



## DALIT IDENTITY AS EVOLUTIONARY DISCOURSE IN INDIA

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This paper traces the roots of Dalit identity formation from pre-colonial to contemporary periods by focusing on evolutionary process of Dalit discourse on identity formation process. By using historical and contemporary model of analysis this paper explores the evolutionary trajectory of Dalit identity formation process. So far as discourse of Dalit identity in pre-colonial period is concern, the ideas of Kabir, Ravidas and Acchuta Nand have been examined. In case of colonial period attempt has been made to document various movements of Dalits and by Dalits to assert new forms of identity in different parts of India. This paper also explores the Dalit identity formation in postcolonial India by focusing on some of the famous autobiographies of prominent Dalit personalities. The main argument of this paper is that intellectuals critically contributed for emergence of identity consciousness among the lower castes of India in the domains of socio-cultural and politics. This paper also proposes that Dalit identity formation process is immensely facilitated by the intellectuals mentioned above whom provided socio-cultural consciousness among masses belong to lower castes.

Intellectual reconstruction of the Dalit identity and their articulation of historical and cultural dimensions of Dalit society have indeed long history. This chapter does not focus on ancient period rather mainly focus on medieval Bhakti movement which created sense of fluid unity among lower castes of India to analyze pre-colonial situation. The main reason for this selection is that in the contemporary discourse of Dalit identity immensely influenced by the ideas of Bhakti saints. Hence this chapter traces the pre-colonial roots of Dalit identity and its convergence in colonial period in the domain of identity formation from the perceptive of mystical spirituality. Celebrated Bhakti saints Kabir, Ravidas and Acchuta Nand made a unique contribution in the form of questioning the validity Brahmanical framework of Indian society. They questioned the religious restrictions on worship prevailed during medieval and early modern period. Even though they operated in the domain of religion their teachings have strong socio-economic and cultural aspects egalitarian ethos forming overarching paradigm. As result of this Bhakti movement became popular among the Sudras and masses belong to lower social strata of Indian society. This paper explores, by referring to select Dalit autobiographies, the contribution of the Adi-movements, the non-Brahman movements against the Brahmin hegemony, bhakti saints attempts of the intellectual re- construction of the Dalit identity and the identity movements in the contemporary period leading to the culmination of the reconstruction of the Dalit identity.

This paper finds out the evolutionary trajectory of the Dalit identity in the pre-colonial period for a penetrating understanding of the evolution of the identity formation process among lower sections of Indian society. Identity formation is based on the experience of the Dalits in relation to within their community and with upper caste Hindus. The experience



about oneself and the community is a part of the existing socio- economic, political, cultural order. Identity as a concept is based on the experience of one - self in relation to others, similar beliefs and cultural expressions that cause to formulate the identity. This can as well be applied to the identity formation of the Dalits against the backdrop of various phases of the consciousness building movements.<sup>1</sup>

Initially the identity formation of the Dalits critically related to the Bhakti movement, which helped construct an identity in opposition to the Brahminical framework of identity. The mystics who led the Bhakti movement include Ramanand and Raidas in the North, Chaitanya and Chandidasa in the East, Eknath, Choka Mela, Tukaram and Narsinh Mehta in the Western parts and Ramanuja, Nimbaraka and Basava, Veemana and Veerabrahmam in the South. Their contribution to the anti-Brahmin thought lies in opposing caste distinctions and asserting equality before God. M.G. Ranade called the Bhakti movement being unbrahmanical.<sup>2</sup> However, the saint poets did not advocate detachment from normal worldly life as a prerequisite for the salvation. They advocated normal family life in society. Unlike the Brahmin priests, Bhakti poets disapproved of renunciation, asceticism and celibacy as the means of enlightenment. The significant contribution of the Bhakti poets is that the untouchables identified themselves as anti-brahmanical by which they formed a unique non-Brahmin identity. Medieval Bhakti movement thus an intellectual revolution which not only questioned the established values of Brahmanical society but also envisaged society based upon emancipatory and egalitarian ethos.

Kabirpanth is a prominent religious reforms movement which spread in most of the northern part of country. It was founded by saint poet Kabir (1398-1494) who lived in Kashi. He preached spiritual as well as social equality .therefore Kabir panth became popular among the untouchable. Kabir who is generally placed in the fifteenth century, emphasized the unity of god whom he calls by several names, such as Rama, Hari, Govinda, Allah, Sain, Sahib, etc .He strongly denounced idol worship, pilgrimages, bathing in holly rivers or taking part in formal worship, such as Namaz . Nor did he consider it necessary to abandon the life of normal householder for the sake of sanity life.

