

## **Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Question of Dalit Identity in Punjab**

**Ronki Ram**

*Panjab University, Chandigarh*

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The 2009 Vienna attack on the lives of the two highest ranking visiting Ravidassia *Sants* hailing from Indian Punjab is generally perceived by the followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, one of the most popular *Dalit* religious centres and a symbol of Dalit assertion in northern India, as an attack on their separate Dalit identity. The question of separate Dalit identity in Punjab is related to rising Dalit consciousness that emerged among the followers of Guru Ravidass, an untouchable Sant-poet of the medieval North Indian Bhakti movement. Ravidass imaginatively chose poetry as the method for non-violent social protest towards the establishment of a casteless society free from all forms of structural bindings and social dominations. After a gap of couple of centuries, the Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan carried forward the legacy of Guru Ravidass by carefully carving out the markers of a separate Dalit identity in the state. The Vienna incident has not only brought Dera Sachkhand Ballan to the center of the world map, it has also created a lot of confusion about the Ravidassia panth, the followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, and their distinct identity in the wake of sudden and spontaneous repercussions in the punjabi diaspora and in Punjab. Based on ethnographic field study of the Ravidassia panth, particularly of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, this paper discusses at length the question of Dalit identity in Punjab, which has been hastily hyped into an intra Sikh conflict.

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### **Introduction: Prevalence of Caste in Punjab**

The recent Dalit<sup>1</sup> backlash in Punjab in the aftermath of the Vienna attack<sup>2</sup> on the lives of two spiritual heads (Sant Niranjan Dass and his second-in-command Sant Ramanand) of Dera<sup>3</sup> Sachkhand Ballan, one of the most important Dalit religious centres and a symbol of Dalit assertion in northern India, showed conclusively as to how caste as a social as well as political category has become central to assertion of lower caste identity politics in contemporary India. What is even more significant is that the attack on the Ballan Sants in a Ravidass temple abroad and the subsequent violent repercussions it gave rise to back home in Punjab has put a big question mark on the prevalence of caste based discrimination as merely a domestic problem.<sup>4</sup> The resonance of close linkages between the ghastly shooting in Vienna and hierarchical oppressive social structures in Punjab coupled with tempting political economy of the affluent religious centres is what made Vienna attack and the consequent spontaneous backlash a unique case of regional caste imbroglio sandwiched between global happenings and local connections.

Caste continues to pull strings in Punjab, even though the state has long boasted of a caste-free society. The dastardly and murderous attack on Ravidassia spiritual leaders of Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Vienna, the capital city

of Austria, during a religious congregation on Sunday (May 24, 2009), unleashed spontaneous and violent protests amongst the vast number of Dalit followers across Punjab. This once again brought into prominence the deep undercurrents of the institution of caste in this northern agricultural belt of India. The backlash has not only brought forth the dormant contradictions between the Dalits and the dominant caste (read Jat Sikhs) in Punjab, but also ignited the 'burning fury' of the ex-untouchables who seem to have been struggling hard in translating their newly earned wealth into a viable avenue of upward social mobility. Surinder Kaur, one of the millions of followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan is quoted as saying, "[t]his is happening to us because our community is making attempts to uplift itself".<sup>5</sup> Another devotee of the Dera interprets the recent Dalit upsurge as "a fight for equality".<sup>6</sup> He is quoted as saying that "[t]he dominated community is attempting to rise and the dominant community is fearful of its rise".<sup>7</sup>

It seems that caste is being deployed to cut the steel frame of caste based hierarchical social structures incarcerating the lower castes for ages. As Amartya Sen, argues: "[t]here is a need for caution, however, for those who believe that invocation of caste in any form in democracy is an evil force. As long as caste is invoked in speaking for a lower caste or uniting it, it is good".<sup>8</sup> Such an unorthodox view of caste confronts head on the widely held thesis that the onset of modernity was to blunt the fangs of the primordial institution of caste. Modernity apart, the institution of caste, however, has not only entered into the corridors of power politics in India, but also thrives, rather more vigorously, among the diverse Punjabi diasporic communities settled in the post-modern glamorous capitals of Europe and North America.

Though the phenomenon of untouchability was never considered so strong in Punjab as in many other parts of the country, it has also never been alien to this part of the country as well (Ibbetson, 1883, rpt. 1970:15; Puri, 2004:1). Dalits in Punjab, like their counterparts in other parts of India, have been the victims of social exclusion, physical oppression, political neglect and economic deprivations. The repeated references to and loud condemnations of caste based discriminations in the teachings of the Sufis and the Sikh Gurus is a case in point. Moreover, the roots of caste based hierarchies have been so well entrenched in Punjab that the reformatory measures undertaken by various social reform movements such as Arya Samaj, Singh Sabha and Chief Khalsa Diwan failed to weed them out. However, what distinguishes caste in Punjab the most from the rest of the country is the primacy of the material and political factors over the principle of purity-pollution dichotomy.<sup>9</sup>

Another feature that further distinguished caste in Punjab from the rest of the country is the widespread phenomenon of acute landlessness among the Dalits, on the one hand, and almost absolute monopoly of the dominant caste on the agricultural land in the state, on the other. The Sikh empire of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the subsequent British rule over Punjab helped Jat Sikhs considerably in establishing their strong hold on land in Punjab (Marenco, 1976: Chps IV-VII; Liu, 1982:387-95). The Punjab Land Alienation Act (1900) had the unintended consequence of officially depriving Dalits, along with other non-

agricultural castes, the right to own land. In Punjab, primarily an agricultural state, land ownership assumes utmost importance in determining social status. Nowhere in India, are Dalits so extensively deprived of agricultural land as in Punjab. Despite having the highest proportion of Dalit percentage (about 29 per cent, census of India 2001) in the country<sup>10</sup>, less than 5 percent of them were cultivators. They shared only 4.82 percent of the number of operational holdings and 2.34 percent of the total area under cultivation (1991 census). Consequently, till recently their landlessness, along with the absence of alternate job avenues, pushed a large number of them (60 percent, 1991 census) into farm labour to work on the land of landowners, who invariably happened to be Jat Sikhs. The relationship of Dalits with Jat Sikhs, thus, is that of landless agricultural workers versus landlords, which in turn led to contradictions between them. The two communities are engaged in a power struggle over land and other resources.

A significant change, however, has taken place over the last few decades. Dalits in Punjab have improved their economic position through hard work and emigration abroad. They have entered into a number of professions, which were traditionally considered to be the mainstay of the business and artisan castes (Ram 2004c:5-6). This has led to a sharp decline in the number of Dalit farm workers in Punjab. However, the disassociation of Dalits from the menial and agricultural work in Punjab and their relatively better economic conditions have not enabled them to get an entry into the local structures of power, almost totally monopolised by the so-called dominant/upper castes. This is what forced them to look for alternate ways of social emancipation and empowerment giving rise to all sorts of *Deras* and a growing yearning for a separate Dalit identity in Punjab. The fast growing popularity of *Deras* and the enormous amount of wealth they receive in the form of donations from the local as well as diasporic followings eventually brought them into a sort of direct confrontation with the long established and deeply institutionalised Gurdwaras and other dominant Sikh Panthic organizations resulting in intermittent caste conflicts in Punjab over the last few years. The Vienna attack and its backlash is just another violent manifestation of this trend.

Although the constitutional state affirmative action programme has been an important factor behind the uplift of the Dalits, the role of the Ad Dharm movement<sup>11</sup> and of Ravidass *Deras* has been most crucial in empowering them and forging a separate Dalit identity in Punjab. The Ad Dharm movement is widely accredited with the task of sowing the seeds of Dalit consciousness in Punjab.<sup>12</sup> It emphasised that Dalits (Ad Dharmis) are the original inhabitants of the region and are distinguished from caste Hindus and Sikhs. It was during this very movement, that the image of Ravidass, a Dalit *Nirguni* (devotee of God without attributes) Sant of the medieval north Indian bhakti (loving devotion) movement was projected systematically to concretise the newly conceived Dalit cultural space in Punjab. This movement used his pictures as its emblem, his poetry as its sacred text and legends about him as illustrations of power, pride and glory of the socially excluded sections of the society in the constructed past. After the historic partition, the movement found its reverberation among the

vast followings of Ravidass Deras epitomised by the Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan (Ram, 2009).

Ravidass holds a special place in the heart of Dalits, as he was one who unleashed a frontal attack on the traditional practice of caste-based social exclusion and oppression. Belonging to one of the lowest castes, his iconic figure continues to act as a catalyst in the emergence of a separate Dalit identity in Punjab. Ravidass, as a spiritual figure which Omvedt boldly called “the bhakti radical”, commands a massive following among his caste fellows, especially the Chamars in Punjab, who consider him their Guru (Omvedt, 2008: 7) They have built temples, gurdwaras, bhawans (memorial halls), educational institutions/chairs, cultural organizations and hospitals in his name all over Punjab. They have also founded several missions<sup>13</sup> to accurately establish facts about his life, times, works, and to disseminate his message of love, compassion, equality, and brotherhood in India and abroad (Hawley 1988:270).<sup>14</sup> In fact, the lustrous image of Ravidass has played an instrumental role in mobilising the outcastes<sup>15</sup>, especially Chamars (leather workers), who also long joined the Ad Dharm movement in large numbers.<sup>16</sup> Ad Dharmis of Boota Mandi were among the early supporters of the Ad Dharm movement. Seth Kishen Dass of Boota Mandi, a renowned Dalit leather merchant, financed the headquarters building of Ad Dharm Mandal in Jalandhar. Nowadays, this building houses Guru Ravidass High School and Sewing Centre. Many of the Chamars and Ad Dharmi Chamars are devout followers of Sant Ravidass. Since Dera Ballan is dedicated to the memory of Ravidass and is run by Chamar saints. Ad Dharmi Chamars who too are devout followers of the faith of Ravidass feel proud to be associated with the Dera. Consequently, the Chamars of Punjab in general and Punjabi Chamar/Ad Dharmi/Ravidassia diasporas in particular have organised themselves into various Guru Ravidass Sabhas (committees) and established a large number of Ravidass shrines popularly known as Ravidass Deras/temples/gurdwara/gurughars both in Punjab and abroad. The number of such Deras has been on a steady rise.

