

Seeking Begumpura: The Vision of Utopian Ideology In Guru Ravi Dass Bani

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Abstract

The chapter gives insights on the vision of utopian ideologies in the form of *Begumpura* and negates the existing patterns of exploitation and subordination by overturning social and political hierarchies. It is evident from the textual verses of Guru Ravi Dass that his songs and hymns are full of humility and devotion. He did not directly attack the upper classes but made an attempt to enhance the dignity and uplift the standard of the people belonging to the lower strata of society in such a manner that the high caste people came to realize and recognize the hollowness of their claims to superiority. By his realistic and practical approach, Guru Ravi Dass gave a novel outlook to the people of the country towards the low castes and disgraceful profession. The name of Guru Ravi Dass is the light that guides people out of slavery and suffering to the attainment of

liberation at religious and social level. To the many followers, their worship of Ravi Dass is not just a religious phenomena but a vehicle of social, religious and cultural protest against the inequitable distribution of power and wealth in a social order.

The Poetry ascribed to Ravi Dass shows contempt for the hierarchical social order of the caste system. The contemporary adherents of Ravi Dass challenge the hegemonic power of the dominant castes and express a dissident socio-religious ideology. There is a strong anti-Brahmanical tone that pervades much of poetry of Ravi Dass. The myths associated with Guru Ravi Dass cannot be segregated from the power-politics of that period and they also contain powerful components socio-religious enlightenment by the marginalized sections of the society during the Islamic rule. Joseph Schaller remarks:

The contemporary adherents of the Ravi Dass Panth who are overwhelmingly from *Chamar* or other untouchable and marginal caste backgrounds, utilize the elements of socio-religious dissent expressed in Ravi Dass 'poetry and teachings to formulate their own message(s) to protest against the iniquitous position they occupy in the caste hierarchy. (106)

Guru Ravi Dass belonged to a society that was cruel and crude that had yet to learn sympathy and responsibility for the poor, the down trodden, the peripheral existence on the fringes of society. It is likely that the work done by Ravi Dass

and many others like him contributed to a change in the social attitudes towards the poor, who could rise higher through their spiritual efforts. Ravi Dass chose to aspire higher than what his circumstances permitted him and he succeeded.

The vicious imposition of the caste system and socio-religious practices of ostracizing the untouchables wobbled the huge segment of the society in the times of Ravi Dass. The harsh and the uncompromising social customs based on caste restrictions segregated the untouchables from the mainstream. The position of the *Shudra* in the society was considered as the lowest and their highest duty was to serve the Brahmins who were learned and virtuous. According to the traditional views, the *Shudra* was considered to be born for the assistance to the Brahmins. Being born in the low caste, the study of the *Vedas* and Holy Scriptures were not allowed to them. Listening and reciting the Vedic mantras by the *Shudras* was considered a profane act and they were highly punished for it. Moreover, the ideals and standard of morality were raised to such an extent that the condition of the *Shudra* worsened. The greatest expedition of Guru Ravi Dass was to put an end to the tradition of caste system as it was constructed on the basis of partiality, inequity. According to Guru Ravi Dass, everyone was equal in the eyes of God:

All earthen pots are made up of the same clay;
The same creator has created them all.
The same One pervades all beings, O Ravi Dass;

The same potter has made them all. (Upadhy 176)

In another verse, he says:

From the same drop of ocean,

This entire expansion has taken place.

It is only the foolish ones, O Ravi Dass,

Who bring in the consideration of high and low caste. (176)

