

Sant Ravidas:

Making sense of Ravidas amidst the appropriating narratives of the *bhagat*, the 'reborn brahmin' and the political performatives of *fakiri*

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Based on the verses, discourses and hagiographic work sourced from the literature and field work at the Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Punjab, this work attempts to extricate Ravidas' devotional thought and the ideas associated with it, from the narratives of appropriation. The narratives of *bhagat* Ravidas and the 'reborn Brahmin' portray Ravidas as a follower, undermining the long legacy of his deification and reclamation as *satguru* (the truest guru). These narratives attempt to substitute the past and contemporary assertions of the Ad Dharmis and Ravidassias respectively, with a compromised depiction of Ravidas' life and thought.

Ravidas situates the self, outside the disciplining and control of the body through the networks of purity/pollution. This paper attempts to highlight the liberating and empowering implications of Ravidas' devotional thought for the marginalized self and body by juxtaposing his views against Vaishnava bhakti thought and the Hindu right's framing of the body as a register of masculinist power and control. It further attempts to visibilise the inexorable link between practices of ascetic mortification of the body, masculinism, and the Hindu right wing's political performative of *fakiri*.

## **The guru, the *bhagat* and the ‘reborn brahmin’<sup>1</sup>:**

Historically, the religious landscape of northern and central India has seen Chishti Sufis, Nath Yogis and Puranic gurus espousing and propagating non-sectarian and overlapping beliefs, forming what is known as a culture of the sants (Gopal 2019). This culture of the sants or *santism* is a radical break from the system of organized religion and its structures of authority (Vaudeville 1987). Sant is a term derived from the Sanskrit word *sat* (the truth). It refers to a person who knows the truth or the one who has experienced the ultimate reality, enlightenment or self-realization (Vaudeville 1987). In common parlance, the term sant is used to describe someone who can be a moral or spiritual exemplar. The term saint, which is often used interchangeably for the term sant, comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, meaning the one who is holy (Cross and Livingstone 2005). While the term saint may be used to convey a formal religious designation or title, the term sant is generally used to convey respect or popularity of a person recognized as spiritually evolved by the people of a region.

The porous and unorthodox ideas of Bhakti devotionalism of many ‘lower caste’<sup>2</sup> sants like Ravidas, Kabir, Namdev, Tukaram, Ramdas, Pipa, Sain and Dhanna (Muthu Mohan and Dharam Singh 2003) have nurtured a devotional ecosystem unburdened with abject sectarianism and orthodoxy. Ravidas is one of the leading sants of Bhakti devotionalism to inspire a positive recalibration and reclamation of Chamar caste identity and the socio-political mobilization of self-respect surrounding it. Omvedt (2008) terms Ravidas as a Bhakti radical for his social vision of the *Begumpura* – the land without the sorrows of caste, that in many ways is the defining feature of Ravidas’ social utopia.

The contemporary assertion of the Ravidassias of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan, for a distinct social identity, is a manifestation of the indelible impact of the values and ideas of sant Ravidas.<sup>3</sup> Ravidas’ thought needs to be situated within this very significant context of being an icon of change for the Chamars who have been able to articulate a positive self-identity of Ad Dharmi, Ravidassia and ‘Chamar’<sup>4</sup> against the humiliating and denigrating meanings of caste occupation and ritual pollution attached with their given social identities.

The term sant is the most commonly used term of reference for Ravidas, a sign of endearment, respect, adoration and often an acknowledgement of his popularity among the masses. In the sant tradition, respect and recognition is gained from the masses, unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition where established authority canonizes sainthood in recognition of holiness. Santhood therefore belongs to the realm of the plural, diverse and fluid where many meanings of the divine co-exist in defiance of the structure of fixed authority. The absence of a rigid or a pronounced notion of hierarchy between the follower and the sant leaves open the possibility of redefining the exchange between the seeker and the sought on more democratic terms. The appellation of sant for Ravidas comes from this context of the sant tradition.

According to the Sikh normative belief, the appellation of guru is a marker of supreme respect reserved for the ten gurus of the Sikh lineage. In the Sikh faith, the reference of guru is exclusively reserved for the ten Sikh gurus part of the established guruship, leaving the other sants to be identified as their followers or the bhagats (Ranjan 2019). This notion of the guruship has been questioned by the dalits of Punjab, who constitute roughly 32 per cent of the total population. Despite the remarkable popularity of the 'lower caste' sants like Ravidas, they find themselves on the margins of the Guru Granth Sahib.

