
The Sainly *Camār*: Perspectives on the Life of Ravidās*

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The Hindu poet-saint Ravidās, one of the most famous of the North Indian poet-saints known as the Sants, is generally believed to have lived in Benares at the turn of the sixteenth century.¹ Ravidās must have been profoundly troubling to the orthodox Hindus of his time, for he came from one of the lowest untouchable groups, the *camārs* or tanners. *Camārs* were considered physically impure because of their occupational contact with dead animals, but it is also important to recognize the moral taint associated with untouchability. Given the prevailing belief in karma, according to which people got what they deserved, birth as a *camār* bore witness to grave sins in one's past. This sinful past also influenced one's present moral tendencies, while one's "sinful" company (fellow *camārs*) made it unlikely that one could ever reform. The notion of a saintly *camār* must have been hard for his contemporaries to accept, as it was, as we shall see, for at least one of his biographers.

Although in the past Ravidās's low status may have presented a problem, his modern admirers strive to affirm, rather than deny it. Ravidās has become an important symbol for certain low-caste groups, particularly *camārs*, in their struggle for social and religious equality. Hawley's reports on the activities of B. R. Ghera and the *camārs* of Shri Govardhanpur are only two examples of this trend (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, 9-10, 19-23). As a *camār* saint, Ravidās is their model in the effort to define a new religious identity, as well as a use-

* This paper has been modified and enriched by a dialogue with many people: Jack Hawley, who read the first drafts; Winand Callewaert, who kindly sent me drafts of his manuscripts on Anantadās; and Eleanor Zelliot and Joseph Schaller, whose criticism was both constructive and insightful. Any defects here, of course, belong to me and not to them.

ful figure for those who wish to bypass the hierarchical assumptions of traditional Hinduism.

This paper will look at six “portraits” of Ravidās. Three of these come from older sources—the accounts by Nābhādās and Priyadās in the *Bhaktamāl* and by Anantadās in the *Raidās Parchāi*. Two of these pictures are much more recently drawn: the first comes from *Sant Pravar Raidās Sāheb*, written in 1956 by Candrikaprasad Jijnasu; the second comes from 1986 and is a comic book in the *Amar Citra Kathā* series. The final source can be found in the poems ascribed to Ravidās in the *Ādigraṇth* and the Fatehpur manuscript. All except the last are distinctly coloured by the writers’ religious, social, and economic concerns.² It is more difficult to draw concrete conclusions from the poems, since their intent is devotional rather than biographical. For this reason I will consider them last of all.

Nābhādās

The first picture of Ravidās comes from Nābhādās’s *Bhaktamāl* (“Garland of Devotees”), which was written at about the turn of the seventeenth century. His roughly two hundred portraits include saints of all the different sects, and in a few verses he deftly outlines each individual’s character. Modern editions of the *Bhaktamāl* usually include the *Bhaktirasabodhinī*, a commentary written by Priyadās about a century later, in 1712 (McGregor 1984, 108-9). Priyadās gives a much longer story about each devotee, but his accounts share little with those of Nābhādās. Even a cursory comparison reveals that Priyadās’s actual source—at least for Ravidās—was the *Raidās Parchāi* of Anantadās, who was roughly contemporary with Nābhādās. Anantadās wrote *parchāis* (“introductions”) for many *bhakti* saints, but because his work has never been published—unlike Priyadās—he remains virtually unknown.³

The descriptions of Ravidās in the *Bhaktamāl* clearly show that these are two distinct narratives, that should be evaluated separately. Nābhādās’s description is brief and circumspect, but his very brevity makes the account more credible.

The pure verses (*bānī*) of Ra[v]idas [were] skilled in breaking the bonds (*granthi*) of doubt, but [were] not opposed to the Vedas, the *śāstras* and the practice of good [people]. The best *haṃsa* bird, separating water and milk, takes [these verses] to heart. Through God’s grace he attained the ultimate goal in this body. Seated on a king’s throne, he showed pride in [his own] lineage (*jñāti*). [People] worshipped the dust of his feet, giving up pride in caste (*varṇa*) and station (*āśrama*). The pure verses (*bānī*) of Ra[v]idas [were] skilled in breaking the knots (*granthi*) of doubt (Nābhādās 1964, 230).

The picture here is quite spare. The word *granthi* (“bonds,” “knots”) may refer to shoemaking, but aside from this there is no explicit reference to Ravidās’s caste. Presumably it was not high, since Nābhādās speaks of others having to abandon their pride, but he also insists that Ravidās was not ashamed of his birth. The statements about being seated on a king’s throne and attaining the highest goal in this body point to a person of rare spiritual accomplishment. This is sustained by the statement that higher caste people would bow at his feet, since only a very charismatic person could invert the social hierarchy so dramatically.

Nābhādās mentions that Ravidās’s verses did not conflict with the accepted Hindu standards (the Vedas, the *śāstras*, and the conduct of virtuous people), which at least does not exclude him from the Hindu fold. One of the lines implies devotion and surrender to God, since he attained the highest state through God’s grace. Finally, there is the call for the discerning listener, the *haṃsa* bird, to take these pure verses to heart. Besides the obvious exhortation to heed the words of such a man, it also points to a body of verses. This admittedly sketchy portrayal does not betray an obvious agenda, and although Nābhādās identified himself as a *Rāmānandī*, his accounts are generally considered objective and non-sectarian (Vaudeville 1974, 30). Yet beyond the general qualities he mentions—many of which could belong to almost any saint—this account contains virtually no concrete detail.

