



International Seminar on the Life, Time, and Philosophy of Satguru Ravidass Ji

Organised by British Ravidassia Heritage Foundation (UK)
Centre for Sikh and Panjabi Studies University of Wolverhampton (UK)
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Keynote Address: Prof (Dr.) Ronki Ram



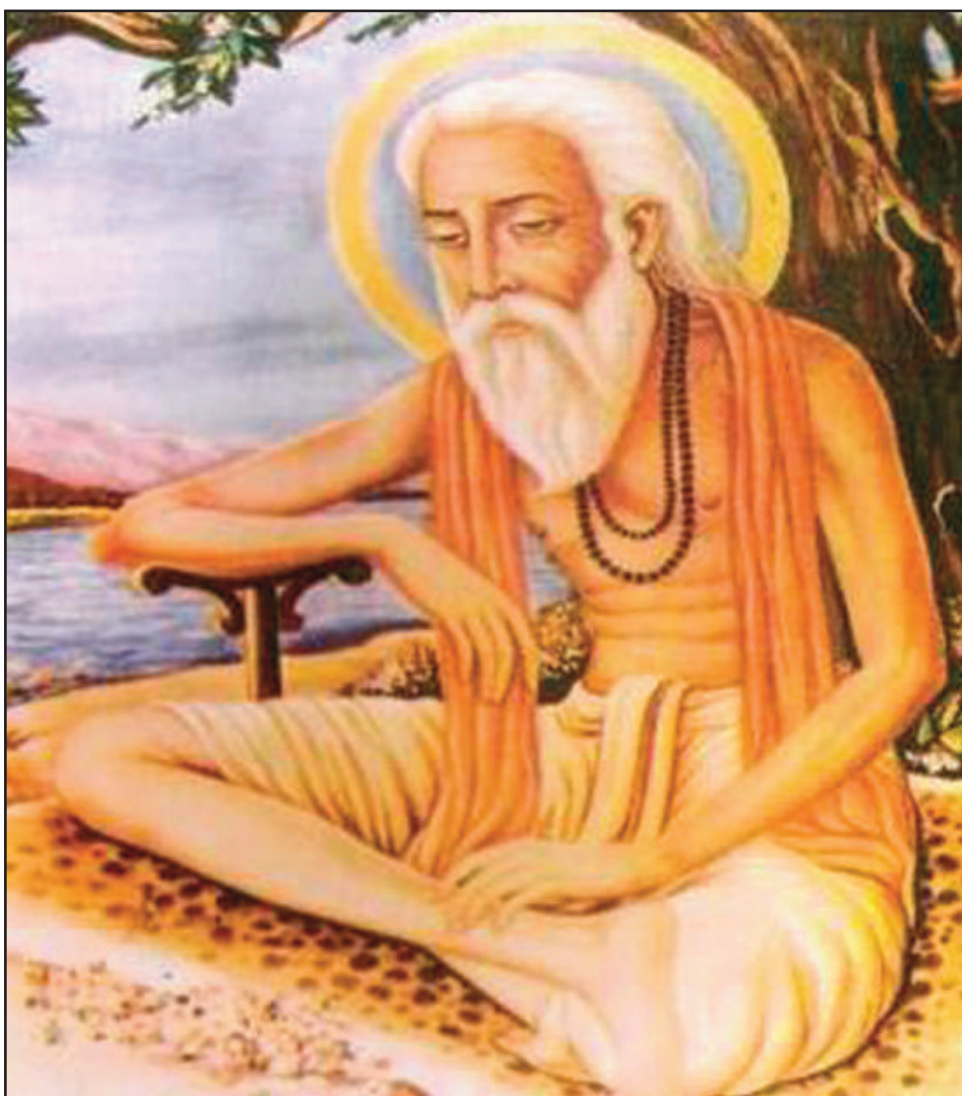
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Before I present my keynote address, let me put on record my sincere thanks to Mr. Om Parkash and Mr. Sat Paul, President and Secretary respectively of the British Ravidassia Heritage Foundation, UK, and Dr. Opinderjit Takhar, Director, Centre for Sikh and Panjabi Studies, University of Wolverhampton, UK, for inviting me to participate in this academic event, first of its kind in the United Kingdom, as mentioned in the brochure issued by the British Ravidassia Heritage Foundation to notify the International Seminar on the Life, Time, and Philosophy of Satguru Ravidass, jointly organised by the British Ravidassia Heritage Foundation and the University of Wolverhampton.

The fact that Guru Ravidass came from one of the lowest castes, acted as a catalyst in the emergence of social consciousness and assertion among them. He became prominent because he unleashed a frontal attack on the long tradition of social oppression and untouchability in society. Though born and brought up in Uttar Pradesh province of North India, he came to command large followings among Scheduled Castes (SCs) in the state of Punjab, which he allegedly visited during his journeys to Rajasthan. Another factor that made him further popular in Punjab is the inclusion of his *bani* (spiritual poetry) in the *Adi Granth* - also known as the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (SGGS), sacred scriptures of Sikh faith. According to Peter Friedlander, an authority on Guru Ravidass studies, it was probably in Punjab that the earliest written versions of Guru Ravidass' verses began to be recorded by the 1570s, and written versions were first incorporated into the Sikh tradition by Guru Amar Das (1479-1574). These verses were later incorporated into the collection of verses that became the basis upon which the *Kartarpur Pothi* was compiled in 1603-1604 which, after additions were made in around 1670, became known as the *Guru Granth* by around 1700 AD (Friedlander 2017: 318).

In pre-partition Punjab, the historic Ad Dharm movement made him its patron saint and a political rallying point for lower castes. Low caste followers of Guru Ravidass,



who considered him their Guru, dedicated to him temples, memorial halls, educational institutions, research chairs, cultural organizations, and hospitals. They founded several missions (1) to accurately establish facts about his life and works and to disseminate his message of fearlessness, compassion, equality, and brotherhood in India and abroad (2) (Hawley 1988:270). In fact, his lustrous image played an instrumental role in mobilising the so-called out-castes (3) especially the Chamars (leather workers) who also joined the Ad Dharm movement in large numbers (4). Consequently, the Ravidassias of Punjab and Punjabi Ravidassia diasporas organised themselves into various Guru Ravidass Sabhas (societies) and established a large number of Ravidass shrines popularly known as *Ravidass Deras* within India and abroad (Ram 2008). The number of such Deras has been on the rise since

then (5). Over the last many years, Guru Ravidass Sabhas and missions both within the country and abroad have been organising *nagar kirtans* (singing of holy hymns by a group of singers in residential areas), annual national and international seminars and conferences on the occasion of anniversaries of Guru Ravidass to spread his philosophy of egalitarianism, dignity of labour and faith in an all-pervasive formless spiritual power.

Guru Ravidass was one of the most famous lower caste sants (sages) of the bhakti movement, especially the *nirguna sampradaya* or *sant parampara* (sect or tradition of devotees of a formless God) of the later medieval - fifteenth and sixteenth centuries - in Northern India (6). He was a cobbler, sage, philosopher as well as a social reformer, who adopted *bhakti* (devotion of non-anthropomorphic God) as a method of social protest against the centuries-

old oppressive system of social hierarchies and inhuman practice of untouchability. He did not disown his caste, nor renounce his household

life, and neither did he abandon the socially stigmatised occupation of leatherwork to move up the social hierarchy, as in the case of two widely accepted and cited models of upward social mobility - conversion and *sanskritisation* (cultural assimilation) - in India and elsewhere. Instead, he chose bhakti of *nirakar* (formless) God while earning livelihood through his hereditary vocation of leatherwork as a middle path to protest against the caste-based evil of social exclusion and oppression. This unique middle path - free from religious rituals and sectarian formalities - was novel and daring given the rampant religious bigotry and social exclusion of his time.