The followers of Ravidas take exception to the deeming of Ravidas' verses in the GGS as the 'bani of bhagat Ravidas' and use markers of guruship for Ravidas, reiterating their stance that Ravidas is not simply a sant or a bhagat but the most superior of all gurus to them (Ranjan 2019). Using markers of guruship like guru and satguru for Ravidas is an act of rejecting the patronizing and dismissive narratives that deliberately underplay and undermine the cultish popularity he enjoys among the Chamars. The dominant Sikh and Vaishnava narratives of Ravidas attempt to uniformize the diversity of sant beliefs by integrating Ravidas into monotheistic traditions where he is obscured by a Sikh or Vaishnava guru (Ibid).

Similar to the guru/bhagat hierarchy, many mainstream hagiographers of Ravidas integrate him in the narrative of the 'reborn brahmin' where Ravidas is shown to be returned to the fold of brahminhood by a Vaishnava guru. The

narrative describes him as a fallen brahmin who first became polluted by violating the order of purity/pollution in his previous birth but was later redeemed and reindicted in brahminhood by Ramanand. This narrative reduces Ravidas' status to the contingency of birth while anointing Ramanand to the status of his inherent and unquestioned saviour.

The Hindi hagiographers Anantdas and Priyadas are two of the more prolific sources of the 're-born brahmin' narrative of Ravidas. Upadhyaya (1982) traces this narrative in Anantdas' *Bhaktaratnavali* where Ravidas is said to be a brahmin who reincarnates as a Chamar due to the 'impure' act of eating meat. According to Anantdas' account, Ravidas was born a brahmin in his previous birth but was reborn as Chamar because he consumed meat (Callewaert 2000). Upon being reborn in a Chamar family, he refused his mother's milk for a period of four days. On the night of the fourth day, Ramanand received a divine command to go and initiate infant Ravidas and his family as his followers. Only after this divine intervention did Ravidas accept to drink his mother's milk, implying that a caste-aware infant Ravidas had refused ritual pollution from a 'lower caste' mother due to his Brahmin affiliations of the previous birth.

Priyadas' account of Ravidas is another variation of the reborn brahmin narrative. This is argued by Gail Omvedt but has been sourced from the Round Table India. Perhaps the right way to frame it is, Gail Omvedt terms Priyadas' 1712 version of this narrative in the *Bhaktirasbodhini* as a brahmanisation of Ravidas (Omvedt 2012, Roundtable 2012). According to Priyadas, Ravidas was born a brahmin but accepted alms polluted from the touch of the cobbler caste people and became demoted to being born a 'lower caste' in the next birth. This narrative too places sole emphasis on Ravidas' birth-based ascription and pins it onto Ravidas' polluting actions. Both these accounts deprive Ravidas of the dignity of agency and impose brahmanising narratives on his legacy. In response to these narratives of appropriation, the Ravidassias deify and glorify Ravidas as a hero, a saviour, a protagonist and a miracle worker.

## Ravidas the protagonist: extricating Ravidas from the narratives of appropriation

There is a general tendency, among the dominant social forces, to mute or temper the legacy of Ravidas. Ravidassias respond to this tendency of appropriation by exalting Ravidas, sanctifying him as their hero and presenting his life accounts as a series of spectacles marking his extraordinary powers and abilities.

Miraculous stories of Ravidas like the 'four janjus' (producing the four sacred threads from his heart) or floating of the pathri (making the stone float on water)<sup>5</sup> invert the dominant narratives of the *bhagat* and the 'reborn brahmin' by taking prominent figures deemed with respect and veneration in Sikh and Vaishnava beliefs, and portraying them as the admirers or followers of Ravidas. The visual imagery of Ravidas circulated in the deras and on its online forums shows him discoursing with people at the ghats of Benaras, arguing with the kings and putting brahmin characters of the story in their place,<sup>6</sup> radically altering the system of existing meanings where the 'lower caste' is the perpetual follower of the enlightened upper caste guru.

