

The Teachings of Bhagat Raidas

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Part I

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@ In a positive sense of "community".

THE *PADS* OF RAIDAS ARE teachings intended to be sung at gatherings of devotees. They can only be regarded as 'texts' in the sense that oral performances are texts. As they were not intended to be read it must be accepted that some aspects of their impact as performance pieces may not be readily accessible from their written versions. Their communal performance, as songs set to music, could have reinforced sentiments not fully comprehensible to a reader. The motivation for the creation of the *vani* of Raidas must have been to express certain teachings, through songs, to the assemblies of devotees at various forms of communal[®] assemblies. It could not have been to demonstrate skill in prosody or musical performance *per se*, these being worldly ends, but the generation of sentiments of devotion to God in those present at such assemblies. This means that to consider the *pads* in terms of the skillfulness of their composition would be, in a sense, an error, **for their true success could be measured by the degree to which they engendered a sense of devotion and of the immanence of God.**

The *pads* of Raidas do not present the teachings of Raidas in an orderly or methodical fashion. Each *pad* is a glimpse into Raidas's thoughts, experiences and beliefs. Moreover, their present arrangement is not due to any rational ordering of basic themes but the result of their performance within the *repertoires* of devotional songs current in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries amongst the Sikhs, Dadupanthis and Nath Siddhas.

In order to study the teachings of Raidas it is necessary to distinguish between certain subclasses of *pads*, determined by the number of manuscripts in which a *pad* occurs. The selection of *pads* for this analysis is based upon the criteria that a *pad* must appear, either in at least 7 out of the 10 Rajasthani manuscripts, or in any Rajasthani Ms/Mss and the *Adi Granth*, i.e. Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

This results in a total of 72 *pads*. The basis for this selection is the hypothesis that *pads* which rarely occur represent distinctive features of subtraditions, rather than teachings which may be presumed to be fully typical of Raidas himself. Due to this 39 *pads* are not included in this study of the teachings of Raidas in this chapter.

The *pads* in the *vani* of Raidas are composed in a number of traditional genres. It is important to be aware of these genres, because the inherent rhetoric of a genre defines the types of ideas that can be presented in a *pad*. The main types of genre in Raidas are as follows:

1. 'Warnings' (*citavani/citavani*): This is one of the most common genres in all Sant works. Its theme is the danger of the belief that life in the world is the ultimate reality, because due to this the soul neglects to consider God and is born again into the suffering of *sansar*.

2. 'Entreaty' (*vinaya/binati*): This is also a very common genre in Sant works. Its theme is the suffering experienced by the singer of the *pad* in the world and his/her entreaty to God to rescue the soul.

3. 'Love-in-separation' (*virah*): The suffering of the soul in separation from God, which is seen as akin to the suffering of a woman separated from her beloved.

4. 'The Destruction of Error' (*bhram vidhasan*): The falsity of image worship and other external practices.

5. 'The Glory of Praise/ the Name' (*bhajan/ namva pratap*): The power of praising God is described and often previous Sants and other figures are quoted to testify to the power of Praise/the Name.

6. 'Meeting with the Pure' (*sadh milap*): The meeting of like-minded devotees, assembled in order to worship God.

7. 'Devotion' (*bhagati*): The nature of true devotion.

8. 'The Recognition of the Beloved' (*piv pichanan*): The characteristics of the Beloved, God, are described.

9. 'The Experience' (*anubhai*): The experience of union with God is described.

1 God

For the Sants God was ineffable, without shape or form, and immanent in creation. This distinguished them from the *sagun bhaktas* who conceived of God as having incarnated, in the form of *avatars*, in the world. Whilst the Sants have been characterised as Nirgunis, devotees of God without attributes, Barthwal noted that 'It must, however, be remembered that these saints can be called Nirgunis only as opposed to [those who practiced] the gross forms of Sagun worship'². McLeod characterises the Sants' view of God by saying: "The Sants were monotheists, but the God whom they addressed and with whom they sought union was in no sense to be understood in anthropomorphic terms. His manifestation was by His immanence in His creation and, in particular, by His indwelling within the human soul"³.

