

Sant Ravidas and Establishment of Dera Sachkhand Ballan

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Abstract: Sant Ravidas was the fourteenth century famous Chamar saint who provided a vision to his followers. His *bani* played significant role in the establishment of religious places devoted to his memory. Sant Sarwan Das was a major figure in the Punjab, who established the *dera* in the early twentieth century for the spreading the teachings of Sant Ravidas. The present paper is aimed at studying the history of Dera Sachkhand Ballan which is less researched aspect in modern Punjab. The paper is divided into four sections. First section is about the context in which Sant Ravidas emerged. Second section deals with the *bani* and his teachings. Third section focuses on historical background of the establishment of Sachkhand Ballan which is based on the teachings of Sant Ravidas. Fourth section deals with the beliefs and practices of *dera* and conclusion.)

Index terms: Dera, Bani, Sant, Baba, Sachkhand, Gaddinashin

I

The *sant prampara* or *nirguna sampardaya* are names given to the religious movement which is represented by Kabir, Ravidas and other *bhaktas* and flourished in later medieval centuries in Northern India.¹ This was essentially a synthesis of the three principal dissenting movement, a compound of elements drawn mainly from *vaishnavas bhakti* and *hatha yoga* of the *nath yogis* with the marginal contribution from *sufism*.² They discarded the idea of incarnation and practice of image worship in temples. In fact they did not address their devotion to Vishnu.³ The most famous members of the *sant prampara* were men of low caste: Namdev (1270-1350) was a tailor who came from Maharashtra; Ravidas who may belong to the fourteenth or the fifteenth century, was an outcaste leather-worker; Kabir, who came from a caste of weavers who were converted to Islam, is the best known *sant* teacher before Nanak.⁴ The most of the *sants* were from low caste groups and in such cases were generally poorly educated or completely illiterate. For this reason their compositions were usually oral utterances which came to be written down only after a period of circulation.⁵ Appreciation for the low caste *sants* and *bhaktas* in the *Adi Granth* treated as an indication of the presence of low caste among the Sikhs.⁶ This tradition has provided the foundation for an often dissident socio-religious philosophy and ideology.⁷

It is to this tradition that Sant Ravidas and contemporary movement centred around him belongs. As per Sikhism, Ravidas is regarded as a *santor bhagat* but for the Chamars of Punjab he is worshipped as a Guru. Ravidas is known in the Punjab as 'Ravidas' (the name preferred by Punjabi speaking people). In Uttar Pardesh, Madhya Pardesh and Rajashthan he is referred to as 'Raidas' (the form preferred by Hindi speaking people). These variants forms of the name can be explained as the result of different regional pronunciation of original name.⁸ In the Rajasthani sources there are also minor variants of the names such as 'Rayadas', 'Redas', and 'Ramdas'.⁹ H.A. Rose in his glossary used a number of terms like Raidas, Rav Das and Rao Das. The main argument is in favour of 'Ravidas' as the original form that it is found in the *Adi Granth* which is regarded as the most authentic version of 'Ravidas'.¹⁰

It is generally agreed that Ravidas was born on the outskirts of Benaras. There is some dispute over the exact place of his birth. One school of thought claims that he was born in an area called Mandua Dih, to the west of the city near to Lahartara. A second school of thought holds that he was born at a place called Seer Govardhanpur to the south of the city. However, it is apparent that although Mandua Dih and Seer

Govardhanpur are now both on the outskirts of Benaras, in the sixteenth century Seer Govardhanpur would have been well outside the town whereas Mandua Dih would have been on the edge of the town.¹¹ Now the four popular institutions like Guru Ravidas Foundation, Jalandhar, Dera Sachkhand Ballan, All India Ad Dharm Mission, Delhi, Shri Guru Ravidas Sabha U.K have recognized to Seer Govardhanpur as a birthplace of Sant Ravidas.¹²

A number of dates have been suggested by the various modern authors for the birth and death of Sant Ravidas.¹³ There are number of factors which have influenced the theories about dates. On the basis of tradition, he was born on the full moon day in the month of *magh*. It was on the 1377 A.D.¹⁴ The primary sources do not give any clear evidence regarding the parentage of Sant Ravidas. The secondary sources gave the names of his parents and family but they do not agree with one another. The version of Ravidas Lila, has been found more reliable and accepted by the Ravidasias of Punjab Santokh Das and Kalsi were the names of his father and mother.¹⁵ One important fact about his life is that he was a Chamar. He himself stated in his *bani*:

ਨਾਗਰ ਜਨਾਂ ਮੇਰੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਬਿਖਿਆਤ ਚੰਮਾਰੰ ।।¹⁶