The life episodes of Ravidas involving the river/goddess Ganga, Kabir, Gorakhnath and Sikander Lodhi are popular in the North Indian tradition of Ravidas veneration.<sup>7</sup> The river Ganga and its anthropomorphic depictions hold a place of reverence in North India for being a holy site. The Ganga thematic of Ravidas life episodes (Friedlander 1996) are very popular at the Dera Sachkhand Ballan. In these life episodes, Ganga appears in her anthropomorphic *avatar* and becomes an admirer of Ravidas. One such life episode goes like this. While making leather in Kashi bazaar, Ravidas was asked by a brahmin called Ganga Ram to accompany him for a dip in the holy Ganga.<sup>8</sup> Ravidas declined to take the dip as he did not believe in the Hindu ritual of washing sins in the Ganga. He asked Ganga Ram to give an offering of a piece of leather to the holy Ganga on his behalf. Goddess Ganga, thinking that Ganga Ram is Ravidas became elated and praised him with many honorifics. She then offered the brahmin a gold bangle as a gift for Ravidas. Ganga Ram took the bangle and gifted it to his wife. After a few days, he went to the market to sell the bangle where it was apprehended as a stolen good. When the king heard news of the stolen gold bangle, he asked Ganga Ram to produce

the other part of the pair to prove his innocence. Ravidas came to the brahmin Ganga Ram's rescue by seeking river Ganga's help through an act of miracle. In the stories of the Ganga thematic, Ravidas becomes the figure of admiration and reverence for the brahmin and river/goddess Ganga. There are many different stories of Ravidas and river Ganga with the same narrative structure where only the objects of exchange vary, from coins, betel nuts, *damri* (a small quantity) to gold bangles/bracelet, while the main characters remain the same.

Here is another popular variant of this life episode. A brahmin would walk barefoot for his daily bath in the Ganga river every day. One day, Ravidas offered him his shoes without accepting money for them. He asked the brahmin to offer betel-nut to the river Ganga on his behalf. Upon being offered Ravidas' betel-nut, the river Ganga appeared in her divine *avatar* and outstretched her hand to accept it. Goddess Ganga praised Ravidas and expressed her respect for him. This act of miracle is said to have made Ravidas famous in the whole of Kashi (Bhatti and Pinney 2011).

In most of these stories, brahmins play the characters of either beneficiaries of Ravidas' kindness or jealous antagonists attempting to harm him. In one such story, Ravidas defeats the machinations of the brahmins to kill him.<sup>9</sup> The story goes as follows: Ravidas began to worship god in the manner of the brahmins. He would apply *tilak* (mark), wear *dhoti* (cloth sheet), blow the conch shell and wear the *janju* (sacred thread). Soon he became very popular among the people for his message of universal brotherhood. Ravidas' vehement criticism of untouchability and the caste system angered the brahmins. They, along with Piran Ditta Mirasi, hatched a conspiracy to kill Ravidas. One day, they invited Ravidas for a meeting. Despite knowing of their scheme to kill him, Ravidas accepted the invitation. Using his miraculous abilities, Ravidas exchanged appearances with the brahmins' companion Bhalla Nath and the brahmins ended up killing him instead. When they heard Ravidas blowing his conch-shell in his hut later that day, they realized they had killed Bhalla Nath. The brahmins then acknowledged Ravidas' extraordinary powers and apologized profusely.

There are many life episodes where Ravidas is glorified as the most virtuous of all saints. A famous narrative is that of the philosopher's stone. According to a popular

rendition of the story, Ravidas preferred to live like a poor man and never accepted any gifts from the many kings and queens who were his disciples. One day, god willed for him to have the philosopher's stone, which was the most precious of all possessions. God visited him disguised as a sant and offered him the philosopher's stone that had magical powers to convert iron into gold. The sant offered Ravidas the stone to use it in the service of the *sadhus*. Ravidas listened to this offer and politely refused with the plea that he rather be of service to the *sadhus* with the resources available to him. The sant made Ravidas repeated offers to keep the stone, but to no avail. When he saw that Ravidas wouldn't accept it, he left the stone in Ravidas' hut telling him that he would come back and collect it later. When the sant came back to collect the stone after thirteen years, he found it lying at the same place he left it. In Vaishnava versions of this story, Ravidas refuses the stone for the love of lord Ram while in the Ravidassia narrative, he forgoes the stone out of his virtuousness.<sup>10</sup> These life episodes, miracle stories and narratives of Ravidas inverting the brahmanical tropes, contest the appropriation of Ravidas by celebrating and glorifying him as the heroic figure.