Though familiar with yogic practice, he considers neither asceticism nor book knowledge important for true knowledge. As a modern historian, Dr Tara Chand, says that

The mission of Kabir was to preach a religion of love which would unite all caste and creeds rejected those features of Hinduism and Islam which were against this spirit and which were of no importance for the real spiritual welfare of the individual.”Kabir strongly denounced the caste system, especially the practice of untouchability, and emphasized the fundamental unity of man .he upheld the fundamental unity of man and was opposed to all

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<sup>1</sup> Ramnarayan Rawat, ' politics and acchut identity: a study of scheduled castes federation and' in suvir kaul(ed)the partition of memory: the after of the division of India, Indian university, Bloomington,2002

<sup>2</sup> Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, New Delhi: Monetary, 2005, 168-69.



kinds of discrimination between human being, whether on the basis of Castes, or religion, race, family or wealth .his sympathies were decidedly with the poor man with whom he identified himself. However he was not a social reformer, his emphasis being reform of the individual under the guidance of a true guru or teacher.<sup>3</sup>

Kabir said about himself that he was never touched pen or paper. He was totally uneducated and not scientifically educated but had wise insight and was a revolutionary. His thinking was practical as well as radical. He presented a simple form of bhakti and spirituality which was appealing to the people. Abul Fajal uses the word “Mujahidin” for Kabir which means “Advatavada”. Kabir was deeply involved in Indian society, its traditions, and values struggles, problems. His heart and mind were fully alive to the spiritual, cultural, ideological and behavioral pattern of Indian life. Poetry became an effective tool for Kabir in communicating the mystical experience. In 15<sup>th</sup> century the society is totally based upon caste, class, social status, profession, language, region and community. The whole society was divided into two religions Hindu and Muslim and there were so many castes belonged to different religion .in Hindustan the Vedic theory is strongly rooted on society. Kabir attacked on the Vedic theory and totally against the Ashram Vyaastha and Vedic theory. Where the four Verna’s were described .the brahamans originate from the mouth of the manu or brahma, the kshatriya originate from the shoulder, vaishya originate from the thies and the shudra from feet.against this theory,he said strongly that.

Haath, pow, mukh, jangh se, jhoot, jano, baat,

Paanch tatva ka doosra raj virajnke boond!

Ek ghate teesra Brahmana, kshatriya, sood”!!<sup>4</sup>

Kabir was totally against the Verna theory about the Purushukta. He says that shoulder, feet, mouth, thies all these are wrong views. He believes in five elements and all these castes are made from one element. Kabir criticized on the birth and origin of human being of different caste, Kabir said that if any Brahmin proud of his Brahmin caste origin, then it is not a reason of proud because the process of birth of all humans are same .he said again that if there is no difference of milk of the black and white cow similarly how it is possible that ours blood are different.

“Hamari kase lahoo tumahari, kasi doodh!,

Tum kase Brahmin hum kase sood”!!<sup>5</sup>

Kabir refused acknowledge caste distinctions or to recognize the authority of six school of Hindu philosophy. He held that religion without bhakti was no religion at all and that asceticism, fasting and almsgiving had no value if unaccompanied by worship. As

<sup>3</sup> Singh, Pushp Lal: Kabir Granthwali, Sateek, Ashok Prakashan 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid



Kabir's writing and saying still form the most important part of the scriptures of his followers, they are of interest not merely as ancient literature, but as living religious forces. One of the chief topics of his instruction was the folly of caste, and idolatry and externalism. Kabir insisted that distinctions of birth are of no importance that all men are brothers, is indeed still earnestly maintained so far as the four higher castes are concerned.<sup>6</sup>

Another important Bhakti saint who revolted against caste based distinctions is Ravidas. He created the social revolution by articulating the notion of *sama samaja*. For the first time ever, marginalized people marched through the streets with their head held high in upper-caste areas. For the first time, these marginalized people sang devotional songs that created the Cultural Revolution. Unlike Kabir, he did not stop with mere ideological awakening. Instead he led a social revolution that briefly allowed the rise of Seva humanism to bloom once more in Kashi. The power of this spiritual and ideological revolution has never been equaled in history.<sup>7</sup>

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. 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. 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 elites of his times towards the plights 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 chooses to imitate the Brahmins in order to symbolize his revolt which was not only highly objectionable but was equally deadly for a Shudra of his times. He challenged the tyranny of Brahmins and defied them by wearing Dhoti (cloth wrapped around the waist), Janeue (sacred thread) and Tilak (sacred red mark on forehead) that were forbidden for the untouchables. 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 much (six centuries) before the articulation of the concept of sanskritization. What made the image of Ravidass a catalyst in the emergence of Dalit consciousness was his being a Shudra and at the same time a saint of very high repute.<sup>8</sup>

Ravidas says,

“Ravidas ekhi nor sa, jimi upjuyo sansar!

Unch-nee chh kiss vidh bhay, Brahman, sood, chamar”!<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> www. Social revolutionary-Ravidas mulniwasi organaiser.html.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Dr. B.P. Sharma. Sant Guru, Ravidas –Vani, Surya Prakashan, Delhi 1978.