The popularity of Guru Ravidass can be known from a variety of names attributed to him by his followers in different regions and languages (Pandey 1961:7-8). He is known as Raidasa, Rohidasa, Ruidasa, Ramadasa, Raedasa, Rohitasa, Rahdesa, Rav Das and Rab Das (Singh 1996:25; Callewaert and Friedlander 1992:20-1; Ibbetson 1883, rpt. 1970: 300). "Together with Namdev and Kabir, Ravidass is one of the few Bhaktas to cross language barriers and become important in several parts of India" (Zelliot 2003:27). His *bani* has universal appeal, being full of radical fervor and boundless love for the formless God as well as dignity of manual labour. Although his *bani* is rich with references to the adoration and longing for God, it also assigns significant space to the "hope for a better world and a fight against exploiters, power-holders and oppression going on under the name of religion" (Omvedt

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2003:33). It reflected his vision of the social and spiritual needs of the downtrodden and underlined the urgency of their emancipation. He is therefore regarded as a messiah by the downtrodden who revere him as devoutly as Hindus revere their Gods and Goddesses, and Sikhs their Gurus (conversation with Sant Prem Dass Jassal, President, all India Satguru Ravi Dass Mission, Vancouver, 17 May 2003). They worship his image and express their faith in his spiritual power. Slogans like *Ravidass Shakti Amar Rahe* (the spiritual power of Ravidass live forever) are raised during his birth anniversaries.

There are various versions about the precise dates and exact places of birth, life, and death of Guru Ravidass, and the number of verses authored by him. Winand M. Callewaert and Peter G. Friedlander in their seminal work entitled *The Life and Works of Ravidass* published by Manohar in 1992, mentioned 94 *pads/shabads* (verses/hymns) of Guru Ravidass bani out of which they selected 72 because "they were either found in most Rajasthani manuscripts or in both a Rajasthani manuscript and in the *Adi Granth*" (Callewaert & Friedlander 1992: 9). Out of the 94 *Pads*, 17 *Pads* are found only in the *Adi Granth*. There are total forty hymns and one shloka (epigrammatic couplet) attributed to Guru Ravidass, which find expression in the *Adi Granth*, and are considered amongst the most authentic of his bani (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988:12; Callewaert and Friedlander 1992: 22). However, as far as the veracity of authorship of the shlokais concerned, a difference of opinions prevails among the scholars. Sahib Singh and Jasbir Singh Sabar, eminent scholars of Sikh scripture, are of the opinion that the shloka in question was by Kabir – listed in the Kabir bani (Shloka 242, at page 1377 of the *Adi Granth*) – whereas Bhai Jodh Singh, Dharampal Singhal, Friedlander and John Stratton Hawley, equally celebrated academics on this subject, considered that it was authored by Ravidass (Hawley, 1988: 12, Friedlander 2017: 319, Singh, 2000, 49; 12; Singhal 1986, 75; see also Singh 1999, 20-25). The shloka was also included in the bani of Ravidass compiled and published by Dera Ballan (Arsh, 2012, 196; and Jassi & Suman, 2001, 327). Irrespective of differences of opinion on the authorship of the sole *shloka* in the *Adi Granth*, the latter is the only authentic historical source available for an account of his life and teachings. Apart from this, no other reliable historical document either authored by Ravidass himself, any of his contemporaries, or indeed by succeeding generations, has been traced so far (Singhal, 1986, 2-6; Callewaert & Friedlander, 1992, 26-28; Friedlander, 2017, 318-19). Pre-modern Indian history was mostly preserved and transmitted by way of memory, folk tales, dictums, and aphorisms.

Available texts about the life and works of Ravidass are simply in the form of hagiographies (Callewaert & Friedlander, 1992, 28-30).

The various floruit versions of Guru Ravidass are mainly based on different beliefs associated with his life events, for instance that he was born on a Sunday full moon of the month of *Magha* (eleventh month of the Hindu calendar, corresponding to January/February of the Gregorian calendar); was a disciple of Ramanand; and that princess Mirabai was his disciple. However, there is also no unanimity on the belief whether he was initiated by anyone into the spiritual practice of *brahmgian* (knowledge of the divine) or he attained the same on his own. Opinions also differ about Mirabai being his disciple. In some writings, it is mentioned that another woman named Jhali, a queen from Chittorgarh, was also known to be a disciple. It is precisely because of such uncertainties about his journey on the established path to spirituality and his discipleship that there exist different versions of the names of probable Gurus who were thought of initiated him into the path of bhakti as well the names of his alleged disciples. Despite these uncertainties, some scholars have nonetheless attempted to determine possible dates of his birth and death on the basis of their estimates of the year and month in consonance with the lifespans of Ramanand, queen Jhali and princess Mirabai as well as a year when a full moon appeared in the month of *Magha* on a Sunday (Callewaert & Friedlander 1992: 24-28), but have arrived at divergent versions about these dates. In 1941, Ramacaran Kuril proposed Guru Ravidass' birth and death from AD 1414 to 1540; in 1956, Shastri estimated his birth between AD 1384-1398 and death between AD 1520-1538; in 1973 A.P. Singh mentioned dated AD 1376 to 1528; Yogindra Singh, in 1972, proposed that Guru Ravidass must have been born around AD 1443; in 1977 Darshan Singh placed him during AD 1414 to 1527; yet in 1981, another Darshan Singh considered his dates from 1393 to 1526; and in 1984 J.S. Sabar proposed that Guru Ravidass must have been born between AD 1376 to 1414 and died in AD 1517 (for details see: Callewaert & Friedlander 1992: 26-27). Collating all the above-proposed dates and comparing them with other sources extending to before c. AD 1700, Callewaert & Friedlander came to the conclusion that Guru Ravidass "may have been born around 1450 and died about AD 1520" (Callewaert & Friedlander 1992: 28).

Nevertheless, there is a general consensus among scholars that Guru Ravidass was born on the outskirts of Varanasi in the North Indian province of Uttar Pradesh. However, opinions still differ between two schools of thought on the exact place of his birth: One considered Manduadih, an area to the West of Varanasi

as the place, whereas a second school of thought thinks it to be Seer Govardhanpur, an area to the south of Varanasi. Though no factual information can be obtained about which of the two places, if either, is the place of his birth, the construction of the Sri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Temple at Seer Govardhanpur has assigned it utmost spiritual importance among the followers of Guru Ravidass. As far as information about the caste of Guru Ravidass is concerned, there is no dispute at all that he was a Chamar. In one of his *Pads* included in *Adi Granth*, he clearly mentioned about his caste: *Meri jaati kut bandhlaa dhor dhouwanta nithi baanaarasi aas paasaa. Ab bipar pardhan tihi karih danduouti tere naam sarnaai Ravidass daasaa* [My Caste is *Kutabādhalā*, I cart carcasses constantly around Benares. Now Brahmans and headmen bow down before me, Ravidās the servant has taken refuge in Your Name (*Adi Granth*: 1293)]. In addition to this *Pad*, in two other *Pads* (*Adi Granth*: 733 & 835) authored by the fourth Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das, the caste of Guru Ravidass was clearly mentioned. In these two *Pads*, Guru Ram Das refers to Guru Ravidass along with his caste title – Chamar. Some more equally clear references to his caste are also available in other early Panjabi and Rajasthani sant sources (for details see: Callewaert and Friedlander 1992: 22-24).

Kutbandhla caste in Uttar Pradesh is similar to Chamar caste in Punjab. Chamar is an umbrella caste category (as referred to in Census caste list for SCs), which includes Chamar, Jatia Chamar, Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi and Ravidasi (for details see: Chandra 2000:31-33 and 49; Deep 2001:7; Ram 2004c: 5-7). According to 2011 Census, Chamars constitute 23.45 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population in Punjab. In total, there are 39 different castes listed under the Scheduled Castes category in Punjab. The Mazhis (sweepers who embraced Sikhism) are another major caste among the Scheduled Castes in Punjab, constituting about 29.72 percent of the total Scheduled Castes population in the state (2011 census). Their Hindu counterpart Chuhars (Balmikis and Bhangis) constitutes 9.78 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population. Thus out of the total 39 Scheduled castes the two major groupings of Chuhars and Chamars together constitute 74.44 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population.⁽⁸⁾ Historically, Chamars have been considered polluted and impure because of their occupational contact with animal carcasses and hides and were consequently condemned as untouchables and segregated as outcastes. However, despite their historical deprivations, they are "... on the top of virtually every parameter – education, urbanization, jobs, occupational change, cultural advancement, political mobilization, etc." (Puri 2004:4). Many of them

have settled abroad (Europe, North America and Middle East) and help their brethren back home through generous remittances. They are also called Chandravanshi by clan and considered the highest caste among the SCs in Punjab. What made the image of Guru Ravidass a catalyst in the emergence of social consciousness among SCs, especially Chamars, was his being an outcaste and at the same time a sage of very high repute whose bani is included in the *Adi Granth*.

