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RELIGION, IDENTITY
AND EMPOWERMENT

The making of Ravidassia Dharm
(Dalit religion) in contemporary Punjab

Ronki Ram

Introduction

The present-day Indian state of Punjab has a unique pattern of caste hierarchy that differentiates it from the rest of the country. In the country at large, Brahmans (the priestly class, knowledge people) are placed at the top of the Hindu caste hierarchy whereby they continue to enjoy special social privileges, such as being the custodians of the sacred and spiritual realms in the religious traditions now popularly called Hinduism or Hindu Dharma. However, in Punjab, they did not enjoy such a privileged status at all. On the contrary, they were treated rather derogatorily and contemptuously called a mang khani jat (a community/caste simply living on alms). The marginalization of Brahmans, however, does not eliminate the possibility of the presence of caste-based social exclusion in the state. Curiously enough, caste and social exclusion continue to persist even today, though with a difference (Ram 2004a). It replaced Brahmans with Jat Sikhs. While replacing Brahmans, Jat Sikhs, however, did not inherit the complex patterns of ritual and ceremonial practices of the former. They came to acquire a dominant social position perhaps because of their material strength, which also extends their hold over the resource-rich management committees of Sikh shrines popularly known as gurdwaras. In other words, Jat Sikhs, unlike Brahmans, came to acquire the status of a dominant caste not by virtue of their being closer to sacredness and the ceremonial paraphernalia of spirituality, but for their hegemony over the agricultural land as well as gurdwaras and other panthic (Sikh organizational) institutions. There is hardly a village/town/city in the state of Punjab that does not retain a gurdwara or several gurdwaras. Many Dalits embraced Sikhism in the hope of escaping social exclusion but they failed to find a place in the management committees of the gurdwaras. Such committees are invariably monopolized by Jat Sikhs who constitute around 30–33 per cent (one-third) of the total population of the state and occupy the biggest chunk of the agricultural land (more than 80 per cent). It is the material and the numerical predominance of Jat Sikhs, formerly a Shudra (lower/menial) caste, coupled with their monopoly over the control of the management committees of the gurdwaras that has helped them in acquiring the status of a dominant caste in the state. Gurdwaras, over the years, have emerged as centres of Sikh identity (Takhar 2005: 21).
Thus contrary to the purity–pollution principle of the caste system, the mechanism of social exclusion in Punjab is historically tied to the asymmetrical structures of the rural economy that privileged the hegemonic interests of the land owning ‘agricultural castes’ over the landless Dalits. Dalits along with all other non-agricultural castes were historically deprived of land ownership rights in Punjab (The Land Alienation Act of 1900). In addition, under the informal local customary scheme of patron-client relationships (popularly known as razat-namas) they were also denied ownership rights even to the plots of land on which their houses were built in the segregated colonies in the vicinity of the mainstream villages. The land on which Dalits were allowed to build houses in the segregated residential areas was legally recorded in the name of the local dominant peasant caste. The customary social separatism and land deprivation of Dalits continued even during the colonial rule of the British administration. It was only after India’s independence that such laws were declared null and void through the concerted efforts of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the constitution of Independent India and the ‘messiah of the downtrodden’.

The annulment of the above-mentioned draconian laws, however, could not empower the Dalits and they remained landless. Though they are the second largest community in the state, and their numerical strength is almost equal to that of the Jat Sikhs, their share in the total number of operational holdings in the state is just 4.82 per cent and they occupy only 2.34 per cent of the total area under cultivation. Notwithstanding their being highest in numbers in Punjab in comparison to their counterparts in the rest of the country, less than 5 per cent of them are cultivators (the lowest in India). Since they are deprived of land and accordingly pushed to the lowest rank in the caste hierarchy, they were/are also deprived of any share in the management committees of Sikh shrines.

Confronted with deprivation of land ownership and absolute marginality in the realm of ecclesiastical authority, it is commonly believed that Dalits often took a fancy to borrowing the sub-caste titles of the dominant local castes and felt proud in imitating their cultural patterns and religious iconography, what Srinivas aptly called sanskritization (Srinivas 1956). Dalits in Punjab have also tried to seek upward social mobility at times through religious conversion. Since the superiority of the dominant caste is less rooted in the cultural sphere and more in its hold on the land, it does not matter much if the Dalits decorate their names with sub-caste titles of the dominant castes or embrace the mainstream religion. In the agrarian economy of the present-day Indian state of Punjab, what really matters the most is not the cultural dimension of social mobility but the material domain of social existence. In other words, Dalit social mobility in Punjab needs to be seen more in the mode of assertion, demanding an equal share in the local structures of power than in meekly following in the cultural footsteps of the upper/dominant castes. Since the possibility of acquiring land through redistribution or radical land reforms seems quite bleak and the mode of conversion has already failed to improve the social status of the Dalits, many began to realize that their genuine salvation might lie in establishing their own distinct religion as well as religious spaces.

