

The Formation of Ravidassia Religious Identity: The Role of the Ravidassia Diaspora: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT:

The Ravidassia Diaspora of late has been playing an active part in establishing a separate religious identity for the Ravidassia community, independent of Sikhism. The role of Dera Sachkhand Ballan could not be under-estimated in guiding and directing the Ravidassia Diaspora in asserting themselves in the form of establishing separate religious places or forming various caste associations for the well-being of their community. The Ravidassia community associations working in England, USA, Canada, Spain and many other countries of the world have been enthusiastically endeavoring to buck up the community members to get together and agitate for their religious and social rights. Although their efforts have not born expected fruit, yet they have been instrumental to a great extent in arousing a sense of self –respect and dignity among the Ravidassias in the Diasporas and back home. The movement for a separate religious identity among the Ravidassias has to tread a long path before reaching its expected goal.

KEYWORDS: Ravidassia, caste, religion, dera, identity

INTRODUCTION:

There is divergence of opinion among scholars as to what precisely religious identity is. According to some of them, religious identity refers to how individuals develop their personal sense of religious and/or spiritual identity over the course of their lifetimes. (Etengoff, Rodriguez, 2020) A majority of researchers often draw a parallel between religion and the concrete rituals and behaviors of traditionally established religious institutions. Resultantly, spirituality becomes synonymous with one's personal faith and ethical beliefs, including private behaviors such as prayer and personal morality. However, there is absence of consensus among researchers as to what is included in the scope of religious identity (e.g., behavior and belief), or the motivating force behind religious identity development. Many a prominent psychological theorist opines that religious identity is learned inside a family and community contexts (e.g., nurture), while others argue that religious development is genetically driven (e.g., nature). Neha Sahgal, a researcher and her associates conducted a survey on six major religious groups in India: Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains, wherein the respondents were asked questions with respect to their religious identity. The findings of the survey indicate that the Indians are split over whether being a member of their respective religious community (e.g., being Sikh or being Muslim) is mainly a matter of religion, mainly a matter of culture or ancestry, or some combination of religion and culture/ancestry. Thus, there is no clear consensus on the identity issue among any of the six religious groups. For an instance, among Hindus in India, there is no common single understanding of what it means to be a Hindu. (Sahgal et al, 2021)

THE RAVIDASSIA RELIGIOUS IDENTITY:

The Ravidassia community has been evolving as a dominant religious community in Punjab, especially in the Doaba region, encompassing four districts of Punjab, which is the hub of Scheduled Caste population. The role played in this regard by the Ravidassia Deras in Punjab cannot be underestimated. Among such Ravidassia Deras, Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Jalandhar district holds an important position. Mark Juergens Meyer in his book 'Religious rebels in Punjab' describes this Dera in the following words,

“Sant Pipal Dass established the Dera at that location, near village Ballan, around the turn of century while wandering in search of truth. When he encountered the place, he found a peepal tree which appeared to be dead, but after he watered it, it sprang back to life. Pipal Dass understood this as a clear indication that truth was to be obtained on that spot, so he

solicited nearby villagers to donate the land and began constructing his Dera. It soon became the centre of pilgrimage for lower castes and other villagers from all over central Punjab and from its inception it was a center for the veneration of Guru Ravidass.” (Juergens Meyer, 1988)

This Dera is ‘the leading religious centre of the global Ravidassia community’. (Toguslu, Leman, & Sezgin, 2014)

Dera Ballan hit the news headlines in the year 2010 when on 31 January of the said year, it made an announcement of a separate ‘Ravidassia Dharam’ on the occasion of birth anniversary of Guru Ravidass, a 14th century *Sant* of the Bhakti movement. (Chander, 2020) A new religious code was made for the followers of this new ‘Ravidassia religion’. A new religious scripture named ‘Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji’ was installed inside the Dera in place of the holy Guru Granth Sahib. This resulted in confrontation between the mainstream Sikhism and Dera Ballan-dominated Ravidassia Deras. (Judge, 2014) This move of the Dera was instrumental to a great extent in initiating the process of carving out a separate Ravidassia identity, distinctive of Sikhism as well as Hinduism. Abhiruchi Ranjan, a scholar writes in his research paper,

“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.” (Ranjan, 2018)