Ravidass Deras began emerging in Punjab in the early twentieth century. According to a field-based study conducted by Som Nath Bharti Qadian, the number of Ravidass Deras in Punjab has exceeded one hundred over the last few years (Qadian, 2003). Since the publication of this study many more such Deras have been established in Punjab: twelve in 2005, eight in 2006 and seven in 2007 (calculated from the various volumes of *Begumpura Shaher*, trilingual weekly publication of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan). The strength of Ravidass Deras abroad has also been growing rapidly (Singh, 2003:35-40). The followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan abroad have established their own separate Ravidass Deras different from the mainstream Sikh Gurdwaras across the world, wherever they have settled. The foundation stones of almost all the Ravidass Deras both in India and abroad are laid by the Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan. It is pertinent to note that these Deras have come up not merely as centers of spiritual gatherings for Dalits but have also metamorphosed slowly into epicenters of social protest (Ram, 2007; Ram, 2008).

This paper primarily seeks to explore the role of the teachings of Guru Ravidass and the contributions made by the Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan in the formation of a separate Dalit identity in Punjab. The paper is divided into two sections. The first one focuses on the teachings and life anecdotes of the sole deity, Guru Ravidass, of Ravidass Deras, and the crucial role they continue to play in forging a separate Dalit identity in Punjab. It also briefly engages with the question of who are Ravidassias and their religion. It further raises questions on whether they are distinct from Hindus and Sikhs and whether they have their own religious organizations and the ways in which they differ from other mainstream religious organizations. The second section draws heavily on the evolution of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, and various discursive practices it has developed to give shape to a separate Dalit identity in Punjab over the last few decades.

### **Ravidass, Ravidassias and Dalit Sikhs**

Ravidass, one of the famous untouchable Sant-poets of the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, as mentioned at the outset remains a most revered figure among the Scheduled Castes (SC), especially Chamars/Chambhars/Charmakars of northwest and central India. The low castes Chamars and other ex-untouchable groups who worship Guru Ravidass, argues Schaller, “do not passively accept their inferior status”. Their worship of Ravidass, continues Schaller, “is the manifestation of a dissident socio-religious ideology” (Schaller, 1996:94). The mere mentioning of Sant Ravidass evokes a sense of confidence and self-respect among them as evidenced in the fact that a large number of them prefer to be identified as ‘Ravidassia’ rather than to be known by their customary and hereditary caste titles colored with derogatory connotations (Hawley, 1988:272). “Although in the past Ravidass’s low status may have presented a problem, his present-day admirers strive to affirm it, not deny it” (Lochtefeld, 2005:201-02). The followers of Guru Ravidass are popularly known as Ravidassia Dalits or Ravidassi Adharmis (Chandra, 2000:49). Though they claim to be different from both Hindus and Sikhs, but, quite often, Ravidassia Dalits are confused with Dalit Sikhs.

### ***Ravidassias versus Dalit Sikhs***

Ravidassias, the followers of Guru Ravidass, are often confused with Dalit Sikhs. For that the Vienna incidence is presented widely as an ugly outcome of the protracted ‘doctrinal dispute’ between the upper caste Sikhs and Dalits. Though some of the Ravidassia Dalits sport beard, keep unshorn hair like baptised Sikhs, and revere, worship and bow before the Guru Granth Sahib, they still do not identify themselves as Dalit Sikhs. Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha, Ontario, Canada, in its recent press release message posted on Sikh Sangat News, a popular Sikh site, clearly articulates the question of Ravidassia Dalit identity, sharply brought into world focus by the Vienna shooting. The message reads straightforwardly:

We, as Ravidassias have different traditions. We are not Sikhs. Even though, we give utmost respect to 10 gurus and Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Ravidass Ji is our supreme. There is no command for us to follow the declaration that there is no Guru after Guru Granth Sahib. We respect Guru Granth Sahib because it has our guru Ji's teachings and teachings of other religious figures who have spoken against caste system, spread the message of NAAM and equality. As per our traditions, we give utmost respect to contemporary gurus also who are carrying forward the message of Guru Ravidass Ji.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Ravidassias***

Ravidassias often assert their separate identity and are very much particular about their distinct faith believing in the teachings and bani of Ravidass whom they worship as Guru and bow before his portrait. They also touch the feet of the Sants of Ravidass Deras and accept them as living Guru – an anathema in the mainstream Sikhism. Beyond doubt, however, strong links do exist between the mainstream Sikh faith and the Ravidassia sect – an independent religion in the making. Ravidassias believe that the founder and first Guru of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak Dev, interacted with Sant Ravidass, although there are no historical records of such meetings. Forty *shabads* (hymns) and one *shloka* (couplet) composed by Sant Ravidass are included in the 'Guru Granth Sahib' the holy scripture of the Sikhs and are considered to be the most authentic (Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 1988:12; Callewaert and Friedlander, 1992:22). But the fact remains that despite the existence of some common religiosity between the Sikhs and Ravidassias, the latter have a separate religious code of conduct tightly woven around the bani (spiritual philosophy composed in the form of poetry) of Ravidass, their Guru. They are often heard complaining that irrespective of the popular Sikh belief that the '*bani is Guru and Guru is bani*', Sant Ravidass is not considered Guru in the mainstream Sikh tradition. He continued to be a Bhakta and his followers, as they often allege, too are not being considered equal by the upper caste Sikhs<sup>18</sup>. The caste-based discrimination against Dalits by the upper caste Sikhs is perhaps one of the most prominent reasons that forced them to build their own separate Ravidass Deras/*gurughars* in Punjab and abroad. Out of a total number of 12,780 villages in Punjab, Ravidassia Dalits have their own separate gurughars in about 10,000 villages (*Dalit Voice* (Banglore), 22:17 (1-15 September 2003), p. 20; Muktsar 2003:21-22). A survey of 116 villages in one tehsil of Amritsar district showed that Dalits had separate gurdwaras in 68 villages (Puri, 2003:2700).

### ***Dalit Sikhs: Mazhbis/Rangretas***

Dalit Sikhs are divided into two segments: Mazhbis/Rangretas and Ramdassias. Mazhbis/Rangretas were *Chuhras* (sweepers) who later converted to Sikhism. "The Rangreta are a class of Mazbi apparently found only in Ambala, Ludhiana

and the neighborhood, who consider themselves superior to the rest ... but it appears that Rangretas have very generally abandoned scavenging (sic) for leather work, and this would at once account for their rise in the social scale” (Ibbetson, 1883, rpt. 1970:294). Rangretas’ close ties with the gurughar (the House of Gurus) is evidenced from the fact that when the legendary Bhai Jaita, rechristened as Jeevan Singh, presented to Guru Gobind Singh the severed head of the ninth Guru and his father, Guru Tegh Bahadar, which he had brought from Delhi, the young Gobind Rai overwhelmed with emotion pronounced *Ranghrete Guru ke Bete* (Ranghrete, the untouchables, are Guru’s own sons). Bhai Jaita, the fearless Ranghreta, had endeared himself so much to the Tenth Guru that he was declared as the *Panjwan Sahibjada* (Fifth Son) in addition to his own four *sahibjadas*. Recently a renowned Punjabi writer Baldev Singh wrote a long novel *Panjwan Sahibjada* (Chetna Prakashan: Ludhiana, 2005) on Bhai Jaita alias Jeevan Singh (Hans, 2009).

Mazhbis are mostly inhabited in Majha region (Amritsar, Tarn Taran and Gurdaspur districts) of Punjab. They played a crucial role in all the battles fought by Guru Gobind Singh and thereafter. By the mid-eighteenth century when the Sikhs organised themselves into five *dals* (warrior bands), one of these was constituted under the command of Bir Singh Ranghreta with a force of 1300-horsemen. It was known as Mazhbi/Ranghreta *dal*. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Mazhbi Sikh militia played a very important role in the Khalsa army. The soldiers in the Khalsa army were called Akali Nihangs. Most of the Nihangs came from the Dalit communities and were known for their martial skills. Even Ranjit Singh used to be careful of them. Though initially he used their power in capturing several places including Srinagar (Kashmir), where many Dalit Sikhs settled permanently, but eventually he reduced their influence, probably under pressure from the Jat Sikh aristocracy that could not digest Dalit Sikhs wielding commanding positions (Hans, 2009). Thus after the establishment of the Khalsa rule under the aegis of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, concerted efforts were made to undermine their influence as the process of consolidation of the Sikh panth was under way. Sikh identity from then onwards began yielding to dormant but strong caste tendencies among the Jat Sikhs (Omvedt, 2008:22).

#### ***Dalit Sikhs: Ramdassias***

Ramdassias, the second of the two segments of the Dalit Sikhs, are usually *Julahas* (Weavers) who converted to Sikhism during the time of the fourth Guru of the Sikh faith, Guru Ram Dass. Though there is a wide distinction between the Ramdassias, typical weavers, and the Ravidassias, typical leather workers, “yet they are connected by certain sections of leather working classes who have taken to weaving and thus risen in their social scale”, argued Ibbetson (Ibbetson, 1883, rpt. 1970:296). Many Ramdassias, like Jat Sikhs, do not strictly follow the Sikh *rahit* (code of conduct). Babu Kanshi Ram, founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, was a clean-shaven Ramdassia Sikh of the Ropar district of the Malwa

region of Punjab. Ravidassias as a community differs from Mazhbis and Rangretas. Traditionally, they are mostly engaged in weaving.

Ramdassias and Ravidassias are probably of the same origin – Chamar. However, the distinction between them is primarily traced in terms of their diverse occupations. The leather working sections of the Chamar caste, the proud occupation of Sant Ravidass whom they also worship and revere as a Guru, has come to be known as Ravidassias. And the weaving occupation community of the Chamar caste popularly known as *Julahas* came to be known as Ramdassias after their conversion to Sikhism. While making a sharp distinction between these two occupationally distinct classes of the single main caste of Chamar, Sir Denzil Ibbetson cogently argues, “[t]he Ramdassias are confused with Raidasi or Rabdasi *Chamars*. The formers are true Sikhs, and take the *Pahul*.<sup>19</sup> The latter are Hindus, or if Sikhs, only Nanakpanthi Sikhs and do not take the *Pahul*; and are followers of Bhagat Rav Das or Rab Das, himself a Chamar. They are apparently as true Hindus as any Chamar can be, and are wrongly called Sikhs by confusion with Ramdassias” (Ibbetson, 1883, rpt. 1970:300).

