

Relevance of Sant [Saint] Ravidas in 21st Century

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1. Introduction

Thomas Carlyle in his famous work *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* explains that the key role in history lies in the actions of the "Great Man"- "The history of what man has accomplished in this world is at bottom of the History of the Great Men who have worked here. Great Men such as prophets, poets, priests, writers, generals and kings were men of action who influenced people in enduring ways. They were artists who imagined new worlds, and then helped to bring them to life."

Ravidas, also called **Raidas**, one of the most renowned of the saints of the North Indian nirguna sampradaya of *bhakti* movement, himself a cobbler, had preached four centuries ago in no uncertain words the equality of men before God, tried to abolish discrimination based on caste, tried to bring the Hindus and Muslims together, opposing pilgrimage and rituals, proclaiming Vedas as worthless, **attacking on the spiritual hegemony of Brahmins**, expressing himself through Bhakti poems and satsang, envisaging an Utopian city Begumpura [literally a city without sorrow], remains relevant as Great Man not only in 21st century but many more centuries to come through his philosophy, through his poems, through his actions, through his ideals influencing the Dalit social-reform movements of the 20th century.

Mirabai became his follower and Ambedkar himself dedicated one of his books *The Untouchables* to him. Around 40 of his poems were included in the *Adi Granth*, the holy scripture of Sikhism. A temple was built in his hometown i.e. Seer Goverdhanpur, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, also called Begumpura, where he was worshipped and his birthday was celebrated as a religious event. He is loved and respected all over the world however the major regions are Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Maharashtra for his bhakti movement and devotional songs. Sant Ravidas Jayanti or birthday anniversary

is celebrated every year on Magh Purnima at full moon day of Magh month with great enthusiasm and happiness all over India.

2. Why he is relevant?

To explain it, let us first try to understand the intricacies of Indian society based on discrimination and inequality.

- i. Apastamba says, it is not permissible to take the food offered by a sudra even if he follows the prescribed rules. Gautama permits a brahmana to accept a sudra's food in the case of his loss of livelihood. Manu – if a brahmana takes their food, he shall fall from his brahmanhood. R. S. Sharma- the practice of pollution became important only when the upper classes used it as an instrument to strengthen and perpetuate their socio-economic and other privileges]. TOI, Feb 18, 2015- An upper caste family in Uttar Pradesh's Jalaun chopped off a Dalit's nose for daring to have food along with them at a wedding.
- ii. Vedic education i.e. Sanskrit was denied to Shudras by Apastamba, Gautama and Vasistha, Manu ordains that nobody should give advice to a shudra or should explain the law to him]. [Manu – Mixed castes or untouchables should live outside villages i.e. mixed castes or the untouchables were being absorbed as inferior shudras]. Vayu Purana and the Brahmanda Purana state that in the Kali age [post Mauryan period – Yuga Purana] the shudras act as brahmanas and vice versa]. Anushashana Parva states that the shudras are workers and there would be no workers if there were no shudras. Manu, Visnu and Yajnavalkya show that the land was rented out to the shudra for crop.

Due this discrimination propagating social inequality, Ravidas denounced Vedas, Puranas, Smritis, Upanishads etc. in the following words:

Charon ved kiya khandoti, Jan Ravidas kare dandoti

(I, Ravidas, proclaim all Vedas are worthless)

He is also known to have invented Gurumukhi language against Sanskrit. Now let us review the existing condition of dalits (Census 2011).

Scheduled Castes :	166,635,700	16.2%
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According to a 2014 report to the Ministry of Minority Affairs by Amitabh Kundu, over 33.8% of Scheduled Caste (SC) populations in rural India were living below the poverty line in 2011-12, compared to 30.8% of Muslims. In urban areas, 21.8% of SC populations were poor, versus 26.5% of Muslims. According to a 2014 report by The India Governance Research Institute, Dalits

constitute nearly half of primary school dropouts. Among state schools, 88% discriminated against Dalit children, while 79% required Dalit students to sit in the back of the classroom. In 79% of schools, Dalit children are forbidden from touching mid-day meals. They are required to sit separately at lunch in 35% of schools, and are required to eat with specially marked plates in 28%. In high schools, higher caste students are often advised not to mingle with Dalits.