The mainstream Sikhs opposed this move by the Dera as they considered the Ravidassia people, very much a part and parcel of Sikhism. Even some of the Dalit Scholars disagreed with the decision of the Dera. A Dalit blogger Ramesh Chander writes in one of his blogs,

“Under the over-all umbrella of Buddhism, one may remain informally a Ravidassia/Ad-dharmi/Balmiki, Kabirpanthi/Mazhabi and so on, if they feel there is any need to do so. Coming to the advantages and disadvantages of the above mentioned options, let me add – the first option of harping on Ravidassia Religion/Ad-dharam identity will keep us divided and marginalized segments of the main stream of the society as Hindus or Sikhs. There will be no spiritual and political salvation to redress our age old grievances and redeem our social dignity.” (Chander, 2020)

Despite of the opposition from various quarters, the dera stuck to its decision of forming a new 'religion'. Since then, Guru Granth Sahib has been replaced by Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji in a sizable number of Ravidassia gurudwaras in Punjab. The Dera has been making efforts to include 'Ravidassia Dharam' in the column of 'Religion' in the upcoming general census. A letter written by the present head of the Dera to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to include a separate column of 'Ravidassia' in the 2021 Census for the Scheduled Castes (SC) community in Punjab has led to social and political debate.

It is to be noted here that the following of Dera Ballan is restricted to not only Punjab or India; it transcends borders and one can see the Ravidassia people in countries like England, USA, Canada, Greece, Italy, France, Austria, Spain, Germany and many an Arab country. The Ravidassias, settled abroad have contributed substantially towards the growth and progress of the dera in terms of expansion of the Dera infrastructure and its various social projects like charitable hospitals and schools. It is with the support of the Ravidassia Diaspora settled in the above-mentioned countries that the Guru Ravidass temples have been established there and in many other countries, where the Ravidassias have a substantial population. The Dera followers have established their own separate Ravidass gurudwaras different from the mainstream Sikh gurdwaras across the world. The foundation stones of almost all these Ravidassia gurdwaras have been laid by the *Sants* of Dera Ballan. (Judge, 2014) The Dera has been regulating the affairs of many a Ravidassia gurudwara overseas. For this purpose it has established international trusts such as, Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (United Kingdom), Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (Vancouver, Canada), Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (United States). These trusts are being managed by the non-resident Indian Ravidassias from the Doaba region of Punjab, which constitutes a large diasporic Ravidassia community. (Sahoo, Kruijf, 2-016)

Much of the existing research work has dealt in detail a progressive dynamics between contemporary transnational Ravidassia identity and Dalit empowerment and social mobility in Punjab, and also some work has been done on the relationship between Punjabi Dalit transnationalism and caste inequalities within Punjab, through an explicit and empirically grounded discussion. (Upadhyay, Rutten and Koskimaki, 2018) Our focus in this paper would be on

analyzing the role of the Ravidassia Diaspora settled in various offshore countries towards the formation of a separate Ravidassia religious identity.

THE RAVIDASSIA DIASPORA AND THE RAVIDASSISA RELIGIOUS IDENTITY:

As stated above, the Dera Ballan followers, called the Rasvidassias can be found in every major country of the world. Amongst the former, Mahiya Ram Mehmi and Mahey were the very first people who landed in British Columbia in 1906. (Malathi, 2022) They were both also involved in the foundation of the first Canadian Gurdwara, the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver, Canada.

“Vancouver’s Ravidassia community developed after many people experienced caste-based discrimination from mainstream Sikh gurdwaras.” (Sabherwal, 2022)

With respect to the Ravidassia Diaspora in England, Kiyotaka Sato, a Professor at Meiji University, Japan writes,

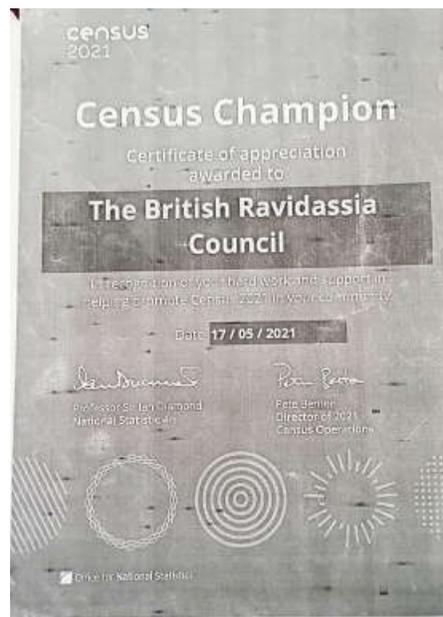
“Another group of Leicester Sikhs, those from the caste associated with skinning and tanning, regard Ravidass (a *bhagat* in the Sikh tradition), as their ‘Guru’. They separated themselves from the GNG in about 1969. There were about ten members initially. They rented a room in Highfields Community Centre, and worshipped once a month there. They also tried to purchase two houses in Vulcan Road in 1984, but they were unable to do so due to opposition from local residents. However they successfully purchased land in Harrison Road, now an Indian residential district in the Belgrave area of Leicester, and opened a new Sikh temple in 1993. That year was the 600th Anniversary of the birth of their Guru, Ravidass”. (Sato, 2010)