Bhai Gurdas also mentioned in his *vars* that Sant Ravidas belongs to this caste:

ਭਗਤੁ ਭਗਤੁ ਜਗੁ ਵਜਿਆ ਚਹੁੰ ਚਕਾ ਦੇ ਵਿਚ ਚਮਰੇਟਾ ।
ਪਾਣੂ ਗੰਢੈ ਰਾਹ ਵਿਚ ਕੁਲਾ ਧਰਮ ਢੋਇ ਢੋਰ ਸਮੇਟਾ ।
ਜਿਉ ਕਰ ਮੇਲੈ ਚੀਬੜੇ ਹੀਰਾ ਲਾਲੁ ਅਮੋਲੁ ਪਲੇਟਾ ।
ਚਹੁੰ ਵਰਨਾ ਉਪਦੇਸਦਾ ਗਿਆਨ ਧਿਆਨੁ ਕਰ ਭਗਤੁ ਸਹੇਟਾ ।

(The meaning is the tanner (Ravidas) became renounced as *bhagat* (sant) in all four directions in accordance with family tradition he would cobble the shoes and carry away the dead animals. Though apparently this was his routine but internally he was a gem unwrapped in *rags*. He would preach all the four *varnas* and make them rapt in the meditative devotion for the lord).¹⁷

Little is known about Ravidas's life, whatever we know is based on the occasional references which he made in his works.¹⁸ The Punjabi sources contain a set of traditions about the life of Sant Ravidas. His life story is not stated a continuous narrative rather it consists many episodes, each of which is complete in it.¹⁹ One episode which is oldest version found in one of Bhai Gurdas *vars*:-

ਨੁਾਵਣ ਆਇਆ ਸੰਗੁ ਮਿਲਿ ਬਨਾਰਸ ਕਰ ਗੰਗਾ ਥੇਟਾ ।
ਕਢਿ ਕਸੀਰਾ ਸਉਪਿਆ ਰਵਿਦਾਸੈ ਗੰਗਾ ਦੀ ਭੇਟਾ ।
ਲਗਾ ਪੁਰਬ ਅਭੀਚ ਦਾ ਡਿਠਾ ਚਲਿਤ ਅਚਰਜੁ ਅਮੇਟਾ ।
ਲਇਆ ਕਸੀਰਾ ਹਥੁ ਕਢਿ ਸੂਤੁ ਇਕ ਜਿਉ ਤਾਣਾ ਪੇਟਾ ।
ਭਗਤੁ ਜਨਾਂ ਹਰ ਮਾਂ ਪਿਉ ਥੇਟਾ ॥੧੭॥

(A group of people went to Kashi (Varanasi) to have dip in the Gangas. Ravidas gave one, *dhela* (half a piece) to one member and asked him to offer it to Gangas. A great festival of *abhijit nakshatr* (star) was on there where the public saw this wonderful episode. Gangas herself taking out her hand accepted that paltry amount, *dhela* and proved that the Ravidas was one with Gangas. For *bhagats* (saints) God is their mother father and son all in one.)²⁰ Due to this miracle, the king accepted Ravidas's explanation and all the world came to know that he was a great devotee of God.²¹

With these miracles, the *bani* of Sant Ravidas is only one reliable source to understand his ideology.²² He is said to have been such a perfect *sant* of God that his conversation and poetry were like suns to dispel the darkness of doubt and infidelity.²³ His *bani* or voice the spontaneous expression of what he heard or felt in his encounter with reality. At any rate, it is a language through which the *sant* communicated his experience to his fellow brothers.²⁴ His essential message is contained in the *bani* preserved for posterity by Guru Nanak's successors and now embodied in the *Adi Granth*. It was compiled in A.D 1604 and contains the forty full length poems (*pads*) and one *salok*.²⁵ Sant Ravidas preached inward spirituality and believed in formless God who was omnipresent. For Him, God is infinite and so ultimately beyond apprehension that he is totally beyond the range of human perception. He does not believe in theory of incarnation.²⁶ He believed in unity of God. He described it in his *bani*:-

ਸਰਬੇ ਏਕ ਅਨੇਕੈ ਸੁਆਮੀ ਸਭ ਘਟ ਭੋਗਵੈ ਸੋਈ ॥²⁷

He believed that God is transcendent and immanent both. He is the master of the creation. He is *dayala* (gracious, compassionate) *garib nivaja* (cherisher of the poor), *bhavkhandana* (destroyer of the cycle of transmigration), *mukti ka data* (deliverer of salvation). It is by the grace of the Lord, the lowest of the low and the most humble are raised to the highest realms of spirituality. He regarded that God as the cherisher of the poor, protector and uplifter of the downtrodden who shows his grace without the consideration of high or low. He regarded that all are equal in the eyes of God and all have an equal right to love and worship. His grace was expressed in his verses as follow:-