Ravidassias, the most upwardly Dalit community, over the last few decades, have started asserting their separate identity and have established their own Ravidass Sabhas and Gurdwaras different from the mainstream Sikh organizations and Gurdwaras across the world. But in official records, they are still bracketed with Chamars (for details see: Chandra, 2000:31-33 and 49; Deep, 2001:7; Ram, 2004c:5-7). Since Chamars are counted among the Hindus in census terms, so are the Ravidassias. But in sociological terms, they are a group apart and are different both from the caste Hindus and Sikhs.

### **Ravidass, *Bhakti* and Protest**

Guru Ravidass is known as a leading star of the medieval northern India bhakti movement, especially the *nirguna sampradaya* or *sant parampara* (for a detailed account of sant parampara of the north Indian bhakti movement see: McLeod, 1968; Chaturvedi, 1952; Schomar & McLeod [eds.] 1987; Lorenzen [ed.], 1996; Lele, [ed.] 1981:1-15). He was a cobbler, saint, poet, philosopher and social reformer, all rolled into one. “Together with Namdev and Kabir, Ravidas is one of the few Bhaktas to cross language barriers and become important in several parts of India” (Zelliot, 2003:27). His popularity can be gauged from a variety of names attributed to him by his followers in different regions and languages (Pandey 1961:7-8). He is known as Raidasa, Rohidasa, Ruidasa, Ramadasa, Raedasa, Rohitasa, Rahdesa, Rav Das and Rab Das (Singh 1996:25; Callewaert and Friedlander, 1992:20-1; Ibbetson, 1883, rpt. 1970: 300). His poetry has universal appeal. It is full of radical fervor and boundless love for the formless God. Although the poetry of Ravidass is rich with references to the adoration of and longing for God, it also gives significant space to the “hope for a better world and a fight against exploiters, power-holders and oppression going on under the name of religion” (Omvedt, 2003:33). His poetry reflects his vision of the social and spiritual needs of the



downtrodden and underlines the urgency of their emancipation. He, therefore, is regarded as a messiah of the downtrodden. They revere him as devoutly as Hindus revere their Gods and Goddesses, and Sikhs their Gurus.<sup>20</sup> They worship his image, recite his hymns every morning and night, celebrate his birthdays as a religious event and show faith in his spiritual power (Wendy, 1999:910). They raise slogans such as '*Ravidass Shakti Amar Rahe*' (may the spiritual power of Ravidass live forever). Ravidass was born in Chamar caste, also known as *Kutbandhla*, one of the Scheduled Castes in Uttar Pradesh. Chamars are known by their profession of leather and tanning.<sup>21</sup> They were oppressed and their touch and sight were considered polluting by the upper castes. Ravidass revolted against this inhuman system of untouchability. He adopted bhakti as a mode of expression for his revolt. His bhakti-based method of revolt was very novel and daring. It was novel because of its emphasis on compassion for all and absolute faith in God. The principle of compassion for all reflected the egalitarian traits of his social philosophy and struggle. His concept of the absolute faith in the formless God showed the apathy of the elite of his time towards the plight of the downtrodden for whose emancipation he had to seek refuge in no one else but God. His method was daring in the sense that he chose to imitate the Brahmins in order to symbolize his revolt which was not only highly objectionable but was equally deadly for an outcaste of his times. He challenged the tyranny of the Brahmins and defied them by wearing the *Dhoti* (cloth wrapped around the waist), *Janeue* (sacred thread) and *Tilak* (sacred red mark on forehead), which were forbidden for the untouchables. Though he attired himself like an upper caste, he did not hide his caste. He continued with his hereditary occupation of making/mending shoes. He, probably, tried to show that while adopting the prohibited dress and symbols of the upper castes, the lower castes could still keep their identity intact. Thus Ravidass provided an alternative model for the emancipation of the Dalits. What made the image of Ravidass a catalyst in the emergence of Dalit consciousness was his being an outcaste and at the same time a Sant of very high repute who chose poetry as a vehicle of peaceful social protest against the oppressive Brahminical structures.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note here that in the popular calendar culture of Punjab, Ravidass is invariably presented in the above-mentioned dress code. His iconography seems to work as a suitable pedagogic tool to convey the message of self-respect and dignity of labour to the downtrodden who were not only completely debarred from entering the spiritual sphere in Hindu society monopolized by the priestly class of Brahmins, but who were also treated worse than animals because of their low caste birth and the nature of their occupation. It is in this context that his iconography turns out to be an icon of social protest.

Thus Ravidass gave a new meaning to bhakti by projecting it as a method of social protest that set the stage for a more secular and radical Dalit movement in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He rejected all forms of religious rituals and sectarian formalities. He also commented graphically on the cursed and abject living conditions of millions of fellow downtrodden. Some scholars were of the opinion that though the devotional songs and hymns of Ravidass reflected the sufferings of the downtrodden, they lack the reformatory

zeal and the bitter condemnation of Brahminism and the caste system that animated the poetry of Kabir and Tukaram (Dasgupta, 1976:162; Omvedt, 2003:191). Though there is a difference in tone between the poetry of Kabir and Ravidass, both convey the same message. The poetry of Ravidass is known to be full of humility and devotion. But at the same time it is equally imbued with reformatory zeal and concern for the downtrodden. Instead of bluntly snubbing the arrogance of higher castes, he undertook to raise the dignity of his own caste and profession, so that the higher castes could come to realize the shallowness of their self-imposed superiority (Lal, 1998:7). He advocated self-help for eliminating sufferings of the Dalits. His vision for self-help is clearly reflected in one of the legends about his refusal to make use of a *Paras* (a mythical stone that turns iron into gold) to get rich (Deep, 2001:11 & 17; Singh, 2000:2-3). He lent purity and respect to *kirat* (manual work), which also found special mention in the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikh faith. In fact, Ravidass's life and poetry provided a vision to the downtrodden to struggle for their human rights and civic liberties in a peaceful and non-violent way.

The bhakti approach of Ravidass was a non-violent struggle for the emancipation and empowerment of the socially excluded sections of the society. Though he combined humility with bhakti, his concept of formless God reflected an altogether different picture. Ravidass's God was not humble at all in the typical sense of the term. He was graceful. He was not indifferent to the downtrodden. His God was rather bold who was not afraid of anyone. He elevated and purified the so-called untouchables. '*Aaisee lal tujh binu kaunu karai. Gareeb niwaaju guseea meraa maathai chhatar dharai... neecho uoch karai meraa govind kaahoo te na darai*' [refrain My Beloved, besides you who acts like this? Protector of the poor, my Master. You hold a royal umbrella over my head] (*Adi Granth*: 1106, translated as in Callewaert and Friedlander, 1992:166).<sup>23</sup> Ravidass further wrote '*Meri jaati kut bandhlaa dhor dhouwanta nithi baanaarasi aas paasaa. Ab bipar pardhan tih karih danduouti tere naam samaaie Ravidass daasaa*' [My Caste is *Kutabādhalā*, I cart carcasses constantly around Benaras. Now Brahmans and headmen bow down before me, Ravidās the servant has taken refuge in Your Name (*Adi Granth*: 1293).<sup>24</sup> It is in this context that his non-violent struggle based on bhakti assumed special importance for the emancipation of the Dalits. He did not only adopt non-violence in his struggle against social oppression, but also motivated the oppressors to abandon the path of violence (Puri, 2006:11). In fact, there is no place at all for violence in the teachings and struggles of Guru Ravidass.

Ravidass's low caste but high spiritual status, however, posed a serious challenge to the oppressive Brahminical structures of domination. The traditional Brahminical institution of *varnashrama dharma*<sup>25</sup> failed to confront Ravidass's pragmatic and revolutionary reasoning based on equality, dignity and fraternity. Instead, the Brahmins attempted to undermine his low caste profile by appropriating him in the Hindu fold. They concocted stories to project him as a Brahmin in his previous life.<sup>26</sup> Thus challenged by the surging popularity of Ravidass, among the lower and upper castes alike, Brahmins knitted layers of mythological narratives about his mythical high caste in his

previous life. This was done, probably, to preclude the lower castes from rallying around his name (conversation with Karam Singh Raju, a prolific writer and devotee of Ravidass, Chandigarh, 9 February 2004). Yet another device adopted by the twice born to diminish his popularity was to present him as a Guru of the Chamars *only*. “This was the final masterstroke to minimize his influence on the society as a whole” (Chahal, n.d.:4-5). Significantly, though Ravidass was himself a Chamar, his egalitarian social philosophy has historically won him many disciples among the upper castes too. Jhali, Queen of Chittor; Mirabai, Rajput princess and daughter-in-law of King of Mewar, Sangram Singh; Prince Veer Singh Dev Vaghela of Rewa of Madhya Pradesh; and Prince of Kanshi have been among the most prominent ones (Kaul, 2001:48).<sup>27</sup>

Dalit activists and academics have been condemning the process of Brahminisation of Ravidass. They ridicule the so-called Brahminical narratives and interpretations about Ravidass and also refuse to accept Ramanand as his Guru<sup>28</sup>. Ravidass never mentioned the name of Ramanand in his most authentic bani recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib. Instead, he mentioned the names of various Sants such as Jaidev, Namdev and Kabir (Muksar, 2002:70-74; and Muksar, 2004). Some radical Dalits claim “that his Guru was Sardanand, and emphasize his ability to defeat Brahmins time and again in debates” (Omvedt, 2003:192; see also Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 1988:15). Thus the process of Brahminisation has not only failed to assimilate Ravidass in the fold of the upper castes, it further strengthens the bond between him and the ex-untouchables. The latter feel proud of being known as only Ravidassias. They consider Guru Ravidass and his bani as a paragon of their struggle for social equality, justice and dignity.

