
The Revolutionary Contribution of Guru Ravidas Ji to Social Reform

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Abstract:

Guru Ravidas Ji was one of the most influential saints of the Bhakti movement who worked for social equality, human dignity, and spiritual freedom in medieval India. Born in a society deeply divided by caste discrimination and untouchability, he challenged rigid social hierarchies through his teachings, poetry, and personal example. His philosophy emphasized that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God and that true devotion is based on purity of heart rather than caste, wealth, or ritual practices. Through simple yet powerful hymns, Guru Ravidas Ji promoted ideals of compassion, justice, brotherhood, and universal humanity. He rejected social oppression and advocated a casteless and harmonious society, famously expressed in his vision of “Begampura,” an ideal city free from fear, sorrow, inequality, and exploitation. His teachings inspired marginalized communities and encouraged social awakening among the oppressed sections of society. This study examines the revolutionary contribution of Guru Ravidas Ji to social reform and highlights the continuing relevance of his egalitarian vision in addressing contemporary issues of social justice, inclusion, and human rights.

Keywords-social, reform, Guru Ravidas Ji, revolutionary, caste**Introduction:**

Guru Ravidas was a prominent saint, poet, and social reformer of the Bhakti movement in medieval India, believed to have lived during the 15th–16th century. Born in Seer Govardhanpur near Varanasi in a humble family of leather workers (Chamar community) . His parents, father Santokh Dass and mother Kalsa Devi were engaged in the traditional occupation of making and repairing shoes. Born in a marginalized community, he rose above social barriers to become a respected spiritual figure whose teachings emphasized equality, devotion, and human dignity. He rejected caste discrimination and ritualistic practices, advocating instead a direct and personal connection with God through sincere devotion (bhakti) and a pure heart. Guru Ravidas composed devotional hymns in simple language, making spiritual ideas accessible to the common people. His verses, included in the Guru Granth Sahib, reflect his universal message of love, equality, and social justice.

Guru Ravidas lived during a period marked by the later phase of the Delhi Sultanate, particularly under rulers like Sikandar Lodi. Politically, the time was characterized by instability and centralized authority, while culturally vibrant cities like Varanasi remained important religious centers. Socially, the age was dominated by a rigid caste system, where untouchability was deeply entrenched and communities such as leather workers faced severe discrimination and exclusion from public and religious life. Religiously, orthodox practices, ritualism, and priestly dominance prevailed, often marginalizing lower castes. However, this period also witnessed the rise of reformist movements like the Bhakti tradition, with saints such as Kabir and Guru Ravidas emphasizing devotion, equality, and a direct connection with God, alongside the parallel influence of Sufi teachings promoting love and brotherhood. Economically, while the system was largely agrarian, urban centers saw the growth of artisan classes who contributed significantly to production yet remained socially marginalized. In this period of inequality and emerging reform, Guru Ravidas's message of equality, dignity of labour, and a casteless, harmonious society was a powerful response to the conditions of his time.

Revolutionised religion by stating the presence of God within all:

Guru Ravidas emerged as one of the most influential social reformers whose life and teachings directly challenged the rigid caste hierarchy and social inequalities of medieval Indian society. Born into a marginalized community, he transformed his lived experience of discrimination into a powerful message of equality, asserting that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God and that social status has no spiritual significance. "Spirituality resides within everybody, a message that had a lasting impact on the minds of the disadvantaged." (Saint Ravidas A Silence Movement :A Case study in the perspective of both Local & Global Issues. pg133) . Rejecting ritualism and priestly dominance, he emphasized inner devotion (bhakti), moral conduct, and purity of heart as the true path to God, thereby revolutionising religion and making it accessible to the common people.