It seems that Dalits are now no longer seeking equality in the otherwise unequal social space by asking for an equal share in the existing social structures in the society. On the contrary, they are asserting equal status and dignity by establishing their own religious and cultural space in the society. The move towards instituting a separate Dalit religious space seems to be parallel to the magnificent presence of gurdwaras in the state and the gurdwaras’ contribution in allocating dominant social status to Jat Sikhs. There is a local adage that whosoever holds a dominant position in the organizational settings of the gurdwaras also holds a dominant social status and controls the levers of power at the grassroots. Thus in
the religiously dominated and segmented social space in the contemporary Indian state of Punjab, it seems appropriate to seek upward social mobility by invoking a religious trajectory.

This chapter aims to explore the rise of the Ravidassia Dharm in Punjab as a way to Dalit empowerment as well as a distinct Dalit identity. It is based on the premise that Ravidassia Dharm is a response to the caste-based social exclusion that is faced by Dalits in the state. They ventured into this highly ambitious mode of upward social mobility after having had their fingers burnt in conversion and cultural emulation strategies of upward social mobility. The only way left to them, it seems, was to construct their own separate Dalit identity thoroughly rooted in the fertile land of religions in the region. Moreover, Dalits of present-day Punjab have a rich legacy of Guru Ravidass, their own low-caste-fellow and a well-known Sant-poet of the medieval north Indian bhakti movement, who unleashed a frontal attack on the dominant structures of the Brahmanical social order while deploying the unique strategy of bhakti-based religion as a vehicle of peaceful social protest.

Lineage of Ravidassia Dharm

Though the Ravidassia Dharm came into formal existence on 30 January 2010 in the form of a declaration made by the Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan (henceforth Dera Ballan), its genesis can be traced to the formation of the Ad Dharm movement in pre-partition larger Punjab in the 1920s. Ad Dharm was the only movement of its kind in the north-western region of India that aimed at securing a respectable place for Dalits through religious reformation, cultural transformation and political assertion rather than seeking emancipation through conversion or sanskritization. It was during the evolution and expansion of this movement that the idea of a separate Dalit religion was envisioned and formed to a large extent. Although this movement ceased to exist in its vehement form after the provincial elections of 1946, its emphasis on social transformation and religious reformation continues to reverberate the rank and file of the various sections of the Dalit communities in Punjab even today. One of its major contributions towards the formation of a Dalit religion is the articulation of a popular counter Dalit narrative emphasizing the existence of a rich imaginary universe of Dalit cultural heritage.

The popular counter Dalit narrative was, however, originally developed by Jyotirao Phule of Maharashtra and later on Babu Mangu Ram Mugowalia (hereafter Babu Mangu Ram), the founder of the Ad Dharm movement, made it popular in the region. The central thesis of this narrative depicts the natives of the region as the rulers of the land who were stripped of their rich cultural heritage by the alien Aryans. The Aryans, tells the narrative, forcibly snatched from the natives almost everything worth possessing and reduced them to slaves (untouchables). They erased their geographies while wiping out the tangible cultural heritage of the natives, deprived them of their history, and consequently pushed them into oblivion, thus, ultimately detaching them from their native religion, culture, heroes, gurus (preceptors) and glory. In the absence of a tangible Dalit cultural heritage, such a Dalit counter narrative facilitated to a great extent in retrieving the lost and hitherto scattered social worldview of the Dalit natives of Punjab, who take pride in considering themselves as indigenous people or the sons of the soil. The Dalit natives often claim to have their own rich cultural heritage – ethos, ceremonies, prayers, kathas (stories), heroes, gurus, rules, traditions, culture, auspicious dates, festivals, symbols, folklores and religion – formed over centuries that they wanted to bring forth in their struggle for self-respect and social uplift. The popular Dalit narrative became the most appropriate way for viable Dalit empowerment.
Once the owners of the land and the rulers of their own destiny, the natives were allegedly devalued into several detestable social categories known by varied nomenclatures such as atishudras, chandalas, antyajas, pariahs, dheds, panchamas, avarnas, namashudras, asprithas, achhuts, dasus, dasas and anairyas. Legal categories of Depressed Classes/Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the patronage category of harijans (children of god) are yet another set of nomenclatures attached to them. The legal categories of Depressed Classes and Scheduled Castes were coined by the British administration, whereas the patronage category of harijans was the outcome of M. K. Gandhi’s approach to the question of untouchability in India. The legal category of SCs became the standard term for the general depiction of ex-untouchables in public discourse since India’s independence. However, none of the above-mentioned categories of varied nomenclatures were devised by ex-untouchables themselves. The only category that they coined themselves is the political category of Dalit, which was developed by the Dalit Panthers, a radical group founded by some ex-untouchables in Bombay in 1972, who were inspired by the Black Panther Party of the United States. It is, perhaps, for the first time in the history of Dalit struggle that the ex-untouchables might have thought to designate themselves as such, which was not only to be interpreted as “the oppressed”, but also as the “the proud, the defiant”, who are eager to become rulers rather than be ruled by the upper/dominant castes (Zelliot 2001: v).