These stories are not simply a reflection of the enthusiasm of the followers of Ravidas to deify and venerate him, but are premised on the powerfully and systematically structured ideas of Ravidas in his devotional philosophy. Therefore, Ravidas veneration is to be analysed in conjunction with Ravidas' devotional philosophy.

## **Ravidas' devotionalism: radically altering the self and the divine**

In the Vaishnava tradition Rama, Vishnu and Krishna are deemed as the aspects of the one deity who is the *paramatman* (the supreme self). *Bhakti* (devotion) is a central aspect of Vaisnava tradition, fixed in the four principal practices of meditation, praise of god, image worship and the Vedic ritual (Lutjeharms 2020).

Ravidas questions the Vaishnava *bhakti* rituals and offers alternative paths to devotion. In Shabad 6 of the Amritbani, the compilation of verses of Ravidas by the



Dera Sachkhand Ballan, he criticizes the rituals of the Vedas, singing devotional praise, asceticism and various other means of worship in the Vaisnava tradition. He says:

*Aisi Bhagat na hoyi re Bhai. Ram Nam bin jo kuch kariai.* (Performing rituals is not the worship of god)

*So sab bharam kahai* (everything without the name of god is an illusion)

*Bhagat na ras dan, bhagat na khathai gyan* (neither singing a sweet song, nor speaking knowledgeably)

*Bhagat na ban ai gufa khudayi* (nor going to forest or caves is worship)

*Bhagat na aise haansi, bhagat na aassa paasi.* (neither worship is a joke, nor a game of dice).<sup>11</sup>

In the aforementioned Shabad 6 of the Amritbani, Ravidas describes the following acts as falsities: the monastic act of going to a cave, attaining knowledge, singing devotional songs, counting rosary beads and tonsuring the head.<sup>12</sup> He refers to those who indulge in these acts as pretenders and hypocrites. According to him, the renunciation of pride and arrogance<sup>13</sup> is the true path of devotion.

Apart from redefining devotion, Ravidas redefines the relationship between the self and the divine such that both self and the divine acquire radically altered meanings. As an expression of hyperbolic praise for god, Ravidas willfully subjugates the self to god. In Shabad 1 of the Amritbani, Ravidas addresses god as the master from whom he seeks the wisdom to enable him to worship day and night.<sup>14</sup> In Shabad 2, Ravidas addresses himself as god's slave and beseeches him to not forget him.<sup>15</sup> He says, "*Mera karam kutilta Janam Kubhanti* (my acts are crooked, birth is mean), *Charan na chhadao sarir kal jai* (I will not forsake your feet even if my body perishes tomorrow)."<sup>16</sup> This subjugation of the self in devotion to god constitutes a self-effacing attitude such that the self is both resigned and reduced in a gesture of humility.

The self-effacing nature of Ravidas' devotionism has the potential to empower the self when the divine entity escapes any fixed meaning or order. Unlike the well-defined hierarchy of the divine order in the Hindu belief system, the object

of worship in Ravidas' thought remains undefined and radically undefinable. The divine remains an unstable object in Ravidas' philosophy, unfit to be structured into a hierarchy. Ravidas' bhakti thought forecloses the possibility of accepting any one entity or authority as the supreme. He does not subscribe to one monolithic notion of god with a personal nature or with fixed attributes, in his verses. To him, the god-entity remains a shifting, unsettled and ambiguous object. Ravidas refers to the god-entity with different names such as Ram, Gobind, bajigar, deva, etc., and introduces plural notions of the divine such that no order of hierarchy can capture it/them.

Ravidas' verses refer to Ram as a non-dualistic force that supersedes all systems of hierarchy and authority, not to a personal god marked in the hierarchy of the Vaishnava gods.<sup>17</sup> His devotionism empowers him to speak from a position of intimacy and affords him the position to challenge the social class of god-mediators. For those who are marginalized and oppressed by the fixities of caste and its divine symbolic universe, this non-monolithic notion of god is empowering. Ravidas slips in and out of several references to transcendence without settling down for one absolute notion.