ਐਸੀ ਲਾਲ ਤੁਝ ਬਿਨੁ ਕਉਨੁ ਕਰੈ ॥
ਗਰੀਬ ਨਿਵਾਜੁ ਗੁਸਈਆ ਮੇਰਾ ਮਾਥੈ ਛੁੜ ਧਰੈ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ
ਜਾ ਕੀ ਛੋਤਿ ਜਗਤੁ ਕੇ ਲਾਗੈ ਤਾਂ ਪਰ ਤੁਹੀ ਢਰੈ ॥
ਨੀਚਹੁ ਉਚ ਕਰੈ ਮੇਰਾ ਗੋਬਿੰਦ ਕਾਹੂੰ ਤੇ ਨ ਡਰੈ ॥੧॥²⁸

He rejected traditional form of Hinduism. He was deadly against thine adoration and worship according to Hindu rites. He vehemently condemned idolatry. He did not even approve of *arti* (waving of lights before the images) because it amounted to idol worship. He denounced offering rituals of worship, religious ceremonies and pilgrimages etc.²⁹ He stated in his *bani*:-

ਤਨੁ ਮਨੁ ਅਰਪਉ ਪੂਜ ਚਰਾਵਉ ॥
ਗੁਰ ਪਰਸਾਦਿ ਨਿਰੰਜਨ ਪਾਵਉ ॥੪॥
ਪੂਜਾ ਅਰਚਾ ਆਹਿ ਨ ਤੇਰੀ ।
ਕਹਿ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਕਵਨ ਗਤਿ ਮੋਰੀ ॥੫॥੧॥³⁰

He has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the *Nam*. He regarded that *Nam* represents the whole reality of the divine. *Nam* is the only means to cross the ocean of the world.³¹ But *haumai* (ego or pride) is the main hurdle between man and the *Nam*. Unless *haumai* is eradicated, the mind cannot concentrate on Him. Man should be free from all worries to recite his *Nam*. He felt that either *haumai* or the *Nam* was missing and when *haumai* has vanished, the *Nam* has crept in. The only way to get rid of *haumai* is to repeat his *Nam*.

He believed that worldly attachments of the human beings constitute the root cause of all of his sufferings. In this condition, the *jiva* wanders in the cycle of transmigration. The main cause of the *jiva*'s separation from God we find expressed in the verses of Ravidas is *avivek*. As he stated in his *bani*:

ਮਾਧੋ ਅਬਿਦਿਆ ਹਿਤ ਕੀਨ ॥

ਬਿਬੇਕ ਦੀਪ ਮਲੀਨ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ³²

In his verses, Ravidas emphasized on the respectability of humanity, keeping the dignity of human beings high by doing his business with his hands. In fact, his life and *bani* provided a vision to the downtrodden sections of society to struggle for human rights and civic liberties. He envisioned an egalitarian model of state (Begumpura), where no property, no taxes, no political torture, no king and no temple. There is state of prosperity and equality. They walk where they wish indicated that the rich and privileged castes cannot impose restrictions of place upon the subordinated castes and poor. The meaning is of being 'set free' is quite this worldly.³³ He expressed as given below:-

ਬੇਗਮਪੁਰਾ ਸਹਰ ਕੇ ਨਾਉ॥
ਦੂਖ ਅੰਦੋਹੁ ਨਹੀਂ ਤਿਹਿ ਠਾਉ
ਨਾ ਤਸਵੀਸ ਖਿਰਾਜ ਨਾ ਮਾਲੁ॥
ਖਉਫੁ ਨ ਖਤਾ ਨ ਤਰਸੁ ਜਵਾਲੁ॥੧॥³⁴

Thus the attainment of this state is the final end of all the religious strivings. According to Ravidas it is a state of living redeemed (*jivanmukta*) where the *sadhka* breaks his bondage and completely merges with God. The characteristic of the redeemed person are not different from God. He in fact is a God on earth. His life is a tool in the hands of God to further his purpose of redeeming the whole mankind.³⁵