The inclusion of the bani of Guru Ravidass in *Adi Granth* carries special meaning for Ravidassias. They often allege that in spite of the respectable place assigned to their Guru (Ravidass) in *Adi Granth*, they are not considered equal by the dominant castes that often discriminate against them (conversations with L.R. Balley, a veteran Dalit leader, Jalandhar, 16 January 2003; K.C. Sulekh, an Ambedkarite and prolific writer, Chandigarh, 2 December 2004). In fact, it is the caste-based discrimination against them by dominant castes that has led the former to build their own separate Ravidass Deras.⁽⁹⁾ Ravidassias, however, are often confused with SC Sikhs. In fact, SC Sikhs are divided into two sub-segments. The first comprises of Mazhis and Rangretas. Before conversion to Sikhism, Mazhis and Rangretas were Chuhars (sweepers). "The Rangretas are a class of Mazbi apparently found only in Ambala, Ludhiana and the neighborhood, who consider themselves superior to the rest...but it appears that Rangretas have generally abandoned scavenging for leatherwork, and this would at once account for their rise in the social scale" (Ibbetson. 1883. rpt. 1970: 294). The other segment of SCs Sikhs consists of Ramdassias and Ravidassias. Ramdassias were *Julahas* (weavers) who converted to Sikhism. Ravidassias are mostly engaged in leatherwork. Though there is a wide distinction between the Ravidassias, typical leather workers and the Ramdassias, typical weavers, "yet they are connected by certain sections of leatherwork classes who have taken to weaving and thus risen in their social scale..." (Ibbetson 1883, rpt. 1970:296).

Ramdassias and Ravidassias are probably of the same origin. However, the distinction between them has risen from a divergence of occupation. "The Ramdassias are confused with Ravidasi or Rabdasi *Chamars*. The formers are true Sikhs, and take the *Pahul* (baptism into the Khalsa, the order instituted by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699, by offering sweetened water stirred with a doubled-edged sword). The latter are Hindus, or if Sikhs, only Nanakpanthi Sikhs and do not take the *Pahul*; and are followers of Bhagat Rav Das or Rab Das, himself a Chamar. They are apparently as true Hindus as any Chamar can be, and are wrongly called Sikhs by confusion with Ramdassias" (Ibbetson 1883, rpt. 1970: 300, emphasis in

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parenthesis added). Over the last few decades, some Ravidassias have started considering themselves to be a separate community, distinct from both Hindus and Sikhs. They have also adopted different symbols and rituals of worship and in some of their religious places they have replaced the Adi Granth with the *Amritbani: Satguru Ravidass Maharaj*. But in official records (census), Ravidassias are included in Chamar caste.

Chamars were known by their traditional profession of leather and tanning. However, there is an alternative explanation of the etymological origin of the term Chamar. This version believes that the Chamar community is Buddhist in origin, and that the term Chamaris derived from the Pali word Cigar [bhikku's robes] and not from *Charm* leather – leather (for details see: Prasad and Dahiwalé 2005:254-56; and Lochtefeld 2005:208-12). They were oppressed and their touch and sight were considered polluting by the upper castes. "Although they occupy the very bottom of the social hierarchy, the Chamārs and other Untouchable groups who worship Sant Ravidās do not passively accept their inferior status. Their worship of Ravidās is the manifestation of a dissident socioreligious ideology" (Schaller 1996: 94). The mere mention of his name evokes a sense of confidence and self-respect among them. So much so that a large number of them prefer to be identified as 'Ravidassia' rather than be known by their customary caste titles colored with derogatory connotations (Hawley 1988:272). "Although in the past Ravidas' low status may have presented a problem, his present-day admirers strive to affirm it, not deny it" (Lochtefeld 2005:201-02). They are popularly known as Ravidassia or Ravidassi Adharmis (Chandra 2000:49).

II

Guru Ravidass was prominent amongst those after Gautam Buddha who dared to revolt against the inhuman system of social exclusion and untouchability practiced in India. However, what made him different was his method of revolt. He adopted bhakti as a mode of expression of his social revolt. His bhakti-based method was not only unique but also a befitting reply to the subtle mechanisms deployed by the Brahminical class to keep the downtrodden out of the mainstream, since Bhakti was considered a privilege reserved for the upper castes, especially the priests, whereas, ex-untouchables were not allowed to practice bhakti because they were condemned as polluted. It is in this context that the adoption of bhakti by Guru Ravidass as a method of social protest assumes special importance. His bhakti-based method of social revolt was neither violent nor tied with the conventional forms of prayers and petitions. In fact, it was a revolt with a difference, being both novel and daring. It was novel, be-

cause Guru Ravidass put emphasis on compassion for all and absolute faith in God. The principle of compassion for all underlined the egalitarian traits of his social philosophy and struggle. His concept of absolute faith in a formless God brought into sharp focus the apathy of the elites of his times towards the plight of the downtrodden for whose emancipation he had to seek refuge in God. His method was daring in the sense that he chooses to imitate the Brahmins in order to symbolise his revolt, which was not only heretical but also deadly for an outcaste of his times.⁽¹⁰⁾ He challenged the tyranny of Brahmins and defied them by wearing *Dhoti* (cloth wrapped around the waist), *Janneue* (sacred thread) and *Tilak* (sacred red mark on forehead), all of which were forbidden for untouchables. Though he attired himself like an upper caste, he did not hide his caste. He continued with his hereditary occupation of making/mending shoes. He thus demonstrated that while adopting the prohibited dress and symbols of the upper castes, the lower castes could still keep their identity intact. Thus Guru Ravidass provided an alternative model for the emancipation of lower castes much (six centuries) before the articulation of the concept of sanskritisation.⁽¹¹⁾

The process of sanskritisation afforded ambitious lower caste members a means to improve their position in the caste hierarchy by simulating the higher castes, since caste *per se* is an immutable social reality. What made the emancipation project of Guru Ravidass different from that of sanskritisation was his emphasis on acquiring social respect while simultaneously retaining caste boundaries. He exhibited his protest against social oppression by putting on the prohibited dress and symbols of the upper castes as mentioned above while continuing to practice his hereditary low caste profession. He thus actively both repudiated and offered a viable self-respecting alternative to that of imitation of the appearance of the upper castes and the abandonment of caste identity to climb up the ladder of the caste hierarchy by the process of sanskritisation. The lower castes need not to be assimilated into the fold of the allegedly 'higher castes'. They had to, rather, assert their human rights by challenging the caste hierarchy itself by the assertion of their caste group.⁽¹²⁾ He wanted to dismantle the norm of varnashram dharma (four-fold division of Hindu society based on graded rank system of social hierarchy) by showing that lower castes were not beyond the pale of spiritual knowledge on the one hand and on the other that Brahmins were in fact "...hollow figures pumped up with false pride and hypocrisy" (Schaller 1996:107). In fact, he used caste itself to disassemble the steel frame of a caste-based social order.

Guru Ravidass gave a new meaning to bhakti by projecting it as a method of social protest against the

centuries-old entrenched structures of Brahminical domination. He rejected all forms of religious rituals and sectarian formalities. He also commented graphically on the cursed and abject living conditions of millions of fellow downtrodden. Some scholars were of the opinion that though the devotional songs and hymns of Guru Ravidass reflected the sufferings of the downtrodden, they lack the reformatory zeal and bitter condemnation of Brahminism and caste system that animated the poetry of Kabir and Tukaram (Dasgupta 1976:162; Omvedt 2003:191). Though there is a difference in tone between the poetry of Sant Kabir and Guru Ravidass, both convey the same message. The poetry of Guru Ravidass is known to be full of humility and devotion, but is equally imbued with a reformatory zeal and concern for the downtrodden. Instead of directly confronting the arrogance of higher castes, he undertook to raise the dignity of his own caste and profession, so that the higher castes could come to realise the shallowness of their self-imposed superiority (Lal 1998:7). He advocated self-help for eliminating sufferings of lower castes. His vision for self-help is clearly reflected in one of the legends about his refusal to make use of a Paras (a philosopher's stone/tincture that turns iron into gold) to get rich (Deep 2001:11 & 17; Singh 2000:2-3). He lent purity and respect to *kirat* (manual work), which also found special mention in the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of the Sikh faith. In fact, Ravidass's life and poetry provided a vision to the downtrodden to struggle for their human rights and civic liberties. It sought to exorcise the internalisation of centuries – nay, millennia – of social ostracism and theft of human dignity, through the rejection of rituals and dogmas and a dual focus on hereditary work and on a formless supreme being who is beyond such deeply flawed social constructs such as caste and creed.