The narrative further reiterates that Dalits should not be repressed by their forced low-caste social status; rather they should deploy their so-called low-caste identity to contest the upper/dominant castes’ hegemony and to retrieve their lost glory. It boldly underlines that if the subjugated Dalits seek to shed their subordination and retrieve their lost glory, they need to establish their distinct Dalit identity fortified within the structures of a separate Dalit religion that will eventually help them shape a new society free from the oppressive binaries of high/low and pure/polluted (Juergensmeyer 1988: 276, 279 and 281; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 2000: 10). This popular counter Dalit narrative received a tremendous response from the Dalits who were deeply initiated into the organizational and ideological anchors for self-respect and social justice during the famous Ad Dharm movement in the pre-partition Punjab, which stirred many of them with the novel idea of a lost rich Dalit cultural heritage and its reclamation through the establishment of a separate Dalit religion popularly known as Ravidassia Dharm.

Ravidassia Dharm is thus the manifestation of the unique process of relocation of Dalit cultural heritage by building on the indigenous and pre-Aryan socio-cultural heritage of the natives. It designates the natives as Ravidassia/Ad Dharmi (original inhabitants/natives) and their society as Ravidassia Samaj. It also claims to include those ex-untouchable people who have been initiated into the Nirankari, Radhasoami, Sarsa Vale, Ak Jot, Divya Jyoti Jagriti Sansthan and similar other such popular faiths of sant mat (Sant tradition). In fact, many of the ex-untouchable followers of different orders of the Sant tradition in contemporary Punjab take pride in considering Guru Ravidass their saviour, whose teachings embolden them to stand up for themselves, and many of them admit to belong to Ravidassia Dharm.

From Ad Dharm to Ravidassia Dharm

The philosophy behind the emergence of Ravidassia Dharm began to evolve in Punjab during the 1920s. It was precisely during this period that the above-mentioned famous Ad Dharm Dalit movement was born in Punjab. In fact, it was this movement that had sown the seeds of the alternative Dalit discourse and separate Dalit religion in the state. It was also during this movement that the radical image of Guru Ravidass, a Dalit nirguna sant-
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poet of the medieval north Indian bhakti movement, was meticulously projected to carve the trajectory of recently emerged Ravidassia Dharma in the contemporary Indian state of Punjab. The fact that the Dalits of Punjab, especially those who belonged to the Chamar (leather working) caste, consider Sant-poet Ravidass their Guru, made the Ad Dharm movement instantly popular among them and later on it was these Dalits who became the devotees of the Ravidassia Dharma.

Guru Ravidass was already well known among the lower castes in Punjab. The fact that forty poems and one couplet of the sacred bani (poetry) of Guru Ravidass are included in the Adi Granth (Sri Guru Granth Sahib) speaks volumes for his popularity in the region. He is believed to have visited Punjab during his journeys towards Rajasthan. Stories about his meetings with Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh traditions, are also very popular among the Dalits of the state. His struggle against the system of untouchability, based on an enlightened vision of an egalitarian social order (begumpura) at a time when no one was ready to lend a supporting hand to the oppressed untouchables, won him a special place in the minds of the Dalit masses. Strategically, the Ad Dharm movement exploited the mass popularity of Guru Ravidass in the region by displaying his pictures as its emblem, reading his poetry as a revolutionary text and deploying legends about him as illustrations of lower-caste pride and power (Juergensmeyer 1988: 33). In a nutshell, Guru Ravidass, who had already set the ball of alternative Dalit religion rolling, ‘was brought to the centre-stage in Punjab by the Ad Dharm movement’ (Ahir 1992: 105). It was the Ad Dharm movement that initially ignited a desire among the ex-untouchables of the region to strive for a separate Dalit religion for the emancipation and empowerment of their community. The Ad Dharm movement came forward to portray Dalits as a separate qaum (an Urdu word derived from Persian and loosely translated as ‘nation’, ‘people’ or ‘community’) with a distinct social identity and rich religious heritage. Under the leadership of Babu Mangu Ram (Manak 1985: 6; Sain 1985: 37), the movement decided to stop Dalits from falling prey to the strategic designs of the various upper-caste social reform organizations by providing them with an alternative social and political platform to compete independently for their genuine civic rights. The Ad Dharm movement had come to realize that the only way to liberate the Dalits of Punjab from the shackles of social exclusion was to relocate and to institutionalize their native but lost religion rather than to make the Dalits an appendage to the so-called upper/dominant caste social reform organizations or to allow them to dabble in the promised but false space of so-called egalitarian religions.