Anantadās and Priyadās

Both Anantadās and Priyadās recount the life of Ravidās in far greater detail. Their accounts are so laden with miracles that one cannot regard them as literal biography, but beneath the veneer of magic and miracle, there are important messages. The most obvious message is that Ravidās was a great saint—a judgment buttressed by the miracles—but they are also clearly responding to the problem of Ravidās’s caste. As mentioned earlier, tanners (*camārs*) were among the lowest of low-caste people; not only did their work involve habitual contact with polluting substances—dead animals and their skins—but birth as a *camār* was seen as evidence of prior depravity. Given these assumptions, the notion of a saint coming from such a debased caste doubtless seemed contrary to the karmic process, and the anomaly of a *camār* saint—and his relations with established religious authorities—are central themes in both narratives, although the writers treat them differently.

Anantadās responds matter-of-factly to the problem of a *camār* saint, declaring that his birth was the result of his former actions. He

reports that Ravidās had been a brahmin in his previous birth, but he had eaten meat and had kept an untouchable co-wife. The bad karma from these actions led to his birth as a *camār*, but he also carried other signs (*cinha*) from his former life, as his first actions clearly show. Distressed because his parents are not religiously inclined, and convinced that death is preferable to a life lived among irreligious people, the infant Ravidās refuses to suckle for four days. The impasse is solved by the dramatic appearance of Rāmānand, a well-known saint, who had been directed there by a heavenly voice. Rāmānand initiates the entire family, and Ravidās begins to eat (Anantadās, chap. 1). As Ravidās grows older his devotion develops and deepens, becoming more established with each year. Unfortunately, his family does not share this devotion, or even appreciate it. Very early in the narrative Ravidās has been kicked out of the family home, denied his share of the family property, and completely ignored by his family, who are never mentioned again.

This is an unflattering picture of his family, who seem to have taken initiation merely to save his life, but their failing stems from their lack of devotion, rather than their status as *camārs*. The important standard for Anantadās is consistently individual: that individuals reap the consequences of their good and evil actions, and that nobility or depravity comes not from birth, but from the depth of one's devotion. The infant was distressed not because he was born a *camār*, but because his family was irreligious. Ravidās's devotion makes him a saint despite his social standing, while his parents, despite their initiation, remain enmeshed in the affairs of the world.

The notion of a *camār* saint seems far more troubling to Priyadās, who explains it not as the fruition of past karma, but by invoking the mechanism of a curse. Priyadās relates that in his previous birth Ravidās had been a brahmin disciple of Rāmānand, and that one of the ways Ravidās served his teacher was by begging food from certain specific households. One day a storm deterred him from his usual rounds, and he foolishly accepted food from a merchant who did business with *camārs*. Rāmānand immediately sensed that something was wrong with the food, and when he discovered the source he cursed his disciple to be born a *camār*.

This device resolves the cognitive dissonance of a *camār* saint. Despite his birth as a *camār*, Ravidās is "really" the brahmin disciple of a powerful saint, and this accounts for his spiritual attainments. Priyadās's account also reinforces conventional opinions of *camārs* as extremely polluting. Rāmānand curses his disciple not for taking food directly from *camārs*, but from a person who merely does business

with them. Yet even such indirect contact is enough to render the food impure (Nābhādās 1964, 471, v. 318).

Negative attitudes toward *camārs* persist through the entire account. According to Priyadās, the infant Ravidās is so horrified at being born a *camār* that he refuses to suckle, and is repulsed by his mother's mere touch. Ravidās is again saved by Rāmānand, who in this version initiates Ravidās alone (Nābhādās 1964, 472, v. 319). Since initiation is considered a second birth, and one's guru a parent, this makes Rāmānand Ravidās's "real" father. Priyadās's message is clear—Ravidās was born in a low family, but does not "belong" to them.

Priyadās also reports that Ravidās's father was displeased by his son's devotional bent; here too the father disinherits Ravidās, kicks him out of the house, and is never mentioned again (Nābhādās 1964, 473, v. 320). Yet in the context that Priyadās has already established, this episode reinforces the lack of any real connection between Ravidās and his biological parents. In the end he is never really their son; they are merely the instruments for fulfilling Ramanand's curse.

Beginning with the tale of Ramanand's curse, Priyadās shows far greater ambivalence about Ravidās's birth than Anantadās. Whereas for the latter Ramanand's appearance is merely dramatic, Priyadās portrays it as the continuation of an established guru-disciple bond, confirming that Ravidās is not "really" a *camār*. Whereas Anantadās reports that Rāmānand initiated the entire family, showing the availability of devotion to all, Priyadās uses this "second birth" as a way to remove the stigma of being a *camār*. Finally, although both writers relate that his family treated him shabbily, for Anantadās this reflects their individual shortcomings, whereas for Priyadās it is one more sign that Ravidās never really belonged to "those" people.