On the one hand his verses are replete with mentions of complete surrender in devotion to the supreme entity, on the other those references are often followed up with mentions of the grace of the guru, company of the sants or the giving up of arrogance as the real paths to the divine.<sup>18</sup> In the Shabad 4, Ravidas introduces the idea of god's worship and the company of sants as ways of achieving deliverance without prioritizing one over the other. He says, "*Ram bhagat bin mukat na pawai* (you cannot achieve salvation without worship of god), *Ravidas pal sadh sangat mil* (If a man spends few moments in the pious company of sants with true devotion), *Puran brahm sada pritpali* (then he can achieve the god, who is the creator)."<sup>19</sup>

Ravidas' idea of an undefinable god and the lack of any fixed path of deliverance makes it possible to reimagine the social order outside of the neat hierarchy sanctioned by a clearly defined system of gods. It also makes possible the imagining of a self that is engaged in the material conditions of existence, as opposed to the idea of renunciation which is a complete abandoning of the body

so as to escape its worldly encumbrances. Ravidas' devotionalism radically alters the notion of self and opens up the possibility of renegotiating individual agency with regard to the divine.

## **Rescuing the body from purity / pollution**

Body is a crucial site of caste-based ascription of purity/pollution. The regimentation of the body based on caste is pivoted on the idea that touch itself is the carrier of pollution unless minimized by practicing a strict social discipline and adhering to rituals of touch and 'untouch.' The disciplining of the body through purity/pollution therefore furthers a body negative ideal that disempowers those who are marked as polluted under the contingent reality of birth. This regimentation of the body, its degree of purity and the transfer of it by birth, can be said to be the basis of caste based social ascription of rank, status and occupation described variously as caste identity, jati and varna.

Under the moral universe of caste, individuals are organized in a social order of hierarchy based on their degree of purity by birth, transfer and association or contact. It would be apt to describe caste as a regulation of bodies and people that is in place "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order" (Foucault 2008). In other words, a social division of labour that is based on the biopolitics of purity/pollution. The dispersed networks of power that operate at the lowest level of life are described by Michel Foucault (2010) as the *dispositif*. *Dispositif* is an abstraction through which Foucault analyzed the totality of practices and discourses in any network of power. In the *dispositif* of caste, the individual regulates the self and the other on the basis of touch/untouch, thereby losing control over their own body and the way in which it relates to other beings and objects. Ravidas' thought provides the possibility to regain control over the body by rescuing it from the discipline and control of the touch/untouch.<sup>20</sup>

Caste functions through an expansive and meticulous network of social institutions and discipline at the level of the somatic as well as the sovereign (Foucault 2010). The caste system can therefore be defined as a dispersed network of power

that operates at the lowest unit of society through to the highest, acting as both a means and the effect of control and discipline. This network comprises of discourses, institutions and rituals of purity/pollution functioning as 'technologies of power'- the means of applying power' (Ibid) as well as the totality of caste.

Alter (1992) argues that Hinduism can best be explained by reference to relative degrees, as no notion is absolute, and things are definable only in terms of where they are placed between the two extreme positions. The Hindu order attaches the disciplines of the body with certain pre-defined stages of life. The householder's stage is that of indulgence in the sensuous and the worldly, while *sanyaas* is a complete withdrawal or escape from the body. Ravidas' devotionalism has the ability to rescue the body from caste-based disciplining, thereby empowering the self to take charge of the body and nurture its capacities. The logic of caste treats the body as the carrier of pollution or defilement unless redeemed by the rituals of purity. Herein, the body has no identity bigger than the one ascribed by birth and no role bigger than that of being the carrier of that ascription, subject to everyday redemption by rituals. Ravidas does not treat his caste occupation as a site of pollution but proclaims it as a site of labour and writes about it as his material condition in an oppressive system. Ravidas says, "*Meri jaati kutbandhlaa dhore dhouwanta nithi baanaarasi aas paasaa. Ab bipar pardhan tihi kari hdanduouti tere naam sarnaai Ravidass daasaa.* (My Caste is Kutabādhalâ, I cart carcasses constantly around Benares. Now Brahmans and headmen bow down before me, Ravidas the servant has taken refuge in Your Name) (Ronki Ram 2009).

This taking charge of the body is a liberation of the body from the rituals that mark it as pure, superior, fierce, aggressive, virile or potent. The willful surrender of the self in Ravidas' Bhakti thought is neither indulgence nor escape but a non-acceptance of either of the binaries that regulate the functions of and impose limitations on the body. There is a range of means for disciplining the body in the Sant tradition. The concept of attaining control over the body or *sadh* is prominent in the religious practices of the saints called the *Sadhus*.<sup>21</sup> These practices are socially interpreted as virtues of sacrificing social power and renouncing attachment to worldly pleasure.