One of the foremost tasks facing the Ad Dharm movement was to put in place the essential ingredients of the proposed Dalit religion. Among them the compilation of a holy scripture of Dalit religion was given top priority. Babu Mangu Ram worked meticulously towards that end. The leaders of Ad Dharm decided to compile a separate Dalit sacred text comprising the bani (spiritual poetry) of Guru Ravidass and various other Dalit Sants on the pattern of already existing mainstream sacred scriptures (Guru Granth Sahib) in the region (Takhar 2005: 10). For this purpose, Babu Mangu Ram approached two famous Ravidassia religious centres of his time – Dera Chak Hakim near Phagwara city and Dera Ballan near Jalandhar city (Juergensmeyer 1988: 85). Sant Pipal Dass of Dera Ballan and Sant Hiran Dass of Dera Chak Hakim were charged to fashion a body of scripture for the Ad Dharm under the title “Sri Guru Ad Prakash Asankh Deep Granth” (The Lord’s Original Scriptures of Infinite Light), but for most of the movement’s history this document remained only a name.

Juergensmeyer 1988: 85
However, in the meantime, *Rae Das Ki Bani*, a collection of the poetry of Ravidass and the verses of Sant Haran Dass, published in 1908 (Allahabad: Belvedere press) by the latter, came to be considered as the religious text of the Ad Dharm (Juergensmeyer 1988: 85 and 87). Later on, Sant Isher Dass from the village Nandgarh in Hoshiarpur District in Punjab compiled the holy book of the Ad Dharm titled as *Ad Prakash* (The Original Light).\(^\text{17}\) Manorama electronic press published the first 500 copies in 1983. It is important to note that the title *Ad Prakash* was chosen by the leaders of the Ad Dharm movement (Juergensmeyer 1988: 52). In the aftermath of the Vienna attack, Ad Prakash is once again in the limelight, resulting in the printing of around 2,000 copies of its Punjabi and Hindi editions.\(^\text{18}\)

The compilation of the sacred scripture of Ad Dharm was, in fact, an important step towards the systematization of the Ravidassia Dharm. Babu Mangu Ram expressed his will to his close associates that in his death ceremony couplets from the sacred *Ad Prakash* should be chanted so that his death rituals could not be usurped by any mainstream religion to the disadvantage of the emerging alternative Dalit theology and philosophy carefully groomed under his leadership.\(^\text{19}\) His wish was honoured.\(^\text{20}\) Since then Ad Prakash has been referred to, at least among the Ad Dharmis, as the religious text of the Ravidassia community and has also emerged as a pictogram of distinct Dalit identity. Ad Prakash has provided the Dalits of Punjab with a symbol of a separate religious identity, which they consider as a viable mechanism for their upward social mobility and empowerment.\(^\text{21}\)

The project of forming a distinct Dalit identity and its consolidation is clearly reflected in the pages of the historic Ad Dharm Report (Juergensmeyer 1988: 290–308), which emphasized devotional reading of sacred scriptures of the then newly compiled Ad Prakash and expected that the precepts should become the foremost duty for all Ad Dharmi/Ravidassias. The report urged every Ad Dharmi/Ravidassia to be a missionary for the Ad Dharm faith and to remember Guru Dev (the sacred name) for half an hour each morning or evening. It is expected that every Ad Dharmi boy and girl should perform such duties after the age of five. To strengthen a separate Dalit identity, every Ad Dharmi was asked to celebrate the festivals of Adigurus and to follow the teachings strictly. They were also expected to conduct the marriage ceremonies according to a distinct ritual, as was already done in the case of Sikhism, by the passing of the Anand Marriage Act in October 1909 (Takhar 2005: 16). The report exhorted that Ad Dharmis should marry only Ad Dharmis, but if someone does marry an outsider, he or she should be brought into the fold of the Ad Dharm religion. Ad Dharmis should follow Ad Dharm rules and should call themselves Ad Dharmis. They should also register in the census as ‘Ad Dharmi’. In order to clearly distinguish themselves from Hindus and other communities, the followers of the movement were asked to use the colour red (the colour their ancestors preferred) as a marker of their distinct identity. The Ad Dharm Report further emphasized that anyone who violates the laws of the Ad Dharm or of the guru, or insults these laws in one way or another, will be liable for punishment. In some cases the violator could even be excommunicated. The report further mentioned in unambiguous terms that the essential teachings of the Ad Dharm will always remain the same and no one should dare to challenge or change them. The Ad Dharmis were asked to boycott and abandon books such as the *Manusmriti* and other *gramhs* and *shastras* (sacred books), which were alleged to have created the problem of untouchability and led to discrimination against the ex-untouchables. All such commandments seem to be intended for the construction of Ad Dharm as a separate religion of the Dalits of Punjab, which has ultimately flourished in the form of Ravidassia Dharm.