### **Ravidass Deras and Dalit Consciousness**

It is in the above-discussed context that the egalitarian social philosophy of Ravidass expressed in the mode of poetry became the manifesto of the Dalit consciousness in Punjab and the Punjabi Dalit diasporas. The establishment of a large number of Ravidass Deras by the Dalits in Punjab and elsewhere over the last few years is a case in point. These Deras are distinguished from both Hindu temples and mainstream Sikh gurdwaras in the sense that they have their separate patterns of rituals, ceremonies, slogans, *ardas* (prayer), *kirtan* (musical rendering of sacred hymns), religious festivals and iconography (Rawat, 2003:589-90). Since the entire gamut of activities in Ravidass Deras revolves around the teachings and life anecdotes of Guru Ravidass, he emerges as a central figure in the premises of the Deras as well as in the minds of their followers. The idols of Guru Ravidass are placed in the sanctum sanctorum of almost all the Ravidass Deras in Punjab and elsewhere in India as well as abroad.

Guru Ravidass has become very popular among the Ravidassia Dalit diasporas, especially of the Doaba Punjab, home to the highest concentration of Dalits in the state. A very significant part of the Ravidassia Dalit diaspora from

Doaba happen to be the followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, also located in the same region. Some of the Ravidassia Dalits abroad are well settled and take active interest in community activities in their host as well as home country. They have constructed a large number of Ravidass shrines (interchangeably known as Deras, gurughars, temples and gurdwaras) in order to assert their separate Dalit identity. Some of the most prominent Ravidassia shrines abroad are in the following cities: Vancouver, Calgary, Brampton, Toronto, Montreal (all in Canada), New York, Sacramento, Pittsburg, Seattle, Fresno, Houston, Selma, Fremont, and Austin (all in USA), Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Bradford, Coventry, Derby, Lancaster, Southall, Southampton, Kent and Bedford (all in UK). In the last few years many Ravidass Temples and Gurdwaras have also come up in Austria, Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Holland, New Zealand, Greece and Lebanon. Sant Niranjana Dass of Dera Ballan has laid the foundation stones of all these Ravidass Deras.<sup>29</sup> The Sants of Ballan pay regular visits to these various overseas Ravidass gurughars and bless the vast Ravidass *naam leevan sangat* (devotees of Guru Ravidass) there.

In addition, Punjabi Dalit diaspora actively participates in various other community activities in the host countries. They organized an International Dalit Conference (May 16-18, 2003) in Vancouver (Canada), which launched a campaign in North America with a view to lobbying multinationals in India to honour the principle of diversity for the Dalits in private ventures. The Dalit diaspora settled in the United States of America took out the float of Baba Sahib Dr B.R. Ambedkar on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> India's Independence Day Parade in New York (on 19 August 2007). The float of Dr. Ambedkar organized by Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha of New York was perhaps the first of its kind in the history of Dalit diaspora.<sup>30</sup> The Ravidassia community of British Columbia (Canada) also created history on February 25, 2008 by celebrating Guru Ravidass Jayanti in the Parliament of British Columbia in Victoria (based on personal communication from Jai Birdi, Vancouver, Canada, February 26, 2008). It is important to note that the planning for all the community activities and their implementation is chalked out at Ravidass Deras.

The number of Ravidass Deras has been multiplying very fast. This has taken the form of a sort of a socio-cultural movement for the emancipation of Dalits. Led by the Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, this movement "...is silently sweeping the Punjab countryside offering a new hope to the untouchable, particularly the Chamars..." (Rajshekar, 2004:3). It has generated a sense of confidence in them and provided an opportunity to exhibit their hitherto eclipsed Dalit identity. The movement of Ravidass Deras "...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 success of this movement lies in the strategy of the Sants of Ballan to "...sell Dr Ambedkar's socio-cultural revolution packed in an ingenious religious capsule" (Rajshekar, 2004:3). Ravidass Deras are, perhaps, the only religious centers where religious and political figures (Ravidass and Ambedkar) are blended and projected publicly.

They thrive on the elements of social protest expressed in the poetry of Ravidass and the teachings of Ambedkar. Ravidass Deras, in fact, have been functioning as missions to sensitize Dalits and facilitate their empowerment (Ambedkari, 2005:5).

### **Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the question of Dalit Identity**

Dera Sachkhand Ballan, also known as Dera Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Maharaj Sachkhand Ballan or simply Dera Ballan, is situated at village Ballan, seven miles north of Jalandhar city on the Pathankot road. Other equally famous Ravidass Deras are 'Temple Ravidass Chak Hakim' (Phagwara),<sup>31</sup> and 'Dera of Sant Jagatjit Giri' (Pathankot). The Ravidass Deras of Ballan and Chak Hakim shot into prominence during the Ad Dharm movement. They were instrumental in bringing social consciousness among the Dalits of Punjab (Juergensmeyer, 1988:84-85). Mangoo Ram, the founder of the Ad Dharm movement, visited the Dera Ballan and sought its support in popularizing the image of Ravidass among the Dalits of Punjab (Juergensmeyer, 1988:85). The association of the Dera with the Ad Dharm movement becomes further clear from the fact that Sant Sarwan Dass, the then head of the Dera Ballan (October 11, 1928-June 11, 1972), offered juice to Mangoo Ram to open his fast-unto-death undertaken by him as a counter measure to that of Mahatama Gandhi's against the communal award in 1932 (Bawa, 2004:6). Although this movement petered out after the first general election in independent India, "...Deras such as that of Sarwan Das remain popular destinations for pilgrimage in the Punjab" (Juergensmeyer, 1988:85). Dera Ballan also hosted the mammoth Dalit conference (13<sup>th</sup> December, 1970) organised by Mangu Ram Jaspal, namesake of the famous Mangoo Ram, to revive the Ad Dharm movement.<sup>32</sup> It was during this conference that the legendary Mangoo Ram and many other prominent leaders of the Ad Dharm movement commended the contribution of Sants of Dera Ballan towards the emancipation and empowerment of Dalits. Sant Sarwan Dass also met Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1948 in Delhi at his residence and encouraged him to fight continuously for the emancipation of the downtrodden. During Dr. Ambedkar's visit to Punjab in 1951, Sant Sarwan Dass sent a message wishing him success in his struggle for the emancipation of the Dalits (Bawa, 2004:6).

### **Ravidass Mission, Sant Sarwan Dass and Dera Ballan**

Dera Sachkhand Ballan was founded in the beginning of the twentieth century by Sant Pipal Das,<sup>33</sup> father of Sant Sarwan Das (February 15, 1895-June 11, 1972). Sant Sarwan Dass lost his mother (Shobhawanti) when he was only five years old. Thereafter, Sant Pipal Dass left home in search of 'truth'. He took his child son Sarwan Dass with him on the mission (Bawa, 2003:4). It was during the course of wandering that the father and son reached the place where Dera Ballan is now situated. Pipal Dass found that place most suitable for spiritual pursuits. He found a dry *Pipal* tree at the site. But the tree, as per local narrative, sprang back into life after he watered it. This convinced Papal Dass that the

desired truth could be obtained on this spot. Sant Pipal Dass whose real name was Harnam Dass came to be known as Pipal (from Pipal tree) Dass after this incident (conversation with the devotees of Ravidass and the priests of Dera Ballan, 13-14 April 2004). The place, in the outskirts of village Ballan, was a thick forest. The father-son duo spent days in the forest and took shelter in a mud 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 (Bawa, 2004:6). 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. "It soon became the goal of pilgrimage for lower caste and other villagers from all over central Punjab, and from its inception it was a center for the veneration of Ravi Das" (Juergensmeyer, 1988:84-85).

Sant Sarwan Dass received early education from his father and learnt Sanskrit from Sant Kartanand of nearby village Kishangarh. He was in his early thirties when Sant Pipal Das died (1928). By that time he had already become a known figure not only among the people of Ballan but also in the neighbouring villages (Bawa, 2004:6-7). However, what distinguished him from other holy men of his time was his devotion and veneration for Sant Ravidass. The dissemination of Ravidass's bani and teachings became his sole mission. Ravidass appealed most to the lower castes probably because of his being a Chamar himself and a pioneer in the field of Dalit literature.<sup>34</sup> The fact that Sant Sarwan Dass was himself a Chamar and a devotee of Ravidass contributed to the popularity of his Dera Sachkhand Ballan among the Chamars.

Under the stewardship of Sant Sarwan Dass, a true emissary of Guru Ravidass, dissemination of the bani of Guru Ravidass and the proliferation of the Ravidassia faith became one of the most important missions of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan. He laid the foundation stones of various Ravidass Deras and bhawans. He sponsored construction of rooms in the Shri Guru Ravidass High School, Jalandhar; Arts and Crafts Training College, Jalandhar; Shri Guru Ravidass Technical College, Phagwara; Primary school, Raipur-Rasoolpur; Bhagwan Ravidass Ashram Nirmala Chowani, Haridwar; and High School, Village Ballan (Bawa, 2004:7). The Sants of Dera Ballan have meticulously kept Sant Sarwan Dass's legacy of spreading the mission of Guru Ravidass intact. They have been spreading the message of the mission to every nook and corner of Punjab and elsewhere. The construction of Guru Ravidass Temples in Seer Govardhanpur (Varanasi), Hadiabad (Punjab), Sirsagarh (Haryana), Pune (Maharashtra), Haridwar (Uttaranchal), and Una (Himachal Pradesh) is a clear indication of the concerted efforts of the Sants of Ballan towards the dissemination and popularisation of the egalitarian philosophy of Ravidass (Heer, 2005:4). Moreover, they have also generated a sense of cohesive belongingness among the Punjabi Dalit diaspora as well.

