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THE TEARS OF GURU RAVI DAS

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Every year, we celebrate the anniversary of Guru Ravi Das ji with fervent desire and zeal. But when I see the sky high temples costing millions and when I look around our followers of Guru Ravi Das, my heart goes out for those, who are still labelled as Dalits, as Scheduled Castes, as Harijans and various such synonyms. Actually, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, architect of the Indian constitution and revered Dalit leader who died in 1956, gave the name Dalit to the Untouchables. Dalit means crushed, broken or oppressed. The word Dal is found in the Hebrew of the Old Testament to mean poor and oppressed. The 1991 government survey of India states that on an average day, two Dalits are killed, three Dalit women are raped, two Dalit's houses are burned and fifty Dalits are assaulted by people of a higher caste.



Does this mean something to the community who celebrate this date every year, just superficially or as I said above, with fervent desire and zeal? I feel like crying for the teachings of this great Bhagat, which are found nowhere among its followers in India and abroad. How proud we feel in the world's greatest democracy where Manuvad philosophy still prevails and a particular segment of populace (various others combined), called Dalits, are not ashamed of demanding the Reservations and Special Rights under the guise of Constitution of India. Just to get some raise in the salary or to get a job, are ever ready to sell our self respect, our dignity and our fundamental rights of Equality. How can we blame the Indian Government when even non-dalits are ready to pay a handsome price to buy a Scheduled Caste certificate to get a job? We will have to go beyond the visible realities.

There is consensus that Bhagat Ravidas was born on Maghushudhi 14 Pooranmashi in Smt. 1456, i.e. February 1399 in Kashi on Sunday (Ravi var) cobbler caste. Some believe he was born in 1414 A.D. The family was declared untouchables. Thanks to the Manuvad philosophy of India. Manuvad i.e. 4 categories of the living humans. A very sick and dehumanized philosophy which was introduced by the Brahmins after the arrival of Aryans. The Brahmins declared themselves elite and the highest among the society. The lowest were Shudras, today's Dalits, to do all the menial jobs in the society, to live in the outskirts of the townships (on the Southern side in general as Lord Yama, according to Hindu Theology, also dwells in the South), were declared untouchables, and deprived of all the possible human necessities which are vital for bare survival. Forget respect and education, the Dalits were, and are, not allowed to take water from the same source as those of the upper caste people. The Harijans of Gandhi have had been exploited to the optimum and slowly, it became a way of life, a part of culture and a recognized evil truth. This stigmatized community has been living under tremendous psychological pressures, so intense that it seems as if the genetics have now been altered and the newborns know nothing that they are also humans, as humans as Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vashyas, the three other pillars of Manuvad.

Who should be blamed? The Indian Constitution, society, culture, the philosophy of survival, our Gurus and Avtaars or the Dalits themselves? It is not easy to find the answer. Many compounding situations, messy circumstances, evil-casteism-practice and top of all, political and social corruption seems to me, responsible collectively. Of course, the Dalits themselves can never escape the responsibility.

It seems to me that the modern day Dalits spread all over the world have forgotten the plight of Guru Ravi Das, his message and the utmost thing; the brethren left behind in that country, called India. Can't we understand the pain of the Saint when he said, '.....the men of my caste have to cart the dead animals to the outskirts of Benaras. And that I am to bow to the Brahmins too, for I have sought the refuge of the Lord's Name.....' (P.1293 Sri Guru Granth Sahib). As far as I know, a total of 40 hymns; set to 16 different musical measures, of Ravidas ji are included in Holy Guru Granth Sahib ji. These hymns address themselves to the theme of love for the Divine, mankind's intimate and essential relationship & devotion to Him, According to Bhagat Ravidas, realisation of the Divine is possible only through loving devotion and all else is mere pretension or futile exercise. Are these lines not enough to understand the pains of this holy person who lived all his life with a stigma? Under the modern day psycho-analytical-microscope, we can determine that all his trauma, pain and anger, was transformed towards his spiritual attainment.