In contemporary Indian politics, the tropes of celibacy and austerity have been invoked by the *fakirs*, *yogis* and *sadhvis* of the Hindu right-wing, creatively combining religion and power through the male-centric notions of the body. Unlike Ravidas' ideas of minimizing the self and questioning of social hierarchies of power, these political performatives of asceticism reproduce traditional structures of power. Control of the body under the binaries of excess and denial is structured on the larger male-centric view of control of body as a measure of its potency, feeding into the socially constructed notions of masculinity.

### **The *fakir*, the *sadhu* and the *sanyaasi*: masculinism and caste in the ascetic performatives of holy men**

Control of the body is central to the ascetic practices of the holy men. The logic of control and disciplining of the body runs across a range of ascetic practices from the milder forms of control through to extreme practices of inflicting pain on the body. *Sadhus* are the ascetics under the Vaishnava or Shaiva traditions popularly known by many different names like *vairagi*, *sanyaasi*, *yogi*, *swami* and so on, depending on the nature, degree and order of their ascetic practices.<sup>22</sup> A range of practices from abstinence from food to self-flagellation, self-control and pain form a prominent part of ascetic practices of the *sadhus*. A *sadhu* is the one who practices *sadh* – the 'gaining of power over', whereas a *sanyaasi* is the one who is a complete renouncer and adheres to a much stricter definition of asceticism. *Sanyaas* (Alter 1992) is "a categorically asocial attitude and style of life. He (the *sanyaasi*) must go through life naked, alone, wandering, celibate, begging, fasting and silent."

*Sadhus* are usually characterized by their ochre robes, shaven or matted hair, a life of penury and are often associated with the practicing of yoga, brahmacharya, *tap* (self-mortification), vows of celibacy or other varieties of ascetic practices. The *sadhus* and *sanyaasis* are believed to be renouncers of all material possessions and desires. However, not all ascetics renounce social power and privilege. The self-fashioned ascetics in the Hindu right-wing are an example of intersection of the body, discourses of power and religion to reproduce and reorient social

power along a new axis of privilege. Therefore, measures of control of the body that appear to be renouncing privilege may effectively reorient privilege and give rise to new networks of power.

In Ravidas' moral universe, the social utopia of equality is the more essential idea of transcendence rather than the control of self over body. This progressive nature of Ravidas' devotionalism and santism needs reiteration in the present context where the Hindutva outfits have utilized the aesthetics and poetics of asceticism in an effort to draw symbolic parallels with the saints.

*Fakiri*, a trait associated with the sant culture of mendicancy or self-imposed poverty has gained popularity the Indian political domain, in the recent times. A cultivated and curated image of *fakiri* is one of the many instances of the political performatives of asceticism in contemporary Indian politics. Political performatives in this context comprise of various bodily comportments, gestures, lifestyles and speech-acts that are part of a performative act larger than its constituent parts. For instance, a popular leader publicly appearing as a bearded sage and practising yoga, or a leader performing the lifestyle of a *brahmachari*, renouncing the pleasures of matrimony to voluntarily take up excessive workload are constituent parts of the larger act of performance of ascetic discipline. In these political performatives, the sant culture stylings and performances of the body become so intricately coiled on to the political figure such that the two become indistinguishable as separate ways of being.

Performative here is used in the sense of bodily appearance, regimens of its disciplining and linguistic utterances (Fischer-Lichte 2008) that not only make statements but also perform actions. It is a term of language philosophy and performance studies where an overlapping of speech and action creates a new aesthetic terrain. The theatrical utterances and appearances of contemporary political leaders have the effect of a performative. These performatives have been utilized by extremist forces to draw symbolic parallels with the *sadhus*, the saints and their lifestyle of poverty, in order to reiterate, not challenge, the established structure of social privilege and power.

The male centric notion of disciplining of the body or *sadh* involves the manufacturing of conditions that inflict pain on the body, outside of or in rejection of the existing social institutions. The ability to tolerate self-inflicted pain on the body, based on the binary of excess/denial, as a measure of its control and of placing value on the self is a predominantly male-centered view of the body and self. It does not take cognizance of pain caused from bodily processes like menstruation and reproductive labour that is a routine aspect of the female body. Ravidas' notion of self and the body doesn't privilege any one gender, caste, class or religion, leaving it open to be utilized as an instrument of empowerment by people of any social group or identity.

