



# **Mysticism And The Theology Of Nirgun Bhakti In Guru Ravidas's Bani.**

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## **Abstract**

Guru Ravidas was born in the 15th century near the oldest city of Hindu mythology, Banaras. He existed during the time when the bhakti wave had reached its peak and was towards decline. Although since bhakti thought was present even in the Vedic and pre-Vedic age, in the form of sacrifice, it would not be accurate to indicate a decline in the bhakti, but the wave was reaching its diminishing days. In the vast and complex spiritual landscape of India, saint poetry has long served as a potent instrument for both mystical exploration and social critique. Emerging from the Bhakti and Sufi traditions between the 12th and 18th centuries, Saint poets such as Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram, Lal Ded, and Bulleh Shah articulated a deeply personal connection with the divine that simultaneously challenged rigid societal norms (Achmare, 77). The work produced by Guru Ravidas became extremely important as he was writing when the wave of bhakti had reached him after creating various bhakti sects in the southern region of India. He was influenced by the bhagats before him, resulting in creating a version of bhakti in Varanasi which represented all the bhaktas' work who wrote before him, whether it be the Alvar Nayanmars, warkari, vashvanite, kashmari shavism and other regional bhakti sectors. He represented them all. The core element of bhakti, which was travelling throughout India from the 5th to the 17th century, when it reached Guru Ravidas in the 15th century, had perfected its essence, which was bridal mysticism. Guru Ravidas' take on it as a devotee of Hari (Krishna) was quite simple yet appealing. The mysticism and nirgun bhakti expressed by him in his bani are exceptional because it includes all hierarchical representations of human civilization of his time. He wrote of his love for the divine like many other bhagats before him, with complete, total surrender and highlighting the social evil which prevailed in his time, engaging not just the spiritual ideologies but also with social issues of his time. His poetry makes one believe and understand love is not just in individuality but is in a union. Another profound element of his poetry was nirgun bhakti; wherever he was, whatever he did, God was included. He writes as if he were incomplete without God and preached to everyone a divine union with Hari. This paper explores some of Guru Ravidas's poetry, the echoes not just of his benevolent bridal mysticism but also the nirgun bhakti preached by him during his lifetime, still alive in his poetry.

## Keywords

Bhakti, Mysticism, Nirgun Bhagti , Arti, Alchemy and lover

## Introduction

The bhakti movement has created an army of devotees who stand as the pillars of bhakti reform; one of the most prominent among them is Guru Ravidas. His poetry has revolutionised the land of Varanasi with his ideologies of equality with love. He does not just live in the hearts of his devotees but in the work of researchers also. His poetry transcends the hierarchical structure of society. The messages he tried to leave behind, of oneness, of brotherhood, of love from the mouth of his devotee has reached the mass population, giving a space to society where equality persists. The voice against social discrimination, not just in the field of spirituality but also within society, by Ravidas was so loud and mind-consuming that its wave reached Punjab. Ravidass, who unleashed a frontal attack on the centuries-old practice of caste-based social exclusion and oppression in India? Belonging to one of the lowest castes (Chamars) in India allowed him to act as a catalyst in the emergence of Dalit consciousness in Punjab. He commanded a very large following among his fellow caste members, who considered him their guru (mentor). They dedicated to him temples, bhawans (memorial halls), educational institutions and chairs, cultural organisations, and hospitals(Ram, 1342). One chair among many working to maintain his legacy alive is our Guru Ravidas Chair of Sant Sahitya, where researchers are working every day to unlock the brilliance he left behind. His expression of mysticism in his poetry doesn't just talk about union with the divine; it reflects a uniformity of love and devotion.

He says,

*All read and hear, and think of God*

*But have no experience of love.*

*How would iron become pure gold,*

*If the alchemist's stone didn't touch it? (Sagar, 71)*

Here in his poem called “Ram Kali”, he expresses his doctrine of love explicitly. He called the reader out for their pompous understanding of theology, he threads this metaphysical idea of alchemy where he called alchemist the lord and the metal human, engaging with the formation of Gold from iron. Personifying Gold as a god-conscious part of human consciousness and iron as a self-conscious form of human consciousness. Binding the touch of God and love for God as one, and the way to unity as well as self-realisation. The pure verses of Ravidas were skilled in breaking the bonds of doubt, but not opposed to the Vedas, the shastras and the practice of Good people (Zelliot, 203). The Vedas, Upanishads and Amgams, or any other religious work talking about theology in a different context, have discussed about a union with the divine and also give way on how to achieve it, although they are not just complicated for the general public but also discriminatory for the subaltern and women. The bhakti path, on the other hand and in fact every bhakti poet discusses bhakti as a simple act of endearment. All the bhakti poetry has given a straightforward road map to God. When Ravidas personifies in his poetry Gold as the form of Human consciousness in union with God, he does not mean only the bharamans, sudras or only women. He means all, the entire human civilisation, without any differentiation. Ravidas tries to make us understand that we read, hear and meditate on the name, but we do not experience the love of God. Reading, hearing, meditating seem to be merely linguistic processes that focus on the word, on the name of God, but beyond language is the experience of God, especially the experience of love, love of God, love of reality, love of that power that creates, maintains and destroys the world, love for all beings in all situations, which is not experienced ( Sagar,134). Another expression of Ravidas's poetic genius is seen in his poem, where he talks of youth and how he has spent his youth.