Despite their differences on whether Ravidās was really a *camār*, both of them consider him a saint, as the wonders they recount clearly show. In both accounts Ravidās is born with full consciousness (Priyadās adds that he felt sharp regret for his error) and refuses to suckle until he has received initiation. This is no ordinary child! Further testimony to his saintliness comes from stories in which Hari himself tests Ravidās's devotion. In one he comes disguised as a devotee, and shows Ravidās a *pāras*, the philosopher's stone that changes iron into gold. Ravidās scorns the stone—Anantadās has him deliver a long speech on the danger that gold (representing wealth) presents to a *sādhu*—but agrees to hold it for safe keeping until the "devotee" returns. When the "devotee" comes back thirteen months later, the stone has never been touched (Anantadās, chaps. 3-4; Nābhādās 1964, 474, v. 321).

To reward Ravidās, Anantadās (chap. 4) reports that Hari left five gold coins, telling Ravidās (in a dream) to use the money for worship, which he does without hesitation. Priyadās reworks the coin motif into further evidence of Ravidās's probity. In his version, Ravidās finds five golden coins every day. He is troubled by this unexplained wealth and refuses to keep it, until finally Hari appears in a dream, and tells him to use the money (Nābhādās 1964, 475, v. 322). In all these cases Ravidās refuses to be seduced by wealth, showing his freedom from greed and worldly entanglements.

Further testimony to Ravidās's holiness comes from the tales of his disputes with the brahmins of Benares. On one occasion they denounce Ravidās to the King, who puts them all to the test before an image of Hari. When the brahmins chant Sanskrit mantras the image remains unmoved, but when Ravidās speaks a single verse, it leaps into his arms as a sign of divine favor.⁴ Later in his narrative Anantadās (chap. 9) uses this motif a second time, but also has the image speak to the crowd—blessing Ravidās as his devotee, and cursing the “lying” (*jhūṭhe*) brahmins.

Both writers conclude with a tale in which Ravidās himself displays superhuman powers. Ravidās goes to visit Jhali, the queen of Chittor, who has taken him as her guru. This raises the ire of the local brahmins, who want to assert their spiritual superiority. Yet as the brahmins sit down in rows for a banquet at the queen's palace, they are horrified to see a figure of Ravidās appear between each one of them, defiling their ritually pure meal. After this display of power, Ravidās peels back his flesh to reveal a golden sacred thread under his skin.

Priyadās tells this story as spiritual one-upmanship: Ravidās is present at the banquet, although he is banished to a corner of the hall; his multiple forms and subcutaneous sacred thread demonstrate his superiority, and also his brahminhood (Nābhādās 1964, 478, v. 326). Anantadās uses the story to convey Ravidās's personal qualities, and to stress yet again the primacy of devotion. Even though the brahmins have abused and insulted him, Ravidās asks the queen to sponsor a banquet for them, showing generosity in exchange for spite. He does not attend the banquet, but remains in the garden where he has been staying. After seeing his multiple forms the brahmins rush to the garden, only to discover that Ravidās has never left his seat, and it is only then that he produces the sacred thread.

Whereas Priyadās concludes his account with the retrieval of the sacred thread, Anantadās describes how the brahmins humble themselves before Ravidās, and beg to become his disciples. At first Ravidās

feigns reluctance, reminding them of their higher status, but concludes by speaking of the power of devotion, which overturns all human boundaries.⁵ Anantadās takes a much more radical position than Priyadās. Rather than simply transforming Ravidās into a brahmin, thereby elevating his status to that of his tormentors, his stress on the primacy of devotion completely overturns the social hierarchy.

By reporting Ravidās as Ramanand's disciple, both Anantadās and Priyadās set him squarely in the Hindu tradition. But though they spend a lot of time relating wonders and miracles—and Anantadās continually stresses devotion—both accounts tell us surprisingly little about the particulars of Ravidās's spiritual life. The things mentioned seem like ordinary devotional fare: giving gifts (shoes) to ascetics and devotees, sharing food, congregational singing (*kīrtan*), loving and serving God. Both writers mention Ravidās using an image in worship, and Anantadās explicitly describes him as a *saguna* devotee.⁶ Since Ravidās is normally described as worshipping a *nirguna* God, that is, a God without attributes, this last claim is surprising.⁷

It is interesting that the villains in both accounts are none other than the local brahmins, who are especially enraged when Ravidās worships images. They continually oppose and harass Ravidās, but they are always defeated in the end. As the conventional religious authorities, brahmins are the stock villains in many tales of the saints, and harass the devotees even when the devotees are brahmins!⁸ Yet the way that both men portray this conflict highlights their larger concerns. Priyadās castigates the brahmins for their inability to see the obvious, namely, that Ravidās is a saint. Yet in their inability to accept that a *camār* could be a spiritual adept, the brahmins are the mirror image of Priyadās, who denies that Ravidās was “really” a *camār*. Both Priyadās and the brahmins resolve this anomaly by affirming only one aspect: the brahmins his caste status, and Priyadās his sainthood. In condemning the brahmins, Priyadās seems curiously blind to his own assumptions.

Anantadās has no such problem with the notion of a *camār* saint, and his account points to something much more fundamental—the tension between *dharma* and *bhakti*, between a hierarchical social structure and an essentially egalitarian religious practice.⁹ The real conflict is not rooted in caste, but in differing standards of religious and spiritual worth. Anantadās continually affirms the importance of devotion, and highlights this on the two occasions when the brahmins abuse Ravidās for transgressing caste boundaries—once for worshipping a *sālagrām*, and later for having the audacity to initiate disciples. In each case Ravidās responds with genuine anger—once warning the

brahmins that their false devotion will send them to hell—and undercuts the assumptions behind their perceived superiority, particularly those of relative purity and impurity. Whereas Priyadās tries to rehabilitate Ravidās as an individual, leaving the social system intact, Anantadās is trying to subvert it completely.