Sato mentions in his write-up that after their arrival in Britain, the Ravidassias were often discriminated against both by the host society and by fellow Sikhs, particularly, Jats because of their caste. Fights and quarrels could often be seen in factories and pubs between the Jats and Chamars sometimes even resulting in murder. Although the Ravidassias succeeded in economic life and in politics, Jats continued to judge them according to caste. The Ravidassias thus had no choice but to separate themselves from those who had a strong sense of caste, and to establish their own Ravidassia organization. Resultantly, as being at the receiving end of ‘racial exclusionism’ stemming from the host community and also ‘caste exclusionism’ from within the

Sikh communities, Ravidassias have been forced to feel a sense of ‘otherness’ in multiple contexts, and their fight against discrimination has culminated in social cohesiveness among them.

It was estimated that twelve percent of England’s Eastern Punjabis originally belonged to Scheduled Castes in Punjab, with a huge proportion of them from the Chamar and the Ravidassia communities of Doaba sub-region. (Ghuman, 2011)

The British Ravidassia Council, an association of the Ravidassia diaspora in England was awarded Certificate of appreciation by the Office of National Statistics, United Kingdom, in recognition of the former’s hard work and support in helping promote Census 2021 in the Ravidassia community.



An image of the Certificate of appreciation awarded to the British Ravidassia Council

Source: Face book page of the British Ravidassia Council

There is a sizeable population of Ravidassias in Oceania too. The Ravidassias from Doaba region of the Indian Punjab established the second gurdwara in the Oceania region in Nasinu on Fiji Island in 1939. (Kahlon, 2016) In a classical study by W.H. McLeod in his book ‘Punjabis in New Zealand’ he penned down the precise number of Ravidassias in New Zealand during the

very first wave of immigration. (McLeod, 1986). Today they have presence in every major city of the world where they have also established Guru Ravidass Gurdwaras.

In the UK, during the 2011 Census, the Office for National Statistics enumerated Ravidassia as a separate religion from Sikhism. There were 11058 individuals who claimed themselves Ravidassia in the census, out of around 100000 strongholds in the Ravidassia community. (White, 2012) Data shows that around ten percent of members of Ravidassia community cited their religion as 'Ravidassia'- empathically distinct from Sikhs and Hindus. During the census, not even a single Guru Ravidass Gurdwara came into direct support of this separate identity, and till date, all Guru Ravidass Gurdwaras in Britain are practicing Sikhism and they do pray and perform all rituals in the presence of Shri Guru Granth Sahib. (Singh, Fenech, 2014)

In one of her articles, 'The Ravidassia community and identity (IES) in Catalonia, Spain', Kathryn Lum discusses about the Punjabi Sikh community in Spain, with a special focus on its caste profile and on the ex-untouchable Ravidassia community. The author describes the evolution of the Ravidassia community in Barcelona and their increasing institutional/cultural distinctiveness from mainstream Sikhism with the passage of time. The experiences of caste discrimination against the Ravidassias by the Sikhs in Spain are discussed, and the reasons for their perception of increased casteism in the Diaspora are analyzed. She also describes the impact of the 2009 Vienna killing in which the most important *Sant* (religious leader) of the Ravidassia community, associated with Dera Ballan was killed. The article is based on the fieldwork carried out by her during 2009/2010. This thesis is basically an ethnographic study of an ex-untouchable group from the Punjab region of India known as the Ravidassias. In this study, Lum deals in detail the mechanisms of caste in social life and in particular, analyses how ex-untouchables negotiate caste stigma. She explores the caste, gender, and youth dimensions of the Ravidassia community settled in Catalonia, Spain. The study compares caste, the management of caste stigma, and the Ravidassia socio-cultural/religious movement in the Punjab, India and Catalonia, Spain. The Ravidassia community is an important case study for the study of caste, as it is the most important former untouchable group demographically in both the Punjab and in the diaspora. Lum elaborates that the Ravidassias have become in the postwar period, 'one of India's most economically and socially assertive 'Scheduled Caste' or SC caste groups, an assertion which is articulated symbolically in the field of religion'. (Lum, 2011)