The active participation by the Sants of Dera Ballan in Sant *sammelans* (spiritual congregations) organised by the devotees of Guru Ravidass in different parts of Punjab and outside showed their deep concern for the mission of Guru Ravidass. In the last few years they participated in 52 Sant sammelans in the year

2005, 70 in 2006 and 69 in 2007 (calculated from the various volumes of *Begumpura Shaher* [2005, 2006 & 2007], the trilingual weekly publication of the Dera Ballan). In the sammelans, shabads of the bani of Guru Ravidass are recited and sung, and at the end *Langer* (free food) is served and shared by all in the congregation. Such sammelans have proved very useful in providing a platform for the propagation of the teachings of Ravidass and the missions of Dera Ballan. Such Sant sammelans are in fact a sort of motivating camps for the inculcation of values of separate Dalit community among Dalits based on the philosophy of Guru Ravidass. The Sants of Ballan also visited their devotees abroad regularly in order to enlighten them of the bani of Ravidass.<sup>35</sup>

The Sants of Dera Ballan (especially the slain Sant Ramanand) have prepared a number of cassettes, compact discs (CDs), and video compact discs (VCDs) of the bani of Guru Ravidass for wider circulation among their followers (Thind, 2009). Some of the most popular cassettes are: 'Mission Guru Ravidass Ji' (Mission of Guru Ravidass), '*Kanshi wich chan chariya*' (Moon in Kanshi), '*Begampura Shaher Ka Nau*' (City Named Begumpura), '*Rabb Dharti Te*' (God on the Earth), '*Satguru Da Updesh*' (Sermon of the Guru), '*Kanshi Ballan Wich Farak Na Koe*' (No Difference between Kanshi and Ballan), '*Har ke Naam Bin*' (Without the Name of God), '*Amrit Bani Shri Guru Ravidass Ji*' (Immortal Bani of Guru Ravidass), '*Duniya de Loko Nek Bano*' (Become nice, Peoples of the World), '*Jai Satiguru Ravidas*' (Victory to Guru Ravidass), '*Darshan Satguru de Kar Lau*' (Be face to face with the Guru), '*Begumpur de Wasia*' (Residence of the Begumpur), '*Guru Da Jehrey Nam Japde*' (Those who Remember the Name of the Guru), and '*Ban ke Messiah Aya*' (Came as a Messiah). '*Eh Janam Tumhare Lekhe*' (This Life is for You), '*Begampure Diyan Raunkan*' (Festivities of Begumpura), '*Shri Guru Ravidass Amrit Bani Dohae*' (Couplets of the Immortal bani of Guru Ravidass), and '*Satsang Mahina Cheet*' (company of the Sants in first month of the Hindu calendar) are some of the most popular VCDs. The six-volumes set of '*Amrit Bani of Guru Ravidass Ji*' is the most popular among the CDs. They are available at Dera Ballan on nominal rates and are also given as souvenir to the devotees. During one of my visits to the Dera Ballan, Sant Surinder Dass Bawa was kind enough to gift me a set of these cassettes.<sup>36</sup> The Dera has also composed a Gurbani programme based on the bani of Guru Ravidass. The program is called '*Amrit Bani: Shri Guru Ravidass ji*', being telecast every Friday, 6.00 – 6.15 a.m. and every Saturday, 7.15 – 7.30 a.m. on Jalandhar Doordarshan since October 13, 2003. The programme is produced in the newly built hi-tech studio in the premises of the Dera through which live telecast of the *satsang* is also beamed to several countries. It has unique importance for the Dalits who in the past were forbidden to read and hear the sacred text. It has contributed significantly in building their self-esteem and confidence that in turn has sharpened their social and political consciousness.

### **Dera Ballan, Social Service and Dalit Philanthropy**

Primary education and healthcare were the two main social service concerns of Sant Sarwan Dass, which further strengthen the surging popularity of the Dera

Ballan among the Dalits. The Sant had encouraged Dalit children to study and helped them financially. He opened an informal primary school within the premises of the Dera. He taught the poor children Panjabi and trained them in reciting Gurbani (sacred text of Guru Granth Sahib) correctly. He used to feed them with rice pudding and fried loafs every Sunday – a diet that was really a luxury for the poor Dalit. There is a common belief among the followers of Dera Ballan that whosoever was taught by Sant Sarwan Dass became an officer in Government service (conversations with the devotees of Ravidass; and Sant Surinder Dass Bawa, priest of Dera Ballan, Ballan, 14 April 2004). He urged the poor parents to educate their children so that they could earn their livelihood in a respectful way and could lead a dignified life (Jassal, 2005:7).

All the subsequent chiefs of Dera Ballan who followed Sant Sarwan Dass<sup>37</sup> carried on the great task of philanthropy began by him for the uplift of the downtrodden. In fact, they turned these vital concerns of capacity building into long-term missions of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan. To fulfill one of these missions, Sants of Dera Ballan founded ‘Sant Sarwan Dass Model School’ at Hadiabad (Phagwara) in April 2004 to provide quality education to the Dalit children for a nominal fee. The school is housed in a magnificent building equipped with modern instruments and materials, and has its own fleet of buses for the conveyance of the students. The medium of instruction in the school is English. What distinguished this school is that along with formal education in different streams of knowledge, students are also informed about the missions of Guru Ravidass and Dera Sachkhand Ballan (Sandhu, 2005:11; Varghese, 2006:3).

Sant Sarwan Dass also established a small *Dawakhana* (Ayurvedic clinic) at the Dera for the benefits of the downtrodden who could not afford exorbitant costly treatment and medicine in the market. The Dawakhana is still in operation and Sant Surinder Dass Bawa runs the clinic.<sup>38</sup> This small beginning at the Dera, however, eventually flourished into a full-fledged hospital (Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital) at Dehpur-Kapoor village Adda Kathar on the Hoshiarpur-Jalandhar road (district Jalandhar). Sant Garib Dass, the then chief of Dera Ballan, founded the hospital in 1982. A humble beginning was made with a small dispensary in 1984. Soon after, it expanded into a two hundred-bed hospital equipped with latest medical technology. The hospital is famous for its expertise in surgery in the region. It provided round the clock emergency services, and has its own medical store shop, which provided medicines at reasonable rates. For the convenience of the patients and their attendants, indoor catering facilities and spacious retiring halls are also provided. A small nominal fee is charged to patients to partially meet hospital expenditure, which is about 2.5 million Indian rupees per month (Kauldhar, 2003: 5 & 8, and Heer, 2006:4). At a time when public health services have almost turned dysfunctional in the state, the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital has come as a great relief to the downtrodden who are incapable of fending for themselves.

In addition, Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan have also been regularly organising free eye operation camps every year, in the month of February, with the support of Swarn Dass Banger, a Non-Resident Indian (NRI) settled in



England. A team of doctors from U.K. held a 10-day (March 16-25, 2005) medical camp in Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital. The camp had the sanction of the Medical Council of India, Department of Health, UK, and the British Medical Association. The camp received wide coverage in the western print media that marked the hospital on the international map. The detailed account of the camp was carried in two publications: 'Trust News' of Calderdale and Huddersfield National Health Service (NHS) and the 'Evening Courier' (Heer, 2005a:4). Swarn Dass Banger has also donated 10 million Indian rupees for the construction of Sant Sarwan Dass Memorial Eye Hospital near the Dera and gave 2.5 acres of prime land adjacent to the Dera where a mammoth *Satsangh Bhawan* (religious congregation hall), centrally air-conditioned with a capacity of accommodating 50,000 people at a time, is now constructed. Sant Niranjan Dass, the present chief of Dera Ballan, laid the foundation stone of the Eye Hospital on November 10, 2004 (Bawa, 2004:7).

Dera Ballan received a large amount of offerings in the form of money and gifts from its Dalit NRI followers in Europe and North America. Seth Brij Lal Kaler of England has donated 10 million Indian rupees to Dera Ballan.<sup>39</sup> The NRI followers of the Dera Ballan in Wolverhampton donated 1.5 million Indian rupees for the construction of bathrooms and an eight feet high wall around the newly added plot to the Ravidass Temple at Seer Govardhanpur in Varanasi. The *sangat* (followers) from Wolverhampton and Birmingham donated 2.2 million Indian rupees to the Dera Ballan for the construction of the second story of the community dining hall at Ravidass Temple at Seer Govardhanpur (Bawa, 2005b:preface). Recently, NRI followers of the Dera from Europe and North America donated 15 Kg. of pure gold for the purpose of making a palanquin of Guru Ravidass, which the Sants of Dera Ballan carried in the form of a mammoth procession from the premises of the Dera to Sri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Temple at Seer Govardhanpur (Varanasi). The procession started from Dera Ballan on February 16 and reached Varanasi in the evening of February 20, 2008.<sup>40</sup> The provision of excellent satsang halls and modern hospital medical facilities in the rural areas of Punjab is what made Dera Sachkhand Ballan an exceptional religious site for the downtrodden where spiritual and social services are combined together. Dalit diaspora philanthropy apart, Dera Ballan also receives rich offerings from its large number of local followers and well-wishers.

### **Dera Sachkhand Ballan and Dalit Literature**

Another important feature of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan that brought it to the forefront of the cause of Dalits' upliftment was its deep interest in literary activities. The Dera has a rich library on its premises. The library contains books on the life and philosophy of Ravidass, Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia and Dr. Ambedkar, the Bhakti movement, the Ad Dharm movement, and on several projects and missions of Dera Ballan (based on participant observation by the author; see also: Hans, 2006:3-4). The books are made available to the readers on nominal charges and even free of cost. Some of the books are also

given to the devotees as a souvenir along with the framed calendar prints of the Dera Ballan and Ravidass temple (Seer Goverdhanpur) with the images of Guru Ravidass and B.R. Ambedkar embossed on them. *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The social Vision of Untouchables* (1988), a pioneer study of the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab authored by Mark Juergensmeyer, is one of the most popular book that is distributed among the devotees (based on participant observation by the author).