The two religious dogmas of *karma* and *dharma* were responsible for the establishment of caste doctrines. The ideology of *karma* professed that the actions performed in the previous birth decided the present caste position. Consequently, it was an honour to take birth in the high caste and the birth in the low caste was penalizing. This also suggested the superiority of the high caste people over the modest background section of the society as far as intelligence, potential and ethics were concerned. In order to institutionalize caste and establish the concept of *karma* and *dharma*, the priestly class authored a large number of *Smritis* or *dharmashastras*. These *dharmashastras* were claimed to be based on the *Vedas*. Like *Vedas*, they were also infallible, inviolable and beyond the realm of any questioning and reasoning. *Manusmriti* is the best known of all such *dharmashastras* which was hailed by the priestly class as the most important work after the *Vedas*. Caste, according to Manu, was the creation of God, and the Brahmins, who were at the pinnacle of caste hierarchy, were the living embodiments of gods on earth. By studying the so called sacerdotal literature

and situating these texts in socio-historical perspective, it becomes quite evident that these texts were written with the primary purpose of establishing and maintaining the Brahmanical hegemony. The *slokas* and the *suktis* in the texts appeared lovely and lofty only for the Brahmins and the upper castes. In the Brahmanical religion and literature; there was absolutely no place for broader social utility or individual justice and freedom which were the heart and soul of any true religion.

Ravi Dass refused to believe in such ideology or recognize the superiority of the Brahmins and rejected the notion that being born in the superior caste was a result of the good actions of the previous life. He endorsed a full equality between the Brahmins and the *Shudras* and became a champion of the downtrodden. He tried to awaken the people about the duplicity and the hypocrisy of the priests exploiting people's religious sentiments to serve their own ends. His attitude to caste discrimination may be judged as vehement denunciation of the system. The mediators of God whom Ravi Dass called deceivers had devised low and high castes and divided men in to high caste Brahmins and low caste *Shudras*. Ravi Dass through his poetic protest provided the *Shudras* and the downtrodden people a comprehensive and all inclusive trial to attain spiritual redemption. He questioned the apprehensions of the conformists and dictators of the Hindu religion and helped in paving the way for the impoverished, downtrodden and

underprivileged to raise their voice and give a form to their yearnings. He emphasized that salvation could be attained by true love and devotion to God and did not require scholastic learning. His poetry regulated an undeviating trend of social dissent amid set the low caste people. It gave them confidence and firmness to articulate against the age old discrimination and despotism they had been facing.

Ravi Dass endeavoured to transform the socio-cultural life by giving an alternative ideology of social equality against the Brahmanical orthodoxy. His discontent against the contemporary society, divided into high and low, was clearly discernible in his writing. He protested against the authority of the four pillars of the contemporary society. He illuminated the period he lived in and made assiduous efforts to teach and enhance the level of the masses through his preaching and built a respectable place for the downtrodden in the socio-religious and economic spheres of society of his times. Through his teachings, Ravi Dass gave shudders to the strict class stratification and proclaimed that God loved his creation disregarding birth, caste or creed.

Ravi Dass was critical of the higher castes, Brahmins, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas*, the twice born, who sought to keep themselves pure by avoiding contact or touch with the low caste. He was obviously rejecting the idea of being an untouchable by taking birth in the low caste. Merely taking birth

in the family of high castes did not make anybody pure because their hearts were not pure. He states:

Though Ganga water be made in to liquor,

Saintly people don't drink it.

Though impure liquor or some other water

Be mixed with Ganga, it remains not different.

(Raga Malaar 1, Sagar 81)

What Ravi Dass mentioned in this context was that when a high caste Brahmin does an impure action, he becomes impure and ceases to be a Brahmin. But when a low caste leather worker does noble and divine actions, he becomes divine and no longer remains of the low caste. Just as a Brahmin loses his caste through low actions, a *Shudra* also loses his caste through his high actions. It is the quality of heart and feelings, the motives and intentions which determine one's high or low status and not the caste by birth. He says:

Giving up the consideration of caste by birth,

Determine caste by action.

This, indeed, is a prescription of the Vedas,

Says, Ravi Dass, on reflection. (Upadhyaya 177)

Similarly a person of low caste and status when engaged in higher level of aspiration and achievement deserves respect rather than contempt on the basis of his origin. He

makes fun of the Brahmins who came to him to find the way to God:

Listen, people of the town!

My caste is well known as leather craftsmen.

God, His attributes, I keep in heart. (Raga Malaar 1, Sagar 79)

My caste removes dead cattle

Around Benaras every day.

Skins them and beats the skin.