Sant Ravidas Ji was one of the foremost exponents of the Nirgun Bhakti tradition, which emphasizes devotion to a formless, attributeless, and omnipresent God. According to Ravidas Ji, God is not confined to idols, temples, rituals, caste, or religious institutions; rather, the Divine resides in every heart and can be realized through sincere devotion (bhakti), remembrance of God's Name (Naam), and inner purity. For Ravidas Ji, true spirituality lay in cultivating humility, equality, compassion, and devotion rather than performing elaborate rituals. His Nirgun philosophy also challenged caste discrimination by asserting the spiritual equality of all human beings before the one formless God. Through this approach, he transformed Bhakti into a powerful movement for both spiritual awakening and social reform. He says,

"Naam tero aarti bhajan murari,

Hari ke naam bin jhoote sagal pasare" (Sant Ravidas Ratnavali pg 4).

Ravidas Ji declares that God's name itself is the real aarti and bhajan, while all worldly displays of religiosity are ultimately meaningless without genuine devotion. Through this verse, he challenges ritualism and emphasizes spiritual equality, teaching that every person regardless of caste, wealth, or social status can attain God through pure faith and inner devotion. "This verse expresses the ideology of the poor and helpless sections of society, where God can be worshipped even without rituals and formal ceremonies. Before removing social inequality, it appears that Sant Ravidas wanted to address cultural inequality and awaken the cultural consciousness of a rigid and unchanging society." (Sant Ravidas Ratnavali pg. 4). Sant Ravidas in this verse emphasizes that true devotion does not depend on expensive rituals, temple ceremonies, caste status, or religious authority. According to him, even the poorest and most helpless people can reach God through sincere remembrance and faith. This idea was revolutionary because, during his time, religion was often controlled by rigid social and caste-based traditions that excluded lower sections of society. The verse gives spiritual dignity to the marginalized. Ravidas suggests that God listens to pure devotion rather than outward show or ritual performance. By saying that the name of God itself is enough, he challenges the belief that one needs priests, wealth, or special ceremonies to attain spirituality. In this way, he makes religion simple, equal, and accessible to everyone. The deeper meaning of the verse is also cultural and social. Before directly attacking social inequality, Ravidas first questions the cultural mindset that supports discrimination. He tries to awaken society's conscience by criticizing hollow rituals and external displays of religion. He believed that a society trapped in rigid customs and false superiority could not become truly humane or equal.

Thus, the verse is not only a devotional expression but also a subtle social reform message. It promotes equality, inner purity, human dignity, and freedom from blind traditions, making Ravidas an important voice of the Bhakti movement and social awakening. Guru Ravidas also promoted dignity of labour by continuing his work as a cobbler while attaining spiritual greatness, sending a strong message against occupational hierarchy. His inclusive teachings transcended religious boundaries, fostering harmony between communities, and his hymns included in the Guru Granth Sahib further testify to his universal appeal. Through simple language and profound ideas, he empowered the masses and left behind a legacy that continues to inspire movements for equality, human dignity, and social reform.

Ethical humanism in Ravidas ji's teachings:

Guru Ravidas ji's role as a social reformer can also be understood through his consistent challenge to the idea of social exclusion and untouchability. At a time when access to temples, education, and social spaces was restricted, he asserted that divine presence is universal and not confined to any particular place or caste. By doing so, he undermined the monopoly of upper castes over religion and opened spiritual paths for the marginalized, thereby laying the foundation for a more inclusive society. Another strong example lies in

his poetry (padas), where he openly rejects caste discrimination. In one of his well-known verses, he asserts:

“Jaat jaat mein jaat hai, jo keetan ke paat; Raidas manush na jud sake, jab tak jaat na jaat.”

There are castes within castes, like the layers of a banana tree. Human beings cannot unite until caste itself disappears. Sant Ravidas used the image of a banana stem, which consists of many layers one inside another. He argued that society had become fragmented into endless caste divisions, preventing genuine human unity and equality. His message was that social harmony is impossible as long as caste distinctions continue to dominate human relationships. Here, he criticizes the endless divisions within caste and declares that true unity among humans is impossible unless caste distinctions are eliminated. This was a direct ideological revolt against untouchability. Guru Ravidas challenged untouchability not through violent rebellion, but through spiritual and social defiance rooted in equality. His teachings did not merely criticize inequality but actively offered an alternative moral order based on compassion, humility, and fraternity.