Both of these accounts are clearly hagiography; the miracles alone render them suspect as biography. Both stories convey important themes: Priyadās's ambivalence about Ravidās being both a saint and a *camār*, and Anantadās's emphasis on devotion. The events they relate can also provide a point of comparison with later accounts.

Sant Pravar Raidās Sāheb

The first modern portrait is painted by Candrikaprasad Jijnasu, author of *Sant Pravar Raidās Sāheb*. Jijnasu openly admits he has an agenda, for the book is subtitled "A Discriminating Biography, Written from a Buddhist Point of View." Jijnasu aims to portray Ravidās not as a Hindu, but as a Buddhist who has been drawn into the Hindu tradition.

Jijnasu's book clearly shows the influence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar was the architect of the Indian Constitution, and a highly educated man, but he was also an untouchable *mahar*. He knew the indignities of untouchability from personal experience, and devoted his life to destroying this ignoble practice. At the end of his life Ambedkar finally rejected Hinduism, urging his followers to convert to Buddhism to escape the degrading aspects of the caste system.

Jijnasu's book was not only published the same year that Ambedkar repudiated Hinduism, but Jijnasu (1956, 9) mentions Ambedkar as an example that great spiritual leaders can come from any community. What better saint to further support his point than Ravidās, who was born a tanner? Jijnasu is speaking to the lower caste people of 1956, trying to give them some basis for self-respect. He urges them to embrace Buddhism, which he claims is identical to *sant* religion, and to abandon Hinduism as one abandons "urine and feces" (10). Throughout the book he seizes every opportunity to demonstrate that Ravidās was not a Hindu, but a Buddhist; he magnifies every possible difference in an effort to distance Ravidās from the Hindu tradition.

Given these aims, it is not surprising that he rejects Priyadās's account of Ravidās's birth as "unnatural and fabricated" (Jijnasu 1956, 7). He ridicules the claim that Ravidās was a brahmin, that a person could be born through a curse alone, or that an infant would refuse the breast until given initiation. Jijnasu stresses that Ravidās

was actually a *camār*, and that he never claimed to be anything else. The real motive behind Priyadās's story, he contends, is brahmin arrogance. He claims that brahmins cannot accept the thought that "low-caste" people can know God by themselves, and he rightly notes that similar tales of brahmin descent were also spread about Kabir (2-3).

Jijnasu's account of Ravidās's birth shows an intimate connection with Buddhism. According to his story, one day Ravidās's father was passing through the deer park at Sarnath, the place where the Buddha preached his first sermon. There was an ascetic staying there who was very fond of rice pudding (*khīr*). Ravidās's parents happily supplied this, and in return for their devotion the ascetic promised them a son. Besides the location, which carries strong Buddhist overtones, the ascetic is said to be a *dhyānayogī*, that is, a person realized through meditation, like the Buddha. Such a person would be free from any brahmin influence, and thus an ideal figure to associate with the birth of Ravidās. Jijnasu (1956, 5-9) claims that an old *sādhu* in Benares told him this story, and that he includes it because it seems so believable. This may well be true, but it is also true that *sādhus* often tell stories that one finds nowhere else, such as this one.

Jijnasu differs with Priyadās on other fundamental points. The first concerns Ravidās's guru. He notes that Ravidās never mentions Rāmānand in his poetry, and that Ravidās's name does not appear in the traditional lists of Ramanand's disciples (Jijnasu 1956, 11-12). Jijnasu therefore denies that Ravidās was Ramanand's disciple, asserting instead that he was realized solely by his own study and reflection, like the Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar (14).¹⁰

Another bone of contention is the claim that Ravidās worshipped images. Jijnasu (1956, 101-6) denies this, citing as proof verses from Ravidās's own poetry. Because of this, he rejects the story about Ravidās finding five gold coins every day. According to the story, Ravidās found the coins in one of the articles used for worship (*pūjā*) (24), but since Ravidās did not do *pūjā*, according to Jijnasu, this story is clearly fabricated.

Jijnasu's final argument is with Nābhādās. Although he agrees that Ravidās's poetry was not opposed to the conduct of the virtuous (*sadācāra*), he takes issue with the statement that it was not opposed to the Vedas and the *sāstras*. Jijnasu (1956, 93-100) devotes a section to disproving this latter assertion, again citing verses from Ravidās's own poetry. He strongly emphasizes the differences between the picture of Ravidās in his poetry and the picture given in the *Bhaktamāl*, trying to distance Ravidās as far as possible from the Hindu tradition.

