

SANT RAVIDAS: BANI AND PHILOSOPHY IN SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB

Maninder Arora

Assistant Professor

Department of History, Lyallpur Khalsa College for Women, Jalandhar

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the philosophical ideology of Sant Ravidas Ji. He was born in a socially low-caste cobbler family. His spiritual achievement proved that the caste concept prevalent in society was made by vested interests and has no meaning as far as personality development and spiritual attainment are concerned. This study explores his vision of an egalitarian society and his enduring spiritual legacy.

Keywords: Sant Ravidas, Bhakti Movement, Begumpura, Radical Humanism, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Anti-Caste Discourses.

Introduction and Historical Context

The Bhakti movement was a significant religious movement in medieval India aiming to bring religious reforms among all sections of society through devotion to achieve salvation. It gained importance through the poems and teachings of the Vaishnava Alvars and Shaiva Nayanars in early medieval South India, before spreading northwards.

According to historian Tara Chand, from the 8th to the 15th century, the South was the home of the religious reformer; it is there that Vaishnava and Shaiva saints started the schools of Bhakti. These saints were called Alvars and Adiyars (Nayanars). The former worshipped the Lord Vishnu and were called Vaishnavas, while the latter worshipped Shiva and were known as Shaivas. These saints repudiated the old notion of bhakti and denounced pilgrimages, fasts, alms-giving, and the study of scriptures. Their emphasis was on the practical side of bhakti, which was all-pervasive, all-consuming, and crossed all limits of individuality. [1]

From the South, bhakti spread to the North, and Ramanand was the chief protagonist of this movement. The progress of the Bhakti movement is defined thus:

"Bhakti arose first in the Dravida land. Ramanand brought it to the North, and Kabir spread it to the seven continents and nine divisions of the world." [2]

The Sanskrit word *bhakti* is derived from the root *bhaj*, which means "attachment, devotion to, fondness for, homage, faith or love, worship, piety to something as a spiritual, religious principle or means of salvation." [3]

In other words, the Bhakti movement originates in love, continues in love and ends in love. Its basis is love. Its means is love; its aim is love. This love, which is devotion to God. Knows no bargaining, knows no fear, and knows no return. It is the union with God, union of the individual soul with the universal soul, which is the goal of Bhakti.[4]

This historical era witnessed a massive surge in regional literature. Devotional verses and compositions replaced traditional Sanskrit texts, making spirituality accessible to the masses. Key figures in this literary revolution included: Andal, Basava, Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, the Haridasa saints like Purandara Dasa, Kanakadasa, Kabir, Guru Nanak (the founder of Sikhism), Tulsidas, Mirabai, Ravidas, and Namdev. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Jayadeva, Sankaradeva and Tukaram.

Bhagat Bani in the Sikh Tradition

Among these reformers, Sant Ravidas stands out as a revolutionary social reformer and philosopher. His teachings were rooted in the service of humanity and the removal of social evils like superstitions and religious orthodoxy. His spiritual depth was so profound that 40 of his hymns (Shabads) were included in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS), the holy scripture of Sikhism. These contributions are set to various musical measures or Raags, including: Raag Siri, Raag Gauri, Raag Asa, Raag Sorath, and Raag Bilaval. His whole life was dedicated to the service of humanity. His teachings emphasized that all humans are equal in the eyes of God.

The incorporation of the Bhagat Bani in the Guru Granth Sahib by the Sikh Gurus was an attempt to break narrow religious boundaries in search of the truth in all religions. [5] Principal Teja Singh observed that this inclusion was inherent in the cosmopolitan nature of Sikhism. The Gurus wanted to establish that divine truth, enlightenment, and salvation were not the exclusive monopoly of any single country, race, clan, or institutionalized religion. [6]

Ideology and Monotheism of Bhagat Ravidas

Bhagat Ravidas was a profound monotheist who emphasized the absolute oneness of God. He taught that there is no difference between the Creator and the created. He elucidated this principle through timeless analogies, stating that just as there is no difference between gold and a gold bangle or water and a wave, similarly, there is no difference between the Supreme Lord and living beings. [7]

In reality, God is omnipresent, and it is only when human beings forget the connection that they commit sins and separate from the Lord. Ultimately, it is through the company of a Saint that God reveals His true form to the wandering soul.

