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The Significance of the Dalit Sant Ravidas: A Theological Response

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Abstract: The life and teaching of Sant Ravidas provide all Dalits encouragement and a shining example of gaining their dignity and place in society as equal human beings. It is clearly shown that the Bible affirms this, and theological analysis and reflection reconfirm the mission of the Church to help all Dalits gain their rightful, respected and dignified place in society.

Keywords: Ravidas, Ravidasas, Ravidasis, Dalit theology, human dignity, dignity of labour, goodness of creation, outcast, caste equality.

Introduction

“*Man changa hai tho kattauchi mein Ganga*”. If one’s mind is pure one will find the goddess Ganga (God) in the water used to wash hides in a shoemaker’s basin.¹ These

¹ Jose Joseph, *Social Protests and Revolts of the Dalits in Bihar* (Bodh Gaya: Magadh University, 1999), Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, p. 239.

Ravidas Smarika (Sant Ravidas Ashram, Patna: Bihar Prantiya Ravidas Mahasabha, 1988), Hindi. A source of dalit interpretations of Sant Ravidas.

Ravidas Smarika (Sant Ravidas Ashram, Patna: Bihar Prantiya Ravidas Mahasabha, 1992), Hindi. A source of dalit interpretations of Sant Ravidas.

are the immortal words of *Sant² Ravidas*. The exact date of his birth is not clear. However, the 18th February is celebrated as *Ravidas Jayanti*. He is born in Banaras late in the 15th century and preaches in medieval India. He is considered to be a contemporary of Kabir and Mira and a disciple of Maharshi Ramananda of the Vaishnav sect.³ Ravidas belongs to the *chamar*⁴ community which is

² The term *sant* is derived from the Sanskrit *sat* which means truth or reality. Hence, the root meaning of *sant* is one who is the truth or one who has experienced the Ultimate reality. In the medieval period, the dalit protest against brahminic oppression takes the shape of the bhakti movements. They first emerged in the seventh century A.D. and reached their peak between the 15th and 17th century A.D. Ravidas needs to be situated in this tradition of the *sants* (poet-saints) of the bhakti movements. They express *social protest in and through the language and idiom of religion and morality*, appropriate to a pre-modern and traditional population. Refer to K. Schomer, "Introduction: The Sant Tradition in Perspective" in K. Schomer & W. McLeod (eds.), *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Delhi, Patna: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), pp. 2-3. Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 247-248. D. Lorenzen, "The Kabir Panth and Social Protest" in K. Schomer & W. McLeod (eds.), *The Sants...*, p. 292. W. Fernandes, "Bhakti and a Liberation theology for India" in P. Puthanangady (ed.), *Towards and Indian Theology of Liberation* (Bangalore: Indian Theological Association), pp. 89-99.

³ Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 239. The dalit version of Sant Ravidas says that he was never a disciple of Ramananda. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 239. Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, *Sant Prawar Ravidas Saheb* (Lucknow: Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan, 1984), Hindi. He presents a dalit refutation of the brahminic legends about Sant Ravidas.

⁴ The term *chamar* includes the tanners (*charmamna*, Rig Veda, VIII.5,38; Tait. Br. III.4,13) of leather or hide (*charman* or *charma*, Rig Veda III.60.2; IV.13.4), the preparers of skins (*charman* or *charma*, Rig Veda I.85.5; I.110.8), the manufacturers of leather articles and the makers of shoes (*carmakara*, Sat.Br. V.4.3.19; Manu, IV.66,74). The term *chamar* of today corresponds to the *charmamna*

mainly found in northern and western India. Chamars are not only persons who work on skins (*chamada*), but they belong to a social group which has a long history of being dominated, exploited, treated as *untouchable* and *socially outcast* by the *varna* society. The word *chamar* is now an abusive⁵ term. Chamars are one of the communities included in the category of the *Scheduled Castes*⁶ and one

or *charmamla* and the *charmakaras* of the past. Refer to G. Briggs, *The Chamars* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), pp. 11-15.

⁵ *Chori-chamari* is the prevalent term used for the act of stealing. The saying *chamar siyar sada hosiyar* equates the chamar with the mythological cunning jackal. Refer to K. Kizhakekala & J. Vadassery, *The Chamars: Their Beliefs and Practices* (Patna: St. Xavier's, 1985), pp. 5-6.

⁶ A schedule was promulgated by a Presidential Order in 1950. The communities treated as untouchable whose names were enlisted in this schedule came to be known as *Scheduled Castes*. This term is used in India for administrative and legislative purposes. Refer to Tomy Joseph, *The Musahars: Cultural Life of a Dalit Community in Bihar* (Mumbai: University of Mumbai, 2007), Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, p. 1.

The *Scheduled Castes* are to be considered as castes (*jatis*) in the loose sense of the term and not in the strict sense. A *jati* (caste) in the strict sense is a local social unit which is included in one of the four *varnas* (castes) of brahminic society. The criteria of purity and pollution determine the *varna* (ritual status) of a given *jati*, which in turn determines the social status of the *jati*. Those social units which are outcast i.e., outside the *varna* system are not *jatis* in the strict sense. However, since the system of *varna* and *jati* dominates Indian society, the outcasts consider themselves as *jatis*. They imitate the religious and social customs and practices of the Hindu upper castes, with the illusory hope that one day they will be admitted into the *varna* system. It is only in this loose sense that we refer to outcast social units which are functionally included in the *varna* society, but ritually and socially excluded from it, as *jatis*. Refer to W. Fernandes, *Caste and Conversion Movements in India* (Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1981), Monograph Series. H. Gould, *The Hindu caste*

of the 400 dalit⁷communities.⁸

With the solidification of the caste system, dalits have become a fixed group who are forced to inherit their situation of inequality, permanent pollution by virtue of *birth* and involvement with organic matter, untouchability, inferiority, segregation, social exclusion and deprivation of human rights. This is the *specificity* of dalit oppression which has been destroying their humanity and peoplehood,

System: The Sacralization of a Social Order (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1987).

