

Social Spirituality of Bhagat Ravidas

DR. S.VANATHU ANTONI*

* Senior Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, Arul Anandar College, Karumathur-625 514. (TN)

Introduction:

This paper proposes to study Bhagat Ravidas and his social spirituality in the light of his verses found in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The sources for the study are exclusively drawn from the translation of the four volumes by Gurbachan Singh Talib. An attempt is made to present the societal vision, spirituality and philosophical contents of Ravidas as culled out from his contribution to the Sikh Scripture. As he is a bhakta, or bhagavat, in the first place and has carved out for himself a prominent place in the medieval Bhakti tradition, the general frame work for understanding his outlook is from within the Bhakti tradition.

For our purpose, *bhakti* may be viewed as 'intense and immense love, devotion and service of the Divine'. Love for the divine seems to consist of a four dimensional space namely 1) Loving God alone, 2) Loving God and the human, 3) Loving God in the human, and 4) Loving the human. Correspondingly this four dimensional approach to *bhakti* implies a re-cognition of loving God alone, a re-orientation towards loving God and neighbour, a re-resolution of loving God in neighbour and finally a revoltion of loving one's neighbour. This approach further leads to the development of four attitudes at the societal level, namely, (1) tolerance, (2) acceptance, (3) respect and (4) mutuality.

Against this general framework of *bhakti*, it is worthwhile to examine the social spirituality as a genuine distillate from the hymns of Ravidas as they share a symbolic connaturality with the Sikh worldview and as they naturally blend into the moods and mode of the Sikh ethos. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib contains at least 16 measures in which Ravidas' hymns are rendered. They are (1) Sri (Raga) (2) Gauri (Gaureri, Bairagan, Purabi) (3) Asa, (4) Gujari, (5) Sorath, (6) Dhanasari, (7) Jaitsari, (8) Suhi, (9) Bilaval, (10) Gaud, (11) Ramkali, (12) Maru, (13) Kedara, (14) Bhairon, (15) Basanthu, and (16) Malar which in varying lengths carry the devotional utterances of Ravidas. The number of measures which couch the *bhakti* hymns of Ravi Das speaks volumes not only for the popularity of the hymns in themselves but also the respect and regard the compiler accords to the songs of Ravidas.

Pen-picture of Ravidas

Sant Ravidas is an important personality of the Indian medieval *bhakti* tradition. His contribution to social and religious renaissance marks a remarkable aspect in the *bhakti* history of Vaishnavism and Sikhism. His ascendancy to the status of a *bhakta* or Sant is a case study in the recovery of the oppressed consciousness of the sudras towards religious freedom and social emancipation.

Sant Ravidas is born in or around Banaras the heart of brahmanical Hinduism as a Sudra. He comes from a cobbler family and probably practices the profession of a cobbler. A reference to his profession is made in the verse, 'People of my caste are hide-bearers and binders carrying carcasses of cattle around Banaras' (SGGS:2501). 'Ravidas untouchable members of whose tribe around Banaras carry carcasses' (SGGS:2602). 'The Lord's dye is fast as madder saith Ravidas the

cobbler' (SGGS:730). 'To obtain loving devotion prays Ravidas, the cobbler' (SGGS:731). 'Low is my caste and status, low in birth, saith Ravidas, the cobbler' (SGGS:1381). 'You distinguished folk! Well-known is my cobbler's caste'. (SGGS:2661).

The life of Ravidas shows no trace of formal learning. This condition is due perhaps to the fact of his being a sudra. The political ascendancy of the Muslims causes a serious struggle in religious, social and political areas. **The attempt to downplay the aspirations of the native religions and their ways of life causes a double pronged oppression of the Sudras both at the hands of the high castes and the political masters.** The genuine concerns and aspirations of the sudras are repressed.

A True Bhakta is born:

Ravidas shows an increasing recovery of the oppressed religious consciousness. This expresses itself in an intense interest in the life of devotion to God. He seems to feel at home in the company of devotees, *bhaktas* and saints, waits on them and satisfies their needs. 'Devotees are thy image, their company is my life' (SGGS:1032). 'Supreme Lord, grant to me company of devotees, joy in listening to their discourse and devotion to them' (SGGS:1033).