Another significant dimension of his reformative work lies in his emphasis on ethical living and inner transformation as the basis of social change. Guru Ravidas Ji believed that societal reform cannot be sustained without reform of the individual mind. Sant Ravidas used the idea behind “Man changa to kathoti mein Ganga” not only as a spiritual message but also as a social reformist statement. At that time, society was deeply divided by caste hierarchy, untouchability, and ritual superiority. Ravidas challenged this system by saying that: a person’s worth depends on the purity of mind and actions, not caste or birth, God is accessible to everyone, including the poor and oppressed and inner goodness is greater than expensive rituals, pilgrimages, or social status. As a social reformer, Ravidas Ji promoted equality and human dignity, rejected caste discrimination, emphasized honest labour (karma) and moral living and encouraged social harmony through the Bhakti movement.

His teachings gave confidence and dignity to marginalized communities because he himself belonged to a socially oppressed caste yet became a respected spiritual leader. He encouraged people to abandon ego, greed, and false pride associated with caste and status, and instead cultivate virtues like truth, contentment, and devotion. “Today, his teachings are even more relevant for society because people now have very little time for philosophy, spirituality, and reflection, and are only running after material wealth”.(Sant Ravidas. Pg 10,11). In this sense, his approach combined both spiritual and social reform, making his philosophy deeply transformative.

Ravidas ji’s vision of an ideal state - ‘Begumpura’:

His idea of Begumpura -a city without sorrow beautifully captured his vision of an ideal society free from caste divisions, oppression, and economic exploitation, reflecting an early articulation of social justice. Furthermore, Guru Ravidas played an important role in empowering marginalized communities psychologically and culturally.

The concept of Begumpura, envisioned by Guru Ravidas, represents an ideal, utopian society free from sorrow, fear, and injustice. Literally meaning “city without grief,” Begumpura symbolizes a world where all individuals live with dignity, equality, and complete freedom. “Begumpura sahar ko naun, dukh andesh nahin tihin thaun. ab ham khoob vatan ghar paya, ooncha kher sada man bhaya”. (Sant Ravidas Ratnavali pg. 4).

Guru Ravidas ji describes Begumpura as an ideal society free from sorrow, oppression, inequality and fear. It symbolizes a just and harmonious world where all people live with dignity, freedom and happiness. " Though Begumpura was an ideal state as visualized by Ravidas, it was not a mere figment of his mind. In fact, its articulation was based on in-depth understanding of the socio-economic and political conditions prevailing during his lifetime”.(Guru Ravidas and His Thought pg. 42) In this vision, there is no caste discrimination or untouchability, reflecting Ravidas’s strong opposition to the rigid social hierarchies of his time. The society is also economically just, with no taxes or exploitation, ensuring equal access to resources for all. Politically, Begumpura is free from oppressive authority, allowing people to move and live without restrictions or fear. Rooted in the egalitarian spirit of the Bhakti movement, this idea blends spiritual liberation with social reform, presenting both a critique of the existing order and a hopeful vision of a just future. In modern terms, Begumpura resonates with the ideals of democracy, human rights, and social justice, and its realization lies in building an inclusive society that guarantees equality, dignity, and freedom for every individual.

Guru Ravidas used the concept of Begumpura as a tool for social reform in many ways. Begumpura represented a casteless society where human worth was based on devotion and character, not birth. The concept promoted universal brotherhood and respect for all people. It gave hope and self-respect to oppressed sections of society. By articulating a vision like Begumpura, he gave people not just hope but a sense of belonging and dignity in an otherwise oppressive social order. His teachings instilled confidence among the oppressed to question unjust norms and assert their rights, which over time contributed to the emergence of collective identities such as the Ravidassia community. Even today, the idea of Begumpura remains relevant because modern society still struggles with caste discrimination, inequality, social exclusion, and economic injustice. Guru Ravidas’s vision inspires movements for social equality, human rights, dignity of labour, and inclusive development. Thus, Begumpura is not just a spiritual city but a powerful symbol of Guru Ravidas’s social reform movement and his dream of a just and harmonious society. This empowerment was subtle yet powerful, as it worked through consciousness rather than confrontation. His influence also extended to gender and social inclusivity, as his teachings did not discriminate on the basis of gender or social background. Women and people from diverse communities were equally welcomed in his spiritual fold, reflecting a broader humanitarian outlook. By promoting equality in both spiritual and social spheres, Guru Ravidas helped create a more balanced and humane social vision.