⁷ The term *dalit* is originally a Marathi word and as a noun or adjective means broken, oppressed, crushed, etc. Refer to E. Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit* (Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1992), p. 267. A. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective" in A. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Centre, 1991), p. 139. For a detailed discussion on the meaning of the term *dalit* refer to D. Rasquinha, "A Critical Reflection on the Meaning of Dalit Christian Theology" in *VJTR*, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 252-260.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), a backward caste Marathi social reformer, was the first to use the term *dalit* to describe the outcast untouchables as the oppressed victims of Hindu society. Refer to M. Prabhakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology" in A. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader...*, pp. 41-42, 45. J. Massey, "Dalits" in *PCR Information*, no. 27, 1990, p. 69.

Many outcasts in India have been inspired to choose the name *dalit*, *exclusively* for themselves to bring out the *specificity* of dalit oppression, liberation and the socio-cultural factors important for dalit mobilization. Refer to T. Nath, *Politics of the Depressed Classes* (Delhi: Deputy Publications, 1987), pp. 1-2. V. Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness " in A. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader...*, p. 1. D. Rasquinha, "A Critical....," pp. 254-255.

⁸ T. K. Oommen, *Protest and Change: Studies in Social Movements* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 254. Dr. K.S. Singh puts the number of dalit communities at 471. Refer to K. S. Singh, *The Scheduled Castes, Peoples of India*, Vol. 2 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 1.

impoverishing them, rendering them politically powerless and damaging their psyche. In this they are distinguished from the most backward castes and the adivasis. Dalits have been and are the most oppressed and exploited people in Indian society.⁹

According to the Census of 2001 dalits comprise 16.2% of India's population. There are 25 million Christians in India which is just below 3% of the total population of the country.¹⁰ About 70% of Indian Christians are *dalits*.¹¹ ***Thus they constitute the vast majority of Indian Christians. Moreover, Sant Ravidas has made an important contribution in deed and word to dalit liberation.*** Hence, it becomes important for us as Indian Christians, to articulate the significance of the dalit Sant Ravidas, and the action of the Creator-Saviour God in and through him, so that dalits and all people in the Church and India are enabled to participate in, cooperate with and respond to God's action.

2. Dalit Interpretations of Sant Ravidas

⁹ M. Prabhakar, "Beginning and Growth of Dalit Studies in the CISRS and its Joint Programmes" in *Religion and Society*, vol. XL, nos. 1 & 2, March-June 1993, p. 106.

J. Massey, *Roots: A Concise History of Dalits* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), Second Revised Edition, p. 6.

S. Chatterji, "Why Dalit Theology" in A. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader...*, p. 23.

G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Indian Church Challenged by Poverty and Caste" in *Sedos*, vol. 26, nos. 6&7, May 1994, pp. 172, 176.

D. Rasquinha, "A Critical...", p. 257.

¹⁰ <http://berchmans.tripod.com/today.html>, accessed on 31st January 2011.

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalit_Christian, accessed on 31st January 2011.

The dalit intelligentsia has been making an attempt, to reinterpret in the present context, the life and message of Sant Ravidas, so that they come alive in the hearts of his followers leading them to praxis. These reinterpretations are done from the perspective, of what dalits consider to be significant for their human well-being. Hence, they select relevant aspects of the life of the saint. The dalit interpretations are very important, because they are also an attempt, to counter the brahminization of Sant Ravidas by the upper castes. The enlightened dalits maintain, that the legends woven around him are brahminic inventions; he worships the formless, attribute free God and not Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu and that his opponents have burnt his sayings.¹²

According to the dalits the original name of Sant Ravidas/Raidas is Ravi. He is trained by Sadan Muni in the hilly tracts of Kaimur. The Rohtas garh (fort) in Sasaram, also known as the Ravidas garh, is the place of enlightenment and the field of action for Ravidas.¹³

We rely on these dalit interpretations and the study

¹² Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 240-251.

D. Rasquinha, "People's Theology and the Meaning and Need for Significant Criteria of Discernment" in *VJTR*, Vol. 74, No. 8, 2010, pp. 619-621.

Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, *Sant...*

¹³ The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Arun Bhojpuri, a dalit writer. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 241, 245.

Ravidas Smarika (Sant Ravidas Ashram, Patna: Bihar Prantiya Ravidas Mahasabha, 1988), Hindi.

Ravidas Smarika (Sant Ravidas Ashram, Patna: Bihar Prantiya Ravidas Mahasabha, 1992), Hindi.

According to another dalit version of Sant Ravidas his original name was Raidas. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 239.

done on them, to articulate the deeper dimensions of the life and message of Sant Ravidas.¹⁴

3. The God-experience of Sant Ravidas

Sant Ravidas is a great mystic who is intimately united to the Absolute. He describes the intensity of this union in the words “*tohi mohi, mohi tohi antar kaisa*” (Between thou and me, me and thou, how can there be a difference?). Since this union with the Absolute is so basic to him, he perceives the whole of reality from the perspective of the Absolute, the one source of everything. Hence, he says that there is no distinction between a *mandir* and a *masjid*, and there is no quarrel between *Ram* and *Rahim*.¹⁵ And so, he preaches the oneness of humanity saying, “How can you maintain the distinction of high and low, when all have arisen from the same Divine Flame? How can you give discriminatory names to some, When the Audible Life in all remains the same?” Thus he sees that the same Lord, the formless attribute-free God is the creator of them all. Brahmins, kshatriyas, vaisyas and shudras belong to the same caste. And so, he

¹⁴ For the study of dalit interpretations of Sant Ravidas refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 240-51.