He says,

To whom should I relate my agony?  
 Without my Lord, how should I survive?  
 My heart knows no Rest; it longs for you.  
 O my Creator, Pray, take care of me.  
 The agony of separation burns me with its excessive heat;  
 No sleep do I have, nor do I like to eat.  
 My friends and companions are intoxicated with pride;  
 In the talk of my beloved, they take no delight.  
 I am the unfortunate one; I know only to commit sins.  
 My youth is gone, and my heart's desire is unfulfilled.  
 You are my Lord, you are my beloved, and you are kind.  
 I am your servant, Slave of yours.  
 This, indeed, says Ravidas, is my fear  
 How will your lover survive without seeing you, O my Dear ? ( Upadhyaya,136)

*JO mohin vedan ka sani ashaun*  
*Vani 82: See also Bani, 61*

In this bani, Guru Ravidas depicts a love story between his God and him. He talks of separation, stating he can't sleep without his God, he can't eat. Depicting the condition of a bhakti devotee, engaging with his solitude, pleading to God, his lord to meet with him. This entire bani is drenched in mysticism, which is generally believed to be a feminine aspect and male bhakti poets have adopted this feminine element. In the case of the male poets, their use of their earlier poetic forms gendered the poetic voice, since bhakti poets spoke of their own experience; they promoted their adoption of the poetic female voice as an appropriate vehicle for expressing love for God (Pechilis, 12). The admiration seen in Guru Ravidas poetry through bridal mysticism is no different, he becomes the female voice of love for his God, creating a unique blend of metaphysical expression through his poetic diction.

### Nirgun Bhakti in Guru Ravidas's Bani

Guru Ravidas's nirgun bhakti just as his mysticism was as unpretentious as his individual theology. Guru Ravidas, one of the famous untouchable saint poets of the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, is known as a leading star of the bhakti movement, especially the nirgun sampradaya or sant parampara (sect or tradition of devotees of a formless God) of the later medieval centuries in the northern India. He was a cobbler, saint, poet, philosopher and social reformer all rolled into one who employed bhakti (loving devotion) as a method of social protest against the century old untouchability (Schempp, 2182). His relationship with nirgun bhakti was deeply intertwined in his day to day life. Most of his stories are told as people came to visit him in his house. The discourse of Guru Ravidas in respect to his stories and miracle performed is encircled in his own house. For him there was no temple as a place of worship but his own house which can also be seen as a symbol of his nirgun bhakti. He has described the meaning of nirgun bhakti in many of his bani's

He says,

*Why are you searching for him outside?  
Search for him inside.  
See the splendour of your Beloved, O Ravidas,  
By concentrating your attention within*

*The one in search of whom i roamed everywhere  
Has revealed himself within me  
The five(melodies) are my companions now,  
They show me the way to the treasure*

*Within the mind i perform worship,  
Within the mind i burn incense  
And within the mind i swerve  
Your resplendent form of sahaj state (Upadhyaya, 28)*

Here as Guru Ravidas decodes for us his nirgun theology. He describes nirgun bhakti as a state, a meditative one which can be seen as a formless belief in the divine being without any dualistic manifestation of his/her form. Guru Ravidas poetic expression in many of his poetry especially the above one has taken nirgun bhakti as a central theme and explained it piece by piece making its adaptation and understanding easiest for his vernacular audience. He says, when the soul withdraws from the body and enters into the third eye, it takes its first step into the inner regions, which Ravidas describes as the inner sky where one can perform the real worship of the lord and the start merging the self or soul into the sound current;

Another poetry of his which has taken up arti one of the major bhramiracal theological practice.

He writes,

*Perform arti in the inner sky;  
Merge the self in the sound current....  
Resplendent within the thousand-petalled lotus,  
Where the unstruck divine symphony is eternally played.  
This is how the true arti of the supreme being is performed  
And the service of the imperceptible  
And undifferentiated lord is observed.  
A Guru alone can explain this arti, Says, Ravidas,  
And such arti can ferry one across at the end ( Upadhyaya, 29).*

Guru Ravidas has taken the hindu ritual of arti generally performed by the poojari of a temple for the temple deity and gives it to an individual, as if breaking free from the middle man, the pandit. This arti which is directed by Guru Ravidas as an individualistic practice within the mind is a profound meditative state of Nirgun Bhakti. His poetry not just describes the nirgun notion of bhakti but also frees the idea of lord from bhramirical norms and hence discrimination. He with his nirgun bhakti eliminates the middle man, gives direction to the devotees of the Lord.

## Conclusion

The poetic diction of Guru Ravidas's ideologies was multilayered; he didn't just talk about the social repressions he also brought to light a beautiful blend of mysticism and nirgun bhakti. The Bhakti approach of Guru Ravidas was a non-violent struggle for the emancipation and empowerment of the Shudras. Though he combined humility with Bhakti, his concept of formless God reflected an altogether different picture. Guru Ravidas's God was not humble at all in the typical sense of the term. He was graceful. He was not indifferent to the downtrodden (Bashir, 2457). He deconstructed the idea of temple worship as a protest against untouchability through his poetry and intellectual resilience. He had described deep seated bhramaical discriminating rituals through his poetry. He talks about arti and entangles it into nirgun bhakti , he talks about finding God within instead of looking outside, he talks about separation and union with the lord. He talks about the importance of God's presence in one's life. To comprehensively analyze the mind of Ravidas, it is imperative to venture into his literary creations, including his simply worded yet blunt poems. His eloquent words were his strong message to society, and continue to be integral to the daily conversations of the Hindi belt of Northern India ( Das, 131). He has included many social evils of society in his poetry with positivity, expressing with polite peaceful protest against inequality. In the vast and complex spiritual landscape of India, saint poetry has long served as a potent instrument for both mystical exploration and social critique.

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