The bhakti approach of Guru Ravidass was a non-violent struggle for the emancipation and empowerment of the Shudras. Though he combined humility with *Bhakti*, his concept of a formless God reflected an altogether different picture. The God of Guru Ravidass was not humble in the typical sense of the term. He was graceful and not indifferent to the downtrodden. His God was rather bold who was not afraid of anyone. He elevated and purified the so-called untouchables. *Aaisee lal tujh binu kaunu karai. Gareeb niwaaju guseea meraan maathai chhatar dharai... neecho uooch karai meraan govind kaahoo te na darai* [refrain My Beloved, besides you who acts like this? Protector of the poor, my Master. You hold a royal umbrella over my head] (Adi Granth: 1106, translated as in Callewaert and Friedlander 1992:166).⁽¹⁴⁾ It is in this context that his non-violent struggle based on Bhakti assumed special importance for the emancipation of lower castes. He did

not only adopt non-violence in his struggle against the social oppression, but also motivated the oppressors to abandon the path of violence (Puri 2006:11).

Low caste but high spiritual status of Guru Ravidass posed a challenge to the Brahminical structures of domination. The traditional Brahminical institution of varnashram dharma failed to confront his pragmatic and revolutionary reasoning based on equality, dignity and fraternity. Instead, the Brahmins attempted to nullify his low caste yet high spiritual profile, by appropriating him in the Hindu fold. They concocted stories to project him as a Brahmin in his previous life.⁽¹⁵⁾ According to one such story, Guru Ravidass was projected as a Brahmin in his previous birth, but due to his habit of eating meat and the untouchable status of his wife, he had to be reborn as a Chamar. Another story relates that Ramananda, his alleged Guru, cursed him in his previous life to be born in a family of untouchables on account of his accepting offerings from a local moneylender who though he himself was not of a lower caste, had business relations with leather workers (Lochtefeld 2005:205). "This itself indicates the degree of purity-pollution behaviours observed even by Brahmin ascetics" (Omvedt 2003:192). The latter story does not end there however. It further informs that the baby Ravidass refused to accept the milk of his low caste mother. He accepted the milk of his mother only when Ramanand supposedly reminded him of his misbehavior in the previous life. Another story about his co-option in the Brahminical fold narrates that he had a golden sacred thread under his skin, though it was invisible on his body. When Brahmins declined to eat while sitting in the same row with him during a feast given in his honor by Jhali, the queen of Chittor, he left the room. But as they sat to dine, they found an image of Guru Ravidass appearing at the side of each of them. The story also tells that he cut open his chest and revealed the sacred thread that lay within – a clear proof of his being a real Brahmin.⁽¹⁶⁾

Thus challenged by the surging popularity of Guru Ravidass, among the lower and upper castes alike, Brahmins knitted layers of mythological narratives about his mythical high caste in a previous life. This was done, probably, to preclude the lower castes from rallying around his name (conversation with Karam Singh Raju, a prolific writer and devotee of Ravidass, Chandigarh, 9 February 2004). Yet another device adopted by the twice born to diminish his popularity was to present him as a Guru of the Chamars only. "This was the final masterstroke to minimize his influence on the society as a whole" (Chahal n.d.: 4-5). Though Ravidass was himself a chamar, his egalitarian social philosophy won him many disciples among the upper castes too. Jhali, Queen of Chittor; Mirabai, Rajput princess and

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daughter-in-law of King of Mewar, Sangram Singh; Prince Veer Singh Dev Vaghela of Rewa of Madhya Pradesh; and Prince of Kanshi were the most prominent among them (Kaul 2001:48).⁽¹⁷⁾

Lower caste activists and academics condemned the process of Brahminisation of Guru Ravidass. They ridiculed the so-called Brahminical narratives and interpretations about Guru Ravidass and also refused to accept Ramanand as his Guru (conversation with K. C. Sulekh, an Ambedkarite and prolific writer, Chandigarh, 2 December 2004). Guru Ravidass never mentioned the name of Ramanand in his most authentic bani recorded in Adi Granth. Instead he mentioned the names of saint Jaidev, saint Namdev and saint Kabir (Muktsar 2002:70-74; and Muktsar 2004). Some radical lower caste activists claim "that his Guru was Sardanand, and emphasize his ability to defeat Brahmins time and again in debates" (Omvedt 2003:192; see also Hawley and Jurgensmeyer 1988:15). Thus the process of Brahminisation had not only failed to assimilate Guru Ravidass into the fold of the upper castes, it further strengthened the bond of the lower castes with him. The latter took pride in being known as Ravidassias with Guru Ravidass becoming the paragon of their struggle for social equality, self-respect and distinct identity.

However, what made Guru Ravidass the most revered among his fellow community folks was his steadfast determination to proudly exhibit his otherwise degraded caste identity and to challenge the dominant structures of social oppression. Though he used to attire himself like a priest, he did not hide his caste. By attiring like that he did not intend to convey the superiority of the profession of priesthood at all. Nor did he pretend to show any pride in the dress of the priestly Brahmin caste per se. His only motive to dress like priests was to challenge the hegemony of the purported high-caste people. He did not feel any shame in earning his livelihood by his so-called 'polluted' hereditary occupation of leatherwork. He boldly wrote about his caste and its related occupation of carrying away the carcass and skinning dead cattle. He earned his livelihood by the sweat of his brow and refused help from all quarters. That made him self-reliant and free from bondage to any upper castes obligations. "He was probably the only saint in Kashi," as articulated by Chandra Bhan Prasad, "who neither sought nor accepted patronage from kings; that's the reason Ravidass continued with his business his entire life. He enjoyed financial freedom and did not live on alms" (*The Print*, April 12, 2018). To quote him further, Guru Ravidass "could travel more widely than any of his contemporaries — Kabir for instance — because he generated revenue from his business."

Therefore SCs were propelled by his example to independently earn their livelihoods through dint of sheer work in order to liberate themselves from the cobwebs of social exclusion and economic exploitation that they have been suffering from for generation after generation. In the present day this has become more meaningful given the large scale shrinking of the public sector domain.

In the popular calendar culture of Punjab, Guru Ravidass is often presented in the above-mentioned dress code, which was (and for many still is) anathema, especially for the upper castes. His non-violent social defiance method of social transformation has effectively worked as a suitable pedagogic tool to convey the message of self-respect and the dignity of labour to the downtrodden who were not only debarred from entering the spiritual sphere of Hindu society monopolized by the priestly class of Brahmins, but were also treated lesser than animals for no other reason than their so-called low caste birth and the allegedly polluted nature of their hereditary occupation. It is in this crucial context that his emphasis on devotion to God and adoption of a unique iconography together produced a new text of peaceful social protest by lower-castes.

The unique 'middle path' and bhakti-based model of lower caste social mobility was well received in Punjab due to a number of reasons: (a) Majority of SCs in Punjab are followers of Guru Ravidass, (b) Ad Dharm leadership consistently worked towards the formation of alternative Ravidassia culture based on the life and teachings of Guru Ravidass, (c) The fact that Guru Ravidass himself belonged to one of the lowest castes (the Chamar caste) acted as a catalyst in the adoption of his unique path, (d) the widespread influence of Ad Dharm movement in Punjab prevented conversion of a large number of lower castes to other religions. It also worked as a bulwark against the cultural assimilation process for fear of losing indigenous SCs culture and (e) the popularity of Ad Dharm (indigenous religion) among a large number of lower castes in the state and their faith in its capacity to salvage them from the abyss of social exclusion and oppression caused by the asymmetrical and oppressive structures that have emerged within the mainstream religions in the state. Since Guru Ravidass himself did not embrace any other religion nor try to escape social exclusion by assimilation into the mainstream social system of the upper castes, lower castes of Punjab found in him an exemplar of the 'middle path'. The presence of simple but sharp elements of social protest in his teachings along with the commonality of his caste provided the basis for the rise of radical consciousness among lower castes in the state. The mere mention of his name evokes a sense of confidence and self-respect among them. So much so that a large number of them

prefer to identify themselves as 'Ravidassia' rather than to be known by their customary caste titles coloured with derogatory connotations. Many of his lower caste followers in Punjab take pride in publicly exhibiting their newly acquired distinct caste identity — Ravidassia/putt *Chamaran de* (sons of Chamars)/SC Boys! This unique phenomenon of articulation of caste-based social identity among the larger sections of the SCs population in Punjab can also be witnessed in mushrooming lower caste related pop songs eulogizing their distinct caste identity.