Ravidas Smarika (Sant Ravidas Ashram, Patna: Bihar Prantiya Ravidas Mahasabha, 1988), Hindi. A source of dalit interpretations of Sant Ravidas.

Ravidas Smarika (Sant Ravidas Ashram, Patna: Bihar Prantiya Ravidas Mahasabha, 1992), Hindi. A source of dalit interpretations of Sant Ravidas.

¹⁵ Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 246-247.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by A.S. Nimbran, a dalit I.A.S. officer. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 242.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Paras Nath, a dalit poet. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 244.

deals with both brahmins and shudras, hindus and muslims as humans who are equal, and not on the basis of their caste or religion.¹⁶

Sant Ravidas' famous words are *man changa hai tho kattauchi mein Ganga* i.e., if one's mind is pure, one will find the goddess Ganga (God) in the water used to wash hides in a shoemaker's basin. The upper castes consider this water to be polluted. Thus Ravidas discovers that purity and pollution are a matter of a person's mind and heart i.e., interior to, and not exterior to a person, as brahminism understands. He also realizes that hides and leather and other organic materials, do not pollute, and neither does contact with them. Being pure of heart he is able to find God in all things. Hence, he cannot be denied access to God, although he is denied access to the holy river Ganges by the brahmins.¹⁷

Sant Ravidas believes in *shrimeva jayate satyameva jayate* (let labour prevail, let truth prevail). He preaches the importance and dignity of labour, and its integration with devotion to God, whom he discovers in hard work. Ravidas earns his living through physical labour as a cobbler. He thus valorizes occupations connected with

¹⁶ Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 239, 246-247.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by A.S. Nimbran. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 242.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by a dalit thinker named Mr. Anirudh Ram, the President of Central Government Employees Association, Bihar. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 243.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by a dalit intellectual named Dr. Avadesh Kumar, the Director, Sant Ravidas Literary, Social and Cultural Research Institute, Patna. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 244.

¹⁷ Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 239, 248.

organic matter, which brahminism considers as polluting and menial.¹⁸ He lives on the meagre income he receives from his work on leather, and refuses to live on the labour of others, especially the poor. According to him begging is sinful, and receiving gifts from devotees is undignified, and against a true religious spirit. Sant Ravidas accepts his life of poverty, although people laugh at his poor miserable existence. Yet, he is able to donate lavishly to the poor from his little income. God has compassion for Ravidas who is poor. Hence, God appears to Ravidas in the guise of a sadhu, and offers him a miraculous stone called *parasmani* (philosopher's stone), which has the power to transform iron into gold. But he politely refuses this offer, preferring a life of honest labour.¹⁹ Sant Ravidas thus represents and symbolizes the dalits, articulating in life and word the significance of their labour for them and society.²⁰

Ravidas humbly accepts that he belongs to the community of *charmakars* who are considered low by the upper castes. Because they live in poor houses, and carry dead animals in and around the city of Kashi.' He experiences God as merciful, who raises him from this lowly situation, to the heights of a great saint who is

¹⁸ The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by A.S. Nimbran. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 242.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Dr. Ashok Kumar, a dalit member of the Legislative Assembly of Bihar. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 242-243.

¹⁹ The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Dr. Ashok Kumar. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 242.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Paras Nath. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 244.

²⁰ Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 246.

revered by people from all the four varnas. Ravidas realizes that God is essential for his life to be fragrant, just as water (*pani*) is necessary for sandalwood (*chandan*), and a thread (*dhaga*) for a string of pearls (*moti*).²¹

4. The Contribution of Sant Ravidas to Dalit Liberation in India

The God-experience of Sant Ravidas leads to his enlightenment, and takes place in the context, wherein caste as a social structure, untouchability as a social institution and brahminism as a religio-cultural ideology are at their zenith. Having become an enlightened person, he spreads the light of enlightenment. *Ravi* means sun and *rai* means a collection of suns i.e., enlightenment. So *raid* is a state of enlightenment. A person who spreads the light of enlightenment is a *raid* or *ravidas*.²²

On the basis of his mystical experience, Sant Ravidas struggles relentlessly, and protests²³ against caste

²¹ The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Paras Nath. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 243-244.

²² The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Arun Bhojpuri, a dalit writer. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 241.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Anirudh Ram. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 243.

²³ There is no consensus among scholars regarding the definition of the term protest. Various definitions each with their own relative merits and demerits have been proposed. I define protest as the public expression of dissatisfaction with the existing situation, dissent and rejection of the existing values of society which oppress and deprive the protesting group of the wholeness of human life and the affirmation of, and attempt to establish genuine human values such as love, justice, equality, dignity and fraternity which bring wholeness to the human community and especially to the protesting group. Refer to Y. Damle, "Protest, Dissent and Social Reform: A Conceptual Note",

inequalities and discrimination, untouchability, social injustice, superstitious practices, religious ritualism, hypocrisy, traditionalism and communalism.²⁴ He revolts against the system of caste to which people are enslaved, and advises them not to follow it. He considers this slavery as the greatest sin. His conflict with brahminism continues till the end of his life, and even beyond his death, as there have been attempts to distort his teachings.²⁵ He positively advocates the establishment of society based on the equality of persons, justice, peace, harmony and the eradication of divisions in society on the basis of religions. He wants a society wherein there is food for everyone.²⁶ On the basis of his mysticism, Sant

in S. Malik (ed.), *Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilization* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), pp. 28-31. S. Misra, "Dissent, Protest and Reform: A Note on Definitions" in S. Malik (ed.) *Dissent...*, pp. 52-54. M. Rao, "Themes in the Ideology of Protest Movements" in S. Malik (ed.), *Dissent...*, pp. 56-57.

