

# RAVIDASSIA IDENTITY AS A MARKER OF DISTINCT SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: FROM AUTONOMY TO ACCOMADATION

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## ABSTRACT

*In 2010, the Dera Sachkhand Ballan, followed by the Ravidassia chamars, asserted a discourse of separation from all religions, as an autonomous faith distinct from Hinduism and Sikhism. However, there is a growing tendency among the dalits, to subscribe to accommodation within more syncretic self-definitions of Hindu. Dalit identity has either been posited in contradiction to, or in conformity with the syncretic Hindu identity. This paper discusses the emerging possibility of the Ravidassia Chamars, to assert an all-encompassing Hindu identity instead of a distinct, separate and autonomous identity.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Ravidas, Dera Sachkhand Ballan, Religion, Dalit Dissent, Caste Discrimination, Sikhism, Khals, Bhakt, Guru Granth Sahib, Dalit Assertion, Ravidassia, Religion, Social Harmony; Chamars.*

## INTRODUCTION

Changes in the discourse of Hinduism, because of the ideology of Hindutva, and its associated categories of *sanatan* dharma (ancient religion) and *samajik samrasta* (social harmony) has offset changes in the way dalit communities have articulated their political identity in recent times. This paper discusses the changing terms of self-reference by the dalit sub-caste of the Ravidassias- a term of self-expression used by a large section of Punjabi Chamars- and the possibility of its sustenance as autonomous, in the context of a politics of syncretism and accommodation.

The Ravidassias are those who identify as belonging to the Chamar community and adhering to guru Ravidass as their patron saint through a network of institutions, rituals, beliefs and deras (places of worship). This paper discusses the possibility of the regional dissent of Ravidassias against the Sikhs in Punjab, to be subsumed under the nationally dominant discourse of *sanatan* dharma and whether there is a real possibility of their assertion as a separate and autonomous belief system.

According to poll statistics, more dalits are voting for the BJP, (The Hindu, 13 September 2014) a trend accompanied by the simultaneous shift of well-known dalit leaders like Ram Vilas Paswan and Udit Raj, towards the BJP. In the Haryana state assembly elections 2014, the popular Dera Sacha Sauda, patronized and adhered to, by a large section of the dalits, made a public declaration to support the BJP (India Today, Oct 13, 2014). A complete reversal from its earlier declaration of a similar support to the

Congress party in the previous elections of 2009. The rise of the Sacha Sauda dera in Sirsa is an important example of how a large section of the dalit population avow personal and political allegiance to the dera. While in many regions of Punjab and Haryana, the growing dera culture has resulted in the emancipation of the dalits, in many deras it has resulted in the increasing personal wealth and popularity by the dera chief.

The dera chief Ram Rahim Insan who was arrested for rape charges in September 2017, is still the revered figure of *pitaji* (father) to his ardent scheduled caste followers. However, deras like the Dera Sachkhand Ballan (DSB), have been central to the social, political and cultural emancipation of the dalits, and distinguish themselves from the Sacha Sauda. The focus of the paper will therefore solely be, the DSB and its religious beliefs, as a reference point towards the theoretical arguments and observations discussed herein.

In 2010, the dera Ballan sant Niranjana Das, the current *gaddinasheen* (office-bearer) was given the responsibility of preaching and propagating the newly formed Ravidassia religion (Kaur, p105-120). Guru Ravidass, the patron saint became the chief guru; Amritbani, the holy book, hari became the *qaumi nishan* (religious symbol) and Varanasi, the place of pilgrimage. The Dera Ballan declared the propagation of the nirguni (formless god) tradition of the bhakti saints Ravidass, Namdev, Balmiki, Kabir, Trilochan, Sain and Sadna as their dharmik objective. By proclaiming a separate dharmik identity, Ravidassias have rejected the khalsa dharmik order.

This paper argues that, initially in favour of an autonomous self-definition, the Ravidassia discourse today faces the possibility of accommodation. While the Hindutva discourse, from its initial monochromatism and rigidity during the 1930's, has become more flexible and creative. This paper traces the tendency of this 'rightward shift' among the Ravidassias- a shift from their earlier politics of autonomy towards a politics of accommodation within the *sanatan* Hindu identity.

The Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP) which shot to prominence as the political party, representative of dalit autonomy, won no seats in Maharashtra and only one seat in Haryana, 2014 state assembly elections. In the 1980's and early 90's, BJP and BSP's dalit politics was considered diametrically opposite, the former invoking its trope of the Hindu golden age, while the BSP depended on the discourse of self-respect and dalit "majority"- the argument was that the depressed and marginalized sections together comprised of the numerical majority. In Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati had given a call for uniting the dalits and the backward castes to form a *bahujan*. But over the years, it has been argued that parties like the Janata Dal (united), Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Samajwadi party have benefitted only the dominant sub-castes from within the Backward sections(The Hindu 13 September 2014).

BSP's discourse has also shifted from Kanshi Ram's *bahujan*-the unity of all oppressed sections, to Mayawati's *sarvajan*-the electoral unity of the upper caste and the oppressed caste. This has caused the OBC and dalit castes, to form separate electoral alliances and the various sub-castes among the dalits and the OBC's, to act as separate political entities marked by different caste identities, instead of acting as a combine. The BJP, in turn has begun to invoke a more creative discourse of the golden-age Hindu identity to bring together the various sub-castes as new social group of the Hindu. The religious identity of the *sanatan*, therefore is set to creatively overtake the caste identity of the dalits. This electoral shift of the dalits in favour of the BJP, signals the first major potential trend of accommodation of the dalits within the *sanatan*, instead of self-expression as autonomous and separate.

### **THE EVALUATION OF RAVIDASSIA IDENTITY**

Religion in the Punjab, as in the whole of North-Western region of India, exists in the shape of various sant sects, led by various low-caste sants. The sant tradition is not organized through regulatory religious institutions like the Sri Gurudwara Prabandhak

Committee (SGPC), the regulatory body of the Sikhs. The sant tradition is an unorganized form of worship, emphasizing interiority or an 'interior experience of god'(Mcloed,1987,p251) and shunning the material contraptions of religion. In Hinduism, the sect which takes from the divine revelation is called the *sampradaya*. The sant sects or the panths deny any revelation, but follow the word of different local, often lower-caste sants.

This marks the distinction between the 'great tradition' Hinduism, deriving from the authority of the Vedas, as opposed to the 'little tradition' or popular Hinduism constituted by the various sant sects.(Economic and Political Weekly Vol 28 No 12, p517-524) The various sant sects have often been used to systematically resist the hegemonic Vedic beliefs like the varna hierarchy, by raising social consciousness. But the sant sects, despite their non-Vedic beliefs and practices, are amenable to being accommodated within Hindutva, as there is no overarching concept of hierarchy of sants in the Hindu religion.

The heterogeneous sant tradition which is so easily accommodated in Hinduism, is shunned by the monotheistic Sikhism which refuses to accept Ravidassia tradition's deviant beliefs or practices. Khalsa tradition of Guru Granth Sahib (GGS) as the guru incarnate, the guruship of the ten Sikh gurus and its insistence on a unified code of conduct for all "Sikhs", including those from the dalit castes, rules out any discursive heterogeneity. The dominant caste Jats of Punjab, have reacted to the Ravidassias, by claiming a moral superiority of the Sikh identity ordered through the khalsa episteme by invoking the *rehat maryada* (code of conduct).

On 24 May, 2009 DSB leaders, sant Ramanand and sant Niranjan were attacked by Sikh extremists in the Ravidassia temple in Rudolphsheim, Vienna where they came to deliver religious sermons as Ravidassia leaders. Sant Ramanand died of the gun shots while sant Niranjan received injuries. The incident was followed by street protests and processions by Chamars in Punjab.

The indignation and hurt of the Ravidassias, especially those directly affiliated with the dera Ballan became the immediate cause, for the proclamation of Ravidassia as the official religion of the Ravidassia community and the dera Sachkhand Ballan on 30th January 2010 as separate markers of Ravidassia dharmik identity were adopted. The assassination of Sant Ramanand was expressed as martyrdom by the Ravidassia community, a term often used by the Sikhs for the Sikh gurus. The Ravidassia Chamars began to assert as a separate, distinct and

autonomous dharmik identity through their subaltern countercultural symbols, narratives and discourses.

### THE CHANGING NOTION OF HINDUTVA

According to the CSDS, in Uttar Pradesh, 48 per cent of the non-Jat OBC's prefer BJP, while in Bihar 33 per cent dalits and 45 per cent non-Jatav OBC's favoured BJP. Dalits have been the traditional voters of the Congress in Punjab, but this traditional support base of the Congress is fast being curtailed by the BJP. The general elections of 2014 saw BJP win 282 of all seats and 31% of all votes. It was the largest majority government since 1984, and the highest performance of the BJP since its inception. The electoral victory by the BJP was the result of a consistent decline in the rigidity of Hindutva ideology, which has been fashioned lately as *samrasta* (harmony) through a book called *saamajik samrasta*.

