

Guru Ravidas and His Thought

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Abstract: Throughout his life Shri Sant Guru Ravidas preached for equality, liberty and truthfulness. He exhorted human beings to shun rituals and superstitions. He showed right path of worship of one God. He was one of the leading saints of Bhakti movement. He has given a unique concept of 'Begumpura' (free from sorrows). He has stressed the need of establishment of Begumpura type of governance in the world. In such a state there will be no discrimination on the ground of caste, colour, sex, faith, religion and so on. All will be equal and there will be no worry at all. Every citizen will enjoy human rights-social, political, cultural, and spiritual. He laid the foundation of Socialistic Democratic Republic. In this paper, the ideas of Guru Ravidas are analyzed, with special reference to the concept of equality, liberty, untouchability, caste system and truthfulness, among others.

Key Words: Sant Guru Ravidas, God, Bhakti Movement, Begumpura.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Guru Ravidas was born in the village of Seer Goverdhanpur, near Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, India, in A.D. 1450. His birthplace is now known as Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Asthan. Mata Kalsa Devi Ji was his mother, and his father was Shri Santokh Dass Ji. He was one of the leading saints of Bhakti movement in India. He died in Varanasi in 1540 A.D. He showed his dissent against the inhuman system of social exclusion and untouchability. For this purpose, he used Bhakti as a method or mode of expressing his revolt against this social evil. His Bhakti-based method was not only unique but also a befitting reply to the subtle mechanizations deployed by the Brahminical class to keep the downtrodden out of the mainstream. Bhakti was used to be 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 Ravidas as a method of social protest assumes special importance.⁽¹⁾

2. VISION OF EGALITARIAN STATE:

Guru Ravidas envisioned an egalitarian model of state for ensuring human rights and civil liberties for all alike. He called his ideal state as Begumpura (free from sorrows). In his ideal state no one would be discriminated against on the basis of caste and religion and everyone would be free from the burden of taxes and worries of food. His ideal state 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. In other words, in Begumpura the evil of untouchability would cease to exist. Though Begumpura was an ideal state as visualized by Ravidas, it was not a mere figment of his mind. In fact, its articulation was based on in-depth understanding of the socio-economic and political conditions prevailing during his lifetime. He lived during the period when Shudras were doubly oppressed by their political masters along with the members of higher castes; and by the Brahmins, the custodians of Hindu religion.⁽²⁾

He had no hope from any quarter regarding the improvement of the conditions of the downtrodden. 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 frequently mentions the term Sahaj, a mystical state where there is a union of the truths of many and the one.

Hari (God) in everything, everything in Hari-
For him who knows Hari and the sense of self,
No other testimony is needed:
The knower is absorbed.⁽³⁾

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 caste. Thus, he condemned the division of mankind on the basis of caste. It is in this context that the egalitarian social philosophy of Ravidas expressed in the mode of poetry became the manifesto of the Dalit consciousness in Punjab.⁽⁴⁾

The establishment of a large number of Ravidas Deras by the Dalits in Punjab and in other parts of India over the last few years is a case in point. Guru Ravidas became very popular among the Punjabi Dalit Diasporas as well, who have also constructed Guru Ravidas shrines in order to assert their separate caste identity. The number of Ravidas Deras has been multiplying very fast. It has taken the form of a sort of a socio-cultural movement for the emancipation of the Dalits. It has generated a sense of confidence in them and provided them an opportunity to exhibit their hitherto eclipsed Dalit identity. The secret of the success of this movement lies in the strategy to combine Dr. Ambedkar's socio-cultural revolution with Bhakti approach of Guru Ravidas. Ravidas Deras thrive on the elements of social protest expressed in the poetry of Guru Ravidass and the writings of Dr. Ambedkar. These Deras, in fact, have been functioning as missions to sensitise the Dalits and to facilitate their empowerment. In order to look different from the shrines of Hindu and Sikh religions, and to distinctly project their separate religious identity, Ravidas Deras have formulated his own religious symbols, ceremonies, prayers, rituals and messages of social protest against the oppressive structures of caste domination in the agrarian society of Punjab.⁽⁵⁾

3. CONCEPT OF BHAKTI:

Guru Ravidas 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 Ravidas reflected the sufferings of the downtrodden, they lack the reformatory zeal and bitter condemnation of Brahmanism and caste system that animated the poetry of Kabir and Tukaram. Though there is a difference in tone between the poetry of Kabir and Ravidas, both convey the same message. The poetry of Guru Ravidas is known to be full of humility and devotion. But at the same time it is equally imbued with reformatory zeal and concern for the downtrodden. Instead of bluntly snubbing 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 realize the shallowness of their self-imposed superiority. He advocated self-help for eliminating sufferings of the Dalits. His vision for self-help is clearly reflected in one of the legends about his refusal to make use of a Paras (a mythical stone that turns iron into gold) to get rich. He lent purity and respect to Kirat (manual work), which also found special mention in the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikh faith. In fact, Guru Ravidas's life and poetry provided a vision to the downtrodden to struggle for their human rights and civil liberties.⁽⁶⁾

The Bhakti approach of Guru Ravidas was a non-violent struggle for the emancipation and empowerment of the Shudras. Though he combined humility with Bhakti, his concept of formless God reflected an altogether different picture. Guru Ravidas's God was not humble at all in the typical sense of the term. He was graceful. He was not indifferent to the downtrodden. His God was rather bold who was not afraid of anyone. He elevated and purified the so-called untouchables. His non-violent struggle based on Bhakti assumed special importance for the emancipation of the Dalits. 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.⁽⁷⁾

4. VIEWS ON CASTE SYSTEM:

Guru Ravidas was born at a time when the social and religious patterns were distressing due to man-made discriminations over social beliefs, caste, color and the like. He faced all these issues in a more bravery manner and answered these questions with wisdom and courage. He taught the people that one is not known by his caste, religion but he is known only for his great actions (Karma).⁽⁸⁾

During his time, low caste people were ignored and were not allowed to do some common works in the society of higher caste people such as inhibited to go to the temples for Prayers, inhibited to go to schools, restricted to visit village during day time. Instead they were allowed to live in huts instead of proper house in the village. To tackle such atmosphere, Guru Ravidas started delivering spiritual knowledge to the people in public. His message was clear,

“God created man and not man created God”

Thereby, meaning that everyone is created by the God and has equal rights on the earth⁽⁹⁾

5. CONCLUSION:

Guru Ravidas was a great Saint, Philosopher, Poet, Writer, Social reformer and a teacher who gave the message of God to people in India. He was one of the most famous and leading figure of Sant-Parampara and led the Bhakti Movement in North India. He gave a variety of spiritual and social messages through his writings to the people to reform their mind, society and their boundless love towards God. His devotional songs are recited by people every morning and night at his birthday anniversary celebration and any other religious celebrations. He is loved by his followers all over India because of his spiritual messages through his hymns and writings.⁽¹⁰⁾

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