It is interesting to note, however, that Jijnasu only uses stories from the *Bhaktamāl* when they can be made to serve his purpose. He cites Ravidās's refusal to use the philosopher's stone (*pāras*) as evidence that Ravidās rejected parasitism and believed in honest labour. Jijnasu (1956, 23) associates this work ethic with "Right Livelihood," one of the steps on the Buddha's Eightfold Path. He also recounts that Ravidās's parents disowned their son, but uses it to illustrate the point that intelligent and hard-working people are soon rewarded. Although his parents didn't give him a thing, after a short while Ravidās had a successful business with a dozen employees! (21) Jijnasu tells the story of the brahmins complaining to the king of Benares, and Ravidās's audience with the king. Finally, he tells the tale of Queen Jhali inviting Ravidās to the banquet, though he refrains from mentioning the golden sacred thread (30-36). For Jijnasu, the important thing about both these episodes was not the miracles associated with them, but the way in which they contrast Ravidās's humble saintliness with brahmin pride and arrogance.

Jijnasu gives a full account of Ravidās's miracles and marvels; his third chapter is devoted entirely to miracle stories (Jijnasu 1956, 41-54). But the introduction to the chapter is titled "Buddhists are not convinced by miracles." He notes that the Buddha forbade his disciples from performing miracles to convince people, and that all great beings shun such vulgar displays of power. According to Jijnasu, Ravidās's greatness stems not from his miracles, but from his moral qualities such as compassion, virtue, and purity—qualities that anyone can hope to emulate. He further claims that Ravidās never performed miracles for their own sake, but that these were always harsh tests of his devotion (41-42). This shows a curious tension. On one hand Jijnasu shows the rationality and rejection of the miraculous characterizing both early Buddhism and twentieth-century scientific thought. But he also gives a full account of these miracles, as if these could give further proof of Ravidās's sanctity. It seems as if Jijnasu wants to simultaneously deny and affirm these miracles. Part of this tension may stem from an audience that may have been impressed by such stories.

Jijnasu's claim that Ravidās was a Buddhist is based on his analysis of India's religions (*dharma*s) into six groups. Three are indigenous (the *sants*, Buddhists and Jains), while the other three are not (Muslims, Christians, and what he calls *vaidik-ārya dharma*) (Jijnasu 1956, 53). This differentiation between *sant dharma* and *vaidik-ārya dharma* not only removes the *sants* from the Hindu fold, but also allows him to claim that there is no such thing as "Hindu" religion (58,

note). According to Jijnasu, *sant dharma* is the original religion of India; it was the religion of the Indus valley civilization, and the ultimate source of the other indigenous traditions (59). Finally, he traces the ultimate roots of the medieval *sants* to the Buddhist tradition, since the *sants* were influenced by Gorakhnath and the Naths, who were themselves influenced by the Buddhist Siddhas (72-73).

This analysis is unconvincing. A major flaw is polarizing the Hindu tradition into *sant dharma* and *vaidik-ārya dharma*. At one time *vaidik-ārya dharma* was certainly a discrete tradition, but non-Vedic elements have been working their way into the tradition since well before the beginning of the Common Era. This is why modern Indologists distinguish between different stages of the tradition: an earlier period ("Vedism" or "Brahmanism"), and a later period ("Hinduism"). Another problem is his assertion that Jainism and Buddhism sprang from the religion of the Indus valley civilization, for which there is absolutely no evidence. Nor does he explain, if *sant dharma* was the original religion of India, why it lay dormant for such a long time, and reappeared only through Buddhism. Finally, although Siddha influence on the Nath yogis is generally acknowledged, the Naths have generally considered themselves Hindus, not Buddhists (see Briggs 1982, 150-52). In the end, Jijnasu is not a dispassionate researcher, but a man trying to support a conclusion he has already reached, in the service of an ideal in which he fervently believes.

Amar Citra Kathā

The most recent picture of Ravidās, published in 1986, comes from the comic book series *Amar Citra Kathā*. Given the medium, it is unreasonable to expect a sophisticated portrayal. However, this account does betray certain concerns reflecting the social currents in modern-day India.

Although untouchability is officially illegal in the Republic of India, it is no secret that discrimination based on caste status persists to this day. The main emphasis in this account is squarely on social issues, such as occupational status, purity, and impurity. The first part of the story sets the stage, showing the social discrimination suffered by Ravidās and the other *camārs*. The primary evil is not poverty, for Ravidās and his family, through their honest labor, are able to make a living. The thing that really bothers them is the low status associated with their occupation, tanning and working leather (Pai 1988, 2-8).

In two places, the comic book explicitly condemns judging people as pure or impure based on their occupation, implicitly condemning caste discrimination. The first is when Ravidās's teacher, Sandan Swami, tells him that the distinctions between pure and impure occupations are solely the product of ignorant men. Men have classified themselves by the work of their own hands, forgetting the hand that made them, that is, God's. Such distinctions are purely adventitious; they do not reflect any deeper reality about the humans performing such work (Pai 1988, 10). Later in the book, Ravidās himself tells his followers to detach their sense of self-worth from their occupation: "Do not be ashamed of yourself. Do not be afraid of your caste. Do your work with dignity and bow before no-one but God" (25).

Social and caste concerns are also reflected in the comic book's story about the origin of Ravidās's followers, the Ravidāsīs. According to the story, the sect is formed when a young man complains to Ravidās that ordinary people cannot escape from the burden of caste that society has laid upon them. He asks Ravidās to give him a new identity, and Ravidās makes him his disciple. In good comic-book fashion, the young man is immediately transformed, and stands up with pride to his former oppressors (Pai 1988, 26-27).¹¹ These oppressors could be seen as a cross-section of Indian society: one has the shaven head and topknot of a Hindu, another wears the skullcap and beard associated with Muslims, while the third is a nondescript Indian male. When the young man shows his new-found dignity and confidence, their expressions betray dejection. The message is clear: there is a new social order in India, one in which all people have human dignity.