Her study proves that the Ravidassias are an appropriate example of a transnational group whose Diaspora status is playing a key role in changing the caste status quo in their native Punjab. During her course of research, she found that a significant portion of the global Ravidassia community, including the Spanish Ravidassia community, opted to break with Sikhism and form a completely autonomous religious identity. A profound identity shift was witnessed on the part of her interviewees who have seen new forms of caste pride emerging, that would have been completely unthought-of merely a generation ago. The Ravidassia youth have been asserting themselves through music albums. They use social media like YouTube to listen to and share music videos of their favorite songs. One of the most popular songs among the Ravidassia youth, '*Putt chamaran de*' (sons of *chamar*) was sung during the religious ceremony of birthday of Guru Ravidass in Barcelona in 2010; indicating the symbolic significance of such type of songs. In the music videos of such songs, well-built, menacing Ravidassia youth are shown, brandishing swords and guns, giving a clear message that the Ravidassias will no longer get bullied or intimidated by the upper castes. Thus the *chamar* pride in songs as well as internally for Ravidassia youth in the Spanish Diaspora has proved to be instrumental in transforming their self-image and sowing seeds of a new self-belief and nascent assertiveness. (Toguslu, Leman, & Sezgin, 2014) This study by Lum reveals that while caste prejudice/stigma has not diminished even in the Ravidassia diaspora, caste as an institution and a social organization has assumed new forms that can be strategically used for forming new religious identity by those who were once completely crushed by the caste system. Catalonia had been a witness to all the caste battles that are routinely experienced back home, as the Ravidassias endeavored to forge their own identity. (Tumbe, 2018)

The assassination of the then deputy-head at Dera Ballan, Sant Ramanand at the Austrian capital Vienna on May 24, 2009, forced the Ravidassia community in Barcelona, Spain, along with congregations throughout the Ravidassia Diaspora 'to dramatically confront the thorny issue of their religious identity and boundaries'. (Jacobsen and Myrvold, 2016) The feeling of being a Sikh or at least connected to the Sikh community vanished and replaced with a Ravidassia identity, which is exclusive and more tightly defined.

Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, another scholar on Dalit issues, in one of her articles, 'The Ravidassia Community in Britain' explains that while you enter a Ravidassia place of worship for the first

time, you may not necessarily realize that it is any different from a Sikh Gurdwara. It has the *palki* housing the Guru Granth Sahib with a *Granthi* (one learned in the language of the Scripture) showing it the respect of the eternal Guru. But on closer observation, you will notice that there are a number of points of departure from that of a Sikh Gurdwara. Portraits of the 14th century lower caste Sant, Ravidass (referred to as Guru Ravidass by his followers) adorn the walls and the *palki* in the Ravidassia place of worship (Takhar, 2005: 89-123) It is this element of confusion that probes a researcher into further enquiry and thus highlights the complexities of clear-cut religious boundaries (Takhar and Jacobs, 2011).

Current issues within the Ravidassia community revolve around separating their identity from the Sikhs and declaring a distinct identity as the 'Ravidassia Dharm', which is neither Sikh nor Hindu (Takhar, 2012). However, the confusion remains with respect to those followers of Guru Ravidass whom are content with being labeled as 'Ravidassia Sikhs' or 'Dalit Sikhs'. So, the question arises that is it actually possible to consider both the Guru Granth Sahib and Bhagat Ravidass as one's Guru? The current dialogue amongst Ravidassias proposes to follow in the footsteps of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe and India whereby copies of the Guru Granth Sahib have been replaced by Amritbani Shri Guru Ravidass. This has not happened in the UK as yet and could be indicative of retaliation from those Ravidassias who are content on being defined as Ravidassia Sikhs. The 2011 UK Census, in which 11058 of the *Chamars* living there, registered themselves as 'Ravidassia' was used as a rallying tool for promoting a separate identity amongst Ravidassias.