Ravidas sets out on the path of devotion in the company of religious men and learns their religious practices. His exceptional devotion seems to reach Swami Ramananda who is generous enough to initiate him into the spiritual life. (Darshan Singh. 1998). **His reputation spreads far and wide as many disciples and devotees gather around him. Nobles and the royalty await his audience. Even Brahmins accord him the status of a realized person.** Despite his popularity he continues with his profession. His discourses, dialogues and discussions have come down to us through various writers.

Ravidas attains the status of a Sudra saint. He travels to nearby and far off places in order to meet people and benefit them through a sharing of the fruits of realization and devoted love for God. The simplicity of Ravidas is significantly relevant, particularly as an antidote against externalities, formalisms and ritualistic activities. **The recovery of the core of authenticity and genuine religiosity unleashes a new wave of liveliness and spontaneity, revitalizing the hitherto dead drab desert of spirituality. His attempts to purge religion of the excessive accretions invites wonderful responses from all genuinely religious persons. Ravidas may be held to be responsible for the recovery of the true face of piety and spirituality.**

Ravidas goes Social:

The real merit of Ravi Das lies in his endeavours to elevate his own dignity and that of his community. Such a programme of action points to the emptiness of the so-called caste hierarchy and its pseudo superiority. Ravidas engages himself in the task of snatching away God from the privileged echelons of society and makes the Divine available to all and sundry especially to the *Sudras*. **God is shown as the uplifter of the lowly, purifier of the defiled and deliverer of the poor'** (Darshan Singh, 1998).

In the present context, when caste distinctions get more and more stratified and identity politics rule the roost, Bhakta Ravi Das opens up new vistas of change in outlook, attitude and purity of labour. No wonder then that many sudra castes have made attempts to recover their social and religious freedom by revisioning Ravidas as the spokesperson of the underprivileged. It continues in the present and will continue into the future as well ushering in a new era of social upliftment and spiritual freedom. The relevance and importance of Ravidas lies on the one hand in the attempts of the Brahmins to provide a brahmanical ancestry to him. On the other hand the Sudras try to identify Ravidas with their own caste. Attempts to idealize and idolize him and form a *pantha* (sect) in his name for social emancipation establish his relevance for the present Indian context.

Bhakta as Servant:

Ravidas as true *bhakta* considers himself in the first place to be the servant of God. 'Thou art know as Master; By one being the Lord, another is known as servant; by the servant too is distinguished the Lord' (SGGS:195). The master-servant relationship pattern seems to be the most significant motif in *bhakti*. This is to affirm the distance and transcendence between God and the devotee. Ravidas while granting the unbridgeable gap between him and the Lord, yet make a bold statement and proclaims that the Lord is known by the kind of servant he has. The servant motif is engulfed in monarchical and feudal thought pattern. **In the context of the Muslim political masters and varnic feudal lords, Ravidas correctly echoes the feelings of the common person, in that God becomes the friend and associate of the lowly and the poor.** 'What difference between Thee and me and me and Thee' (SGGS, 194) One cannot miss the rebel in Ravidas who has the audacity to claim identity between the devotee and the divine. 'Divine Lord, Life of my life put me not out of thy mind –I who am thy devoted servant. Pray grant early union to your servant; delay not' (SGGS, 729).

Identity between the *bhakta* and God has to be seen against the traditional cosmotheandric vision of the vedic lore in which the Brahmin becomes the centre of reality through the means of yajna. In the case of Ravidas it is bhakti, love, devotion and self-surrender which unite the devotees with God. The pervader of all comes home through simple faith and love. Despite the exalted position of the master Ravidas affirms an identity and union bordering on non-duality. He does realize his failure in not having served the divine king as he feels humble because of his social status, caste, rank and birth. 'Low is my caste, low my rank, low my birth. The Divine King have I not served, saith Ravidas the cobbler' (SGGS, 1033). But he is not to be bogged down in the misery of his status. A higher status comes to him through his loving devotion. If there were any cause for unhappiness, it has been the failure of devotion. 'Loving devotion has not arisen .This has made Ravidas unhappy' (SGGS, 732).