The Dera Ballan also publishes, and sponsors books on Dalit literature. In addition, it also confers honors on Dalit scholars as an acknowledgement of their literary contributions towards the uplift of the downtrodden. Till now, it has honoured twenty Dalit scholars with gold medals (Bawa, 2005b: XXX). In addition, the Dera has also been publishing a 12 page trilingual (Panjabi, Hindi, and English) weekly 'Begumpura Shaher' since August 15, 1991. This weekly was founded by Sant Garib Dass, fourth head of the Dera Ballan, to highlight the problems of the downtrodden and to educate them about the mission of Guru Ravidass. 'Begumpura Shaher', the sole mouthpiece of the Dalits who were highly under-represented in the mainstream print and electronic media, has become an important source for raising social consciousness and a symbol of self-respect among them.<sup>41</sup> The *Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya* Academy (Indian Dalit Literary Academy) honoured its chief editor, Sant Ramanand, recently killed in the Vienna shooting, with the 20<sup>th</sup> National Dalit Literary Award (2004) for the contribution it made in the field of journalism and Dalit consciousness. The Academy also organized a two days National Dalit Introspection Camp (9-10 June 2006) at Dera Ballan to discuss the commonalities among the thoughts, missions, and objectives of Buddha, Ravidass and Ambedkar. Among the prominent participants who attended the Camp were Dr. Mata Parsad, former Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, Babu Parmanand, former Governor of Haryana, Dr. Satya Narayan Jatiya, former central minister of social justice and Member of Parliament, Chanderpal Sallani, former Member of Parliament, Bavanrao Gholap, former social welfare minister of Maharashtra and member of the State Legislative Assembly, and Dr. J. S. Sabar, Chair Guru Ravidass, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (Sumanakshar, 2006:1). The participation by such a large number of renowned personalities in the Dalit Introspection Camp – a rare occasion of its kind at a religious site – lend credence to the missions of Dera Ballan for the upliftment of the Dalits. In a hierarchically structured society of Punjab, the literary chapter of the Dera Ballan has proved to be of immense importance in raising awareness and building confidence among the downtrodden masses, who have been on the margin in the mainstream literary circles.

### **Seer Goverdhanpur: The Mecca of Dalits**

Of all the major contributions made by Dera Ballan, the construction of a mammoth 'Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Mandir' (Temple of Shri Guru Ravidass's Birthplace) at Seer Goverdhanpur, a locality in the city of Varanasi is the most significant. The Sants of Ballan traced the birthplace of Ravidass to

a location in the village Seer Goverdhanpur, on the outskirts of Varanasi, near the Banaras Hindu University (BHU). Sant Hari Dass of Dera Ballan had laid the foundation stone of the temple on June 14, 1965. Dalits from India and abroad contributed enormously towards the construction of the temple. Giani Zail Singh, the President of India (July 25 1982-July 25, 1987), visited the Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Temple Seer Govardhanpur on May 25, 1984 (*Sachhi Kahani*, 2007:11-12). The construction of the temple was completed in 1994. Babu Kanshi Ram, the BSP supremo, performed the ceremonial installation of the golden dome atop the temple. KR Narayanan, the then President of India, performed the opening ceremony of the huge monumental entry gate to the temple, on July 16, 1998.

Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Mandir at Seer Goverdhanpur has acquired perhaps the same importance for Dalits as the 'Mecca' for Muslims and the 'Golden Temple' for Sikhs (based on conversations at Deras). Every year during birth anniversary of Guru Ravidass, the Mandir attracts millions of devotees from India and abroad. The Dera Sachkhand Ballan made special arrangements for the pilgrimage of Ravidass devotees to their *Mecca* at Seer Goverdhanpur (Varanasi). Special trains were arranged from Jalandhar city in Punjab to Varanasi especially to participate in the celebrations of the birth anniversary of Ravidass. This temple serves an important purpose in reminding Dalits of the silent 'social revolution' led by Ravidass in Varanasi, the headquarters of Hindu religiosity. Its unique contribution lies in symbolising a vision for the future and the forgotten history of the Dalit struggle for equality and dignity in medieval India. Amidst the erstwhile headquarters of the oppressive Hindu social order, 'Temple of Shri Guru Ravidass's Birthplace' has become an important cultural and religious site for the assertion of distinct identity where the ex-untouchables can move around with their heads held high and without the fear of being measured on the scale of caste hierarchy – in a way *Begumpura* in the making. In fact, this temple has turned out to be a repository of separate Dalit identity.

### **Dera Sachkhand Ballan, Dera Sants and Markers of a Separate Dalit Identity**

Dera Sachkhand Ballan became a paragon of the Ravidass movement in northwest India. It made concerted efforts for the construction of a separate Dalit identity, independent of both Sikhism and Hinduism – the two main religious traditions of the region. The architecture of Dera Ballan is unique in its outlook. It resembles both a temple and a Gurdwara at the same time. Though the Guru Granth Sahib is placed in the Dera but unlike a Gurdwara, the idols of Guru Ravidass and the late heads of the Dera Ballan are also installed in its premises and are worshipped along with the Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>42</sup> The membership of the management committees of the Ravidass Deras is strictly confined to Ravidassia Dalits only. No upper caste Sikh is allowed to become a member of the managing committees of the Ravidass Deras and Sabhas.

In Ravidass Deras, Ravidass is worshipped as Guru. Moreover, *Gaddi Nashins* (heads) of the Ravidass Deras are also considered as Gurus. Sant Niranjan Dass is the fifth Gaddi Nashin in the line of individual Gurus in the Dera Ballan. However, in Sikh religion, Ravidass is known as Bhakta. In Sikh religion only the ten Gurus and Guru Granth Sahib are considered the legitimate Gurus. The issue of Bhakta versus the 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 between the Sikh and Dalit diasporas.<sup>43</sup> The recent Vienna incident is a violent escalation of this chronic communal polarisation. Another factor that distinguishes Sants of Ballan from the priests of Sikh religion (especially since the formation of the Khalsa in 1699) has been their nomenclature. The titles of their last names are 'Dass' (humble). Perhaps, they inherited the tradition of suffixing 'Dass' from the very name of their Guru Ravi (Dass). The titles of the last names of the Sikhs are invariably 'Singh'.<sup>44</sup> Though Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan also don a turban, keep unshorn hair and a flowing beard like that of the Sikh priests, still they do not consider themselves Sikhs. One of the heads of the Dera Ballan, Sant Garib Dass, was clean-shaven. It is in this context that the Dera Ballan has emerged as an alternative religious site for the Dalits, separate from Hindus and Sikhs, with its own code of conduct that paved the way for a separate Dalit identity.

The religious insignia of Dera Ballan and of all other Ravidassia Deras is 'Har' (Supreme Being).<sup>45</sup> This insignia is also known as the '*Koumi Nishan*' of the Ravidassia samaj. The religious symbol of the Sikh Gurdwaras is 'Khanda' (Two-edged sword over a quoit with two crossed sabers below the quoit). 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 forty hymns of Guru Ravidass. 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. The flame represents the 'Naam' (word) that would illuminate the entire world. The sign of flame crosses over into the bigger circle. In between the bigger and smaller circles is written a couplet *Naam tere kee jot lagayi, Bhaio Ujjaaro Bhawan saglaare* (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 Ravidass and his teachings. The insignia *Har* is chosen after the name of their Guru [Ravi-Sundass-servant] (servant of the sun). The Dalits, especially the Chamars of Punjab, proudly hoist flags with the print of insignia 'Har' on top of their religious places, and on vehicles during processions on the occasion of Guru Ravidass's birth anniversaries and other festivities. The insignia 'Har' has become a symbol of a separate Dalit identity.

The format of the *Ardas* (a formal prayer recited at most Sikh rituals) performed in the Ravidass Deras also differentiates them from that of Sikh religion. It is comprised of a *Shloka* (couplet) and one of the forty hymns of Guru Ravidass. It 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* concluded with: *Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri*

*Akal* (Blessed is the one who utters: 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 *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 reflective of their determined willingness to confront it head on.

Like the *Ardas*, the *Aarti* (a Hindu ceremony of adoration which consists of waving round the head of an idol on a platter containing five burning wicks) that *Ballan Sants* perform in front of the sanctum sanctorum of their *Dera* differentiate them from that of Hindu temples.<sup>46</sup> The *Ballan Sants* 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 the *bani* of *Ravidass* (based on participant observation). The salutations in the *Ravidass Dera* are also formulated selectively in order to project their unique and independent religious identity. Every religious community has its own way of greeting. *Sat Shri Akaal* (True is the Immortal One) is the greeting of the *Sikhs*; *Jai Ram Ji Ki* or *Jai Sita-Ram* (Victory to Ram or Victory to Sita-Ram) is of the *Hindus*; *Ravidass Deras* adopted the greeting *Jai Gurudev* or *Jai Guru Ravidass* (Victory to the divine Guru or Guru Ravidass) to which the reply was *Dhan Guru Dev* (blessed the divine Guru). The short version of the greetings is *Jai Santan Di* (Victory to the Saints). The forms of *Ardas*, *Arati*, and salutations adopted by the *Sants* of *Dera Ballan* have thus become distinct markers of the separate identity of the *Dalits* of the region. In other words, the *Dera Ballan* has evolved into a nursery for the cultivation of symbols, icons, signifiers, and narratives to shape a separate *Dalit* identity.

Despite the fact that *Ravidassias* and *Ravidass Deras* have emerged as a separate community and distinct *Dalit* religious space respectively, the former continued to be confused with *Dalit Sikhs* and the latter with *gurdwaras* probably because of the physical appearances of some of the *Ravidassias*, on the one hand, and the presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib* within the premises of *Ravidass Deras*, on the other. Not only that, it has further led to a sort of contradiction between the long established *Sikh rahit maryada* (code of conduct) and observance of non-*Sikh* rituals and traditions within *Ravidass Deras* such as touching the feet of the Heads of the *Deras* and worshiping the idols and calendar images of *Bhakt Ravidass* revered as *Guru*. This contradiction is considered to be one of the several main reasons behind the ghastly shooting incidence that took place at the *Ravidass temple* in *Vienna* on *May 24, 2009*. The *Sants* of *Dera Ballan* took strong objection to the gross misrepresentation of their mission and the dilution of their separate *Ravidassia Dalit* identity as clubbed with the mainstream *Sikh* religion in national as well as international print and electronic media.