Do the followers of Ravi Das ji living in western countries and leading a life of luxury know that even today, the Dalit Postmen in India can not deliver the post, riding a bicycle in upper caste colonies in parts of Rajasthan, AP and Orrissa? That even today the Dalits are being massacred in states like AP, Bihar and UP by the upper caste landlords? That they can not enter the higher-caste sections of villages, can not use the same wells, can not wear shoes in the presence of upper castes, can not visit the same temples, can not drink from the same cups in tea stalls, or lay claim to land that is legally theirs, that they still work as bonded labour, that dalit children are frequently made to sit in the back of classrooms? According to one report, at least one million Davits work as manual scavengers, clearing faeces from latrines and disposing of

dead animals with their bare hands. Dalits also comprise the majority of agricultural labourers who work for a few grams of rice, or 15-35 rupees (less than US\$1) a day.

According to the Human Rights Watch Report of 14th April 1999 authored by Sunita Narula, in India's southern states, thousands of Dalit girls are forced to become prostitutes for upper-caste patrons and village priests, before reaching the age of puberty. Landlords and the police use sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women to inflict political "lessons" and crush dissent within the community. Dalit women have been arrested and tortured in custody to punish their male relatives who are hiding from the authorities. One of the most prominent militias, the Ranvir Sena, has been responsible for the massacre of more than 400 Dalit villagers in Bihar between 1995 and 1999. There are thousands of such examples. And the violence against them has not reduced since the publication of this report, rather has escalated. Manifolds. Dalits throughout the country also suffer from de facto disenfranchisement. During elections, Dalits are routinely threatened and beaten by political party strongmen in order to compel them to vote for certain candidates. Dalits who run for political office in village councils and municipalities (through seats that have been constitutionally "reserved" for them) have been threatened with physical abuse and even death to get them to withdraw from the campaign. In the village of Melavalavu, Tamil Nadu, following the election of a Dalit to the village council presidency, members of a higher-caste group murdered six Dalits in June 1997, including the elected council president, whom they beheaded and the elected accused, never prosecuted. Is not it human rights abuse on a vast scale?

Let us understand the Indian Constitution now. In the year 1950, the Constitution of India abolished Caste discrimination and Untouchability. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution is the Untouchability Abolition Act. But however, 'hidden apartheid' is prevalent in all over India. Right to equality in the Constitution has also abolished the practice of untouchability in Article 17. Practice of untouchability is an offense and anyone doing so is punishable by law. The Untouchability Offences Act of 1955 provided penalties for preventing a person from entering a place of worship or from taking water from a tank or well. In 1976, the name of this act was changed from Untouchability Offences Act to Protection of Civil Rights act.

Why Dr. Ambedkar was forced to convert to Buddhism? Because perhaps Buddhism is the least dogmatic or hierarchic of world religions. Buddha's vision was a casteless society. Dr. Ambedkar's response to Gandhi was that he wanted to treat the symptom, not the cause of the disease – how can untouchability be abolished without addressing the Hindu caste and the *dharma* system, which is at the root of it.

Is it only for the Indian government to act now to demonstrate its stated commitment to ensuring equal rights for Dalits or Dalits themselves have some commitments to themselves and the community? After Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, has the onus of responsibility vanished somewhere in the sky? Is not the Anniversary of Guru Ravi Das a proper occasion for self-introspection? For how long the corrupt Dalit leaders like Mayavati will be tolerated by this community? Is it sufficient to celebrate this day with great extravaganza forgetting the facts that the daughters of the community are being raped back home? Who will voice for the equal rights for Dalits in India? Why Dalits are still the 2nd and 3rd class citizens of the world's largest democracy? Is the Constitution of India capable of safeguarding Dalit rights?

No! I don't think so. Dalits and Dalit leadership has the moral responsibility to aggressively seek policies for the uplift of the Dalit community. Reservations alone cannot possibly help Dalits. Focus must shift to problems of land reforms, right to work and a massive social awareness, not among the so called higher castes, but Dalits themselves. Another Ravi Das ji and another Dr. Ambedkars are needed. It is never too late. Instead spending millions of pounds of your hard earned money on the cement structures just to compete with those of the other religious sects, this money should be used to fight the battle till won. Will ever the dream of Ravi Das ji come true? Bhagat Ravi Das's sentiments echo in the words of Dr. Ambedkar :

“Noble is your aim and sublime and glorious is your mission. Blessed are those who are awakened to their duty to those among whom they are born. Glory to those who devote their time, talents and their all to the amelioration of slavery. Glory to those who would reap their struggle for the liberation of the enslaved in spite of heavy odds, humiliation, storms and dangers till the downtrodden secure their Human Rights”

Never forget, each tear of a Dalit in the world, is a tear of Guru Ravi Das.

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