Even though the idea of harmony is not new to Hindutva, the present notion of *samrasta* ushers in a new logic of creativity and flexibility within Hinduism, through what has been termed in this paper as 'strategic syncretism' (Ibid). The strategic syncretism lay in the shift from the discourse of Hindu identity, from purity towards unity and accommodation as a strategy to gain new social bases among the dalit sub-castes.

Strategic syncretism has been a constant feature of Hindutva, since its inception during the 1920's, when the Rashtriya Sevak Sangh and the Hindu Mahasabha defined the notion of a common Hindu identity. The Vedic age was deemed as the golden age, where society, in its ideal state based on varna, a social order based on ritual purity-pollution. The notion of Hindutva was made more syncretic, combining features of western reformism and Hindu revivalism through various stages, since its conception. This section traces the genealogy of Hindutva and the infusion of syncretism through different stages.

Classical Hindu identity, had been based on the logic of indocentric world-view of self-universalization (Sharma, 2011, p17). Classical Hindu identity is manifest in Swami Dayanand's organicist world-view, centered on the belief that Vedas are the only true repository of light. Dayanand, in the *Satyarthaprakash* rejected the puranas and the various non-Vedic sects like the Vama Margis, the Vaishnavas and the Shaivas, upholding the Vedas and the varna system as the only true source of social organization.

The social model of varna-based hierarchy came into direct contestation with the popular anti-Brahmin movement led by dalit leader BR Ambedkar. After the anti-Brahmin movement, any conception of Hindu identity could not afford to overlook or exclude the dalits. From Dayanand's exclusionary and varna based version of a common Hindu identity, Savarkar initiated a discursive shift towards the inclusion and accommodation of the dalits, within the fold of Hindutva. This can be seen as the first stage of strategic syncretism of Hindutva.

VD Savarkar, the chief of Hindu Mahasabha, was the most inspirational Hindu ideologue of the 1920's. He coined the phrase Hindutva in the 1920's, redefining Hindu identity as a system of beliefs where the vaidik, sanatani, Jain, Baudha, Sikh and the Devasamaji could all share equally despite differences in their beliefs and practices. According to him: the Sikhs, the Jains or the Buddhists, despite their less numbers were equal members of the *shruti-smriti-puranika* dharma, or the *vaidik* dharma (the universal form of Hindu belief which is all-encompassing).

Savarkar's Hindutva demonstrates a clear sense of inclusion of all sant sects within Hindutva. "A Hindu marrying a Hindu may lose his caste, but not his Hindutva. A Hindu believing in any theoretical or philosophical or social system, orthodox or heterodox, provided it is unquestionably indigenous and founded by a Hindu may lose his sect, but not his Hindutva" (Savarkar, 1923, p33). For Savarkar, the caste hierarchy, instead of a system of exclusion, is a system of inclusion and accommodation. According to him, even those who do not adhere to the varna system, are a jati, bound together by the ties of blood.

M.S. Golwalkar took over as the RSS *sarsanghachalak* (chief) in 1940. In the late 1930's Golwalkar, coined the term *hindusthan* (the land of the Hindus), a concept of Hindu identity where religion was used to formulate a martial brand of Hinduism, based on religious otherisation. He said that religion provides the "framework for the fullest stature of manhood" (Golwalkar, 1939, p8).

Assimilation and unity were central to Golwalkar's idea of Hinduness. According to him, those who do not belong to the Hindu race should adopt the religion, culture and language of the nation and so as to completely merge themselves in the national race. Here the emphasis, unlike classical Hindu identity, was on

cultural unity or the Hindu *Sangathan*. Hindu *sangathan*, is the Hindu unity for a varna based social order through integration of the lower caste communities.

In the present times, the strategic moment of Hindu identity, is in the form of *samajik samrasta*, a rejection of untouchability and the varna system to promote the logic of dalit dignity and equality (Dainik Jagran, 7 December 2017).

## **CONCLUSION**

The self identity of the Ravidassia Chamars is at the cross-roads of two kinds of tendencies, the first one being of separation, and the second, that of assimilation. While there seems to be a recent inclination towards assimilation, because of the changing socio-political context, the theoretical question shall only settle itself in the way the articulation and assertion of identity interacts with the dominant discourse outside and within Punjab.

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