²⁴ The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Arun Bhojpuri. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 241.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by A.S. Nimbran. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 241-242.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Avadesh Kumar. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 244-245.

²⁵ The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Arun Bhojpuri. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 241.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by A.S. Nimbran. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 242.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Anirudh Ram. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 243.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Avadesh Kumar. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 244.

²⁶ The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by A.S. Nimbran. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 241-242.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Avadesh Kumar. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 244.

Ravidas challenges the brahminic values of purity and pollution and understanding of organic matter, making a significant contribution to the cultural liberation of the dalits.

The brahmins try to suppress his protest movement, humiliate and insult him time and again. But they do not succeed, as Ravidas is a wise and saintly man, who is filled with the power of God. The fame of Ravidas spreads far and wide, and so Jhali, the king of Banaras and Mirabai, the queen of Rajasthan become his disciples. He does not retaliate against the brahmins, but remains calm showing that his fight is not against individuals, but against the oppressive ideology, structures and institutions. He condemns brahminism without any trace of anger.²⁷

The real triumph of the caste system lies in the creation of a false consciousness in the dalits. Consequently, they accept their inferior status in the ritual hierarchy, and the supremacy of the brahmin, as a part of the natural order of things. Given this context, the greatest contribution that Sant Ravidas makes, is helping the dalits become aware, that they are human and equal to all people, who have come from the same flame. Thus he shows dalits that they should reject their false consciousness, and accept a true consciousness which liberates them. He does this by proudly affirming, and boldly proclaiming, that he is human and dignified as a chamar. He does not feel inferior to any person and so, he does not hide his identity as a member of a community, that is considered low and untouchable. This enables him to be free from the

²⁷ The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by A.S. Nimbran. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 242.

Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 245.

psychological and cultural impact of social oppression. Sant Ravidas shows that a human person, especially a dalit has the capacity to face the harsh reality of oppression, lead a dignified life and attain the highest spiritual bliss. Ravidas acquires knowledge and wisdom, access to which has been denied to the dalits. And so he contributes to dalit liberation at the social, cultural, spiritual and psychological levels.²⁸ Sant Ravidas is the voice of the voiceless. He enables them to give up their sense of worthlessness, and rediscover the dignity and identity, which they think they have lost. His songs continue to inspire the dalits to live with confidence and courage.²⁹

5. Reflections on the Dalit Appropriation of Sant Ravidas

The dalits do not make any serious attempt to deify Sant Ravidas. The emphasis is on his humanity. Therefore, they do not perceive him as a person with miraculous powers, who fights the battles for the dalits. They also do not see him as someone, who takes away all their infirmities and sufferings. He continues to remain one

²⁸ The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by A.S. Nimbran. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 241-242.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Avadesh Kumar. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 244.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Anirudh Ram. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 243.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Paras Nath. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 243-244.

Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 245-246.

²⁹ The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Anirudh Ram. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 243.

The interpretation of Sant Ravidas by Avadesh Kumar. Refer to Jose Joseph, *Social...*, p. 244.

among them, yet a model whom they can follow in their struggles against oppression.³⁰

The term *chamar* is not the name of a *jati* in the strict sense, as it does not belong to and is not included, in any one of the four *varnas* of the system. However, since the system of *varna* and *jati* dominates Indian society, the chamars consider themselves and act as a *jati*. Because of the abuse that the term *chamar* connotes, the people prefer to be called by the name *ravidas* / *ravidasas* / *ravidasis*³¹ i.e., the members of a community which identifies with Ravidas, regards him as a great saint and lives according to his teaching and message. The name *ravidasa* is a socio-cultural ethnic identity and not a caste identity. Because he rejects the caste system and its value of graded inequality.

Unfortunately, only an enlightened minority of the chamars, know and understand the liberative potential of the life and message of Ravidas and the name *ravidasa*. The majority of the chamars, wilting under the domination of brahminic society, do not follow the teaching of Ravidas. They understand the name *ravidasa* as a caste identity which is not abusive. This is illusory, because the term *ravidasa* is not, and in all probability will not be included in the *varna* system as a caste identity. In this process, the *ravidasas* enslave themselves to the brahminic society, and deprive themselves of the liberative potential of the person and message of Ravidas, and the name *ravidasa*. Moreover, because of the impact of brahminism, most dalits who are not chamars do not know and accept Ravidas as a dalit saint, with his potential to inspire,

³⁰ Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 244-245.

³¹ K. Kizhakekala & J. Vadassery, *The Chamars...*, pp. 5-6.

strengthen and guide them in their struggle for liberation. Today, most of the Ravidas statues are adorned with *genev* (sacred thread), and many members of the dalit community proudly believe that Sant Ravidas was a brahmin in his previous birth. This is the effect of a process which Jigyasu, a dalit ideologue of Lucknow calls *brahmanikaran* or brahminization, a powerful expression of the brahminic appropriation and domination of dalit culture.³²

6. Sant Ravidas Through his Life and Message Manifests the Action of the Creator-Saviour God

Ravidas *explicitly affirms the God, who is the depth of the values*, for which he has been striving. A section of the dalits by accepting baptism, have linked some of these values to their explicit faith, in the God who has revealed himself decisively in Jesus Christ.³³ Their faith and that of the universal Church, enable us to reflect on the life and teaching of Sant Ravidas, and show that they manifest the creative and saving action of God.