Radical Humanism and Anti-Caste Discourses

Sant Ravidas Ji was a true humanist saint. He gave importance to human beings irrespective of any caste, creed, religion, wealth, or lineage. According to him, caste divisions are meaningless, which is why he himself said:

Jat pat ke pher manhi, urajhi rahai sab log, manukhta koon khat hai ravidas jat kar rog. [8]

In another hymn, he proudly acknowledged that he belonged to a low caste:

"My social status is low, my ancestry is low, and my birth is low as well. I have not performed the service of the Lord, the Lord, says Ravidas the cobbler." [9]

Opposing casteism, he said that no human being is high or low because of their birth, caste, or religion, but rather because of their good or bad qualities. Through devotion to God, even a degraded person becomes a human being of high status. [10]

As he says, *"one who chants the Naam, the Name of the Lord, is not concerned with social class, birth and rebirth."* [11]

The Concept of Begumpura: The Welfare State

He gave the concept of a welfare state and named it Begumpura (i.e., a city of no sorrow). This is a spiritual vision of an ideal society where sufferings, anxiety, fear, desire, inequality, and caste distinctions do not occur. There are no restrictions. No one prevents anybody from going to the place of the Lord—a state of pure bliss and freedom internally and externally. This is a place where spiritual liberation occurs. [12]

Bhagat Ravidas's Begumpura represents one of the earliest recorded indigenous Indian models of a classless, casteless, and tax-free utopian socialist state—predating Western democratic and socialist philosophies by centuries.

Critique of Ritualism and Superstitions

Sant Ravidas Ji also opposed empty rituals. According to him, God can be attained not through rituals but only through devotion of the body and mind. [13] He declares: *"I dedicate and offer my body and mind to You. By then Guru's Grace, I attain the immaculate Lord."*

Sant Ravidas Ji, while severely criticizing those who slander saints, says that no matter how much a person slanders them, even if he recites, worships, chants, does penance, or performs good deeds, all are in vain. He cannot be saved and must face spiritual ruin. [14]

"Someone may bathe at the sixty-eight sacred shrines of pilgrimage, and worship the twelve Shiva-lingam stones, and dig wells and pools, but if he indulges in slander, then all of this is useless. How can the slanderer of the Holy Saints be saved? Know for certain, that he shall go to hell."

Sant Ravidas was of the belief that pure bhakti of God is attained through love, purity of mind and soul, humility, and by discarding false rituals and superstitions. He strongly criticized the hypocrisy in idol worship. Flowers, scents, and lamps are used to worship the idols, and worldly purity is prioritized, yet all these items are already contaminated by nature. Only self-surrender is the pure offering that one can make.

"The calf has contaminated the milk in the breasts. The bumble bee has contaminated the flower, and the fish the water. O mother, where shall I find any offering for the Lord's worship? I cannot find any other flowers worthy of the incomparable Lord... The snakes encircle the sandalwood trees. Poison and nectar dwell there together. Even with incense, lamps, offerings of food and fragrant flowers, how are Your slaves to worship You? I dedicate and offer my body and mind to You. By Guru's Grace, I attain the immaculate Lord." [15]

He consequently emphasizes that one must detach from the ego and materialism and focus on Naam Simran. [16]

The Illusion of Maya and Vices

According to Sant Ravidas, there is no difference between God and the individual soul. Any difference perceived is due to Maya. Maya is a power under God consisting of three attributes: Rajas, Sattva, and Tamas. Through this power, according to Ravidas Ji, Maya acts as a great and potent power of God. All living beings, sages, and gods are under its influence. It has brought the entire creation under its control.

According to Sant Ravidas, the mind has become so enslaved by Maya that it has not even kept its own pure intellect. The five vices—lust, anger, greed, attachment, and pride—dominate it, taking it away from God at every moment. He subsequently observes that human beings are puppets in the hands of the Lord. God makes all human beings play to His tune, which is Maya. If one has to escape from Maya, one must fall in love with the puppeteer.

"How does the puppet of clay dance? He looks and listens, hears and speaks, and runs around. When he acquires something, he is inflated with ego. But when his wealth is gone, then he cries and bewails. In thought, word and deed, he is attached to the sweet and tangy flavors. When he dies, no one knows where he has gone. Says Ravidas as, the world is just a dramatic play, O Siblings of Destiny. I have enshrined love for the Lord, the star of the show." [17]

In his Bani, Ravidas Ji emphasized staying away from sensual vices like lust, anger, greed, attachment, and pride because indulging in these vices distances the soul from God. The effects of Maya and ignorance are such that what the living being sees is not what truly is. The living being is a part of God, a divine form. Guru Ravidas Ji explains this by giving the example of a frog in a well. Just as the frogs living in a well have no news of the outside world, similarly, the human mind is obsessed with material vices and lacks any understanding of the hereafter.

"The frog in the deep well knows nothing of its own country or other lands; just so, my mind, infatuated with corruption, understands nothing about this world or the next. O Lord of all worlds: reveal to me, even for an instant, the Blessed Vision of Your Darshan. My intellect is polluted; I cannot understand Your state, O Lord. Take pity on me, dispel my doubts, and teach me true wisdom." [18]

The Guru's teaching is that only by worshipping the Lord can a living being attain liberation from material vices. Salvation can be attained only by chanting the Name of God.