Ravidas ji's influence on Meerabai:

The influence of Guru Ravidas on Meerabai became an important step towards social reform because their relationship challenged the rigid social and religious structure of medieval India. Meerabai, a Rajput princess born into a rajput royal family, she devoted her life to the worship of Lord Krishna whom she regarded as her eternal husband and divine beloved. Influenced by the teachings of Guru Ravidas ji, she accepted Guru Ravidas who belonged to a socially marginalized community as her spiritual Guru. This itself was a revolutionary act in a caste-dominated society. Through this relationship, several reformatory ideas spread in society. At a time when caste hierarchy was very strict, a royal woman accepting Ravidas ji as her guru questioned the belief that spiritual wisdom belonged only to upper castes. It promoted the idea that devotion is greater than caste, all humans are equal before God, and spiritual greatness depends on inner purity, not on birth. Thus, their association weakened caste barriers socially and spiritually.

Both Guru Ravidas and Meerabai emphasized personal devotion to God, love, equality, and humanity, rejection of unnecessary rituals and social pride. This made religion simpler and accessible to ordinary people, especially lower and marginalized sections of society. Meerabai's devotion inspired women to express spiritual freedom openly. She opposed: patriarchal restrictions, forced social expectations, and blind obedience to royal traditions. Her acceptance of Ravidas ji's teachings showed that women could choose their own spiritual path and question social norms. Guru Ravidas deeply shaped Meerabai's spiritual outlook by emphasizing pure devotion (bhakti) over ritualism and social status.

“Ravidas's teachings may have inspired in her a sense of inclusivity, a belief that caste or social standing had no bearing on the path to bhakti”.

(Mirabai: The Renunciation, the Rebellion and the Sainthood” pg. 103)

Under his influence, her devotion became more intense, personal, and detached from worldly expectations. She began to reject royal comforts, societal pressures, and even family opposition, choosing instead a life dedicated entirely to Krishna. This reflects Ravidas's teaching that true devotion requires inner purity and complete surrender, not external show or social approval. His egalitarian philosophy also found expression in Meerabai's life and poetry. Inspired by Ravidas's message of equality, she disregarded caste and gender barriers, openly mingling with saints and devotees from all backgrounds. Her verses reflect a deep sense of spiritual freedom and defiance of orthodox restrictions, echoing Ravidas's vision of a society free from discrimination and hierarchy. Thus, Guru Ravidas's influence on Meerabai was not merely spiritual but also social and psychological. He empowered her to rise above rigid structures of caste, gender, and royalty, and to embody a path of fearless devotion and equality. Their relationship stands as a remarkable example of how Bhakti saints collectively contributed to social reform and spiritual democratization in medieval India.

Conclusion

Guru Ravidas Ji emerged as a revolutionary social reformer who challenged caste discrimination, social inequality, and ritualistic orthodoxy through his teachings of equality,

human dignity, and universal brotherhood. His vision of Begampura represented an ideal society based on justice, freedom, and social harmony, where every individual could live with dignity irrespective of caste or status. By emphasizing inner devotion, ethical conduct, and the unity of humankind, he inspired marginalized communities and contributed significantly to social transformation. Thus, beyond his devotional contributions, Guru Ravidas stands out as a visionary reformer who combined spiritual depth with social awareness. His ideas continue to resonate in modern discussions on equality, dignity, and social justice, making him a timeless figure in the history of reform movements in India. Through his life and teachings, Guru Ravidas emerged as a powerful voice for social reform, inspiring generations to strive for a more just and inclusive society.

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