The Ravidassia places of worship in England currently have the Guru Granth Sahib installed therein since it incorporates forty-one hymns composed by Sant Ravidass, which are regarded as the most authentic of his works. Sant Ravidass belonged to the caste of cobblers, the *Chamars*. His community of followers is almost exclusively also from this Dalit caste. It is often considered as derogatory to use the term *Chamar* as it has connotations of untouchability due to the occupation involving animal hides. Hence the term Dalit, meaning oppressed and crushed is preferred by Ravidassias as a true reflection of their social status and treatment in Indian society. A significant number of former *Chamars* converted to Sikhism in the hope of getting an equal status with fellow Sikhs as Sikhism preaches an egalitarian society, based on the principles of humanity and brotherhood. However, the Ravidassias strongly resent and protest that the stigma

of untouchability remained intact even after they converted to Sikhism, which aimed at seeking caste equality on both a practical and a spiritual level. When one discusses the role of caste amongst Sikhs, many of them will out-rightly reject the idea that caste has survived amongst Sikhs. But then a pertinent question arises that if it is so, why is there tension between Sikhs and Ravidassias? In an apparently caste-free society, where and why the labeling as a 'Dalit Sikh'? This surely contradicts the very essence of the egalitarian nature of Sikh religious philosophy? As one begins to analyze identity formation amongst the Punjabi Dalit caste of *Chamars*, the Sikh Gurus' aspirations towards eliminating caste-based discrimination must be borne in mind.

The Punjabi Dalit Diaspora had organized an International Dalit Conference in the Canadian city of Vancouver from May 16 to 18, 2003. The aim of this event was to launch a campaign in North America to lobby the MNCs in India to honor the concept of diversity for the Dalit youth in private ventures. Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha of New York, USA, organized the float of Dr. Ambedkar on the occasion of 60th Independence Day of India parade in New Yrk on August 19, 2007. This event was perhaps the first of its kind in the history of the Ravidassia Diaspora. (Judge, 2014) The Ravidassia Diaspora settled in British Columbia, Canada, on 25 February, 2008, celebrated Guru Ravidass jayanti in the Parliament of British Columbia in Victoria. Similarly Shri Guru Ravidass International Organization for Human Rights in United Kingdom celebrated Guru Ravidass birth-anniversary in House of Commons in 2007 and in House of Lords in 2008. (Judge, 2014)

The Dalit American Foundation, in collaboration with the Ambedkar National Mission, the Ambedkar Association of North America and the Dalit American Women's Association launched a study of caste among South Asian Diaspora. Throwing a light on the findings of this study Valliamall Karunakaran explained that caste travels with the South Asians wherever they go. Conversations on caste unjustifiably centre only around the Dalits issues and never on 'the networks of privilege that sustain 'upper' caste power in the Diasporas'. (George, 2021) In Canada, the Ravidassia temples have become meeting places for Dalits.

The religious organizations in the Diaspora reflect endeavors on the part of Ravidassias, organizing themselves around religious symbols in an effort to attain justice and religious identity of their own.

CONCLUSION:

The religious traditions in India have had porous boundaries. The former untouchables, who converted to Sikhism in search of equality and dignity of life, feel disappointed as their high caste fellows failed to grant them a social status at par with the former. Presently with the changing circumstances, there are voices of protest and discontent against the backdrop that Dera Sachkhand Ballan has emerged as a rallying point of the Dalit protest. The Ravidassia community is currently at crossroads, caught between the complexity of caste and the prospect of a new religious identity. The Ravidassia Diaspora have succeeded to a great extent in carving out a separate religious identity, independent of Sikhism as in the United Kingdom, the Census, England and Wales Order, passed on May 20, 2020, has allowed ONS to collect data for both Ravidassia religion and ethnic group. The British Ravidassia Council was awarded Certificate of appreciation by the Office of National Statistics, United Kingdom, in recognition of the former's hard work and support in helping promote Census 2021 in the Ravidassia community. Similarly in other countries of the Europe and America, the Ravidassias have established their own separate places of worship, where they meet for religious congregations and to discuss important issues related to the welfare of their community. Despite this, Ravidassia community in Punjab and the Diaspora has to go a long way before being called a separate religion. This is because the movement for a separate Ravidassia religion led by Dera Ballan is in line with the footprints of the religious history of South Asia, characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty.

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