"Says Ravidas, the whole world has been plundered, but I have escaped, chanting the Name of the One Lord." [19]

Dignity of Labour

Sant Ravidas Ji gave labor a high status for human welfare and worked diligently throughout his life. According to him, every kind of profession is respectable, whether it is shoe-making or cattle-driving. He himself says that he does leatherworking along with devotion to God, while the rest of the world is spending its life merely polishing its physical form. Sant Ravidas proudly addresses his socio-economic background to the elite citizens of Benares. [20]

"O citizens of Benares, my lineage is famously associated with tanning leather and clearing away cattle carcasses around the city. Yet, through devotion, even high-caste scholars now bow before me."

He was a man of humility and a gentle nature. It is a manifestation of his humility that he repeatedly calls himself a humble servant in his Bani instead of a great saint or a devotee. In his Bani, he addresses himself at various places as Ravidas Chamar, Ravidas Khalsa Chamar, Dasandas, etc.

He struggled a lot throughout his life, having to fight with rulers and orthodox religious authorities, and endured torture and pain, but still, he did not give up his humility. He asserted that whether a person is a Brahmin, a Vaishya, a Shudra, or a Kshatriya; whether he is a poet, an outcaste, or a filthy-minded person, he becomes pure by meditating on the Lord God. He saves himself, and the families of both his parents. [21]

Contemporary Tributes

The saints and devotees of Guru Ravidas Ji's contemporaries praised him in their hymns. Guru Ram Das Ji, the fourth Guru, praised Sant Ravidas by saying:

"Ravidas, the leather-worker, praised the Lord, and sang the Kirtan of His Praises each and every instant. Although he was of low social status, he was exalted and elevated, and people of all four castes came and bowed at his feet." [22]

Guru Arjan Dev Ji, the fifth Guru, too praised the Sant Ravidas:

"Kabeer is good, the slave of the Lord's slaves; the humble barber Sain is sublime. Highest of the high is Naam Dayv, who looked upon all alike; Ravidas was in tune with the Lord." [23]

Conclusion

Sant Ravidas bridged profound monotheism with a radical analysis of social hierarchies, permanently altering the medieval Bhakti landscape. He proved that divine and spiritual elevation resides equally in everyone, and he dismantled the social justification for caste discrimination and empty ritualism.

His visionary concept of Begumpura was the basis of an egalitarian welfare state. His life proved to society the inherent importance of honest labor, which was conveyed through his sacred shabads in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. His legacy remains a universal blueprint for building a close, compassionate, classless, and inclusive society.

REFERENCES

1. Bala, Shashi, *The Concept of Monotheism, A Comparative Study of Major Religious Scriptures*, ABS Publications, New Delhi, 1993, p.120.
2. Ibid.
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhakti>
4. Chitnis, K.N, *Socio-Economic History of Medieval India*, Altantic Publishers, New Delhi, 2002, p.130
5. Mann, Gurinder Singh, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, pp. 109–111.
6. Singh, Teja and Singh, Ganda. (1950). *A Short History of the Sikhs, Vol.1*, Punjabi University, Patiala, pp. 31–34.
7. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS)*, Raag Sorath, Bani of Ravidas Ji, p. 658.
8. Composition quoted from the text: "Ravidas Ramayan".
9. SGGS, Raag Gauri, Bairagani, Sant Ravidas, p. 345.
10. SGGS, Raag Asa, Sant Ravidas, p. 486.
11. SGGS, Raag Bilaval, Sant Ravidas, p. 858.
12. SGGS, Raag Gauri, "Begumpura Shehar ko Naon", p. 345.
13. SGGS, Raag Sorath, Sant Ravidas, p. 658.
14. SGGS, Raag Maru, Sant Ravidas Composition on Slander (Ninda), p. 1106.
15. SGGS, Raag Gujri, "Doodh ta bachhre thanhu bitariyo", p. 525.
16. SGGS, Raag Gujri, p. 525.
17. SGGS, Raag Asa, Puppet Imagery Composition, p. 487.
18. SGGS, Raag Bilaval, "Kupa Bhariyo Jaise Dadira", p. 858.
19. SGGS, Raag Bhairon, Sant Ravidas, p. 1196.
20. SGGS, Raag Malar, "Nagar Janan Meri Jati Bikhyat Chamarang", p. 1293.
21. SGGS, Raag Bilaval, Core equality compositions, p. 858.
22. SGGS, Raag Suhi, Mahala 4, p. 733.
23. SGGS, Raag Sarang, Mahala 5, p. 1192.