Ravidassia Dharm thus draws heavily on the persona and philosophical teachings of Guru Ravidass. What made him the most popular Sant in northern India, apart from the factors
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mentioned above, was probably his fight against untouchability and his frequent standoffs with the pandits and priests of Varanasi, one of the important sacred centres of the Hindu traditions and a seat of Brahman learning (Prasad and Dahiwale 2005: 250). Yet another important aspect of Guru Ravidass’ life that made him a role model of the downtrodden is the deep importance that he attributed to the dignity of manual labour, the mainstay of a vast majority of Dalits. Consequently, this in turn has inspired many Dalits who take pride in highlighting their so-called low-caste titles publicly. One often finds in the Doaba region of Punjab motorcycles and cars with stickers proudly proclaiming: *putt chamaran de* (Sons of Chamars) and SC boys. Thus Dalits, while following the path shown by Guru Ravidass, have not only refused to conceal their so-called inferior social status, they have also started questioning rather vehemently the entire Hindu social hierarchy that has forced them to live on the socio-cultural margins for centuries. The preaching of Guru Ravidass, in fact, has taken the shape of a political strategy based on his ‘dissident socio-religious philosophy and ideology’ (Schaller 1996: 94). The ‘dissident socio-religious philosophy and ideology’ of Guru Ravidass has eventually become the cradle of the recently emerged Ravidassia Dharm in the present-day Punjab.

Ravidass Deras: harbingers of Ravidassia Dharm

Ravidass Deras may be considered as the precursors of Ravidassia Dharm. Interchangeably known as *gurughars* (abodes of the Guru), temples, gurdwaras, and simply Deras, they began emerging in Punjab in the early twentieth century. A vernacular field study completed in 2003 puts their number as around 100 (Qadian 2003). Since then many more such Deras have come into existence in Punjab (Ram 2008: 1343). Ravidass Deras devised their own separate rituals, ceremonies, slogans, symbols, auspicious dates, customs, *ardas* (prayer), *kirtan* (musical rendering of sacred hymns), religious festivals and iconography. Since the entire array of religious and cultural activities in Ravidass Deras revolves around the teachings and life of Guru Ravidass, the latter emerges as the central figure in the premises of these sacred and socio-cultural Dalit sites. Guru Ravidass idols are installed and worshipped in the sanctum sanctorum of almost all such Deras. Guruship is also bestowed on the head priests of the Ravidass Deras, popularly known as *gaddi nashins* (Heads of Deras). Calendar posters printed in the image of Guru Ravidass decorate the walls of the premises of these Deras. Quite interestingly, the portrait of other untouchable Sants and of Dr B. R. Ambedkar can also be seen hanging on the walls of Ravidass Deras.

Many Ravidass Deras have erected state-of-the-art buildings equipped with all modern utilities. In order to look different from both the Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras, Ravidass Deras based their architecture on a combination of them. Like the Sikh gurdwaras, almost all of the Ravidass Deras have *langar* halls (verandas where food is served) with free communal kitchen facilities. Partaking in *seva* (voluntary service) and food in the *langar* halls is a common practice. The head priests of Ravidass Deras are revered as gurus and their advice is candidly sought in almost all affairs, sacred as well as mundane, by their large number of followers all over Punjab. Non-stop recitation of sacred scriptures is another regular feature of these Deras, which offer their followers well-protected sacred and social space where they feel at home. Regular visits to these Deras, not only on specially marked auspicious and sacred dates and days, but also on a daily basis clearly attest to their massive popularly among the lower castes.

The emergence of Ravidass Deras amidst the gurdwara-dominated culture of Punjab and the arising of a separate Ravidassia identity has led to bitterness, provocations, confrontation
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and even violent clashes between Dalits and dominant castes in the state. The Ravidass Deras not only symbolize the assertion of a distinct Ravidassia identity, but also the emergence of a ‘counter-public’ (Hardtmann 2009; Narayan 2011) of Ravidassia Dharm. The phenomenon of Ravidass Deras has taken the form of a new socio-cultural Dalit movement. It is popularly known as the ‘Ravidassia movement’ or the ‘Ravidass Deras Dalit movement’. Led by the Sants of Dera Ballan, this new Dalit socio-cultural movement ‘is silently sweeping the Punjab countryside offering a new hope to the untouchables, particularly the Chamar’, argues V. T. Rajshekar, editor of the famous weekly Dalit Voice (Rajshekar 2004: 3). It has generated a sense of confidence among the socially excluded sections of the periphery of Punjab and provided them with an opportunity to exhibit their hitherto eclipsed Dalit identity. The movement of Ravidass Deras, argues Rajshekar, ‘reflects the fast changing socio-cultural scene of Punjab where the once powerful and revolutionary Sikh religion is failing to meet the needs of the oppressed who discovered the right remedy to cure their wounded psyche in the Ballan experiment’ (Rajshekar 2004: 3). The secret of the success of this movement, perhaps, lies in an excellent strategy based on close interaction between the two rich subaltern traditions: the north Indian radical bhakti movement and neo-Buddhism. The Sants of Ravidass Deras, particularly of Dera Ballan, have been quite successful in blending together the poetry of Guru Ravidass and the philosophy of neo-Buddhism as propounded by Dr Ambedkar (Ambedkari 2005: 5). In Ravidass Deras the ecstasy and reason of the song of the utopia of Begumpura (free from all sorts of fears), as envisaged by Guru Ravidass in the early modern period, fits perfectly well with the analytical resonances of the Prabuddha Bharat of Dr Ambedkar, one of the most popular and reason-based utopias envisioned by dalit-bahujan (Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes) intellectuals and leaders of the anti-caste movement during the colonial period. Dera Ballan has become a paragon of the Ravidass movement in northwest India. It has also been regulating the affairs of various Ravidass Deras overseas through its international trusts and has been making strenuous efforts for the consolidation of Ravidassia identity and the construction of a separate Dalit religion – Ravidassia Dharm.