Despite rejecting caste distinctions, the comic book sets Ravidās's life in a distinctly Hindu context. The opening page shows his parents bathing in the Ganges, and mentions that they came every morning for a "holy dip" (Pai 1988, 1). His parents beseech Sūrya, the sun god, to fulfill their only wish, the desire for a son. An ascetic named Sandan Swami assures them their wish is granted, and in due time, the child is born. This same swami gives Ravidās his first instruction about God, and later becomes his guru (9-10).

However, any religious beliefs portrayed in the book must also be compatible with the comic book's message of social equality. Sandan Swami's teaching (and later, Ravidās's) is heavily influenced by *advaita vedānta* ("non-dual monism"), according to which all distinctions are ultimately false. The swami tells Ravidās that because God and the human being are one and the same, Ravidās should see himself as he

really is (that is, God), and not according to the label applied by society (*camār*) (Pai 1988, 10). In the next episodes, Ravidās breaks down his mental constructions: he first stops thinking of himself as a *camār*, then destroys the distinction between “self” and “other.” This latter point is shown by his charity, especially to the poor (Pai 1988, 11-13). The comic book’s cover shows Ravidās meditating in the lotus position (*padmāsana*), lost in yogic contemplation of the Absolute. Finally, after Ravidās realizes God, he never shows the slightest uncertainty, hesitation, or self-doubt. This unshakable confidence accords with Śaṅkara’s conception of the liberated state as permanent and irrevocable.¹²

Based on this perspective, the comic book criticizes other types of Hindu practice. Image worship and sectarianism are criticized as ideas limiting God based on human conceptions. Though Ravidās does not deny that God is in an image, he sees God everywhere else as well. Seeing God only in an image, he says, puts the image between oneself and God. It is the same with different names for God. To name is to limit and particularize, but God transcends human conceptual capacities. For this reason, Ravidās says, he refers to God solely as “Name” (Pai 1988, 24-5).

The ultimate identity of God and devotee are re-emphasized at the end of the story, when the famous devotee Mīrābāi visits Ravidās. Mīrā constantly carries an image of Lord Krishna, and laments that she cannot bear to be separated from him (that is, Krishna) for even a moment. In response, Ravidās says that since she is already one with God, how could there be any separation? After some days in Ravidās’s presence, Mīrā finally sets the image down, presumably having been liberated from slavery to a statue (Pai 1988, 30-1).

Given the communal and sectarian problems in modern India, it is not surprising to find the message that God transcends particular names and forms, but there are also other reasons for this stand. The issues of ritual purity and impurity are less likely to be emphasized in a practice that does not have sacred images, whereas these issues will probably be important if images are used.¹³ The lack of emphasis on images is thus consonant with the comic book’s social concerns.

The comic book also criticizes mechanically performing ritual action (*karmakāṇḍa*). There is an episode late in the story where a brahmin goes to the Ganges to make a ritual offering. In the process he spurns a poor beggar, one of the only dark-skinned people in the comic book. Though the beggar falls into the river and calls for help, the brahmin ignores him, concentrating solely on his ritual. Ravidās helps pull the man from the water, then tells his disciples:

Unless you know the Supreme Essence, what use is shaving the head...dancing, singing and praying.... Of what use is the lamp ceremony and fire worship to him whose hair contains *crores* [ten millions] of suns...if we do not also love our fellow-men? He would certainly prefer our kindness to our rituals (Pai 1988, 29).

The emphasis is clearly on one's inner attitude rather than mere external action, with the conviction that genuine devotion to God is intimately connected with concern and care for one's fellow human beings.

Like Anantadās, Priyadās and Jijnasu, the comic book tells of conflict between Ravidās and his parents, but treats this story differently from the other sources. The problem comes from Ravidās's compassion for the poor, for whom he steals shoes and money from his parents. On one occasion when his father asks whether it was proper to give away their earnings, Ravidās replies: "Her need was greater than ours" (Pai 1988, 14). After a while, his despairing father sets him up in a separate household.

Thus far the story accords with tradition, but while the other sources portray Ravidās's father as a greedy and selfish man, he is given far nobler motives here. He is worried about Ravidās, and thinks that the burden of running a household will turn him into a responsible adult. In the end, he is only doing what he thinks is best for his son (Pai 1988, 18). Unlike any of the other sources, Ravidās and his parents are eventually reconciled. His father not only apologizes, which Ravidās dismisses as unnecessary, but also becomes Ravidās's disciple. Thus the stain on the name of Ravidās's parents is neatly erased, and the ultimate integrity of the Indian family is preserved.

The comic book gives an idealized account of Ravidās's life, strongly emphasizing twentieth-century ideals such as equality, compassion, and brotherhood. The only thing marring this picture comes in the exact center of the magazine, where there is a full page ad for shoe polish! (Pai 1988, 23-24) This may reflect the belief that leather workers would flock to buy a magazine portraying Ravidās, but at the very least it shows incredible insensitivity. The sad reality is that despite the comic book's cheery message of equality, one should have no illusions that caste, color and occupation are meaningless in modern-day India. This may be true someday, but it will probably take a long time.