III

His poetry reflects his vision of the social and spiritual needs of the downtrodden. He, therefore, is regarded as a messiah of lower castes. The Chamars revere him as devoutly as Hindus revere their Gods and Goddesses, and Sikhs their Gurus. His memory has been kept alive by a loose network of shrines and *deras* dedicated to his devotion.³⁶ His followers dedicated to him temples, *bhawns* (memorial halls), educational institutions and chairs, cultural organisations, and hospitals. They founded several missions to accurately establish facts about his life and works and to disseminate his message of compassion, equality, and brotherhood.³⁷ The most popular *dera* is situated twelve miles north of the Jalandhar city. It was founded by Pipal Das in the years of early twentieth century who used to meditate at this location. He reached this place while he was wandering in search of truth, when he encountered this place, he found a *pipal* tree, which appeared to be dead, but after he sat under, it sprang back to life. Pipal Das understood this as an indication that truth was to be obtained on that spot.³⁸ His real name was Harnam Das and he came to be known as Pipal (from the *pipal* tree) Das after this incident.³⁹ He was born at village Gill Patti in Bathinda district. As a child, he used to work in the fields as labourers. As he grew he made up his mind to inspire and guide the public in religious matters. He left his ancestral village taking along with him his younger son Sarwan Das (who was at that time about five years old). He used to move from village to village, visit the habitants of the poor localities, hold *satsang* and inspire them for God's *bhakti*.⁴⁰

The place in the outskirts of village Ballan, was a thick forest. The Ballan is located about the two kilometres from the main Jalandhar-Pathankot highway. As one crosses the bridges over a small canal on the western side of Ballan, a nucleus of buildings appear.⁴¹ The father-son duo spent days in the forest and took shelter in house in the village Ballan during nights. Subsequently the mud house was first converted into a temple, popularly known as *ad mandir*, and later a new concrete building was raised in its place. Later on, a landlord (Hazara Singh) of village Ballan donated some land to them in the forest where they built a thatched hut to begin with.⁴² It soon became the goal of pilgrimage for lower castes and other villagers from all over central Punjab.⁴³ It is also known as Dera Sant Sarwan Das Sachkhand Ballan among the followers.⁴⁴ It is comprised of an original small shrine, a langar, dispensary, several rooms and a yard. The main entrance to the *derais* a four storey residential buildings for visitors who wish to stay overnight.⁴⁵

Sarwan Das who used to get out of the village to carry on his spiritual practice at some secluded spot in the fields or in the deserted place. He would come back at the time of *rehras* (evening prayer) and deliver spiritual discourses at night.⁴⁶ His basic concern was to associate the people to *nam simran* and *satsang* and emphasized upon the *bani* of Guru Granth Sahib.⁴⁷ After constructing the *dera*, there is appropriated the figure of Ravidas. The activities of *dera* is based on the life and teachings of Sant Ravidas. The association of a large number of Chamars with *dera* becomes clearer when we consider the fact that Ravidas was special for them who himself was a Chamar and Sant Sarwan Das also to have come from a humble background of this caste. His *dera* instantly became popular among the followers of Sant Ravidas.⁴⁸ They consolidated their identity behind his figure. He has become the source of inspiration for his followers.⁴⁹

IV

The Dera Sachkhand Ballan has also inspired from the teachings of Sant Ravidas and follows him. It has its particular importance in spreading his teachings.⁵⁰ The saints of *dera* associated the devotees to the *nam* through the *bani* of Sant Ravidas.⁵¹ The recitation of Nam is the central motif of his spirituality to attain salvation.⁵² He attached much importance to the Nam which represents the whole reality of the divine.⁵³

The saints of the *dera* lay stress on the importance of True Nam which establishes a direct connection of heart with God.⁵⁴ Through the True Nam man can achieve salvation. It is clear that aim of man's life was to attain salvation and this end was best gained by the continual service of God.

The saints of *dera* introduced their own religious symbols, ceremonies, prayers and rituals of worship to give cohesion to their followers. Sant Ravidas didn't believe in reincarnation and idol worship. Nor his followers subscribe to the philosophy as observed by Hindus. They simply believe in spiritual powers of Sant Ravidas.⁵⁵ They worship his image and recite his hymns every morning and evening and raise slogan as "*Ravidas shakti amar rahe*" (the spiritual power of Ravidas live forever).⁵⁶

Sant Ravidas is revered by the devotees. His figure is prominently displayed throughout the *dera* and other buildings. His pictures, and stories related to his life are preached to the people by publishing literature.⁵⁷ His verses are also compiled in *gutkas* and published by the *dera*.⁵⁸ The *gaddinashins* saints since the time of Sant Pival Das to the present *sant* are also revere along with Ravidas. They observe a daily routine of *dera*.