1.1 Raidas's conception of God

Raidas refers to God as 'unique and incomparable' (*eka anupama* 7.0), 'the unique pure essence' (*bimala eka rasa* 58.2), and 'the incomparable' (*anupama* 58.3). He affirms that 'from first to last, in the end, He is the unique essence' (*adi ati ausana aika rasa* 30.1). He views the true God as inherently unique and he says 'there in no other God like You' (*tumha sa deva avara nahi duja* 55.2). This is reminiscent of the similar phrase often used by Nanak to stress God's uniqueness: 'There is no other' (*avara na duja*; cf. GNSR, p. 164). Raidas conceives of God as ultimately ineffable. This because He is 'unfathomable' (*agama* 58.3), 'imperceptible' (*agocara* 58.3), and 'He has no shape or form' (*barana rupa nahi jakai* 11.0). God is described as 'formless' (*nirakara* 11.3, 58.3), and 'changeless' (*nribikara* 11.3, 58.4, 84.3). Moreover due to His uniqueness He cannot be compared to anything, except Himself 'as You are, so You are, what comparison can be given?' (21.3). In the *vani* of Raidas God is characterised by a number of epithets which indicate His absolute qualities. God is said to be the 'Imperishable' (*avinasi* 58.4, 61.1, 85.5), the 'Complete' (*asila*, 9.3, 11.0), the 'Infinite' (*anata* 34.1), the 'Unborn' (*aja* 58.3; *CJ* and *U*) and the 'Unconquerable' (*ajita* 58.3; *DIV*).

Raidas regards God as immanent in His creation. He says that God 'permanently pervades all places' (61.1). He is 'the Inner Witness' (*antarayami* 34.2), who 'constantly dwells within every body' (12.2).

For Raidas God is 'without and within, hidden and manifest, in each and every body there is no other Lord.' (59.2) and he says that, 'In plants and animals, creeping and flying insects, Hari the king dwells in everything' (30.1). God's immanence is summed up in Raidas's statement that 'You are in everything and everything is in You' (34.3).

Raidas also calls God *nirajana*, 'The Stainless' (11.3, 62.4, 63.0, 63.1, 84.3). God is also *avigat*, 'Unknown' (63.0). Raidas refers to God as 'the creator' (9.1, 9.4, 30.2, 32.1, 35.2, 57.4, 61.1, 61.2). He states that the true God is 'He who is imperishable is the Creator of everything, He permanently pervades all places. He created the five elements' (61.1). God is called 'the Creator and the Destroyer' (*karata harata soi* 30.2) and 'the one Creator who experiences the world' (57.4).

In the *vani* of Raidas God is sometimes referred to as being, 'without attributes' (*nirgun* 58.3, 84.3). However, for Raidas ultimately God transcends the dichotomy of being 'with attributes' or, 'without attributes' for He is said to be 'not material, not immaterial' (11.4).

1.2 Forms of address for God

Raidas often speaks of God personified as the celestial king. God is called 'The Stainless King' (*nirajana raya* 63.1, 79.0), 'The Sultan of Sultans' (35.0) and 'King Ram' (43.3, 50.0 in Mss. *CJ* only, 99.0). In His personification as the celestial king God is envisaged as holding court like a mortal monarch 'At the gateway to the court of the God of the gods, Raidas calls out 'Ram! Ram!' (89.3).

God, as celestial king, is regarded as 'the universal protector in all four ages' (37.3). God is also referred to by the name 'Kamalapati' (85.0, 111.1), 'the husband of Kamala', an epithet of Vishnu in his celestial form as the king of heaven with His consort Kamala.

Raidas appeals on a number of occasions to Ram in his sovereign aspect by using such names as 'Raghunath' (37.2, 88.6), which means 'master of the Raghu clan' and 'Raghava' (4.4), the Raghu clansman, as well as 'king Ramachandra' (101.5). **All of these are epithets of the avatar Ram rather than Ram as absolute God. This in no sense implies that Raidas is acknowledging the doctrine of the incarnation of God as avatars, which is specifically rejected by him.** The reason for the appearance of these epithets of God must rather be understood in relation to their context in the *vani*, which is always when Raidas is appealing to God to grant him refuge in accordance with the long standing Indian tradition that it is the *dharma* of kings to grant refuge.

Compassion is also for Raidas an important attribute of God, because due to His compassion He rescues his devotees from their suffering. Raidas says that 'the compassionate Kesav' is one of the names of God (9.1). He appeals to Krishna to be compassionate (12.3) and employs 'O compassionate One!' as a vocative form of address to God in one instance (19.2). He also appeals to God to 'have mercy on living beings' (99.3). Clearly the quality of compassion, or mercy, is one which characterizes God for Raidas. **Although Raidas appeals to those avatars of God which exemplify compassion, this does not indicate that he accepts the**

validity of the avatars, but points towards the way he saw them as exemplifying particular characteristics of God. Raidas calls Narasimha 'Narahari, merciful master of the meek' (*dinanatha dayala narahari* 20.0). The core of the story of Narasimha avatar is that Prahlad could only be saved from his afflictions when Vishnu felt compassion and manifesting as Narasimha killed Prahlad's father. Thus the principal characteristic of Narasimha, despite his evident ferocity, is mercifulness and it is to this merciful aspect of God that Raidas is appealing in this *pad*.