Ravidass Deras are not merely a religious space. They in fact symbolize a meticulous on-going process of the concretization of a separate Dalit identity. Their central concern has been to present themselves as different from the Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras, and to provide an alternative religious domain where their followers need not hide their identity and meekly suffer the onslaught of social exclusion. Their distinctiveness also lies in the fact that they neither take refuge in any of the established theologies nor do they present themselves as emulating the dominant socio-cultural ethos of upper-caste society. On the contrary, they proudly differentiate themselves from the mainstream religious systems and also contest the long imposed supremacy of those systems over the Dalits.

The figure of Sant-poet Ravidass is worshipped as a Guru in Ravidass Deras, and the prefix of Guru before Ravidass and the heads of Ravidass Deras separate the Ravidass Deras from Sikh gurdwaras, where the phenomenon of human guruship ceased to exist after the proclamation of Adi Granth as Guru Granth Sahib by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Thus in Sikh gurdwaras, Guru Ravidass is addressed as bhagat and not guru. The issue of bhagat versus guru has not only pitted the Ravidassia community and Jat Sikhs against each other in Punjab and elsewhere, but has also led to communal polarization in the Sikh and Dalit diasporas as well.

Another key factor that underlines the assertion of a separate identity by the Ravidass Deras is the distinct nomenclature preferred by its priests, distinguishing them from their counterparts in Sikh gurdwaras. The titles of the last names of the Sants of Ravidass Deras
are Dass (humble). It seems that they have inherited the tradition of suffixing Dass from Guru Ravidass, whose first name is also suffixed with Dass. Singh invariably follows the first names of male Sikhs initiated in the Khalsa. 23 Though Sants of Ravidass Deras keep unshorn hair, a flowing beard and don a turban, like that of the Khalsa Sikhs, they still do not consider themselves as Sikhs. Some of the heads of Ravidass Deras were also clean-shaven.

Har (Supreme Being), the insignia of Ravidass Deras, known as koumi nishan (community symbol) of the Ravidassia Samaj, is yet another distinct identity marker that endows them with a separate identity. The religious symbol of the Sikh gurdwaras is khanda (a two-edged sword over a quoit with two crossed sabres below the quoit) and the symbols of Hindu temples are a trident, the written mantra Om or names of gods and goddesses. The insignia har is composed of a sun-like circle with an image of forty rays on its circular edge. The forty rays round the circle of the insignia signify the forty hymns of Guru Ravidass. Within the circle, there is another smaller circle within which har is inscribed in Gurmukhi script with the sign of a flame on the top of it. The flame represents the nam (word) that illuminates the entire world. The sign of the flame crosses over into the bigger circle. In between the larger and smaller circles is written a couplet: Nam tere ki joti lagayi, bhaio ujiaro bhavan saglare (Your name is the flame I light; it has illuminated the entire world). This inner circle couplet is taken from one of the forty hymns of Guru Ravidass. The insignia har represents the very being of Guru Ravidass and his teachings. The insignia har is chosen after the name of their Guru (ravi (sun) dass (servant), servant of the sun). The Dalits, especially the Chamars of Punjab, proudly hoist flags with the image of har over their religious centres, atop vehicles during processions on the occasions of Guru Ravidass’ birth anniversaries and other festivities, and raise slogans such as guru ravidass shakti amar rahe (Long live the grace of Guru Ravidass). The insignia har has become a distinct marker of a separate Dalit identity. It is also being circulated in the form of souvenirs, stickers and wall calendars printed in the image of Guru Ravidass.

The format of the ardas (a formal prayer recited at most Sikh rituals) performed in the Ravidass Deras also differentiates the Ravidassias from the Sikhs. It is comprised of a shloka (couplet) and one of the forty hymns of Guru Ravidass. 24 The ardas closes with the utterance bole so nirbhay, sri guru ravidass maharaj ki jai (Fearless is the one who utters: Victory to Shri Guru Ravidass), whereas in the Sikh religion the ardas concludes with bole so nihal, sat sri akal (True is the Immortal One). The reference to nirbhay (fearless) in the conclusion of the ardas of the Ravidass Deras has become a central motif of the Dalit consciousness. The inclusion of the word nirbhay in the ardas of Ravidass Deras is thus not only symptomatic of the historical oppression of the Dalits at the hands of the upper castes, but is also indicative of their determined willingness to confront it head-on.