³² Jose Joseph, *Social...*, pp. 239, 251-252.

Nabhadasa, *Bhaktamala* (1969), 5th Hindi Edition. Source of brahminic legends regarding Sant Ravidas.

Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, *Sant...*, p. 88.

³³ D. Forrester, "The Depressed Classes and Conversion to Christianity, 1860-1960" in G. Oddie (ed.), *Religion in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1977), pp. 15, 35, 37.

J. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), pp. 26, 31, 40-41, 45-47.

J. Boel, *Christian Mission in India: A Sociological Analysis*, (Amsterdam: Academische Pers, 1975), pp. 30, 37-39.

W. Fernandes, *Caste and Conversion Movements in India* (Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1981), Monograph Series, pp. 16-21, 26.

6.1 Sant Ravidas Manifests the God who Establishes Justice and the Humanity, Equality, Community and Oneness of All People

Ravidas believes in the humanity, equality and oneness of all people which he sees as founded by the one, absolute, formless, creator God, the Lord and source of everything. As Christians, we see that the faith and values of Ravidas are a *free gift* from their *founder God*, whose reliability, faithfulness, trustworthiness, love, omniscience, truth, light and revelation make faith possible. He acts through the Holy Spirit³⁴ on the reason, will, body, emotions, senses and imagination of a person producing desires, ideas, values, decisions and actions in the direction of divine values (Ex. 3; Ps. 139; Jn. 1:9, 14; 3:14-16; 14:6; 1 Jn. 1:5; 4:7ff.; Rom. 5:5; Gal. 4:8-9; 5:22; 1 Cor. 13; 2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 4:18; 5:8; Lk. 4:18; 6:20ff; 7:22).

For Christian faith, everything God has created is good (Gen. 1:18, 21, 31), because his goodness is present in everything. However, only the whole of humankind and each person has been created by God according to his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27).³⁵ The dignity of

³⁴ The Holy Spirit continues in creation and history the action of the Creator-Saviour God.

³⁵ G. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 147.

G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan:

Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), p. 391.

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 2 (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 683.

For further details on these points see D. Rasquinha, "A Dalit Christian Understanding of God and Jesus in the Indian Context" in

humans lies in their being in the likeness of God. He is *LOVE* i.e., *Self-gift*. In this lies his *dignity*. The Father, Son and Spirit fully give themselves to and receive each other. God is truth and he has reason which knows the truth. God has a will and is totally free. Hence, God's *dignity* also lies in his *reason* and *will*. And so, the dignity of the human person lies in his reason and will, and in his being called and being given the capacity to love fellow humans, the self and God, to take care of the cosmos and to be loved by the one creator (Gen. 1:26-28). The human person is dignified, because he is also called to represent God to fellow humans and the cosmos. Since the whole of humankind and each human person is created with the same human dignity by the one creator, the whole of humankind is one, all human persons are equal and hence, entitled to equal rights and responsibilities in society. God is thus the foundation of the *human dignity, equality and oneness (unity)* of humankind.

The Triune God is a community of three equal persons relating in love. This God creates in his own image the human family, with the capacity to relate and form a community where there is love and justice, and therefore fraternity. Thus for Christians the *Triune God* is the foundation of *community, fraternity and justice*.³⁶

Journal of Indian Theology, Vol. III, No. 3, September-December, 2010, pp. 25-28.

³⁶ J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981), p.108.

J. Neuner & J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2004), pp. 139-140.

K. Rahner, "Theos in the New Testament" in K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), pp. 79-148, especially pp. 125-148.

Human dignity is the core of human identity and remains stable and permanent. Its dynamic aspect lies in its realization on the part of Sant Ravidas, who proclaims that he is human as a chamar and so, equal to a brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra who are all dignified, equal members of one human community. Hence, Ravidas' faith-commitment to these values manifests the action of God. He also enables Ravidas to relate to Hindus and Muslims as members of one human community, and to work for the establishment of communal harmony and against religious communalism. It divides humans on the basis of religion, by asserting that the various interests of different religions are antagonistic to each other, and by proclaiming the religious identity as the fundamental identity of humans. This contradicts God's will in creation. Communalism also contradicts the meaning of true religion, whose function is to link humans to God who establishes their well-being. For Sant Ravidas *Ram* and *Rahim*, the *mandir* and *masjid* symbolize and represent the different religions and mediations which come from, contain and point to the one, absolute, ultimate mystery which Jesus decisively reveals (Jn. 1:18).

6.2 God Sets Humans Free from Oppression and Sin and Re-establishes Justice and the Dignity, Equality, Community and Oneness of the Oppressed and All People

The essence of the God whom Jesus reveals to us is unconditional and universal love (Mt. 5:43-45; Jn. 3:14-

For further details on these points see D. Rasquinha, "A Dalit...", pp. 25-28.

D. Rasquinha, "The Quest of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: A Theological Interpretation" in *In Christo*, Vol. 48, No. 2, April, 2010, pp. 153-154.

16; 1Jn. 4:7ff.). However, given the situation of inequality in society caused by injustice, God can only love all unconditionally and equally, by making an *option of priority to save the oppressed poor* as a clear expression of his will to save all people.³⁷ This action of God is witnessed to by the O.T. and the N.T.