Ravidass also says,

*“Meri jaati kut bandhlaa dhor dhouwanta nithi baanaarasi aas paasaa*

*Ab bipar pardhan tihi karih danduouti tere naam sarnaai Ravidass daasaa”<sup>10</sup>*

The process of sanskritization facilitated the ambitious lower castes to improve ‘its position in the local caste hierarchy’ by pretending to look like the higher castes that enjoy ‘great prestige’ in the hierarchically organized Brahminical social order. Since the caste is given and cannot be changed, the lower castes were left with no option but to imitate the culture of the upper castes. What made the emancipation project of Ravidass different from that of the sanskritization was his emphasis on acquiring social respect without crossing over the caste boundaries.<sup>11</sup>

He did not want to pretend to appear like an upper caste to ride the bandwagon of social prestige. On the contrary, he exhibited his protest against the social oppression by putting on the prohibited dress and symbols of the upper castes. By imitating the appearance of the upper castes he did not want the lower castes to abandon their caste to climb up the ladder of the caste hierarchy as in the process of sanskritization. The lower castes need not to be assimilated into the fold of higher castes. They had to, rather, assert for their human rights by challenging the caste hierarchy while being firm in their very caste group. He wanted to dismantle the norm of varnashram dharma (fourfold division of Hindu society based on graded rank system in caste hierarchy) by showing that lower castes were not beyond the pale of spiritual knowledge on the one hand and on the other that Brahmins were in fact hollow figures pumped up with false pride and hypocrisy. In fact, he used caste to cut the steel frame of caste based social order – the only way of Dalit emancipation.<sup>12</sup>

The Bhakti approach of Ravidass 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. 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 low caste but high spiritual status posed a challenge to the Brahminical structures of domination. 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.

The egalitarian social philosophy of Ravidass expressed in the mode of poetry became the manifesto of the Dalit consciousness in Punjab. The establishment of a large number of Ravidass Deras by the Dalits in Punjab and in other parts of India over the last few years is a case in point. Ravidass became very popular among the Punjabi Dalit Diasporas as

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Manish Kumar, *Saint Ravidas*, Prahat Darshan, New Delhi, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> [www.socialrevolutionary.com/revolutionary-ravidas-mulniwasi-organiser.html](http://www.socialrevolutionary.com/revolutionary-ravidas-mulniwasi-organiser.html)



well, who have also constructed Ravidass shrines in order to assert their separate caste identity.<sup>13</sup>

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 century. 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. 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. 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. 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 civil liberties in a peaceful and non-violent way.<sup>14</sup>

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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. Kanshi Ram, the BSP

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ronki Ram, Untouchability, Dalit Consciousness, and Ad Dharm Movement in Punjab, Contributions to Indian Sociology, October 2004, vol.38, no.3, pp. 323-349.



supreme, 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 symbolizing 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.<sup>15</sup>

While Bhakti movement created background for fostering identity formation among lower sections of India in pre-colonial period, Adi (indigenous) movement in colonial India is transformation of the former into a socio-political identity in colonial period. The Adi movements indeed played significant role in formation of the Dalit identity all over India. Gail Omvedt argues that “The mobilization of the oppressed and exploited sections of society, the peasants, Dalit, women and low castes that Phule had spoken of as shudras and ati-shudras occurred on a large scale in the 1920s and 1930s, under varying leaderships and with varying ideologies.”<sup>16</sup> Adi movements thus essentially a cultural project aimed at unifying by the way of injecting new confidence among Dalits of India. To understand the context of identity formation process among Dalits it is useful to track certain changes ushered by British colonial rule and their impact upon lower sections of Indian society in general and Dalits in particular. Economic historians propose that British rule besides its exploitative characters it also created certain new avenues which created opportunities for Dalits. In case of rural economy, the British have promoted unprecedented expansion of agriculture by the way of streamlining land settlements in all over India. Expansion of agriculture, particularly for commercial crops such as sugar, tobacco, plantations, cotton etc necessitated massive quantum of labor. This labor was mainly drawn from Dalits.<sup>17</sup> At the

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<sup>15</sup> Ronki Ram, Untouchability in India with Difference: Ad Dharm, Dalit Assertion and Caste Conflicts in Punjab, Asian Survey, Vol.44, No.6, No.Dec, 2004, pp.895-912.

<sup>16</sup> Gail Omvedt, Dalit Visions: *The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity*, New Delhi : Orient Longman, 2006, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Robb, ed, *Dalit Movement and Meaning of Labour in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1993.



same time in the urban sphere new professions were opened up for Dalits such as workers in residencies of Europeans, sweepers, and other professions too offered avenues to Dalits to work under less oppressive conditions than in rural areas.<sup>18</sup> Gail Omvedt argues that colonial conditions indeed provided new dynamism to Dalit society to strive for better life. Particularly introduction of western education was main stimulator for measuring the traditional oppressive conditions with more emancipator and rational concepts flown from western civilization. The combination of these factors resulted in assertion of Dalit intelligentsia for better life and mobilization of fellow Dalits to gain benefits from colonial rule. Identity based socio-political movements among Dalits in different parts of India was manifestation of this process.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Tirthankar Roy, *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Dalit and Democratic Revolution: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, Sage, New Delhi, 1996.