Thus, it is for such reasons, as mentioned above, that Guru Ravidass was embraced by the leadership of Ad Dharm movement as an exemplar of the 'middle path' in whose life and teachings lower castes in Punjab found the necessary ammunition for the ignition of radical SCs consciousness in the state. The establishment of a large number of Ravidass Deras by SCs in Punjab and in other parts of India over the last few decades is a case in point. Guru Ravidass has become very popular among Ravidassia diasporas as well, who 'have built Ravidass temples wherever they happened to live even in small numbers' in order to assert their separate caste identity. Some of the most prominent Ravidass shrines abroad are in the following cities: Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Montreal (all in Canada), New York, Sacramento, Pittsburgh, Seattle, Fresno and Austin (all in USA), Wolverhampton, Southall, Kent, Bedford (all in UK). In the last few years many Ravidass Deras have also come up in Italy, Holland, New Zealand, and Greece. Sant Niranjani Dass of Dera Ballan has laid down the foundation stones of all these Deras. The number of Ravidass *Deras* has been multiplying very fast, and has taken the form of a sort of alternate socio-cultural Ravidass *Deras* movement. Led by the sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan (for a detailed account see Ram 2008: 1341-64), this movement "...is silently sweeping the Punjab countryside offering a new hope to the untouchable, particularly the Chamars..." (Rajshekar 2004:3). It has generated a sense of confidence among them and provided them with an opportunity to exhibit their hitherto eclipsed SCs identity. The secret of the success of this movement lies in the strategy to "...sell Dr Ambedkar's socio-cultural revolution packed in an ingenious religious capsule" (Rajshekar 2004:3). Ravidass Deras are, perhaps, the only religious centers where religious and political figures (Guru Ravidass and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar) are intermingled and projected publicly. These Deras thrive on the elements of social protest expressed in the poetry of Guru Ravidass and the critical writings of Dr. Ambedkar. These Deras, in fact, have been functioning as missions to sensitise SCs and to facilitate their empowerment (Ambedkari 2005:5). Ravidass Deras have — perhaps ironically, given Guru Ravidass'

rejection of dogmas and ritualism — formulated their own religious symbols, ceremonies, prayers, rituals and messages of social protest against the oppressive structures of caste domination in the agrarian society of Punjab (Rawat 2003: 589-90).⁽¹⁹⁾ Moreover, since the Vienna incident (24 May, 2009), the sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan have been publicly exhibiting their separate social and religious identity in the form of a re-claimed indigenous lower castes' religion — Ravidassia Dharm (Kumar 2013: 1-2; Ram 2017: 52-78; Ram 2017a: 283-89; Ram 2016: 371-383; Ram 2009: 1-34; Ram 2009a). Guru Ravidass Dera movement has offered further hope to those who have been empowered by the constitutional provisions of state affirmative action. The goalmouth of the Ravidass movement, based as it is on the teachings of Guru Ravidass, is rooted in the ideal of Begumpura (a city free from all sorts of social divisions, restrictions, sorrows and sufferings), though again, this is at variance with the aggressive projection of caste identity through songs and suchlike, noted above.

III

Begumpura, an egalitarian model state envisaged by Guru Ravidass, promises human rights and civil liberties for all alike. It describes an abode of everlasting security augmented by the principles of fraternity, freedom from worries, sufferings, social hierarchies, and the burden of paying taxes. Thus, in Begumpura no one would be discriminated against on the basis of caste and religion. It would be free from the graded system of caste hierarchy. There would be no segregated colonies for the downtrodden and they would be free to move around without caste prejudice and fear of social discrimination and punishment. In other words, the evil of untouchability would cease to exist in Begumpura. In fact, the very binary of low and high would cease to exist. Except the sovereignty of the eternal God, none would be authorised to exercise any power on the inhabitants of the city of Begumpura. Guru Ravidass concludes the description of his prescient joyful city by underlying that all those who live there would be his friends: *Jo ham shehri so meet hamara* [whoever is my fellow citizen, is my friend] (Adi Granth:345). There would be no space for boundaries whatsoever between lower and higher caste as well as classes and all would be treated equally. In such an egalitarian system of governance no one would suffer pangs of hunger — *Aisa Chahu Raaj Main Jaha Mile Sabhan ko Ann, Chot Bade Sabh Sam Base Ravidass Rahe Parsan*.

Though Begumpura is an ideal state as envisioned by Guru Ravidass, it is not a mere figment of his mind. In fact, its articulation was based on an in-depth understanding of the socio-economic and political

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conditions prevailing during his life-time. He lived during the period when Shudras were doubly oppressed by their political masters along with the members of higher castes (Singh 1996:99; See also Raju 2001:141-47). The establishment of an egalitarian social order, based on dignity of labour, presupposes caste-class solidarity. Caste-class solidarity, in fact, depends upon what Dr B.R. Ambedkar pithily articulated as the 'annihilation of caste'. Caste has not only engaged lower and upper castes in mutual antagonism, the lower and upper castes are further deeply divided within their own respective social segments. All castes follow the principles of endogamy and exogamy. They marry within their respective social cocoons and limit themselves to their *biradari* (clan/blood relationship) and *rishtedari* (family ties) during formal family functions and community social gatherings.

Inter-caste marriages are not a taboo among the upper castes only. Lower castes too are equally afflicted with this divisive caste malady. Ravidassias, Ramdassias, Valmikis, Ad Dharmis – are just some of the total 39 SCs categories in Punjab – follow their respective *biradari* traditions and customary social bindings in deciding their matrimonial and other social practices and ceremonies. Territorial social divisions in rural settings also pose a formidable challenge to caste-class solidarity. Villages are divided into two social settings: mainstream village (*pind*) and the segregated SCs neighbourhoods. The latter are contemptuously called *chamarlees*, *thathees*, and *vehras* in Doaba, Malwa and Mazha regions of Punjab respectively. It was against such a divisive state-of-affairs in the society that Guru Ravidass articulated his utopia of Begampura.

Guru Ravidass nurtured no expectation from any quarter regarding the improvement of the conditions of his fellow-down-trodden caste members except through the benevolence and grace of (a formless God. In one of his hymns he thus articulated *Dardu dekh sab ko hasai, aaisee dasaa hamaaree*. Ast dasaa sidi kar talai, sab kirpa tumhari. [Everyone laughs seeing my poverty, such is my state. The eighteen perfections are in the palm of my hands, all through Your grace] (Adi Granth: 858). In fact, his entire poetry echoed a loud protest against slavery on the one hand and boundless love and devotion to the formless God on the other. He believed that God created all human beings and resided in all of them. If the same God pervaded the entire humanity, then it is foolish to divide the society on the basis of man-made caste hierarchies. He minced no words in condemning caste-based societal divisions. It is in this context that the egalitarian social philosophy of Guru Ravidass expressed in the mode of poetry in his envisioned model state of Begampura that became the manifesto of lower

caste consciousness within India and abroad.

Notes

1. The two most important missions are All India Adi-Dharm Mission (New Delhi), and *Dera Sach Khand Ballan* (Punjab). Banta Ram Ghera founder of the All India Adi-Dharm Mission worked meticulously to locate the birthplace of Guru Ravidass at Seer Govardhanpur in Banaras (Uttar Pradesh). Ghera made consistent efforts in building Ravidass Temples at Seer Govardhanpur and at Khuralgarh, Hoshiarpur District, Punjab. *Dera Sach Khand Ballan* (Punjab), solely dedicated to the mission of spreading the *Bani* (philosophy in the form of poetry) of Ravidass, also made consistent efforts to locate the birthplace of Ravidass and contributed significantly in completing the project of Guru Ravidass Birthplace Temple at Seer Govardhanpur in Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh). For details see: (Schaller 1996:111-6; Hawley 1988:271; Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988:19-20; Juergensmeyer 1988).

2. Dera Sach Khand Ballan has established the following international charitable trusts abroad for dissemination of the *Bani* of Ravidass amongst the Dalit Diaspora: Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust [U.K.]; Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust [Vancouver] Canada; and Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust [U.S.A.].