6.2.1 God's Saving Action as Articulated by the O.T.

In the O.T. the starting point of Israel's understanding of its God is the Exodus event, wherein God relates to the oppressed slaves of Egypt as their Saviour from oppression and bondage (Ex. 3:7-12; 6:2-7; Dt. 6: 20-23; 26:5-9).³⁸ God's saving love for the poor and the oppressed is expressed in his defence of the "widow, the orphan and the refugee" (Ex. 22:21-24; Dt. 10:17-19). God saves "the oppressed of all the earth" (Ps. 76:9; 103:6), protects the poor (Is. 3:13-15; Zeph. 3:12; Ps. 14:6), comforts them (Is. 49:13) and identifies with them (Pr. 14:31; 17:5; 19:17).³⁹

The oppressed cry out to God to save them (Is. 40:27; Ps. 35:23). He responds to them because he is a just saviour (Is. 45:21; Ps. 98:2) and because he is love. Hence, he perceives them as human, created in his own image and likeness, his children. He sees that oppression violates

³⁷ A. Durand, "Relating to the Poor as a Constitutive Element of Faith" in *VJTR*, November 1989, pp. 618-619.

³⁸ A. Durand, "Relating...", p. 615.

G. Soares-Prabhu, "Class in the Bible: The Biblical "Poor" A Social Class?" in *VJTR*, Vol. 49, No. 7, August 1985, p. 338.

³⁹ T. Hanks, *God So Loved The Third World: The Bible, the Reformation, and Liberation Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), Translated by James Dekker, p. 7.

G. Soares-Prabhu, "Class...", p. 334.

their human dignity, that of the oppressors and his dream in creation. Hence, God intervenes to uphold the dignity of the victims of oppression [once “No People”, now “God’s People” (Ex. 19:5-6)], and through them he challenges the oppressor to set the oppressed free, in accordance with his own humanity.⁴⁰

God’s love is universal, hence his saving love for Israel, is an expression of his love for the oppressed of all the earth, with whom he is identified. Moreover, Israel is seen as a representative and symbol of all the oppressed, and not just a particular ethnic group whose religion and culture is governed by faith in Yahweh. The oppressed of the O.T. and the dalits of Indian society both share in different ways in the reality of oppression, which denies their dignity. Moreover, the God who saves the oppressed of the O.T. is the very same God who saves the dalits. Hence, the oppressed of the O.T. symbolize and represent the dalits. And so the God of the O.T. makes a priority of option to save the dalits, as a sign of his will to save all. In this process he re-establishes the human dignity of the dalits and their oppressors and inter-human relationships which promote the realization of the humanity of all.⁴¹

6.2.2 God’s Saving Action as Articulated by the N.T.

According to G. Soares-Prabhu, there is a growing consensus today that in the New Testament, even more than in the Old, the word “poor” is a sociological category even in the three good-news-to-the-poor texts found in Mt. 11:5 = Lk. 7:22; Lk. 4:18 and Lk. 6:20.⁴² Normally the

⁴⁰ D. Rasquinha, “A Dalit...,” p. 31.

⁴¹ D. Rasquinha, “A Dalit...,” p. 31.

⁴² G. Soares-Prabhu, “Class...,” p. 331.

meaning of the term *ptochos* is destitute. However, in these three texts, the term *ptochos* has a wider sociological meaning than the expression destitute. The poor who are declared as blessed and to whom the good news is preached are the economically indigent, the social outcasts (Mk. 2:15-17; Lk. 15:1-2 such as the tax-collectors and sinners), the illiterate whom Matthew terms as "the little ones" (Mt. 18:10), those who were physically infirm (the blind, the deaf, the lame, the dumb, the sick in Mk. 1:32-34; 3:7-12; 6:53-56) and the mentally sick i.e., those possessed by demons and suffering from epilepsy (Mt. 9:14-29; 5:1-20). These people are seen as the oppressed. They are victimized by human beings (the social outcasts and the destitute) or by demons (the sick, the physically handicapped and the possessed),⁴³ since people in Jesus' time did not differentiate between his healings and his exorcisms (Mt. 12:22; cf. Acts 10:38).⁴⁴ Oppression reduces them to a condition of diminished worth or capacity and inferiority. The oppressed of the N.T. represent and symbolize the dalits of today.

In total freedom and knowledge, Jesus fully commits himself to love the oppressed and all sinful people unconditionally (Lk. 4:16ff; 6:20ff; 7:22; Rom. 5: 6-8). He takes the consequences of so doing, because of his intimate communion with God (Mk. 1:9ff.; 10:39- 40;

⁴³ G. Soares-Prabhu, "Class...", pp. 331-332.

G. Soares-Prabhu, "Good News to the Poor! The Social Implications of the Message of Jesus" in D. Amalorpavadass (ed.), *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981), p. 623.

⁴⁴ G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Miracles: Subversion of a Power Structure?" in S. Kappen (ed.), *Jesus Today* (Madras: AICUF House, 1985), pp. 25-27.

14:36; Mt.3:17; 4:4; 5:45; 6:26; 11:25-27; Lk. 4:16ff; Jn. 4:34; 15:9; 17:20-23), through which he realizes that God loves him, the oppressed and all sinful humans unconditionally.⁴⁵