The Krishnaite names of god in the *vani* of Raidas occur most commonly in *vinay* ('entreaty') *pads*. In these *pads* Raidas focuses on the merciful aspect of God by appealing to Krishna, as personification of mercy. It appears that for Raidas Krishna is the personification of compassion for lowly devotees and it is possible that stories such as that of Vidur⁶ may be related to this perception of Krishna as the compassionate God. It is due to this that in the *vani* of Raidas numerous Krishnaite names are found, such as Krishna (4.4, 12.3, 23.1, 26.2, 27.1, 43.0, 83.0), Kanha (24.0, 75.0), Kesav⁶, Madhav⁶, Murari⁷, Banavari, 'one wearing a garland of forest-flowers' (48.2, 62.0), Syam (19.0 CJ), Gusai 'the Master of the cattle' (38.5, 109.0), Gopal 'the Keeper of the cattle', (86.0, 94.0) and Govinda⁸.

Islamic names for God occur in contexts where the irrelevance of sectarian divisions is stressed: "I did not see as one, Krishna, Karim, Ram, Hari, Raghav" (4.4). Such usages may be distinguished from the use of terms of Persian and Arabic origin in a small group of *pads*⁹. This group – distinguished by a high incidence of such loanwords – is characterised by common language, rather than shared subject-matter, and includes *vinays* (35), *cetavanis* (41, 64), and *virah pads* (69), as well as **the vision of Begampur (36). This may suggest that Raidas and his later exponents adopted a suitable style to expound his teachings when in the company of Muslims¹⁰. In the special context of this group of Pads God is called 'the Sultan of Sultans' (35.1), 'the Bounteous Lord' (*sahiba gani* 41.0), 'the Creator' (*khalik* 65.0), 'the Compassionate' (*karim* 64.1) or 'the Husband' (*sah* 69.1, SGGs).**

1.3 The concept of *naam*

The importance of the concept of *naam* is indicated by the various definitions suggested for it in the studies of the Sants. In Kabir's teachings it is said *naam* "is conceived of as unique and as expressing or revealing in a mysterious manner the all-pervading Reality: it is the voiced form of the divine"¹¹. In Dadu "the Name of God is something more than any particular form of address the worshipper may use in his approach to Him. The Name of God, in a word, is God made known"¹². **In Nanak, "The divine Name is the revelation of God's being, the aggregate of all His attributes, the aggregate of all that may be affirmed concerning Him"**¹³.

For Raidas too the *naam* is of vital importance. However, it should be noted that two distinct usages of the word *naam/naav* in the *vani* of Raidas can be distinguished. First, at a conventional level, 'name' refers to the particular letters or sounds, the label, by which something is known. Secondly, at the metaphysical level, 'Name' refers to the concept of the essential essence of God. Moreover, the names of God are not to be confused with the concept of the name of God. Raidas makes this explicit when he says: "I worship Him, who has no village, no place and no name" (4.5). Here 'name' is used in reference to the conventional names of God,

rather than the concept of the Name of God. The Name of God is central to Raidas's teachings and he describes it as his "sole support" (13.3).

An additional indication of the centrality of the concept of the Name of God for Raidas is his reference to the Puranic doctrine that in the present "dark age the Name is the only support" (32.4).

He also lays particular emphasis on renunciation of worldly matters in favour of the Name of God. It is only through the Name of God, which is in itself the *patit pavan*, or 'the uplifter of the fallen', that Raidas believes liberation can be attained (8.2). The power of the Name to liberate the sinner is the most consistently stressed feature of the Name in the *vani* of Raidas and in this Raidas is subscribing to the general Sant view on the power of the Name¹⁴.

His belief in the Name's potency as a means of salvation for the sinner is also evident in 47.3 and 34.0 (*Adi Granth*).

In the context of Raidas's social status the conception of the Name's power to grant liberation to the fallen has a special poignancy. The social position of the Chamars is evidently referred to Pad 67.0: "I was unhonoured but due to Hari I became honoured".

1.4 Ram

Ram is the most frequently used name of God in the *vani* of Raidas. In the mediaeval period the name Ram was used for both God in His incarnated form and in His absolute attributeless *nirgun* form. The name Ram derives from the Sanskrit root *ram*, which means both 'to enjoy (sexually)' and also 'to stop, to stay at rest'¹⁵. Ram was an important name of God in the works of Kabir, and Vaudeville says that in the works of Kabir "*rama or nama* is conceived as the supreme *bija-mantra*, containing all 'truth' or 'being' (*satya*) in itself"¹⁶. To a great extent the words *ram* and *naam* appear to be synonymous. The close relationship between the words 'Ram' and 'Name' is shown by the frequent occurrence in Raidas's *vani* of the phrase *ram nam*, 'the Name of *Ram*', which occurs eleven times¹⁷.