Like ardas, arti (a Hindu ritual which consists of waving burning wicks before the sacred images) that is offered at the altar of the sanctum sanctorum of Ravidass Deras differentiates them from that of Hindu temples. 25 The Sants of Ravidass Deras do not wave burning wicks. They blow a conch shell and rattle a gong, which is followed by the recitation of a hymn from the bani of Ravidass. 26 The salutations in the Ravidass Deras have also been formulated selectively in order to project their separate identity. Different religious communities have their own way of greeting. Sat shri akal (True is the Immortal One) is the greeting of the Sikhs. Namaste, jai ram ji ki (victory to Ram) and jai sita-ram (victory to Sita-Ram) are examples of some of the many greetings of Hindus. Ravidass Deras adopted the greeting jai gurudev (victory to the divine Guru) or jai guru ravidass (victory to Guru Ravidass) to which they reply dhan guru dev (blessed the divine Guru). The short version of the greetings is jai santan di (victory to the Sants). 27
The forms of *ardas*, *arti*, insignia and salutations adopted by the Sants of Ravidass Deras have thus become distinct markers of a separate Dalit identity that not only differentiate them from other religious communities in Punjab but also present them as prominent Dalit social and religious sites. The Ravidassia movement, argues Kathryn Lum, ‘uses religion as a tool to push for greater social equality … while discouraging any affiliation to other religions’ (Lum 2009). Ravidass Deras, in fact, have become a testing ground for the cultivation of a separate Dalit identity in the form of a ‘separate religion based on the *bani* (sacred scriptures) of Guru Ravidass Ji’ (Lum 2009). In other words, Ravidass Deras have evolved into a nursery of symbols, icons, signifiers and narratives of a separate Dalit identity that have helped greatly in shaping the contours of a separate Ravidassia Dharm. Almost all the principles of the newly established Ravidassia Dharm as mentioned in the *Amritbani Satguru Ravidass Maharaj* (Arsh 2012) are adopted from the sacred repertory of Ravidass Deras.

**Conclusion**

Ravidassia Dharm is a response to social exclusion emanating from discriminatory and oppressive social structures coupled with the persistence of acute landlessness among Dalits in Punjab. It has provided Dalits with a distinct social identity deeply rooted in the ‘sons-of-the-soil’ thesis which proclaims that they are the descendants of the natives of this land who were deprived of their past glory by alien marauders. Dalits’ failure to overcome their historic subjugation through the tested models of upward social mobility, conversion and sanskritization, forced them to look for an alternative way of social emancipation and empowerment. It was in this critical context that the newly established Ravidassia Dharm has attempted to come to their rescue with the aim of providing them with a distinct Dalit identity anchored in a separate Dalit religion. It empowers Dalits to peacefully contest their historically entrenched social exclusion and enables them to press for their rightful share in the local structures of power while upholding their distinct Dalit identity.

The chapter has further illustrated that although the Ad Dharm movement was the originator of the idea of a separate Dalit religion, it came to acquire its current shape in the form of Ravidassia Dharm through the versatile agency of numerous Ravidass Deras. These Deras provide distinct socio-religious space to its followers, mostly Dalits, who seem to feel empowered to exhibit their separate Dalit identity as a channel of upward social mobility. Thriving on distinct Dalit identity markers such as separate Dalit religious shrines, centres of pilgrimage (Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Temple, Seer Goverdhanpur), slogans (*bole so nirbhay, sri guru ravidass maharaj ki jai*), salutations (*jai guru dev, dhan guru dev*), *arti* and prayers (*nam taro arti majan murary … and har so hira chhadh kai …*), insignia (*har*), traditions, rituals, Dalit gurus and heroes, festivals and sacred texts (*Amritbani Satguru Ravidass Maharaj*), Ravidass Deras are fast emerging as potent centres of Dalit empowerment in the state of Punjab. It also encourages its followers to highlight rather proudly their distinct identity as a way of Dalit empowerment conscientiously invigorated by the newly established Ravidassia Dharm.

**Clarification**

Caste names are used in the paper for academic purposes. Any inconvenience caused by such an exercise is deeply regretted.
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Notes