Jesus is crucified as the King of the Jews by the Romans, at the instigation of the Jewish leaders, that is by the rich and the powerful. His death is a direct consequence of his setting free the oppressed (Lk. 4:18) out of love. This expresses itself in his solidarity and identification with them (Mk. 14:36; 15:29-31, 34; Lk. 9:1-3, 58; 10:4; 23:32-39, 46; Jn. 13; 19:20, 23, 30; Heb. 13:12-13), his stand for justice (Lk. 6:20; 7:22), his fellowship with social outcasts (Mk. 2:14-17; Mt. 9:9-13; 11:19; Lk. 5:27-32), his establishment of fraternity in society (Mk. 3:32-35; Mt. 5:44-45; Lk. 11:2-4), his forgiving sinners, even those murdering him (Mk. 2:5,10; Lk. 7:47-48; 23:34) and his healing those oppressed by evil spirits (Lk.10:38). Setting free the oppressed can be understood as the historical content of the obedience of Jesus who does so out of gratitude to and love for the Father and people (Lk. 4:18; Mk. 14:36; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:7-10; Jn. 13:1; Jn. 15:9). Thus Jesus makes clear the socio-historical dimension of salvation as liberation of the oppressed from social, economic, political, cultural and religious oppression.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ D. Rasquinha, "The Cross: Foolish or Triumphant?" in *VJTR*, Vol. 74, No. 9, September 2010, p. 692. The intimate communion that Jesus has with the Father, is the basis of his commitment to save the oppressed and all people. God's Word and Spirit are active in this communion, and in the close relationship that Sant Ravidas has with God, leading to Ravidas' commitment to dalit liberation.

⁴⁶ D. Rasquinha, "The Cross: Foolish...", p. 693.
D. Rasquinha, "A Dalit...", pp. 33-35.

Jesus is sinless and holy (Heb. 7:26; 2 Cor. 5:21) i.e., his love is full and stronger than its rejection. Hence, at the historical level as Jesus sets free the oppressed, at the depth level the God of love i.e., LOVE breaks the power of sin, death and oppression, raises Jesus from the dead and chooses to dwell within the womb of human history (1 Cor. 15: 12-57, especially 54-57; Rom. 5:20). And so, the God of the N.T. makes a priority of option to save the dalits as a sign of his will to save all. In this process he re-establishes justice and the dignity, equality, community and oneness of the oppressed and of all people which have been negated by sin. This love is available to the oppressed, Christians and all people.⁴⁷

God's love is poured out into the hearts of the dalits and

L. Nereparampil, "A New Commandment I Give You": Johannine Understanding of Love" in *Jeevadhara*, Vol. 13, No. 74, March-April 1983, pp. 104-105.

V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1974), Second Edition, pp. 588-589.

G. Soares-Prabhu, "Good...", pp. 618-623.

G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Miracles...", pp. 25-27.

J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985), Second Edition, pp. 532, 664, 667-668.

J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1 (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1978), Translated by John Bowden, pp. 103-104.

G. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and the Poor" in J. Murickan (ed.), *Poverty in India: Challenges and Responses* (Bangalore: Xavier Board, 1988), pp. 266, 274, 280.

G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Spirituality of Jesus as a Spirituality of Solidarity and Struggle" in J. Vattamatton, V. Theckanath, S. Arockiasamy & T. John (eds.), *Liberative Struggles in a Violent Society* (Hyderabad: A Forum Publication, 1991), p. 146.

⁴⁷ D. Rasquinha, "The Cross: Foolish...", pp. 693-694.

D. Rasquinha, "A Dalit...", pp. 39-40.

all people through the Holy Spirit. He incorporates them and makes it possible for them to enter into a relationship with the Father as his children (Gal. 4:4-7; Rom. 5:5; 8:14-17), as brothers and sisters of the Son who do the will of God (Mk. 3:35), as members of the kingdom of God (Mt. 25:31-40) and thus to progressively relate in society as redeemed humans, whose dignity and oneness have been re-established.⁴⁸

6.3 Sant Ravidas Manifests God's Action through his Contribution to Dalit Liberation

On the basis of what we have articulated in points 6, 6.1, 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 we can say that God is active in Sant Ravidas in his struggle against brahminism. It upholds the principle of graded inequality as the basis of the social structure, and grades the dignity of humans using the criteria of purity-pollution. Consequently many of them have been declared as *no humans*, untouchables. The Spirit empowers Ravidas to challenge the brahminic ideology and structures with love and forgiveness, and not anger and revenge against the brahmins who try to suppress his protest. God enables Ravidas to positively advocate the establishment of a society where there is equality of persons, justice and equity, so that there is food for everyone.

In his struggle against religious hypocrisy, ritualism and traditionalism, Sant Ravidas manifests God's action through the prophets (Is. 1:11-15; Am. 5:14, 21-24; Hos. 6:6) and Jesus (Mt. 6:1-18). They challenge hypocrisy and false religion and uphold true religion which affirms

⁴⁸ *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) nos. 12, 15, 16, 17, 19, 24 and 26 reaffirm the dignity of the human person.

human well-being and deals with human intentions and motivations (Mk. 2: 23-28; 7:1-23). Moses (Ex. 3:1-22; , 6:1-13; 20:1-20), the prophets (Am. 2:6; 4:1-3; 5:10-12; 6:4-7; 8:6; Mic. 2:1-3; Is. 5:8-10 ; 3:13-15) and Jesus (Lk. 4:16-21; 6:20ff; 7:22) through their voices, articulate the voice of the voiceless and of God against oppression and for justice and human dignity. This mystery is continued in Sant Ravidas, who is the voice of the voiceless. He enables them to give up their sense of worthlessness, rediscover the dignity and identity which they think they have lost and live with confidence and courage.

God's power is seen most clearly in Sant Ravidas when he makes the dalits aware that they are human and equal to all people in society, and so need to give up the inferiority and shame in their hearts, which lead them to hide their identity. Dalits need to imbibe this true consciousness by giving up their false consciousness i.e., a real change of mind and heart (Mk. 1:14-16). The divine preferential love and mercy operative in the life of Mary, a representative of the oppressed (Lk. 1:46-55) *frees* Ravidas from the cultural and psychological impact of social discrimination and gives him the wisdom, knowledge and power, which brahminism denies to dalits. Consequently, he shows that a human person, especially a dalit has the capacity to face the hard reality of oppression, lead a dignified life and attain great spiritual heights.