Overcoming of bodily pain is an aspect of the everyday physical labour of women within the spaces of family, society and workspace, and not of renunciation of the social space. Far from being a source of power or valuing of self for women, these bodily processes involving overcoming of pain are largely associated with ritual impurity and inferiority, leading often to debarring women from social and domestic spaces. Therefore, regimens of control of the body in a *sadhu*, *yogi* or *fakir* privileges and normalizes male centric views of the body and its disciplining.

Arpita Chakraborty (2019) argues that the dietetic and spermatic forms of control in MK Gandhi's practices of *brahmacharya* and vegetarianism are heteropatriarchal regimens of the male body that further 'symbolic violence' – a Bourdieusian concept where the oppressed misrecognize the dominance imposed on them as something natural. The political performatives of *fakiri* lie at the intersection of the discourses of power, body and masculinity such that the dominant caste, religious and gendered discourses that perpetrate symbolic violence become circulated in the form of abstractions such as nationalism, discipline, fitness, cleanliness and so on.

The imagery of the half-black, half saffron Hanuman icons, or the sculpted body of the Hindu male gods put on display on the social media space embody the aggressive masculinity of the Hindu right-wing, directly othering the religious minorities. Furthermore, the right-wing's ideological and political support to the policies of neo-liberal capitalism that structurally exploit the poor, while upholding the bodily aesthetics of *fakiri* or *sadhuwad* extends the symbolic violence (Deepak

K 2021) of class where the poor are made to believe that the economic practices that oppress them are meant for their own good.

The right-wing political practices of glorifying sacrifice of carnal pleasure, allegations of effeminacy against the men in political opposition, aggressive nationalism, justification of rape, slut shaming of women opposition leaders, male protectionism and many other such routine acts of masculinism constitute everyday symbolic violence through male centric discourses of the body and self. Contemporary political rhetoric uses binaries such as sexual freedom / moral uprightness, nationalist protectionism/ anti-nationalism, celibacy / indulgence that become seamlessly interspersed in popular puns and social media conversation, framing the aggressive, morally disciplined and sexually abstinent bodies as masculine. In many such rhetoric, Jawaharlal Nehru's purported sexual indulgence is juxtaposed against the morally superior body of the *brahmacharis* and *fakirs*.

In such political rhetorics, the sensitive, sensuous, inquisitive, self-critical, intellectually curious, sexually exploratory or rebellious attitudes that have the effect of potentially empowering people against the violent patriarchal structure are marginalized as traits of the effeminate, inferior or infantilized bodies. In these rhetorics helmed by the political protagonists, the bodies that are self-regulated and disciplined under the regime of masculinism are framed as superhuman and virile.

The ascetic performatives of the holy men have the effect of reproducing the existing forms of social power and privilege, arguably in more effective ways than direct and graphic forms of violence. The right-wing discourse of self and the body, involving performatives and tropes of *fakiri* and *sadhuwad*, further perpetrate and entrench caste, class and gendered privileges of the performers by preserving and normalizing the existing social hierarchies and symbolic violence.



## Notes

1. The reborn brahmin is a popular narrative of Ravidas being reborn as a Chamar due to caste pollution in the previous birth, but being redeemed by the Vaishnava guru Ramanand and, under his discipleship, attaining his upper caste status. This can be said to be one variant of the ghar wapsi or reclamation through conversion, integration or appropriation.
2. The so-called lower caste communities, in reference to the graded hierarchy of the caste system in India. See, B R Ambedkar. 2013. Hindu Social Order. New Delhi: Critical Quest.
3. Field notes. Dera Sachkhand Ballan. September 20, 2017.
4. Instead of reference to the 'lower caste' identity, this term is redefined by the Ravidassias to mean the one who is made from Cham or flesh. This universalization of the term Chamar is an assertion of pride and rejection of the denigrating meanings associated with it.
5. "Stories of Shri Guru Ravidas Ji," Shrigururavidasji, Accessed February 20, 2021, [https://www.shrigururavidasji.com/site/articles\\_books/ravidasji/ravidas\\_a\\_b\\_stories.php](https://www.shrigururavidasji.com/site/articles_books/ravidasji/ravidas_a_b_stories.php).
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20. Untouch is not the absence of touch but the presence of a state of being that is defined by not being in contact of anything or anybody.
21. Monier, Monier-Williams, A *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. The XHTML edition. The digital Monier-Williams *Sanskrit-English dictionary*. The XHTML edition (inria.fr)
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