Once loving devotion arises and Ravidas centres himself in God, he rises like a buoy and asserts that the servant is bound to the master by the string of love. He is prepared to extricate himself from property, wealth ad misfortune because of his absorption in god. 'Thy servant by the string of love is bound' (SGGS, 1034) and the only fear is to lose devotion because 'Only of vanishing of loving devotion would thy servant be afraid' (SGGS:1035). Being in love with God catapults him to break the chains of master-servant pattern.'Thy servant Ravidas in the dye of love is immersed

and he is prepared to enjoy himself in the world for 'Saith Ravidas: Brother! this world is a play. With the master of this play am I in love' (SGGS:1034).

Naam simran of the Bhakta:

Ravidas as servant of god has taken shelter with the name of God. This has prompted even the Brahmins to pay respects to him. 'Yet distinguished Brahmins to me make obeisance as Ravidas, thy servant with thy name has taken shelter' (SGGS:2602). As God is available to all one can attain union with God by the mere remembrance of the name of God. Naamsimran occupies an important place in the hymns of Ravidas. A name defines and limits the scope of what it signifies. As Ravidas attempts to free God from the traditional names of God, the Name of God alone assumes significance against differentiation. The Path of Nirguna is indicated. But it further breaks down into the multiple ways God is understood and expressed by different people. On the one hand God is inexpressible. 'Thou art only as Thyself; by what simile to express Thee' (SGGS:1772).

But the songs of Ravidas contain names of God from the common idioms of ordinary people. Any epithet for God is fine to fill the bhakta with loving devotion to God. The following appellations indicate the many ways in which God is palpably and tangibly experienced in the everyday world: "Illimitable Reality, Redeemer of the fallen, Controller of the inner self, Master, Lord, the sandal wood, divine monarch, ocean of joy, wish-fulfilling stone, Name divine, divine light, mountain moon, lamp, bathing spot, enlightener of the world, conferrer of liberation, Mukand, divine beloved, ocean of bliss, and tree of the gods". As the name stands for the entire reality of the person of God, Naam is said to be the complete expression of the inexpressible and ineffable God. Ravidas considers himself to be the privileged one to have acquired the Name as divine wealth. **'I am God's merchant dealing in enlightenment; Merchandize of God's Name have I packed. The world has packed poison'** (SGGS, 730).

In the present age which is the *Kali yuga*, human beings are puzzled and baffled by the means available to acquire material possessions. While political and economic corruption of every kind permeates public life, bhakta Ravidas relies entirely on the devotion to the Name as the only support and means. 'In kali yuga devotion to the Name is the sole prop' (SGGS, 731). He has no fear of death because he has uttered the divine Name. 'Ravidas the Name Divine utter; thereafter with Yama has he no concern' (SGGS, 1382). The existential angst at the moment of death and the fear of annihilation after death are met with courage because the divine Name is a sure shield to ward off the shafts of death. The utterance of the ambrosial Name Divine (SGGS1447) acts as the solace at the moment of death.

Ravidas despite being a prominent Santa of the Northern Vaishnava bhakti tradition, shows close similarity as he draws on the imagery of the one of the early Alvar saints of the Southern tradition when he eulogizes Naam Simran as the proper path for freedom. 'Thy Name the lamp, the wick, thy name, the oil into it poured, As with thy name is lit the flame, is the whole universe illuminated' (SGGS:1447). The cosmic offering by Ravi Das is similar to the Alvar poetry in which the *bhakta* offers his own body as the proper place of worship. The meeting of the macrocosmic and microcosmic elements in *bhakti* seems to be the result of *Naamsimran*. Besides the only worship or ritual is centred on the Name. 'Thy Name to me is prayer offering

and holy dip. Other than the Name, false is all show or ritual. Thy Name is my mat and the holy stone to rub the sandal wood, thy name the saffron to sprinkle over thee, Thy Name the water, the sandalwood, that rubbing to thee, I may offer' (SGGS:1447). Saith Ravidas : 'Thy Name is the true worship offering ; Thy holy Name the true food offering to Thee' (SGGS 1448).