Poems of Ravidās

The final picture of Ravidās comes from his earliest known poems: thirty-nine poems attributed to him in the *Ādigraṇth* (AG), and eight in the Fatehpur manuscript. The Fatehpur manuscript was compiled in 1582 and the *Ādigraṇth* in 1604, which makes these poems at least contemporary with the works of Nābhādās and Anantadās, the earliest “biographical” accounts. Since these poems are the benchmark against which other poems are judged for authenticity, they define (in a sense) the “real” Ravidās.

Though it seems contrary to look at the earliest material last, there is good reason for this. On the whole, the poems address purely religious concerns, mentioning little or nothing about Ravidās’s personal life—they are poems by him, rather than about him. For this reason, any picture drawn from them would be sketchy and highly speculative. It therefore seems better to use what can be drawn from these poems to assess the veracity of the other portraits.

One thing that seems sure is that he was actually a *camār*. He mentions this many times (AG 3, 4, 5, 9, 20, 38, 39),¹⁴ and appears quite open about it. Since most of his poetry stresses devotional (*bhakti*) themes, this may account for the reason he shows neither shame in his own caste, nor deference to another’s. Since all human beings are equally insignificant compared to God, the most significant quality is not one’s birth, but the depth of one’s devotion.

A few of the verses substantiate the image of absolute identity with God portrayed by the comic book: “What is the difference between you and me, me and you? [We are] like the gold and the bracelet, water and waves” (AG 1). Sometimes the identification is less direct, phrased in terms of things invariably associated with one another: “If you are the mountain, I am the peacock; if you are the moon, I am the *cakora* bird” (18). There are also times when he shows great certainty he has attained the highest state: “Yama’s rod will not strike me, I’ve abandoned all entanglements” (4; see also 20).

Most of the poems, however, strike notes more consonant with the general themes in *bhakti* poetry. The dominant theme is a deep sense of unworthiness and distance from God: “I am bound by the snare of delusion, you are bound by bonds of love; I can make no effort to free myself, if I am freed it is by devotion to you” (Bahura and Bryant 1982, 157).¹⁵ Some other prominent themes are: praise of the saints (AG 8, 29, 39), praise of God’s Name (12, 19, 25-27, 31, 37), warnings not to fritter away the blessing of a human birth (Bahura and Bryant 1982, 190-92), and praise of devotion (*bhakti*) (6, 13, 15, 21, 32, 33, 36, 38) as the best means to realization. In the

end, the dominant picture is of a humble man with little faith in his own capacities. His only hope lies in surrender to God, and the confidence that God will not abandon him: "Tanner Ravidās says: My birth is low, my people are low, my caste is also low—Raja Rāmācandra, I've come to you for refuge!" (19) The emphasis in these poems is very different from the picture in the other sources. The later stories begin with the assumption that Ravidās is a saint, and according to popular conceptions, saints are never afflicted by self-doubt.

Only one poem seems to have an overt social or political message. In it Ravidās tells about a place he calls "The Sorrowless City" (*begampurā*), in which there is no unhappiness or anxiety, no jealousy, taxes, or trade. There is "no second or third" (i.e., no social hierarchy), all are equal. People live richly and comfortably, stroll wherever they please, and no-one keeps them from the Beloved's house (AG 3). This is a utopian vision, although one can certainly imagine Ravidās comparing this ideal to the society he saw around him, and finding the latter wanting.

On the whole, however, Ravidās seems less interested in changing society than in transcending it altogether. In one poem he compares himself to a fish that never forgets its home—even after its body has been cut up for cooking, every piece still longs for the water (Bahura and Bryant 1982, 157). In another poem he compares himself to a widow separated from her Beloved (146). These images convey a sense of alienation and displacement, a feeling that Ravidās did not consider this world his true home.

Ravidās's poems do not mention his guru's name, though he does refer to the necessity of a guru. The guru is the philosopher's stone, transforming the disciple (AG 6); through the guru's grace one attains God (13) and does not go to hell (11); through the true guru (*sadguru*) one can know the saints (8); and finally, he exhorts people to follow the guru's path (7). It is not clear whether these statements about a guru refer to his own experience, or are more general pronouncements about the need for a spiritual guide. But even if they refer to himself, one need not assume that Ravidās had a human preceptor. The word "guru," especially "*sadguru*," is often simply another way to refer to the Divine. From the limited evidence in the poems, there is no sure answer.

Ravidās's position is much clearer with regard to ritual action (*karmakāṇḍa*). Given his emphasis on devotion, he feels that ritual action without inner feeling is empty:

One cleans the outside [of one's] body with water, but inside [the heart] there are various faults. How can one become pure, this is [like] the elephant's bath (an expression for a useless activity, since the elephant throws dirt on itself immediately after a bath) (AG 6).

In another poem (35), he bluntly states that a man of good family performing ritual action without devotion is no better than an untouchable. Although he would probably not denounce action performed with devotion, he clearly thinks the latter is more important.