3. Outcastes were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy and were meant to serve the three higher Varnas - Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya. Their touch, shadow or even voice was considered by the caste Hindus to be polluting. They were not allowed to keep certain domestic animals, use certain metals for ornaments and utensils, eat a particular type of food, use some type of footwear and dresses and were forced to live in the outskirts of the villages towards which the wind blew and dirt flowed. Their houses were dirty, dingy and unhygienic where poverty and squalor loomed large. They were denied the use of public wells. The doors of the Hindu temples were closed for them and their children were not allowed into the schools attended by the caste Hindus. The public services were denied to them. They performed hereditary menial occupation, such as scavenging, shoe-making and animal carcass removing. Some of them embraced, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism in order to evade the oppression of untouchability. However, even their conversion to other religions could not protect them from the ruthless onslaughts of untouchability. The outcastes were beyond the Varna and were known as *Ati* shudras, Chandalas, Antyajas, Pariahs, Dheds, Panchamas, Avarnas, Anariyas, Namashudras, etc. (For details see: Ambedkar n.d.; Chopra 1982:121-2; Gokhale 1986:270; Juergensmeyer 1988:84; Puri 2004:190-224; Ram

2001:146-170).

4. Though the founders of the Ad Dharm movement appealed to all the untouchables in the state, the response of the Chamars was tremendous. Some 400,000 of them joined the movement in about four years (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 2000: 102).

5. According to a recent study, the number of such Deras has exceeded one hundred in Punjab (Qadian 2003). Since the publication of this study many more Ravidass Deras have been established in the state. In the year 2005 alone, the saints of Dera Ballan have laid down the foundation stones of 12 Ravidass Deras. (Calculated from the *Begum Pura Shaheer* [Jalandhar] weekly). The strength of Ravidass Deras has also been rapidly growing abroad (for details see: Singh 2003:35-40).

6. The concept of Bhakti in sant paramparais entirely different from that of the *vaishnava* (Vishnuite) tradition (Singh 1996:83-86). In the *vaishnava* tradition, *Bhakti* is based on idol worshipping of the avatars (reincarnation) of God (*sagun*). The sant paramparalays emphasis on loving adoration of and devotion to the non-anthropomorphic God (*nirgun*), and continuous recitation of 'word' (*naam*) given by the Guru. Though sant parampara and Vaishnav traditions are collectively known as *Bhakti* movement, the former is radical in content and appeal and is also known as *Nirguna Bhakti*. The famous Bhaktas (devotees) associated with the *sant parampara/nirguna Bhakti* were Kabir, Nanak, Dadu, Sain, Pipa, Dhanna, Sadna and Ravidass. Many of them belonged to the lower caste. Sant Ravidass "...came from a caste that ranks below that of any of his compeers in the world of medieval North Indian bhakti" (Hawley 1988:270). For a detailed account of sant parampara of the North Indian *Bhakti* movement of the medieval period see: (McLeod 1968; Chaturvedi 1952; Schomar & McLeod [eds.] 1987; Lorenzen [ed.] 1996; Lele [ed.] 1981:1-15).

7. This hymn seems to testify one of the legends in which the bewildered Brahmins were shown prostrating before him after they found his bodily image appear between each and every one of them during a feast thrown by queen Jhali at Chit-torgarh.

8. All the SC castes population figures are taken from Census of India 2011. Online available at: <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011censua/SCST-Series/SC14.html> (accessed on 1 November 2016; See also: Deep 2001:7; Puri 2004:4).

9. Out of a total of 12,780 villages in Punjab, Dalits have their own separate Gurdwaras in about 10,000 villages. See also: (*Dalit Voice*, 22 (17), 1-15 September 2003: 20; Muktsar 2003:21-22).

10. Shudras were prohibited from hearing and reading the sacred texts of the Hindu religion. Its violation invited severest punishment as men-

tioned in the *Manusmriti*, the law book of Hindu religion.

11. "Sanskritisation may be briefly defined as the process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, ritual, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a 'twice-born' (*dwija*) caste. The Sanskritisation of a group has usually the effect of improving its position in the local caste hierarchy" (Srinivas 1998:88).

12. For a detailed account of the almost total failure of the process of sanskritisation in significantly enhancing the ritual status of chamars, see: (Schaller 1996:94-119).

13. It divided Hindu society into four *Varnas* (occupational categories): Brahmin (priest), *Kshatriya* (soldier), *Vaishya* (trader), Shudra (menial worker). Originally somewhat flexible, this division became rigid with the passage of time and got further degenerated into castes and sub-castes. Broadly speaking, Varna system constituted the very basis of the hierarchically graded caste system in India, where *Brahmin* (priest) occupied the highest position to be followed by *Kshatriya* (soldier), *Vaishya* (trader) and the *Shudra* (menial workers) who were placed at the lowest rung and were hence considered as impure and polluted.

14. Henceforth translations of the quotations from the poetry of Ravidass are taken from Callewaert and Friedlander (1992) and the Panjabi couplets (romanized) of his poetry with the page numbers of the *Adi Granth* are taken from Jassi and Suman (2001).

15. Ironically, even some Dalits also feel comfortable with such concoctions about his life. Being his caste fellows, the elevated status of Ravidass serves as a facilitator in their attempt to move up the social hierarchy of the Hindu caste system (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988:13 and fn 19).

16. For a detailed account of such stories see the following sources in English: (Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar [eds] 2005, esp. section on Ravidass; Callewaert and Friedlander 1992; Hawley 1988: 9-32).

17. As far as Mirabai is concerned, different scholars hold different views regarding the belief of her being a disciple of Ravidass. For details see: (Chaturvedi 1952: 239-40).

18. Based on conversations with the priests of Dera Ballan, 14 April 2004; Virinder Kumar Banger, a devotee of Guru Ravidass and follower of the Dera Ballan, Vancouver, 17 May 2003).

19. Though Scheduled Castes in Punjab are largest in numbers (31.94 per cent) in India, their share in the agricultural land of the state is the lowest in the country (3.20 per cent).

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CONGRATULATIONS ON THE 646th PARKASH UTSAV OF SATGURU RAVIDASS JI MAHARAJ

Prem K. Chumber

Editor-In-Chief:

Ambedkar Times & Desh Doaba

Sri Guru Ravidass Ji Maharaj, whose 646th birth anniversary is being celebrated throughout the world, is revered as Shiromani Sant of the medieval Bhakti movement of North India. He was born in the so called lowest of the low castes, in Seer Goverdhanpur near Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), whose touch was used to be considered polluting to the Savarnas. He opened a frontal attack on the system of Untouchability and spoke against the system of hegemonic Brahminical mediation for an access

to spirituality. He also said that one needs not to hide his caste or leave his low profession to reach God. He became a model for his fellow beings to overcome the hierarchical barriers of Brahminical Social Order and to establish Begumpura a state without fear and sorrows. Sri Guru Ravidass elevated the status of the labour by emphasizing on the fact that manual labour is the best way to lead a pious life. He vehemently opposed living on alms and charity of others.

He defeated the famous Kashi Pundits in a formally organized Shastarth and proved that merit is not the fiefdom of the so called upper

castes alone. Everybody is capable of obtaining knowledge and to worship. He underlined the fact that the fourfold division of the Hindu society is a sham and a gimmick keep a large section of the society under the cruel control of a few Upper castes in the name of purity-pollution principle cunningly devised by Brahmins. It is against this very system of oppressive social differentiation that Guru Ravidass envisioned an egalitarian socio-political order where there would be no place for untouchability and social oppression. For the social transformation of the society, Sri Guru Ravidass Ji laid emphasis on labour,

compassion, virtue, prohibition of alcohol and all bad deeds. He also reiterated the urgent need of remembering the formless God whom he addressed by varied names. Some scholars are of the view that Guru Ravidass did not form an organization nor he launched any consistent and systematic agitation against the system of untouchability. This is true. But to raise a loud voice at his times was no less than a clarion call to dismantle the unjust system of Brahminical social order. It is also true that the path told by him has become the beacon light for the Dalit movement.

The State of Washington recognizing April 2023 as “Dalit History Month”

“Ambedkar Times” and “Desh Doaba” Weeklies are pleased to gladly share the proclamation from the State of Washington recognizing April 2023 as “Dalit History Month”. April 14 is celebrated world over in honor of Bharat Rattan Babasaheb Dr B. R. Ambedkar's 132nd birthday and in remembrance of his lifelong struggle for the annihilation of caste and the creation of egalitarian social order as well as democracy.