Besides worship, liberation comes by the utterance of god's name. Ravidas believes that his entire life is nothing but the Name Divine. 'Service to God cannot be in any way other than the utterance of the Lord's Name.' (SGGS:1802). 'My prop is the Name Divine that to me is life, breath and wealth' (SGGS,1998). Every word that has made up the tomes of the Vedas and Puranas is part of the Sanskrit alphabet consisting of thirty four letters. No blessings are forthcoming from all scriptures. For, 'No boon is supreme as the Name Divine' (SGGS:2249) upon which his attention is fixed. He is a true yogi as he only repeats the Name. 'Whoever with expression of divine laudation, the Name repeater is a true yogi, pure and free from desire' (SGGS:2417).

Not only personal liberation but also social liberation is possible only through the contemplation of the Divine Name. 'Saith Ravidas: Whoever the Name contemplates, from disabilities of caste and birth shall be exempt' (SGGS: 2417). He believes that the *Naamsimran* mode is the perfect and complete method to attain personal and social liberation. The thrust of the *Naamsimran* is the attempt at simplifying spirituality for the unlettered and ordinary masses freeing them from the excessive verbosity of the mantras and elaborate techniques of ritualistic worship. Therefore great emphasis is laid on the simplicity of the *Naam* way.

God- No Private Domain:

A strong clarion call is made by Ravidas to make God belong to all. Notwithstanding the monarchic and feudal master-servant pattern the effort at deconstructing the monopolized monarch of Godhead owned by empty ritualism and formalism echoes right through his songs. 'The Lord is no one's property; to love does the divine monarch yield' (SGGS:1379). Perhaps this is a very stern warning to, and condemnation of, those who lay a total claim to God and his favours. The project of Ravidas is to make God a public wealth available to all through purity of heart and the simple means of love. Love alone is the motivation for God to yield to human beings irrespective of caste and creed. No wonder therefore that the *bhakta* challenges God to free himself from his love which is an impossibility. 'You (God) too in the bonds of love are caught; Attempt your own release' (SGGS:1379). In Tamil bhakti tradition Manikka Vasakar , one of the four Saivite saints in the same note had challenged Lord Siva to get out of his tight hold, almost a millennium earlier.

Ravidas' Quest for Emancipation:

The hymns of Ravidas express his attitudes to life in the world, social status and the attendant problems of discrimination, his firm commitment to personal and social liberation based purely on the devotion and love of God, his quest for meaningful social intercourse and perhaps a utopian ideal of an egalitarian society based on human dignity and freedom. All these themes constitute the philosophy of his life. He tries to negate the unhealthy social structure first by affirming the inbuilt contradiction of the varnic hierarchy. There are a number of instances in which he refers to himself as a Sudra, his caste, rank birth and status.

(SGGS:730,731,1033,1381,2249,2601,2602). His caste is that of the cobbler. He belongs to the community of people whose touch defiles the world (SGGS:2249). His personal status as a cobbler is not as an isolated individual but as a true representative of a people standing in need of liberation.

The significant aspect of Ravidas mention of Banaras is to indicate symbolically that the heart of Hinduism and its dharma is corrupt to the core. Therefore he indicts the caste-ridden Hindu social life as unworthy of being human and cultured. In this context of discrimination and duality, he develops his anthropology. His condition is not elevated. 'Worthless is my company; day and night this in anxiety keeps me; evil are my actions, low my birth' (SGGS:729). The traditional way of listening to the Vedas and Puranas has raised doubts and 'the doubt ever in the heart abides' (SGGS:731). It is not a doubt which will clear when enlightenment dawns. It is the doubt as to how he is going to extricate himself from the mire of social discrimination. It is the doubt which comes from ego and perversion. 'which my ego lasts, art thou no such... Lord what can I say? Such is illusion; under its influence are objects not such as thought to be' (SGGS:1378).