Now chief scholars prostrate to him,

Ravi Dass the servant has taken refuge in His Name. (81)

Ravi Dass preached that all men were children of one God and had originated from same five elements. All dissimilarities that men had created for themselves were false. Ravi Dass believed that one's caste should be decided not by birth but by one's worth. According to him, the conventional distinction of religions was a superficial division of humanity created by priests of different religions. He regarded all the outer distinctions of caste, creed and religion as hollow and worthless. He gave an example to illustrate this elevation in the following verse. He says:

A wall of water, a column of air

A mixture of blood and semen,

A structure of bones and flesh and veins

And the poor bird lives in it. (Raga Sorath VI, Sagar 51)

Ravi Dass condemned the caste system based on birth and provided a way out of its tyranny. He advocated caste or social divisions based on worth, motive and actions, which made it dynamic, not static. He was conscious about his low caste status in the society and this discrimination made it possible for him to identify with every menial worker and scavenger. He marshalled against everyone who mistreated downtrodden segments of the society with aversion and contempt. He was of the opinion that all the social divisions based on notions of purity, culture or money ceased to exist for a person devoted to God. He says:

A family in which a saint of God is born
Is known in the world
Nor as of high or low caste,
Not as beggarly or kingly,
But as pure fragrance. (Raga Bilawal 1, Sagar 65)

The saint-poets, who came from society's underclass, in many ways clothed their rebellion against injustice and oppression in obedience to God.

Their devotion was to a God who 'stirred up rebellion' in the hearts of the devotees. The God exhorted and inspired his devotees to free him from the idolatrous-and ignominious- fetters of pseudo-religion founded and jealously guarded by the unscrupulous pundits and *maulvis*. In this concord, the deity and the devoted were

determined to rescue religion and society from the clutches of corrupt elements. (Mani 138)

Ravi Dass strived for a true religion which was not an end in itself but a means to bolster humanist values and ethos for a better social order. In his total obedience and devotion to God, Ravi Dass found no difference between him and the Almighty. He says:

Between You and me, me and You,
What's the difference?
As between gold and its jewel
Water and its wave. (Raga Sri, Sagar 23)

In another verse, he says:

You are the sandal wood.
I am a poor castor-oil plant.
live in your company.
A lowly tree has grown tall.

Fragrance is housed in foul smell. (Raga Asa 111, Sagar 35)

The Bhakti saints, through their *bani*, widened the scope and dimensions of the social protest. They were not merely iconoclasts. They had more enduring commitment to society. Whatever they did was prompted by a vision, the vision of new egalitarian society based on common humanism. The feelings, dreams and aspirations of the unknown, secluded and marginalized people found expression through their poetry. As Gail Omvedt remarks:

The Bhakti radical, Ravi Dass was the first to formulate an Indian version of utopia in his song 'Begumpura'. Begumpura, 'the city without sorrow', is a casteless, classless society; a modern society, one without a mention of temples; an urban society as contrasted with Gandhi's village utopia of *Ram Rajya*. 'Begumpura' described a land with no taxes, toil or harassment, where there is no hierarchy but all are equal. Finally, calling himself a 'tanner now set free', he proclaims that he wanders freely within his friends: the right to walk anywhere in a settlement city or village, is a unique matter for dalits. (7)

The antithetical conditions prevailing in the society gave birth to Utopia. The probability of a progressive society, a society full of equity and love aroused hopefulness and fervid sentiments among the people. Ravi Dass' *Begumpura* was strikingly contrasted with the golden age of Brahmanism. Brahmanism did not have any such offer of equity and ideal society for anyone. They talked about an age or an era when *Varnashramadharma* was truly practiced; sacrifices took place at mass level and pure men, the Brahmins, united with gods. Salvation was considered accessible only outside this world of *Maya* or illusion. Ravi Dass in his verse referred to building a palace on a dung heap and he very well knew where the dung heap existed. It was the need of the hour to clear the moral and religious debris. He was targeting not only the Hindu

observances but also objecting to the ethical paragons established by Hindu Brahmins.