The stand of Sant Ravidas on purity and pollution manifests the action of God. He sees that matter and the creatures he has created are good (Gen. 1:18, 21, 31) and so non-polluting. The cosmos is described as the visible expression of the invisible beauty and power of God (Wis.

13:1-9; Sir. 17:8; Rom. 1:20).⁴⁹ All things are created through the Word. Hence, it has an inbuilt relation to the cosmos. When the Word becomes flesh, it becomes an intimate part of matter and history to which it has given shape, and further increases the value of matter. Thus matter cannot pollute as brahminism asserts. And finally the resurrection of Jesus who continues to be incarnate, but with a glorified body, and the hope of humankind to share in that destiny, tell us that matter is now glorified and raised to the highest possible level in history and beyond (1 Cor. 15; Jn. 20:19-21:13; Lk. 24:1-50). Because in Jesus, the Word becomes flesh and loves, suffers, dies and rises liberating humankind, Paul can speak of the hope of liberation of the material universe (Rom. 8:18-23; 1 Cor. 8:1-6; Col. 1:1-29 Eph. 1:1-14), and the book of Revelation can look forward to a total renewal of the universe, as *a new heavens and a new earth* (Rev. 26:1). Thus matter can never pollute.⁵⁰

Food habits and involvement with matter neither pollute nor purify humans, and what God declares as clean we are not to consider unclean (Acts 10:10-15). No person is ritually unclean or defiled, and nothing that goes inside a person makes him unclean, but that which comes out of a person's heart defiles him (Zech. 7:10; Mk.7: 15-23; Rom. 7:8, 17, 20, 23). Purity is a question of the intentions, desires, thoughts and motivation of the human heart (Mt. 5: 8). Jesus declares all things clean and reinterprets the meaning of purity and pollution (Mk. 7:1-23). Hence, the brahminic understanding of matter and

⁴⁹ GS nos. 12 and 26 reaffirm the goodness of creation.

⁵⁰ D. Rasquinha, "A Dalit...", pp. 38-39.

purity-pollution does not stand.⁵¹ Sant Ravidas by articulating and living according to the true meaning of purity and pollution and the goodness of organic matter, cannot be denied access to God, whom he finds in all things. And so, he contributes to dalit liberation at the social, cultural, spiritual and psychological levels manifesting the action of the Creator-Saviour God.

6.4 Sant Ravidas Manifests God's Action through his Spirit of Hard Labour and Poverty

In creation humans are called to relate to the cosmos *like* God and as his *image* i.e., to realize their dignity and in accordance with it (Gen. 1:28-31). This means using the earth and taking care of it (Gen. 2:15).⁵² When dalits engage in hard physical labour out of love they humanize nature, contribute to human and cosmic well-being and so realize their human dignity. Hence, far from polluting them through contact with organic matter, their labour is good and valuable. It manifests the action of the Creator-Saviour God who labours to give the abundance of life to people and the cosmos (Gen. 1; Jn. 10:10; Rom. 8:19-23; Rev. 21:1).

Sant Ravidas articulates the dignity and importance of physical labour (especially that of the dalits) in word and deed. He does not want the miracles of God to take away the struggle and value of honest labour, which he sees as an expression of his devotion to God, and as leading to the experience of God, the truth. And so as truth prevails, labour also prevails. Hence, Ravidas manifests the action

⁵¹ D. Rasquinha, "A Dalit...", p. 39.

⁵² D. Rasquinha, "The Care for Creation: A Theological Perspective" in *In Christo*, Vol. 48, No. 3, July 2010, pp. 239-240.

of God whose reliable love (the truth) sets us free from sin, its manifestations and effects (Jn. 1:14; 8:32; 14:6; 17:17; 1 Cor. 15:28, 54-57).

The poor are those who are oppressed in any way and so reduced to a condition of diminished capacity or worth (Lk. 4:16-21; 6:20ff; 7:22).⁵³ The poor in spirit are those who in their poverty and helplessness rely absolutely and exclusively on God (Mt. 5:5).⁵⁴ Jesus is *the* poor person who lives a life of actual poverty in full identification with the poor (Lk. 9:58), and total dependence on God (Mt. 4:4), revealing the action of a loving God.⁵⁵ He is active in the life of Sant Ravidas who lives on the meagre income from his hard labour as a cobbler, refusing to beg or accept the gifts of his disciples. Although he lives a life of poverty, he accepts it in total dependence on God and donates generously to the poor like the widow of the gospels (Mk. 12:41-44; Lk. 21:1-4).

Conclusion

The mission of the Church is to participate in, cooperate with and enable the oppressed and all people to respond to the action of the Creator-Saviour God. Hence, the Church in India is called to enable the *ravidasas* (including Christians who are ravidasas) to come to the true understanding of the name-identity

⁵³ Refer to point 6.2.2 of the article.

⁵⁴ G. Soares-Prabhu, "Good News to the Poor: The Social Implications of the Message of Jesus" in Francis D'Sa (ed.), *The Dharma of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 238. A. Gelin, *The Poor of Yahweh* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1964).

⁵⁵ Refer to point 6.2.2 of the article.

ravidas/ravidasa/ravidasi, follow the teaching of Sant Ravidas (in as much as it does not contradict the truth revealed by Jesus) and respond to the action of God present in it. The Church is also called to help all dalits to understand the life and message of Sant Ravidas, through which God is energizing them in their struggle for liberation. We hope that as the Church fulfils these aspects of her mission, she herself is inspired, energized, guided and transformed by the life and message of Sant Ravidas, and the action of God that they manifest.