1. For the caste system, see Chapter 16 in this volume.
2. There is a common saying in Punjab that if the first person you meet in the early morning by chance happens to be a Brahman then your whole day gets spoiled.
3. A local peasant caste, which was otherwise assigned the lower status in the predominant Hindu social order. Jat Sikhs claim to occupy the top position in the distinct caste hierarchy in Punjab. For details see Singh (1977:70).
4. The annual budget of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the apex religious organizational body of Sikhs that controls their shrines, for the financial year 2013–2014 was Rs. 800 crore (8 billion rupees).
5. Dalit (ex-untouchables) is a sociological category that became a buzzword during the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra in the 1970s. In its wider usage, it includes Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Castes (OBC), minorities and women. However, in the present study, I have confined it to SCs only, which is the politically correct use of the term.
6. Dalits who converted to Sikhism can be divided into two segments. One consists of Mazhabis and Rangretas, who were members of Chulha caste (sweepers). The other consists of Ramdastas, who were Julahas (weavers) before their conversion to the Sikh religion. For details see Ram (2009: 6–8); Ram (2004b: 5–6).
7. Punjab is a Sikh (59.9 per cent) majority state. However, around 60 per cent of the Sikh population consists of Jat Sikhs who comprise about 30–33 per cent of the total population of the state.
8. They constitute as many as 29 per cent of the total population of Punjab, highest in comparison to all other states in India and much higher than the national average of 16 per cent. The proportion of the SC population is further going to increase rather significantly, as Mahatam/Rai Sikh – another downtrodden community – has recently been included in the SC list of the Indian constitution-wide ((f) in part XIV) Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order (Amendment) Act, 2007, No. 31 dated 29 August 2007 (Punjab Government Gazette, Regd. No. CHD/0092/2006–2008, No. 45, 9 November 2007).
9. The declaration was made in Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Temple, Seer Goverdhanpur, a suburb of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh eight months after the attack on the life of two topmost Sants of the Dera Sach Khand Ballan at a Guru Ravidass Temple in Vienna on 24 May 2009. In the attack around sixteen people were reportedly injured. Sant Ramanand, the second-in-command of Dera Ballan later succumbed to his injuries leading to a massive backlash in India, which caused huge losses to public and private properties worth thousands of millions of Indian rupees and a curfew for four days (for details see: Ram 2012: 696–700).
10. The term Sants refers to holy persons throughout the Hindi and Punjabi speaking territories in India and the diasporas. Many of the Sants remain nomadic, while a few of them lead a sort of settled celibate life in shrines, devoted to prayers and recitations of the sacred names received from their respective Gurus.
11. Dera literally implies a holy abode free from the structural bindings of institutionalized religious orders and is the headquarters of a group of devotees vowing allegiance to a particular spiritual person who is reverently addressed as Sant/Guru/Baba/Mahraj Ji. A Dera thrives on a distinct philosophy, rituals and symbols that are inspired by the teachings of a particular holy person, living or historical, after whom it has been established.
12. Dera Sachkhand Ballan, also known as Dera Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Ji or simply Dera Ballan, is situated about twelve kilometres away from Jalandhar city.
The Ad Dharm movement came into existence along with several similar movements in a number of regions (Adi Andhra, Adi Karnataka and Adi Dravida movements in south India and the Adi Hindu in Uttar Pradesh) in India in the 1920s. What made this movement the most popular were its low-caste character and the vehemence of its struggle against the structures of social domination. It laid special emphasis on distinct Dalit identity. For details see: Juergensmeyer (1988); Ram (2004c: 323–349).


In fact, this argument somehow resembles that of Ambedkar where he articulated his choice for conversion to Buddhism on account of Buddhism being the ancient religion of the Mahars of Maharashtra. In a similar vein, Ravidassia Dharm is considered to be the ancient religion of the Dalits of Punjab.


Punjabi Tribune (Chandigarh), 7 July 2009.

Interview with Chanan Lal Manik, 1 May 2001.

Interview with Chatter Sain, son of Babu Mangu Ram Mugowalia, Garshankar (District Hoshiarpur), 27 April 2001.

Interview with Chatter Sain, son of Babu Mangu Ram Mugowalia, Garshankar (District Hoshiarpur), 27 April 2001.

Dera Sach Khand Ballan has established the following international charitable trusts abroad for the dissemination of the bani of Ravidass amongst the Dalit Diaspora: Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (UK); Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (Vancouver) Canada; and Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (USA). These trusts are managed mostly by Non-Resident Indian (NRI) Dalits from the Doaba region of Punjab who constitute a large diasporic community (Ravidassia Samaj) of the devotees of Guru Ravidass and the followers of the Dera Sach khand Ballan.

The title ‘Singh’ became popular among the Sikhs after the formation of the Khalsa in 1699.

The shalok is Harso hira chhadh kai karih an ki as, te nar dojak jahige sat bhakhai Ravidass (Those who renounce a diamond like Hari [God] and pin their hopes on others, shall go to hell – this is the truth, says Ravidass). The hymn is namu tero arti majanu murare, hari ke nam binu jhuthe sagal pasare. For details see: Callewaert and Friedlander (1992: 163–164, 230).

In Sikh gurdwaras, however, arti is not performed. Guru Nanak referred to arti in the hymn Dhansar 3 (Adi Granth: 13). The entire cosmos, said he, is performing the arti of a single God. The whole sky is the platter and all the stars are its burning wicks. For details see: See Deep 2001: 44–46.

Based on participant observation by the author.

Based on participant observation by the author.

Holy book of the sacred scriptures of the Ravidassia Dharm. It contains the hymns of Guru Ravidass. It was compiled after the Vienna attack as an important component of the quick process towards the establishment of distinct Ravidassia Dharm.

References


Religion, identity and empowerment