Discrimination also exists in access to healthcare and nutrition. Medical field workers do not visit 65% of Dalit settlements. 47% of Dalits are not allowed entry into ration depots; 64% are given less grains than non-Dalits; and 52% are given grains from a distance.

Caste-related violence between Dalit and non-Dalits allegedly stems from Dalit's economic success amidst ongoing prejudice. A crime against Dalits happens every 18 minutes — 3 women raped every day, 13 murdered every week, 27 atrocities every day, 6 kidnapped every week. Dalits were forbidden to worship in temples or draw water from the same wells as caste Hindus, and they usually lived in segregated areas outside the main village. In the Indian countryside, Dalit villages are usually a separate enclave a kilometre or so outside the main village where the other castes reside. While discrimination has declined in urban areas and in the public sphere, discrimination against Dalits still exists in rural areas and in the private sphere, in everyday matters such as access to eating places, schools, temples and water sources.

According to a 2014 survey, 27% of the Indian population still practices Untouchability. Across India, Untouchability was practised among 52% of Brahmins, 33% of communities traditionally called Other Backward Classes and 24% of non-Brahmin forward castes. Untouchability was also practiced by people of minority religions - 23% of Sikhs, 18% of Muslims and 5% of Christians. According to statewide data, Untouchability is most commonly practiced in Madhya Pradesh (53%), followed by Himachal Pradesh (50%),

Chhattisgarh (48%), Rajasthan and Bihar (47%), Uttar Pradesh (43%), and Uttarakhand (40%). In Madhya Pradesh, Dalits are not allowed to touch food and water at common gatherings. Dalits are prohibited from entering temples in 80% of villages. Most Dalits in India practice Hinduism. However, according to the 61st round Survey of the National Sample Survey Organisation, 90% of Buddhists, one-third of Sikhs, and one-third of Christians in India belonged to Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes.

Muslims, dalits and tribals make up 53% of all prisoners in India. Dalits make up 22% of prisoners, almost one in four. Their proportion in population is about 17% according to Census 2011. Most experts say that this disturbing trend is not because these communities commit more crimes. Rather, it arises because they are economically and socially under-privileged, unable to fight costly cases or often even pay for bail. Some say that these communities are targeted with false cases. Though there is an increase in the population of dalits in the country, many States with a considerable number of dalits don't have any legislation to protect the interests of the community. Many scheduled caste families don't own land or any other property.

Therefore, despite the fact that "untouchability" was abolished under India's constitution in 1950, the practice of "untouchability"—the imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of their birth in certain castes— remains very much a part of rural India. "Untouchables" may not cross the line dividing their part of the village from that occupied by higher castes. They may not use the same wells, visit the same temples, drink from the same cups in tea stalls, or lay claim to land that is legally theirs. Dalit children are frequently made to sit in the back of classrooms, and communities as a whole are made to perform degrading rituals in the name of caste.

Most Dalits continue to live in extreme poverty, without land or opportunities for better employment or education. With the exception of a minority who have benefited from India's policy of quotas in education and government jobs, Dalits are relegated to the most menial of tasks, as manual scavengers, removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers, street sweepers, and cobblers. Dalit children make up the majority of those sold into bondage to pay off debts to upper-caste creditors. Dalit men, women, and children numbering in the tens of millions work as agricultural laborers for a few kilograms of rice or Rs. 15 to Rs. 35 a day.

3. **Ideology and preaching of Sant Ravidas:**

Indra Raj Singh in his book Sant Ravidas states that saints were neither Hindu nor Muslims which is reflected from the words of Ravidas:

- i. *Masjid sau ghinn nahin Mandir so nahin pyar
Inme Allah Ram nahin kahay Ravidas vichar.*
- ii. *Jau re Allah basahi masjid mahain
Mandir mein kou naahin bhagwan.*

He was the first to motivate his followers to make/call them untouchables who make/call them so.

'Ravidas janm ke kaarne hot na koi neech

Nar kun neech kari dari hai ochche karm ki kinch.'

What shall I offer Thee for worship, O Rama? - Fruits and flowers are rare, I find not. The milk in the cow's udder is defiled by the calf tasting. - The 'Bhramara' hath contaminated the flower, and the fish the water. The serpent entwines the sandal tree: - Poison and nectar are to be found side by side. In the mind is the worship: In the mind, the incense: - In the mind I attend on Thy natural Form. I know not Thy worship or oblation. - Says Ravidas: What shall be my fate?