Prem Kumar Chumber
Editor-in-Chief “Ambedkar Times” and “Desh Doaba” Weeklies

The State of Washington



Proclamation

WHEREAS, Washington is home to a diverse population of multiple races and ethnicities encompassing Native American, Black, Hispanic, White, Asian, Pacific Islander, and additional racial and ethnic populations. Diverse communities all over the world continue to experience systemic racism, injustices, and discrimination. The constitution of the USA and the State of Washington is committed to upholding the human rights, dignity, and equality of all Washingtonians; and

WHEREAS, April is a significant month for Dalit communities as this special month includes the birth of important Dalit leaders and social reformers such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, who led the movement against systemic discrimination based on caste; and

WHEREAS, the life work carried out by Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar has elevated the lives of millions of marginalized people and women across all classes of population to have a life honoring social, political, economic, and religious equity and provided them with an opportunity to live with dignity and honor in modern India and now in USA; and

WHEREAS, the work of these great social reformers is recognized for the revival of democratic principles in modern India to embrace the principles of compassion and non-violence for a society that leads to equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity; and

WHEREAS, this Month is an opportunity to remember and honor the legacy of dedication to equity, social justice, human rights, and dignity, which continues to inspire the people of Washington and across the World; and

WHEREAS, this month allows the state of Washington to participate and celebrate the liberation of emancipation of millions of marginalized people in India and join the people from this diaspora living and thriving here in Washington; and

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Jay Inslee, Governor of the state of Washington, do hereby proclaim April 2023 as

Dalit History Month

in Washington, and I encourage all people in our state to join me in this special observance.

Signed this 27th day of March, 2023

Governor Jay Inslee



The State of Michigan recognizing April 9-15, 2023 as "Social Equity Week"

"Ambedkar Times" and "Desh Doaba" Weeklies are pleased to gladly share the proclamation from the State of Michigan recognizing April 9-15, 2023 as "Social Equity Week". April 14 is celebrated world over in honor of Bharat Rattan Babasaheb Dr B. R. Ambedkar's 132nd birthday and in remembrance of his lifelong struggle for the annihilation of caste and the creation of egalitarian social order as well as democracy.

Prem Kumar Chumber

Editor-in-Chief "Ambedkar Times" and "Desh Doaba" Weeklies



ON BEHALF OF THE PEOPLE OF MICHIGAN,
I, Gretchen Whitmer, governor of Michigan, do hereby proclaim

April 9 – 15, 2023

as

SOCIAL EQUITY WEEK

WHEREAS, the life work carried out by Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Bharat Ratna Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar has elevated the lives of millions of marginalized people and women across all classes of society to live their lives with social, political, economic, and religious equity and an opportunity to live with dignity and honor in modern India; and,

WHEREAS, the work of these social reformers is recognized for reviving democratic principles in modern India to embrace compassion and non-violence, leading to a society built on equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity; and,

WHEREAS, the week-long awareness activities are to honor all social reformers in India who worked towards the betterment of social changes and inculcating democratic values in the social strata of the Indian populous; and,

WHEREAS, this event allows the State of Michigan to participate and celebrate the liberation and emancipation of marginalized people in India and join people from this diaspora living and thriving in Michigan; and,

WHEREAS, Social Equity Week is an opportunity to remember and honor the legacy of dedication to equity, social justice, human rights, and dignity, which continues to inspire around the world;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Gretchen Whitmer, governor of Michigan, do hereby proclaim April 9 – 15, 2023, as Social Equity Week in Michigan.


Gretchen Whitmer
Governor



Assemblyman Hoover's Representative Report

Legislature Approves My Request to Audit Homelessness Spending

On Wednesday, the legislature passed my requested audit on homelessness spending in California on a 12-0 vote. Joining me in this request was a bipartisan coalition of lawmakers including Assemblymember Evan Low and Senators Dave Cortese, Roger Niello, and Rosilicie Ochoa Bogh.

Since 2018, California has spent \$20 billion taxpayer dollars on homelessness. During that same period we have seen a 77% increase in our state's homelessness population. Approving this audit is a critical first step toward improving our investments, protecting taxpayers, restoring our public spaces, and getting people the help they need.

* The audit will evaluate statewide coordination of homelessness funding and programs, including:

Assessing the cost effectiveness of up to five homelessness programs, including how many individuals received shelter and services annually in five years.

* Identifying any barriers to assessing and tracking the homeless population.

The audit is expected to take 6-7 months to complete, and I look forward to sharing the results of that audit with you as soon as they are available.

Community Meeting Recap

I had a wonderful time in Citrus Heights at my first community meeting during my term as your Assemblyman along with Senator Roger Niello. The first half of the meeting we gave an update on what has been

happening in the State Legislature so far in 2023, and in the second half we answered questions from the packed crowd.

We have two more community meetings coming up in the near future, and I hope to see you at one of them!

Friday, April 14th

8:30am - 9:30am

Rancho Cordova City Hall (2729 Prospect Park Drive, Rancho Cor-



dova 95670)

Friday, April 21st

8:30am - 9:30am

Bayside Folsom (890 Glenn Drive, Folsom 95630)

7th Assembly District Woman of the Year - Tanya Kravchuk

I was thrilled to honor Tanya Kravchuk as the 2023 Woman of the Year in the 7th Assembly District at the State Capitol earlier this week. Tanya is a dedicated community

leader helping Ukranian refugees through the Ukrainian American House. She also serves families and students as a School Board Member in the San Juan Unified School District. Congratulations Tanya!

Committee Approves My Bill to Help Students in Underperforming Schools

On Wednesday the Assembly Education Committee approved AB 237, a bill I have authored along with

Assemblymember Greg Wallis, which provides more educational options for students in underperforming schools.

It is critically important that we increase educational options for families within the traditional public school system. This bill breaks down barriers for struggling students and allows parents the flexibility to find a school that better fits the needs of their child.

Police K-9 Ban Passes Assembly Committee



Earlier this week, the Assembly Public Safety Committee passed Assembly Bill 742 by a vote of 6-2, which would ban the use of police K-9s for apprehension and crowd control. This bill will next go to the Appropriations Committee, and if passed will then go to the Assembly Floor.

I will be voting against this bill if it gets to that point, because I believe police K-9s are an invaluable and non-lethal part of agencies across the country. If we take away this law enforcement tool, we are just eliminating one more non-lethal method for law enforcement to use.

First Pitch at Little League Opening Day

Baseball is back! I enjoyed throwing out the first pitch at today's Foothill Farms Little League opening day parade and ceremony. It was also great to see Twin Rivers USD President Michelle Rivas and Vice President Michael Baker. Little League is a wonderful organization with approximately two million boys and girls who play worldwide, and I look forward to another wonderful season for the kids playing here in Sacramento County.

Assembly Education Committee Approves Bill to Help Students in Underperforming Schools

SACRAMENTO - Today Assemblymembers Josh Hoover (R-Folsom) and Greg Wallis (R-Palm Springs) announced the passage of Assembly Bill 237 (Wallis and Hoover), which provides more educational options for students in underperforming schools. It was approved on a 5-0 vote in the Assembly Education Committee.

"It is critically important that we increase educational options for

families within the traditional public school system," said Assemblyman Hoover. "This bill breaks down barriers for struggling students and allows parents the flexibility to find a school that better fits the needs of their child."

"Students and families are being left behind in situations that are beyond their control," said Assemblymember Wallis. "Our most vulnerable

students deserve the opportunity to find a new school that will help them bridge the achievement gap and succeed with the support they need. This bill will provide that opportunity."

Specifically, the bill would prohibit a home school district from vetoing an interdistrict transfer for an underperforming student at an underperforming school. It now moves to

the Assembly Appropriations Committee for consideration.

Josh Hoover represents Assembly District 7, which includes the cities of Citrus Heights, Folsom, and Rancho Cordova and the unincorporated communities of Carmichael, Fair Oaks, Foothill Farms, Gold River, Mather, McClellan Park, North Highlands, Orangevale, and Rosemont.

Legislature Approves Bipartisan Audit of Homelessness Spending Joint Authored by Assemblyman Josh Hoover

SACRAMENTO - Today Assemblyman Josh Hoover (R-Folsom) announced the passage of a bipartisan audit of homelessness spending in California. The audit request — authored by Senator Dave Cortese (D-San Jose), Assemblymember Evan Low (D-Silicon Valley), and Assemblymember Josh Hoover (R-Folsom) — was approved by the Joint Legislative Audit Committee with unanimous bipartisan support.

"Since 2018, California has spent \$20 billion taxpayer dollars on homelessness," said Assemblyman Hoover. "During that same period we have seen a 77% increase in our state's homelessness population. Ap-

proving this audit is a critical first step toward improving our investments, protecting taxpayers, restoring our public spaces, and getting people the help they need."

The audit will evaluate statewide coordination of homelessness funding and programs, including:

Assessing the cost effectiveness of up to five homelessness programs, including how many individuals re-



ceived shelter and services annually in five years.