However human incarnation is a gift and reward. But it could go waste without enlightened thinking. Human beings have willfully remained ignorant, demented. Between thinking and thoughtlessness our days have passed. Strong in our senses, in realization and understanding are we weak (SGGS:1380). The human physical condition is portrayed by Ravidas as follows: 'Man's body is made of wells of water, pillars of air and mud of blood drops. In the cage of bones, flesh and blood vessels abides the poor bird of life' (SGGS:1381). Life is brief as a bird's sojourn on a tree. This body shall ultimately turn into a heap of ashes. This body is as straw screen (SGGS:1651). Man is like the musk deer that its own secret has not found, that in his own body bearing fragrance or musk looks for it without (SGGS: 2416).

Ravidas builds up a philosophy of the body enumerating both the pathetic situation in which a person's physical space is constricted and the enormous potential within the body for breaking out of constraints. The *motif* for personal emancipation by gaining more space for each human body in the given social space and regaining the space lost due to encroachment and occupation by power and performance of rituals. Ravidas points out the futility of ritual actions as follows: 'Ritual purity is only like the elephant's action of bathing' (SGGS:731). Ritual action needs to be replaced by a reaction and counteraction. Such an action is carried out by one who overcomes his ego and duality with the world by total involvement and action. 'He is the true doer who free from fear abides. To bear fruit is vegetation in bloom. As appears fruit, so do flowers disappear; for enlightenment is involvement in action' (SGGS:2363).

Liberative Social Spirituality:

It is the liberative praxis both at the personal and social levels in the company of other saints which can bring about the utopian ideal of equality and freedom. Liberative action at the personal level begins when egoism drops and liberation at the social level occurs when God's name is remembered by all members of the community and godliness is established through Grace. 'Name, God and Guru' are categories which are all rolled into one for Ravidas. **Loving devotion to Name is**

the only way to liberation. ‘Those who never performed ritual acts of piety all such by god’s Grace of Nama have been liberated’ (SGGS:729).

The purpose of prayer is nothing but to obtain that loving devotion which removes doubts, grants understanding and realization to human beings whose life is like the frogs of which the well is full that know not of different lands (SGGS:730). Loving devotion is the simplest way open to all particularly to those who have been denied the opportunity to utter and understand the intricacies of mantras merely because they belong to the sudra caste. The company of those who exercise only loving devotion to Name is the real locus of godliness and spirituality, for it is said ‘Devotees are thy image; their company is my life; by the holy preceptor’s teaching have I realized the devotee to be supreme among gods’(SGGS:1032). The demand for shedding of egoism and greed is the hallmark of true worship. ‘Offer Him homage; discard egoism and acquisitiveness; At early dawn contemplate in heart the holy Name’(SGGS:1650).

There are two evils which work against social equality. The first is egoism and the second is greed. Ravidas correctly strikes at the very root of inequality. Egoism and duality are to be overcome by the model of marital life. ‘The happily wedded wife alone knows the truth of her Lord; discarding pride in joy she disports’ (SGGS:1650). The dawn of social emancipation is portrayed by Ravidas in the narrative of the Begampura city. This is presented both as a utopian ideal which must be realized in future and as already existing in the company of saints who have given up acquisitiveness. **‘The city joyful is the name of that city. Suffering and sorrow abide not there. Neither is there worry of paying taxes,** Nor does any hold property; Neither fear of punishment for error nor of doctrine This fine place of habitation have I found: Brother! There weal perpetually reigns. Eternally fixed is the kingship therein: No second or third are there; all are alike. Ever fully populated, famous is that city. Those abiding therein are prosperous, opulent. There people disport themselves as they please. All are inmates of that mansion; none has any. Saith Ravidas the cobbler, freed from all bonds, Whoever of that city is desirous is our friend’ (SGGS:729).

Conclusion:

Bhagat Ravidas envisions a path of *bhakti* which makes a symbolic subversive transition from the corrupt egoistic Banaras centre, to the liberated egalitarian social periphery of ‘Begampur’, which is at once a movement, a pilgrimage, a journey and a project in enlightenment. ***This emancipatory path leads the bhakta from sorrow and unhappiness to joy; from perversion to correct vision; from discrimination to equality; from puerile ritualism to devotion; from egoism to love of neighbour; from mantras to naamsimran; from oppression to freedom and from greed to God.***



Author’s Note:

All references are from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib in four volumes translated by Garbachan Singh Talib, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1990.