ in the rest. The texts and the prevalent beliefs of the Dalit community hold that Ravidas rejected the Hindu Vedas, he was opposed by the Brahmins and resisted by the caste Hindu as well as Hindu ascetics throughout his life, and that some members of the Dalit community have believed Ravidas was an idol worshipper (saguni bhakti saint) while other 20th century texts assert that Ravidas rejected idolatry.⁷²

In fact, there is always protest against excess of ritual and external pomp. Mahatma Buddha had also protested it strictly. It is also said in Upanishad that there is no salvation on the basis of it. This ritual will drown the people in the way without salvation.⁷³ Saint Ravidas also protested traditional Idol worship. His statement was,

“ Jo Avinasi sabka karta, Wyapi reh, yo sab thaur re.
Panch tat jin kiya psara, so yo hi kidhu aur re.

Tu tau kehat hau yo hi karta, yanku manic krai re.
Tarni Tarni shakti je yamai, to Aapn kyun na tirai re.
Aamhi bhrose sab jag budha, suni pandit ki baat re.

...Ya ki sev sool bhajai katai na sanshy fans re.”

It's means: The God, who is the master of whole world and omnipresent, and is completely present in five element of world ever, His represented could not be this stone idol. On thinking all these he left idol worship.⁷⁴ In another place he described,

“Pati tore puji rachavai, taran tran kahai re.

Murti mahi basai pamesur, to paani mahi Tirai re.”

It's mean : The test of the power of the Idol saying that If God dwells in Idol, he could be swim in water at least but it drowned itself.⁷⁵

In fact, Ravidas has protested rituals, idol worship and blind faith which were in trend at that time; but it is necessary to clear here that Ravidas has protested only the external form of it. While, he forced it's fundamental from, internal worship and life of purity.⁷⁶ Ravidas said

that when there is God's meditation instead of external display in the heart of a person then that person is not harassed by lust and anger and that devotee become form of God himself. According to him, people should recognize the real and actual form of religion in place of religious rituals and external pomp.⁷⁷

According to saint Ravidas, If any person do all the religious ritual and he have lack of humanity then his all these religious ritual are in vain. Raidas is completely the founder of devotional religious practice also in the field of religious practice. His statement is that the religious seeker should remember God day and night giving up religious dispute.⁷⁸

The fundamental concept of religious practice of Raidas was social reform and public welfare. He consider saint only those people whose works is only public welfare.⁷⁹ Kabir also spread his voice for social welfare. While Raidas realized the pain of the society as that time and he solved it by spreading his voice. In the period of Raidas the traditionalism was controlled the society strongly.⁸⁰

Although, the saint and social reformer of earlier period had also raised their voice to get it's solution but complex form of traditionalism was continue as earlier. Raidas, himself had faced this problem in various place of their life in extreme and he protested it at place to place.⁸¹ Raidas was that first saint who presented the thought of this new era in acceptance form. Raidas also started his work of social welfare on religious basis, because in medieval period the social fram was based on religion.⁸²

Raidas had given the view of social equality against social injustice at that time. He said about the equal right of every people in the field of religion and devotion. In this way, he declared the great need of new era. Raidas did not consider Hindu-Muslim culture as good. So, he had given the message of fundamental equality and mutual Harmony between these two. In fact, this was a great message of unity in that age of social stress.⁸³

At last, Raidas was a North Indian mystic poet-saint of the bhakti movement during the 15th to 16th century.⁸⁴ Venerated as a Guru in the region of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, the devotional songs of Ravidas made a lasting impact upon the bhakti movement. He was a poet-saint, social reformer and a spiritual figure. He is considered as the founder of 21st century Ravidassia religion by a group who previously were associated with Sikhism.⁸⁵ His family that worked with dead animals and their skin to produce leather products, making them an untouchable Chamar (leather) caste.⁸⁶ His name often include the honorific Bhagat, sometimes spelled as Ravidas, Raidas , Rohidas and Ruhidas.⁸⁷

The people were inspired by his simple life and satisfaction.⁸⁸ He had protested the external form of religion spread in that society but supported the internal and basic form and emphasized on the devotion on God.⁸⁹ Raidas realized the condition of society of that time and had given a practical solution through religion.⁹⁰ Raidas taught removal of social divisions of caste and gender, and promoted unity in the pursuit of personal spiritual freedoms.⁹¹

In this way Raidas, the symbol of simplicity and brotherhood, started his life from a leather worker and ended it as a famous poet, religious and social reformer, who is very useful and relevant lesson for present India society.

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