Satsang or *kirtan* is important part of the activities of *dera*. In every session of *satsang*, there is a tradition of *kirtan* in which *bani* of Ravidas recited. After every *kirtan*, devotees sing *aarti* collectively. The *arti* (Hindu ceremony of adoration which consists of waving around head of an idol on a platter containing five burning wicks) that performs in front of *sectum - sectorum* of *dera* differentiate them from that of Hindu temples. They do not wave a platter of burning wicks. They blow a conch shell and rattle gong, which is followed by recitation of a hymn from *bani* of Ravidas.⁵⁹ There is a tradition of particular session of *satsang* on Sunday and *sangrand* of every month. A large number of devotees visit the *dera* on these days.⁶⁰

The format of *ardas* (a formal prayer recited at most Sikh rituals) comprises a *salok* (couplet) and one of the forty hymns of Ravidas. It closes with the utterance: *bole so nirbhay, shri Guru Ravidas maharaj ki jai* (fearless is the one who utters: victory to Shri Guru Ravidas). The devotees greet one another by saying, "*jai gurudev*" to which response is "*dhan gurudev*".⁶¹

There is also a tradition of distributing *prasad* among the devotees and visitors. Generally it is of puffed rice (fullian) but sometimes the fruits and sweets brought by devotees as offering in the *dera* are also distributed among the *sangat*.⁶²

Every day *langar* is served and shared by all in the congregation. This practice started from the foundation of the *dera*. The people who come to the *dera* shared the *langar*. They sit in rows. In the first session, before partaking the *langar* they recite the *satnam* for a number of times. This recite by one person in

the hall and *sangat* followed repeat it. The devotees repeat the same after him. There are separate rows for men and women.⁶³

Dera Sachkhand Ballan follows a specific tradition of *nam dan*. The ritual or process of *nam dan* is in many respects different from other sects and religions. Wednesday of every week is fixed for this purpose. The *gaddinashin* of the *dera* gives five words to his devotees who are told not to share it with anyone else except who has already got the *nam dan* from the same *dera*.⁶⁴

The saints have their own *nishan sahib* 'Har' (supreme being). The insignia 'Har' is composed of a sun like circle which signify the forty hymns of Sant Ravidas. Within the circle there is another smaller circle, within which 'Har' is inscribed in gurmukhi script with a sign of flame on the top of it. In between the bigger and smaller circles is written a couplet' ਨਾਮ ਤੇਰੇ ਕੀ ਜੋਤ ਲਗਾਈ ਭਇਓ ਉਜਿਆਰੇ ਭਵਨ ਸਗਲਾਰੇ (your name is the flame I light, it has illuminating all other world.)⁶⁵

The saints don the turban and keep unshorn hair and flowing beards. Even one of the late heads of the *dera*, Sant Garib Das was clean shaven.⁶⁶ They usually wear simple white clothes with an orange colour turban. This practice is in continuity since the time of Baba Pipal Das.

They established their school and health care centres. They encourage the lower caste poor children to study, so that they could earn their livelihood in a respectful way and help their community to lead a dignified life.⁶⁷ Beside this, they emphasize ending caste based discrimination and an egalitarian philosophy, invoking scriptures like those of Ravidas and Kabir, and exhort followers to shun liquor and drugs and to protect the environment.⁶⁸

The tradition of going on pilgrimage to holy places is an important practice of the *dera* on the occasion of Ravidas birthday.⁶⁹ The birth place of Sant Ravidas at Seer Govardhanpur, Kashi Benaras became the most revered place for his followers.⁷⁰ The *dera* makes special arrangements for the pilgrimages of devotees to birth place temple. Special train is arranged from *dera* Jalandhar to Benaras called 'Begumpura Express' exclusively for Ravidas Jyanti celebrations. Maghi and Baisakhi are other important occasion for celebrations in the *dera*. The death anniversaries of Baba Pipal Das, Sant Sarwan Das on June 11, Sant Hari Das February 7, Sant Garib Das July 23 and Sant Ramanand May 25. On these occasions, all the devotees who have taken *nam dan* from the *dera* make efforts to visit there.⁷¹ In search of their own cultural roots, they have constructed separate monuments and pilgrimage centres.⁷²

The saints of *dera* have begun using their own scripture 'Amritbani Satguru Ravidas Maharaj Ji' based exclusively on Sant Ravidas's hymns.⁷³ They announced their own religion, the Ravidasia *dharm*. This announcement was made in Kashi, Benaras. This declaration is concerned with the moulding of divergent beliefs and practices.⁷⁴

Within the short period of time, Dera Sachkhand Ballan has achieved prominence among the followers of Sant Ravidas and contributed a lot for the spread of his message of humanity and universal brotherhood. It has established and helped a number of institutions for the welfare of the society. The *dera* adheres to the ideal of service to humanity. It has also helped the Ravidasia community to stand on its own and assigned it a new identity to the establishment of *deraby* strengthening the specific tradition on the basis of teachings of Sant Ravidas.

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