Gail Omvedt defined utopia:

Utopias are projected visions, sometimes imagined in the past, sometimes located in a different world, and sometimes inscribed in the future possibility. But they all lay a claim to some kind of reality, the reality of being possible, and in so doing provide the motivation for efforts at social transformation. The 'heavenly city' or the glorious life projected in the religious tradition is brought down to earth, and posed as inspiration for living and possible action before oppressed human being. (15)

The unique *Begumpura* concept was the vision of Guru Ravi Dass. In this unique vision of Queen City, there is a deliberation of all those awful appalling and detestable forces which Ravi Dass had to bear because of his low birth. He imagines *Begumpura* as:

The regal realm with the sorrowless name:
They call it Queen City, a place with no pain,
No taxes or cares, none opens property there,
No wrongdoing, worry, terror, or torture.
Oh my brother, I've come to take it as my own,
my distant home, where everything is right.
That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,
Where none are third or second-all are one;

Its food and drink are famous, and those who live there,
dwell in satisfaction and in wealth.

They do this or that, they walk where they wish,
They stroll through fabled palaces unchallenged.

Oh, says Ravi Dass, a tanner now set free,
Those who walk beside me are my friends.

(Hawley and Juergensmeyer 32)

Begumpura, the imagined city of Ravi Dass, is in many ways a modern city. There is no property, no taxes, no political torture, no temple and no king in Ravi Dass' utopian city. The city without sorrow is full of prosperity and equality and everyone can walk where they wish. This indicates that the rich and the privileged castes cannot impose restrictions of place upon the subordinated castes and the poor. It is a land of the poor and the deprived, an image of society they aimed for. There is a remarkable distinction between the land of the Brahmins and rulers and *Begumpura*, the land of the saints. The Brahmanical land was characterized by *Vedas*, caste- based distinctions, religious sects, old age, death, pain and doubts. The Sorrowless land of Sant Ravi Dass contained no such evils. Ravi Dass posited presence of several good features in his Sorrowless Town. What is present is security, brotherhood, one Supreme Power without check and balances of a second or third power, population, riches, contentment, and

friendliness. God is the eternal emperor of this kingdom and *Sants* are his courtiers.

Ravi Dass' mention about the tax showed his worries about the taxes he had to pay as a non-Muslim. Ravi Dass was the lowest of the low in the caste hierarchy. His caste carried away dead bodies of the cattle from the town, so he could not have had much of property. So, being a poor non-Muslim, he worried about paying taxes. Apart from *Jaziyah* on all Hindus as tax for protection of non-Muslim life in Muslim State, there was tax on Hindus for going on pilgrimage to their shrines. This explains why Ravi Dass admired absence of restraint on movement in his ideal state. The tax on commercial transactions of Hindus was double of the tax on commercial transactions of Muslims, which Ravi Dass might have paid during his life time. In any case, tax seemed to have caused him enough of anxiety to wish for an ideal society where people like him did not have to pay taxes.

Ravi Dass had characterized his Sorrowless Town as absence of all worries and cares, of fear and fall, of loss and change. Normally many of these cares, worries and fears emerge from deep attachments. Therefore, Ravi Dass, experiencing poverty and social contempt, because of his caste and family, might have grown to be routinely detached from his unhappy environment. Low birth combined with high aspiration to be one with the highest God seemed to have made him impervious to the nibbling away of worries and anxieties. That

was why he felt settled in state of mind which had become his home and country. This kingdom once established was never lost, as it was always the same without change. Ravi Dass said that having found his true home, he was free of his feelings of being a low leather worker. He had been freed of his Dalit consciousness, and so he was free of feeling of limitations and dependence. He waged a persistent campaign in opposition to the evils of the contemporary society. First of all, he resisted the discriminatory social structure (i.e. caste, untouchability, low status of *Shudras* and their deprivation of knowledge). He persuaded the impoverished and subjugated section of the society to evade incomprehension and ignorance and worked hard to elevate their status because destitution, ignorance and incomprehension are adversaries of humanity.

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