It was against this crucial backdrop that the *Ballan Sants* decided to completely detach themselves from a long preserved tradition of reciting the holy *bani* from the *Guru Granth Sahib* on the important occasions of birth and death anniversaries of the *Sants* of *Dera Ballan* and of *Guru Ravidass*. This was perhaps for the first time in the 109-year-old existence of the *Dera Sachkhand*

Ballan that on June 11, 2009 (death anniversary of Sant Sarwan Dass) and again on June 13, 2009 (*antim ardas*, the last condolence concluding ceremony of Sant Ramanand, the deputy chief of Dera Ballan, who died in the Vienna shooting) the religious ceremonies were organised without the '*parkash*' of the Guru Granth Sahib. "The palanquin or canopy, under which Sikhs' holy book is usually placed for reading scriptures, instead held the portrait of Sant Sarwan Dass in whose name the Ballan dera was established nearly a century ago" reported the *Times of India* (June 14, 2009). Dera spokesperson SR Heer called this deviation a "reaction to Vienna incident" and "decision of Sants of the dera" (*Times of India*, June 14, 2009). The deviation and the strategic silence about it, however, is intended to sharply focus on the separate Ravidassi Dalit identity than on distancing from close ties with mainstream Sikhism. Moreover, the deviation has also been widely perceived by the large followers of the Dera as a permanent solution to the blown up communal issue of the violation of the Sikh code of conduct at Ravidass Deras.

### Conclusions

Dalit consciousness in Punjab emerged against the backdrop of the bani of Guru Ravidass who inventively chose poetry as a vehicle of non-violent, peaceful social protest for the establishment of a casteless society, free from all sorts of bindings and structures of dominations. The bani of Guru Ravidass set the tenor of social protests among Dalits, who started contesting their forced subjugation. It empowers them with enough strength to raise their voice against historical injustice and oppression perpetrated on them for no other reason but for low caste birth. After the gap of couples of centuries, the Sants of Dera Ballan carried the torch of the great mission of Guru Ravidass. Various spiritual and community development projects meticulously undertaken by the Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan have been inching towards the great mission. It is the ingenuity of the Sants of Dera Ballan who have been able to blend successfully the egalitarian teachings of Guru Ravidass with the rational and critical philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar that consequently evolved into a powerful socio-cultural movement for the cultural transformation and spiritual regeneration of the Dalits in the region. If Guru Ravidass is considered the prophet of the Dalit consciousness during the medieval north Indian bhakti movement, the Sants of Dera Ballan can be credited with the task of relocating and re-invigorating Dalit consciousness and identity in the contemporary Punjab. They have provided Dalits with concrete and tangible identity markers that help them in sharpening the 'we'-'they' dichotomy. Ravidass Deras in Punjab and in other parts of the country, especially Dear Sachkhand Ballan (Punjab) and 'Guru Ravidass Birthplace Temple at Seer Govardhanpur' (Varanasi), the insignia of 'Har', rituals of Ardas and Aarti, slogan of *Bole So Nirbhay*, and the salutation of *Jai Guru Dev* have become the key signifiers of the emerging distinct Ravidassia Dalit Identity in north India and among the Dalit diaspora across the globe.

The Vienna incident is allegedly interpreted as an attack on this fast emerging distinct Ravidassia Dalit identity in Punjab and abroad. Since the

Vienna incident is connected with the violation of the Sikh code of conduct during the spiritual preaching by the Sants of Dera Ballan in a Ravidass temple over there, the latter retaliated silently in exhibiting their separate social and religious identity by deviating from their long established tradition of devoutly reciting the holy bani from Shri Guru Granth Sahib at the antim ardas ceremony of the slain Sant Ramanad of the Dera Ballan. In other words, the spontaneous violent reaction and the subsequent deviation from the tradition of the 'Prakash of Guru Granth Sahib' at Dera Sachkhand Ballan underline deeply the question of a separate Dalit identity in Punjab rather than what unfortunately and also wrongfully projected as an issue of intra-Sikh communal divide.

**[Acknowledgements:** This essay has long been in the making. It draws heavily on extended conversations I had over many years with the devotees of Guru Ravidass, Sants and followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, Dalit leaders and writers as well as the priests and followers of various other Ravidass Deras in Punjab and abroad. Earlier drafts of the paper were presented at various fora in India (JNU, IAS, Panjab University, Himachal Pradesh University, *Dalit Chetna Manch* (Mohali), Ambedkar Memorial Bhawan (Jalandhar), Canada (Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver), US (New York, Sacramento, Pittsburg, Fresno, Fremont, Salma, Bay Area and Yuba City) and Pakistan (Sir Ganga Ram Heritage Foundation, Lahore). My thanks to P.S. Verma, Ashutosh Kumar and Amit Prakash for carefully reading the earlier draft and to Autar S. Dhesi and Shinder Thandi whose sharp observations helped me to improve the narrative. This essay is dedicated to Seema for her patience and unstinted support throughout my numerous long field trips and extended hours in study. The usual disclaimers apply.]

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term Dalit (literally, grounded/oppressed/broken) is the "politically correct" nomenclature, which came to be used by the Mahar community in the late twentieth century for the untouchables (the people who have traditionally been placed at the lowest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy – see notes 15 and 25 below). The term includes Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Castes. However, in current political discourses, Dalit is mainly confined to Scheduled Castes.

<sup>2</sup> The attack was launched on the two topmost Sants of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan during the sermon ceremony on May 24, 2009 at Guru Ravidass Temple situated in Vienna-Rudolfsheim, the capital's 15<sup>th</sup> district near Westbahnhof, one of Vienna's main train stations. The number of the persons involved in the attack was reportedly six, who were overpowered by around 200 devotees gathered at the occasion. In the melee around two 16 people were reportedly injured. Sant Ramanand, the second-in-command of Dera Ballan later on succumbed to his injuries in hospital.

(<http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2009/05/24/world/AP-EU-Austria-Temple-Shooting.ht>). Downloaded on 5/25/2009.

<sup>3</sup> Dera literally mean a holy abode free from the structural bindings of institutionalised religious orders and is the headquarters of a group of devotees owing allegiance to a particular spiritual person, who is reverently addressed as Baba, Sant or Maharaj. A Dera thrives on a distinct philosophy, rituals and symbol, which are inspired by the teachings and philosophy of a particular holy person after whom it has been established.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Editorials ‘Caste Out, Yet Again’, May 16, 2009:5.

<sup>5</sup> Mishra, Vandita, “Inside Dera Sachkhand”, *The Sunday Express*, May 31, 2009, 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *The Hindu*, December 16, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed theoretical understanding of this point in a broader context refer to: Srinivas, 1956: 481-496.

<sup>10</sup> The proportion of the SC population is going to increase further rather significantly, as *Mahatam, Rai Sikh*, another downtrodden community, has recently been included in the Scheduled Castes list of the Indian constitution [(f) in part XIV] wide Constitution (Scheduled Castes) order (Amendment) Act, 2007, No 31 dated 29<sup>th</sup> August, 2007 (Punjab Government Gazette, Regd. No. CHD/0092/2006-2008, No. 45, November 9, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> The Ad Dharm movement came into existence in 1925 to fight against the system of untouchability. It was one of the earliest Adi movements of India that brought the downtrodden together to fight for their cause. It exhorted them to come forward to assert for their rights (for details see: Juergensmeyer, 1998; Juergensmeyer, 2000:221-37; Ram, 2004a:323-49).

<sup>12</sup> The Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF), the Republican Party of India (RPI), and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have subsequently carried on the legacy of this movement. For details see: Chandra, 2000:51; Ram, 2004b:895-912.

<sup>13</sup> The two most important missions are All India Adi-Dharm Mission (New Delhi), and Dera Sachkhand Ballan (Punjab). For details see: Schaller, 1996:111-6; Hawley, 1988: 271; Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 1988:19-20; Juergensmeyer, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Dera Sachkhand Ballan has established the following international charitable trusts abroad for dissemination of the bani of Ravidass amongst the Dalit diaspora: Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust [U.K.]; Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust [Vancouver] Canada; and Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust [U.S.A.].

<sup>15</sup> The outcastes were beyond the *Varna* (literally color) and were known as *Achhuts*, *Ati shudras*, *Chandalas*, *Antyajas*, *Pariahs*, *Dheds*, *Panchamas*, *Avarnas*, *Anariyas*, *Namashudras*, *Harijans* etc. They were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy and were meant to serve the *Varna* categories - *Brahmin*,



*Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and even the *Shudras*. The British regime in the country clubbed them first under the legal category of Depressed Classes and then the term Scheduled Castes. And in independent India the term Scheduled Castes became a constitutional category. They performed hereditary menial occupation, such as scavenging, shoe-making and animal carcass removing. Some of them embraced Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism in order to evade the oppression of untouchability. However, even their conversion to other religions could not protect them from the ruthless onslaughts of untouchability. (For details see: Ambedkar, n.d.; Chopra, 1982:121-2; Gokhale, 1986:270; Juergensmeyer, 1988:84; Puri, 2004:190-224; Beltz 2005:39; Ram, 2001:146-170).

<sup>16</sup> Though the founders of the Ad Dharm movement appealed to all the untouchables in the state, the response of the Chamars was tremendous. Majority of the total of 418,789 Ad Dharmis who joined the movement within the four years of its origin, belonged to the Chamar caste (Juergensmeyer, 1988: 77; see also Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 2000:102). Chamar is an umbrella caste category that clubs together “Chamar, Jatia Chamar, Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi and Ravidasi” (Census of India 1981, Series 17 <Punjab> Part IX. They comprise about twenty six percent (1991 census) of the total Scheduled Caste population of the state. If clubbed with Ad Dharmis, they together comprised forty two percent of the total Scheduled Caste population in Punjab (Gosal, 2004:23). Since majority of the Ad Dharmis are Chamars, they are popularly known as Ad Dharmi Chamars. Chamars and Ad Dharmi Chamars are mostly concentrated in the Doaba sub-region of the state. Mazhbis (Sweepers who embraced Sikhism) is another top ranking caste among the Scheduled Castes in Punjab. They constitute about 30 percent of the total Scheduled Castes population in the state (1991 census). Their Hindu counterpart Chuhras (Balmikis and Bhangis) constitutes 11.1 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population. Thus out of the total 38 Scheduled castes the two major groupings of Chuhras and Chamars together constitute 80 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population. (See also: Deep, 2001:7; Puri, 2004:4).