Ravidas played an important role during this period and tried to abolish discrimination based on Dharma, Caste etc. Ravidas also tried to bring the Hindus and Muslims together and this is evident from his thoughts which have been expressed in his songs. He said that one can meet God in his own heart even if he does not go on any pilgrimage. Devotion towards God and sadhna can be clearly seen in his works. In his famous 'Begum Pua Shehr Ka Noun' Guru Ravidas describes a Utopian city called Begumpura (literally a city without sorrow):

There is a city named Begumpura, where pain and sorrow find no place;

There is no fear of tribute or of tax;

There is no care, nor sin, nor dread nor death.

Now I have found an excellent abode

Where ceaseless happiness doth reign my friends

There firm and for aye is sovereignty of God

No second or third is there adored,

He ruleth alone;

Inhabited and ever famous is that city;

Its people are fully dowered with wealth

Theirs it is to wander as they please

Gail Omvedt in his work Seeking Begumpura [2008] contrasts the utopias envisioned by the Begumpura of Ravidas, the Bali Rajya of Phule, the Dravidastan of Periyar and Ambedkar's Prabuddha Bharat with Gandhi's village utopia of Ram Rajya, Nehru's hindutva-laced socialism and Savarkar's Hindu Rashtra.

In his hymn Tohi Mohi Tohi Antar Kaisa Guru Ravidas Ji does not recognize any difference between man and God and thereby between man and man.

Ravidas Brahman mati pujiye jau howe gunhin

Pujhi charan chandaal ke jau howe guna parwin

Ravidas tried to express himself through Bhakti and Satsang. He always worked for the betterment of the society. His concept of Bhakti is different from others and it has relevance even in the present times:

O brother, bhakti is not practiseth this way;

Whatever we do without the name of God is illusion.

Bhakti does not consist in giving charity, displaying

Learning and retiring to the caves in the forests.

Bhakti does not consist of fun and games,

Cherishing false hopes and all that

Brings disgrace to the honour of the family.

Bhakti does not consist in control of senses,

Practice of yoga and fasting.

All these are karmas that bind us.

Bhakti does not consist in having the sense,

Becoming indifferent to the world

and increasing the knowledge.

Bhakti does not consist in shaving the heads,

counting of beads and washing of feet.

All those who do these practices are called virtuous.

*As long as we assert ourself,
We cannot attain Bhakti
All that we do in ego increases our karmas.
O brother, Bhakti is attained when we are purged of our ego:
This is Bhakti.
We meet God when our sense of ego is subdued
And all the yogic powers are discarded.
Says Ravidasa,
When all the desires are extinguished,
Then alone is God near him;
When the soul gets peace,
All wealth is attained.*

Ravidasa's concepts of Bhakti and Begumpura are the high watermarks for the liberation of the low castes and his emphasis on self-assertion is answer to the many challenges being faced by them. Ravidasa stands for universal brotherhood and tolerance. Ravidas was a monotheist and held that the soul differs from God in that it is encumbered with a body; God is everything, is gracious to all and is accessible to all. He alone can save men from evil passions and should be worshipped with all devotion that man is capable of.

Ravidas' compositions have relevance even today. Taking its name from him, there is an important Vaishnava sect, the Rai-dasis. The sect has no particular sacred book, although it has orally preserved a number of hymns attributed to its founder. Several of these have been included in *The Adi Granth*, the holy book of the Sikhs. It is said, "his conversation and poetry were like the Sun that dispels darkness of doubt and infidelity". His devotional songs and verses made a lasting impact in the Bhakti movement.

President and Prime Minister have showered their praise on his jayanti on 2nd February 2015 in the following words:

President:

"Guru Ravidasji's noble teachings propagating universal brotherhood are of great relevance in today's world. Let us derive inspiration from the struggle of Guru Ravidasji for equality in society." "Let us rededicate ourselves to the building of a casteless society for which Guru Ravidasji fought ceaselessly."

Prime Minister:

Guru Ravidas ji's teachings of equality & brotherhood in society are a great inspiration for us.

4. References:

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