Identifying any barriers to assessing and tracking the homeless population.

It will also assess how the City of San Jose and another city selected by the Auditor have used state homelessness funding at the local level. California State Auditor Grant Parks stated he expects the audit to take 6-7 months to complete.

Josh Hoover represents Assembly District 7, which includes the cities of Citrus Heights, Folsom, and Rancho Cordova and the unincorporated communities of Carmichael, Fair Oaks, Foothill Farms, Gold River, Mather, McClellan Park, North Highlands, Orangevale, and Rosemont.

DICCI Seminar on Food Processing Industries – Opportunities for Scheduled Caste Entrepreneurs

The Punjab Chapter of Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI) in cooperation with Ministry of Food Processing Industries of the Government of India hosted a one day Conference on Opportunities for SC/ST Entrepreneurs in Food Processing Industries at Jalandhar on March 27, 2023. DICCI is an apex chamber to promote and facilitate dalit entrepreneurs with a view to establish an integrated and inclusive society in an equitable socio-economic order in the country and the society at large as visualized by forefathers headed by Babasaheb

spect'. DICCI is doing an excellent service to the deprived and marginalized sections of the society.

The One-day event in Jalandhar was a well organized function on the theme "Opportunities for SC/ST Entrepreneurs in the Food Processing Industries. I participated in the function as a Guest of Honour, courtesy my friend Tilak Khinder. National Head of Sports and Allied Industries of DICCI and Head of the Punjab Chapter of the apex body, Rajesh Kumar. In the inaugural session, Tilak Khinder welcoming the guests and business participants said that they,

butter with dignity. It was a matter of satisfaction that more and more young business aspirants were joining DICCI and rightly so.

The Technical Session were all the more educative and informative – Charu Verma and Amit Kumar of SIDBI in their presentations informed about the facilities and services of SIDBI with regard to the SC/ST intended beneficiaries, Dr. Puneet Sharma of NSIC informed about the MSME, NSIC and SC/ST Hub activities with special reference to help SC/ST clients and informed that they help the SC/ST companies

informed the attentive audience about their activities and facilities with regard to entertaining SC/ST clients. Some of the interactive interventions



Ramesh Chander
Ambassador - I.F.S. (Retired)
91-99885-10940



Ambedkar. The website of DICCI, inter alia, states the purpose and motto of the Chamber, "The Punjab-based Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI) was established in 2005 by Milind Kamble, a civil engineer and entrepreneur. While Mr. Kamble is currently the Chairman, the organization has grown with the help of 29 state chapters & 7 International Chapters. Its membership base is rapidly expanding as more Dalit entrepreneurs become aware of its activities and what it can offer them.

The activities of its members are quite diversified ranging from manufacturing (sectors such as chemicals, agro-products, frozen foods, plastics, textiles, pest control, metals and metallurgy, marine engineering, solar energy, sugar refining), construction and services (health care, hospitality industries, education and international trade).

DICCI's tag line explains its philosophy and its raison d'être: **Be Job Givers – Not Job Seekers**". I feel happy in adding that Milind Kamble, Padam Shri Recipient is a dedicated social and educational activist, an acquaintance of 'understanding and re-



under the aegis of DICCI, were trying their best to encourage and facilitate dalit businesses to join the main stream of the society. Referring to my diplomatic career and experience, I said in my brief remarks that DICCI was doing a wonderful job helping, facilitating and motivating the SC/ST businesspersons and cajoling them to stand up as equal partners and stakeholders in the development of the society while earning their bread and

to participate in Exhibitions and Trade Fairs both within in India and abroad. It was also informed that they even help SC/ST business in Tendering for the Government procurements and also financial help to SC/STT students in pursuing higher education, Eisha Jassal of PAIC, Anubha Garg of Punjab Agro Export Corporation, Sunil Arora of Punjab Grameen Bank, M.R. Salan of Polytechnic Training Centre gave useful presentations and

by K.D. Singh, Chairman of Punjab Commission for Protection of Child Rights and Baldev Bhardwaj of Ambedkar Mission Society and a prominent social activist among other, made the session live and interesting for the benefit of the participants.

The closing session of the one-day conference was addressed by Hon'ble Punjab Minister Lal Chand Kataruchak, a well-meaning and socially dedicated politician. He informed about the two forthcoming agro-centers – one at Pathankot for Litchis and second at Hoshiarpur for Kinnows and promised all possible help to young entrepreneurs not only in the Food Processing Sector but otherwise too.

The function was concluded with the Vote of Thanks by Tilak Khinder who was also one of the Senior Coordinators of the Conference. This narration will not be complete if I don't mention Rajesh Kumar and Jagdish Dalia who ably steered the function with flair and style. With this, I take this opportunity to wish DICCI and the young SC/ST business aspirants all the best wishes in the days to come.

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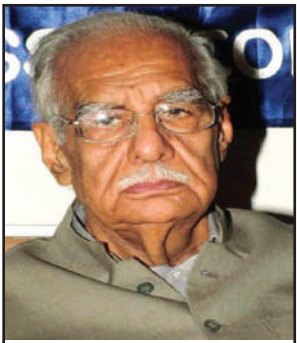
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Goodie Takhar, PhD

Dalits, Durban and a Lost Chance



Sh. Kuldip Nayar (Late)

The news is that New Delhi has been successful in keeping out caste by descent from the final U.N. resolution at Durban on racism. I do not think it is a matter for celebrations, which the unthinking Ministry of External Affairs is doing.

The Government's stand on caste is political. Otherwise, it is not understandable why it should have been a party to block the discussion on Zionism at Durban. People in India support Jews but not the thesis that Israel can go on expanding its frontiers. What has New Delhi proved? Does it mean that India knows of no discrimination by birth, or does it mean that the non-recognition of such ills will make them disappear? True, caste is not racism. But the difference is technical. How does it matter when the end product of caste and racism is the same, dis-

crimination and degradation? Even the National Human Rights Commission, otherwise tilting towards the Government, has said that the nomenclature is of little importance when caste-ism and racism do not treat men and women as human beings.

The series of legislative steps against the Dalits are impressive on paper. But the reality is that they continue to live in separate habitations, draw water from separate wells and get the worst chastisement if they ever dare to raise their head. They are hanged if they marry out of caste. They are murdered if they dare to be equal to the upper caste. Official figures show that one Dalit woman is raped every six hours and one Dalit killed every three days.

Wounded People

No democratic system should be ashamed of discussing at any forum its practices, which disable its own people. A free society owes its existence to the tenets of freedom. The Dalits have never had a breath of freedom in the suffocating Hindu society. They are wounded people, battered and broken. India is strong enough democratically to admit that

it has failed somewhere, despite all the guarantees in the Constitution, to provide the same glow of freedom, which the upper castes enjoy.

In fact, India has lost at Durban yet another opportunity to explain to the international community the country's shame. The Government could have admitted before the world that despite its legal efforts it had failed to remove untouchability and that it wanted the international community to discuss the case and suggest remedies. It would have been New Delhi's moral success.

It was at Durban that Mahatma Gandhi embarked on his agitation against racism and intolerance. It is at Durban that the Government of the country for whose freedom he fought has shut out from discussion caste, which was one of the targets of his agitation. New Delhi, happy over its victory, feels elated that even the U.N. Secretary General, Mr. Kofi Annan, refused to include caste on the agenda when NGOs from India accosted him. But it is Pyrrhic victory. The world expects something better from the land of the Mahatma.

The blame is not that of the upper caste alone. The politics of

votes has become ingrained in the Dalits. Their leaders, belonging mostly to the creamy layer, have come to enjoy the spoils of office, without articulating the cause of the lowest in real terms.

While piloting the Constitution, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the tallest among the Dalits, was able to incorporate in it the numerous safeguards for the untouchables. Untouchability is also banned. But this has made Hindu society no better in its treatment towards untouchable. The upper caste has not changed, neither in its attitude of hide-bound superiority, nor in its refusal to admit the Dalits in the social structure. Caste is denounced but not the cast system.

But what annoys me is the patience and stamina of the Dalits who have stayed part of the Hindu society in spite of the cruelties they have undergone for untold years. Dr. Ambedkar aptly described the situation by borrowing a phrase from Shakespeare: "It may be your interest to be our masters but how can it be ours, to be your slaves?"

Courtesy: Durban 2001

CASTE AND WORLD CONFERENCE AGAINST RACISM



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ਦੀਆਂ ਵਿਸ਼ੇਸ਼ ਸੇਵਾਵਾਂ



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