Ravidās is more ambivalent about Hindu sacred texts, namely, the Vedas and the Purāṇas. Given his feelings about ritual action, it is not surprising he denounces the sections in these texts that prescribe ritual action (AG 6). Nor does he feel that they can even hope to convey the majesty of the Divine: "O Lord, the Vedas call you the Inner Knower, [but] they do not know your glory" (Bahura and Bryant 1982, 146). But he also speaks favorably of them when they are conducive to devotion: relating the weaknesses of the gods themselves (AG 24), or telling the stories of paradigmatic devotees (35). In the end, he does not reject them wholeheartedly (as Jijnasu claimed), but neither is he unopposed to them (as per Nābhādās). The final scale against which texts are measured is whether or not they lead one to true devotion.

Conclusion

Which of these pictures gives us the "real" Ravidās? Of all the different perspectives, his poems seem the most reliable, but they are also the sketchiest. And although the poems are the earliest sources for the life of Ravidās, they too have been selected and filtered. Ravidās himself was almost certainly illiterate, so the poems would have been transmitted orally until they were finally written down. Nor can we overlook the possibility that these collections may have been selectively compiled from a larger body of work that is now lost. But there is an important difference between the tone in these poems and the other accounts of his life. The other sources begin by assuming that Ravidās is a saint, which automatically makes him important. They then use his life story to advance their own concerns—whether highlighting the value of devotion, glorifying a devotee, creating a new religious identity, or exhorting toward greater social justice—and their respective concerns affect the way that they interpret his life. The poems attributed to Ravidās himself carry no obvious agenda, but convey instead a living human being—full of doubt, despair, and sometimes joy. This human voice carries a ring of authenticity. Here there is no saint, no realized being, but only a man struggling to find his place in the world, and his relationship to the divine.

Endnotes

1. The word "Sant" refers to a collection of North Indian poet-saints who, though not bound together by formal ties, shared certain characteristic orientations: the conviction that the divine was formless and beyond human ability to conceive; an emphasis on "interior" religion leading to a personal experience of this divine being; disdain for ritual practice (particularly image worship); a stress on the power of the divine Name; and a general disregard for caste distinctions. Given his low social status, it is not surprising that Ravidās is found in this community, where his religious charisma would have been sufficient to bring him authority.
2. Not surprisingly, this pattern appears in the accounts of other *bhakti* saints, as Lorenzen (1991, xii) notes in the case of Kabir.
3. For my remarks on Anantadās I am deeply indebted to Dr. Winand Callewaert of Catholic University, Leuven, who was kind enough to send me the text from four different manuscripts of the *Raidās Parchāi*, and without whose help this would have been impossible. In accordance with his wishes I shall not quote the manuscript, except to clarify occasional words and phrases.
4. Anantadās, chap. 3; Nābhādās 1964, 477–78, v. 325. Anantadās specifies that the image Ravidās worshipped was a *śālagrām*, an aniconic form of Vishnu. Priyadās remains silent on the specific nature of the image.
5. Anantadās, chaps. 11–12. The final discourse plays on the similarity between the words *sīdhā* ("respectable") and *sūdra*; Ravidās notes that the power of devotion has turned him from the latter to the former.
6. Anantadās, chap. 5; Nābhādās 1964, 476, v. 324. Anantadās says that Ravidās did *pūjā* to a *śālagrām*, which is aniconic, but still an image. The claim that Ravidās was a *saguṇa* devotee may simply reflect Anantadās's concern to promote devotion of every kind. In the *Raidās Parchāi*, Anantadās contrasts Ravidās with Kabir, the quintessential *nirguṇa* devotee, but concludes by proclaiming that both forms of devotion are equally valid, although they appeal to people with differing inclinations.
7. Even if one discounts the claims that Ravidās worshipped images, in his poetry he often uses Vaishnava names for God, showing tendencies that seem to be *saguṇa*. Ravidās seems to show both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* tendencies, and the real problem may lie in the rigidity of the categories themselves.
8. Tulsidas and Eknath, though brahmins themselves, were both greatly troubled by brahmins. For Tulsidas, see Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, 146–47; for Eknath, see Mahipati 1981, 82–94, 130–34, and *passim*. Priyadās (1964, 476, v. 325) gives the standard explanation that Hari himself inspires this opposition to magnify the fame of his devotees.

9. Thomas Hopkins (1966, 17) has nicely explored this tension. He points out that it is often said to be easier for lower caste people to be good devotees, by virtue of their low social status; whereas the pride resulting from their social status can make higher caste people less inclined to surrender to the Lord.

10. With regard to this claim, most Western scholars would agree with Jijnasu; see Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, 13.

11. This is the only account that mentions the Ravidāsis, recognizing it as a modern-day religious movement.

12. The moment when Ravidās realizes God is clearly shown to the readers by the halo surrounding his head from that point on, a portrayal probably influenced by Christian iconography. It is also striking how much the picture of the realized Ravidās (light skin, long brown hair, and beard) corresponds to the picture-postcard images of Jesus. If (as it is generally accepted) Ravidās was a *camār*, it is unlikely he would have been that light-skinned. This may indicate something about the target readership for this series (more educated, better off economically) as well as the continuing stigma connected with dark skin.

13. For a good discussion of the relationship between image worship and the emphasis this puts on ritual purity, see Van der Veer 1987, 692–93.

14. The numbers given to the poems come from the numbering scheme in Singh 1977, 191–204.

15. For other poems on this theme, see AG 2, 5, 7, 10, 13, 16, 21, 24, 28, 33, 38, and 40. Though there are only thirty-nine discrete poems in the AG, one poem is repeated, which is how there can be a poem number 40 here.

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