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?showtopic=44560>.

<sup>18</sup> Based on conversations with L.R. Balley, a veteran Ambedkarite Dalit leader, Jalandhar, 16 January 2003; K.C. Sulekh, a senior Ambedkarite and prolific writer, Chandigarh, 2 December 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Baptism into the *Khalsa*, the order instituted by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699, by offering sweetened water stirred with a doubled-edged sword.

<sup>20</sup> Based on conversation with Sant Prem Dass Jassal, President, All India Satguru Ravi Dass Mission, Vancouver, 17 May 2003.

<sup>21</sup> However, there is an alternate version about the etymological origin of the term Chamar. This version believes that the Chamar community is Buddhist in origin, and that the term Chamar is derived from the *Pali* word *Cigar* [bhikku’s robes] and not from *Charm* [leather]. (For details see: Prasad and Dahiwal, 2005:254-56; and Lochtefeld, 2005:208-12).

<sup>22</sup> Based on conversation with Arun Kumar, an Ambedkarite activist, Vancouver, 18 May 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Henceforth translations of the quotations from the poetry of Ravidass are taken from Callewaert and Friedlander (1992) and the Panjabi couplets (romanized) of his poetry with the page numbers of the Adi Granth are taken from Jassi and Suman (2001).

<sup>24</sup> This hymn seems to testify one of the legends in which the bewildered Brahmins were shown prostrating before him after they found his bodily image appear between each and every one of them during a feast thrown by Queen Jhali at Chittorgarh.

<sup>25</sup> *Varnashram dharma* divided Hindu society into four *Varnas* (occupational categories): *Brahmina* (priest), *Kshatriya* (soldier), *Vaishya* (trader), *Shudra* (menial worker). Originally somewhat flexible, this division became rigid with the passage of time and got further degenerated into castes and sub-castes. Broadly speaking, *Varna* system constituted the very basis of the hierarchically graded caste system in India, where *Brahmina* (priest) occupied the highest position to be followed by *Kshatriya* (soldier), *Vaishya* (trader) and the *Shudra* (menial workers) who were placed at the lowest rung and were hence considered as impure and polluted.

<sup>26</sup> Ironically, even some Dalits also feel comfortable with such concoctions about his life. Being his caste fellows, the elevated status of Ravidass serves as a facilitator in their attempt to move up the social hierarchy of the Hindu caste system (Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 1988:13). For a detailed account of such stories see the following sources in English: (Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar, [eds] 2005, esp. section on Ravidass; Callewaert and Friedlander, 1992; Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 1988:9-32).

<sup>27</sup> As far as Mirabai is concerned, different scholars hold different views regarding the belief of her being a disciple of Ravidass. For details see: Chaturvedi, 1952:239-40.

<sup>28</sup> Based on conversation with K. C. Sulekh, an Ambedkarite and prolific writer, Chandigarh, 2 December 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Based on conversations with the priests of Dera Ballan, 14 April 2004; Virinder Kumar Banger, a devotee of Guru Ravidass and follower of the Dera Ballan, Vancouver, 17 May 2003.

<sup>30</sup> As reported in one of the most popular Dalit web site: [http://www.ambedkartimes.com/about\\_Ambedkar.htm](http://www.ambedkartimes.com/about_Ambedkar.htm) [November 11, 2007].

<sup>31</sup> Sant Hiran Dass of this Dera established Ravidass Sabha in 1907 and published a collection of Ravidass's poems under the title *Rae Das Ki Bani*, Allahabad: Belvedere Press, 1908.

<sup>32</sup> Mangoo Ram Jaspal is an NRI Ad Dharmi of village Haryana near Hoshiarpur, Punjab. He returned from England in 1970 and settled in Jalandhar. He took a active interest in reviving the Ad Dharm movement in Doaba region of Punjab and convened a conference on December 13, 1970 at Dera Sachkhand

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Ballan and revived the Ad Dharm Mandal as the Ad Dharm Scheduled Castes Federation.

<sup>33</sup> For biographical details see: (Bawa, 2005:2 and Bawa, 2005a:5 & 2).

<sup>34</sup> Based on conversations with Ajit Chand Nimta, a poet and devotee of Ravidass, Jalandhar, 14 April 2003; Chaman Lal, a follower of Dera Ballan, Chandigarh, 17 August 2002.

<sup>35</sup> In year 2005, the present head of Dera Ballan, Sant Niranjana Dass accompanied by late Sant Ramanand, visited Greece, Italy, Spain, Holland, and Germany from March 20 to May 31; and U.S., Canada and U.K. from July 1 to August 31. During April-May 2006 he paid visits to Europe (Italy, Greece Germany, Holland and England). This was his 4<sup>th</sup> international religious visit to Italy and probably 14<sup>th</sup> to U.K. (Madahar, 2006:1, 9 & 5). In 2007 Sant Niranjana Dass along with Sant Ramanand paid visits to their followers in Europe and North America during the months of September and October (Madahar, 2007). Sant Garib Dass, predecessor of Sant Niranjana Dass, also visited England six times, America four times, and Canada two times (conversation with Sant Surinder Dass Bawa, priest of Dera Ballan, Ballan, 14 April 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Based on field notes.

<sup>37</sup> Sant Hari Dass (June 11, 1972-February 7, 1982), Sant Garib Dass (February 7, 1982-July 23, 1994), and Sant Niranjana Dass (July 23, 1994 – Continuing).

<sup>38</sup> Based on participant observation by the author.

<sup>39</sup> Based on conversation with Som Nath Bharti Qadian, Dera Ballan, 14 April 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Based on personal communication with one of the participants in the procession; see also *Rozana Spokesman*, February 17, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> In the first-ever statistical analysis of the social profile of more than 300 senior journalists in 37 Hindi and English newspapers and television channels in New Delhi, the capital of India, it was found that Dalits and Adivasis (tribals, designated as Scheduled Tribes [ST] in the constitution of India) "...[were] conspicuous by their absence among the decision-makers. Not even one of the 315 key decision-makers belonged to the Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes" (*The Hindu*, [Delhi Edition], June 5, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Based on participant observation by the author.

<sup>43</sup> "In 1980, a Punjabi Dalit went to a Sikh Gurudwara in Vancouver to pay his respectful tribute. While speaking on the podium, he mentioned the name of Sant Ravidas as "Guru" Ravidass. The moment he mentioned this name, he faced sharp objections and reactions from the preachers and the members of the management committee. This grave sense of grave humiliation of a Dalit in Sikh Gurudwara triggered a mass mobilization of Dalits in Canada. These Dalits collected donations from Dalits living in all over Canada and bought a piece of land to build their own Gurudwara. Later Shri Guru Ravidas Sabha of Vancouver built a huge beautiful Shri Guru Ravidas Gurudwara in Vancouver.

Later these Ravidassis decided to commemorate the birth anniversary of their Guru Shri Guru Ravidass. They requested a local Punjabi Newspaper to carry a paid advertisement about the birth anniversary of Shri Guru Ravidass. That newspaper not only refused to publish their advertisement, even ridiculed them for adding prefix “Guru” with the name of Sant Ravidass. The newspaper made an issue out of it and managed to create disharmony and antagonism between Ravidassia community and Jat-Sikhs. Nevertheless another Punjabi newspaper the Indo-Canadian Times not only agreed to publish the add with prefix “Guru” with Sant Ravidas, it also wrote an editorial why should Sant Ravidas be called as “Guru” and why should Dalits have rights and freedom to call Sant Ravidass as Shri Guru Ravidass” (Singh 2003:39). I came across a similar case study during my visit to Shri Guru Ravidass Temple Sacramento (Rio Linda), California on 30 May 2008.

<sup>44</sup> The title ‘Singh’ became popular among the Sikhs after the formation of the Khalsa in 1699. Before that the names of all the Sikh Gurus were not followed by the title ‘Singh’.

<sup>45</sup> However, the earlier insignia of the Ad Dharm Mandal of 1926 as well as of the All India Adi Dharm Mission (Regd.) of 1960 was *Sohang*. The Sants of Dera Ballan changed it into *Har* with the approval of the Ravidass Sadhu Sampradaya of Punjab, Ravidass Deras, and the various Guru Ravidass *Sabhas* (Committees) both within India and abroad. It was registered under the Copyright Act 1957, Government of India, registration no. A48-807/87/CO, dated March 6, 1987. Later on, the change of the insignia became a bone of contention between the All India Adi Dharm Mission (Regd.) and the Dera Ballan. The Sants of Dera Ballan justified the change on the ground that Guru Ravidass did not use the word *Sohang* in his sacred poetry at all. On the contrary, he used the word *Har* as many as 24 times. Moreover, it is alleged that the word *Sohang*, being an article of spiritual faith, cannot be used casually and publicly in the form of an insignia. The All India Adi Dharm Mission (Regd.) refused to buy this logic of the Dera Ballan and continued to adhere to the original insignia of *Sohang* (*Sachhi Kahani* [The True Story] 2007: 50-66). Though the insignia *Har* has become an acceptable symbol of the entire Ravidassia community in Punjab and abroad, but some of the temples abroad (Shri Guru Ravidass Temple Pittsburg [California]) still adhered to the old insignia of *Sohang* or display both of the insignia on their (Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha, New York) letter pads (based on field observation on May 25 –June 3, 2008). For a detailed account of the frequency of the word *Har* and other similar sacred names of the *Nirankar* (formless God) used by Guru Ravidass in his poetry recorded in the Adi Granth (Guru Granth Sahib) of the Sikh faith see: Singh, 2001:45-46).

<sup>46</sup> In Sikh Gurdwaras, however, *Aarti* is not performed. Guru Nanak referred to *Aarti* in the hymn *Dhanasari* 3 (Adi Granth: 13). The entire cosmos, said he, is performing the *Aarti* of a single God. The whole sky is the platter and all the stars are its burning wicks (for details see: Deep, 2001:44-46).

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