For Raidas, Ram is the name of God par excellence and whilst he uses, as has been shown, a wide range of names for God it is the name Ram which for him is the supreme name of God. When Raidas refers to 'Ram' he is not referring to Ram, the *avatar* of Vishnu but to the supreme God, as is explicitly stated in Pad 9.1: "All the world is misled, speaking of a 'Ram', who is not this Ram. For Raidas belief in the *avatar* Ram is an error: "Through the 'Ram' which all the world knows, one is lost in delusion, brother"(9.2).

It is through Ram, in his *nirgun* form, that the knot of doubt which separates the soul from God can be overcome:

Apart from Ram, who can conquer your pride? (32.2, PV)

From first to last, in the end apart from Ram,

There is no other who grants liberation, O Hari! (19.0)

The ultimate goal for Raidas is total absorption into Ram: "When the mind has merged into the ocean of Ram, the cries disappear" (3.2).

Raidas asserts that he follows the tradition of attaining liberation through Ram, whose former adherents include many revered figures:

Brahma-Rishis, Narad, Syambha, Sanak and his siblings –
only those who repeated *ram* passed over. (23.3)

The power of the very syllable *ra* itself is often stressed: “Singing of the virtue of the sound *ra’ ra*, Sants and sadhus easily pass over” (47.3). The significance of the syllables *ra* and *ma* in the *sadhana* of Raidas is great. In one *pad* he explains that the power of the sound *ra* is that through which one becomes free from everything and attains union with God:

I will sing the name of Ram –
The sound *ra ra* is free from everything.
I shall merge in union within. (14.0)
The ultimate experience is characterised as *paracai*, mystical encounter, with Ram:
Whoever abides in the experience of Ram,
is touched by the philosopher’s stone –
he has no sense of duality. (1.0)

Through this experience alone the duality of the devotee is eliminated:” he becomes gold” (1.0; variant in Ms V). To become gold is to attain union with God, for, as Raidas often reiterates, the relationship between the soul and God is like the relationship between bracelets and gold.

**- End of Part I
[To be concluded]**

References

1. *pads* in 1 Ms only: M 26-29, 68, 91, 94; I 61, 80; *Adi Granth* (SGGS): 95-111.
pads in 2 Mss only: 46 CJ; 60 IU; 70 DM.
pads in 3 Mss only: 16 MCJ; 25 VIU; 93 IMP.
pads in 4 Mss only: 17 IUCJ; 71 VIMU.
pads in 5 Mss only: 79 IMUCJ; 84 DAVIM; 92 AIMCJ.
pads in 6 Mss only: 76 DAIUCJ.
2. Barthwal: 1978, p. x.
3. GNSR, p. 152/13. p. 215.
4. See Nabhadass *Bhaktamal* 51, p. 102-4.
5. Kesav, ‘The one with [luxuriant] hair; or the brilliant one’, also said to be because he slew the demon Kesina: 7.0, 9.1, 21.0, 28.2, 37.0, 38.4, 82.2, 83.0.
6. Madhav, ‘The honey-like one’, also said to be because Krishna is a descendant of the Yadava king Madhu. 27.3, 27.4, 43.0, 44.0, 51.0 (AG), 55.0 (AG), 57.0, 58.0, 72.0, 80.2, 82.3, 95.2.
7. Murari, ‘The Enemy of Mura’: 43.0, 48.2, 83.3, 78.1 (AG), 103.1.
8. Govinda, ‘The Possessor of cattle’, 22.0, 38.5, 39.0, 47.0, 52.3, 58.3, 68.0, 75.1, 83.0, 85.5, 109.1. However, the word *go* also means, ‘earth’ or ‘world’ hence ‘the master of the world, the possessor of the earth, the Lord of the earth’, etc.
9. Cf. Shackle: 1978 for the parallel corpus in the AG.
10. See however Shackle: 1978, p. 93 and McLeod: 1989, p. 28.
- 11, 14, 15, 16. Vaudeville: 1974, p. 141/135/141.
12. Orr: 1947, p. 140.
13. GNSR, p. 215.

17. 14.0, 17.0, 28.1, 77.0, 78.1 (AG), 91.1, 91.2, 94.4, 101.4, 102.3.