ONE

Ravidas

Oh well-born of Benares, I too am born well known:
my labor is with leather. But my heart can boast the Lord.

BENARES, Hinduism’s oldest city and a citadel of the
Brahmin caste, fits along the left bank of the Ganges as if it
were an elaborately embroidered sleeve. A long and complica-
cated city, like the religious tradition it symbolizes, it opens at its
southern extremity onto the spacious grounds of Banaras Hindu
University, and for most people it stops there. But just beyond the
high wall that surrounds the university, at its back gate, there is one
more settlement, a dusty little enclave called Sri Govardhanpur. It is
the last collection of houses before the country begins, and there is
a reason that it has grown up where it has. This is a village inhabited
almost entirely by Untouchables, outcasts. Even in a secular India
committed by its constitution to the abolition of untouchability,
their pariah identity still has its geographical symbol.

The people of Sri Govardhanpur have no intention of accepting
their lot as if it were decreed by fate or religion. Since 1967 they have
devoted many of their efforts toward the completion of a large tem-
ple that is designed to put Sri Govardhanpur on the religious map of
Benares. They hope that their four-story edifice will rival temples in
other sectors of the city and become a familiar part of the pilgrims’
circuit—or if not that, at least serve as a magnet for low-caste people
who are not always welcome in the city’s other temples. The project
by no means belongs to the people of Sri Govardhanpur alone.
Much of the organization has come from a “mission” headquarted
in New Delhi that is dedicated to advancing the Untouchables'
cause, and financial support has been largely provided by urbanites of Untouchable background who live in the distant but prosperous province of Punjab or lead even more comfortable lives in far-off England. Clearly, even people who have managed to escape the worst strictures of caste care about erasing the shame of untouchability.

The new edifice in Sri Govardhanpur is not just another Hindu temple. In fact, there is some debate about whether it should be called Hindu at all, for it is dedicated to the remembrance of a saint whose person, perspective, and teachings place him in a sense outside the Hindu pale. His name is Ravidas; he was a man of Benares; and though he lived in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, he still qualifies today as the great Untouchable saint of north India. If one means by Hinduism the religious system whose central rituals are entrusted to Brahmins, whose central institutions require a set of reciprocal but unequal social relationships, and whose guiding ideas set forth what life should be within this hierarchically variegated world and how it may rightly be transcended, then Ravidas was not really a Hindu. As he saw it, there was nothing fundamental about the institutions of caste. His position in society helped him see the point, for he was a leatherworker, a camaï, a shoemaker, someone whose work brought him into daily contact with the hides of dead animals. Strict Hindus either shun the touch of such skins altogether, believing them to be polluting, or contact them only with the lowest portion of their bodies, the bottom of their feet. And that, by extension, is what the camaï is in relation to almost all of Hindu society.

But Ravidas was special: he was a poet and singer, and the hymns he sang evidently had such a ring of truth that even Brahmins came to hear them. His poet’s charisma must have been equally powerful, for he says that the Brahmins actually bowed before him, in a total inversion of religious and social protocol. Yet he never forgot his own condition. In praising God he habitually contrasted the divine presence to his own: God, he said, was finer than he, as silk was to a worm, and more fragrant than he, as sandalwood was to the stinking castor oil plant.

His clear perception of his lowly condition made him poignantly aware that it did not belong just to him, but to every shoemaker and scavenger of this world. These, he felt, included not only his castefellows but everyone who exists inside a body. No living being is spared the degradations of the flesh, and whoever prefers to think otherwise is dwelling in a world of make-believe. Ravidas thought it ridiculous that caste Hindus could set such store by rituals demanding the use of pure substances, when in truth there is nothing on earth that is not polluted. “Can I offer milk?” he asked in one poem, referring to the substance Hindus regard as purest of them all, since it emerges straight from the holy cow. His answer was that even it had been polluted by prior use: “The calf has dirtied it in sucking its mother’s teat.” Nothing is spared the stench of the flesh, so he railed against anyone who treated another person as trash. Even kings, he said, dream that they are beggars; only the absence of love in one’s life makes one truly an Untouchable.

For the wonder is that God is precisely the sort of being who cares for those who are troubled and lowly. As Ravidas puts it, he “rescues even tanners of hides.” In relation to God, every person is untouchable; yet because God is who he is, every person is touched.

An Outcaste in the Family of Saints

Such a message appeals on every front to the hard working, socially oppressed people of Sri Govardhanpur; that Ravidas was a Banarsi makes him even more naturally their patron. But he does not belong to Untouchables alone. Ravidas is one of the bhakti family, and as such he is venerated by Hindus of all backgrounds and stations. The sharing in God that bhakti implies creates networks of human beings that cut across the divisions society erects—even those that it dignifies with religious significance. In many of its expressions bhakti has called into question that version of Hinduism that ties itself intimately to the caste system. Hence even upper-caste Hindus who regard themselves as its beneficiaries take care to include in the hagiographical pantheon at least one representative of caste groups normally considered too low to qualify as “twice-born”—ritually pure—members of society. When the camaï of Sri Govardhanpur began building their temple to Ravidas, then, there was an aspect of Hindu religion to which they could appeal. On a bhakti construction of what Hindu religion is about, a temple to Ravidas had a genuine claim to being included in the religious universe of Benares.
Ravidas himself indicates the bhakti family in which he felt he belonged by naming in his poetry several of his predecessors in the faith. One of the names he gives is that of Namdev, a fourteenth-century saint of western India who was a tailor and a member of the relatively low caste associated with that profession.9 Another was Trilocan, also from the west.10 A third—and the name he mentions more frequently than any other—was Kabir, the crusty fifteenth-century iconoclast who, like Ravidas, lived in Benares.11 Kabir too came from the lower echelons of society. He was a weaver and belonged to a caste, the jumilas, many of whose members had found their place in Hindu society sufficiently distasteful that they had turned to Islam. In mentioning these three as recipients of divine grace along with himself, Ravidas underscored his sense of solidarity with a tradition of bhakti that flowed with particular animation in the lower ranks of society.

This, however, is only Ravidas's immediate bhakti family, the one that he constructs for himself in several of the poems that have a good claim to being regarded as authentically his. These compositions are included in the Adi Granth, the bhakti anthology that serves as scripture to the Sikh community. The Adi Granth was compiled in A.D. 1604 by the fifth in the lineage of Sikh gurus, Guru Arjun, and contains the oldest substantial collection of poetry attributed to Ravidas: forty full-length poems (padh) and an epigrammatic couplet.

But many more poems than these are generally thought to have been sung by Ravidas,12 and many more connections between him and other bhakti figures are accepted by tradition. One of these traditional links is with Nanak—a connection that Sikhs see as almost a tenet of faith, since they understand Nanak, whom they regard as their founding guru, to have been inspired by the other poets anthologized in the Adi Granth. It is commonly accepted that Nanak and Ravidas were contemporaries who met at a place in Benares that is now called, fittingly, Guru Bagh—"The Gurus’ Garden"—but the estimation of who learned more from whom depends upon whether one is primarily a follower of Nanak or of Ravidas.13

Another saint mentioned in Ravidas's company is Mirabai, the woman poet of Rajasthan, who is said in a modern text called the Ravidas Ramayana to have traveled all the way to Benares to obtain initiation from Ravidas.14 Another is Gorakhnath, a renowned yogi who is usually thought to have lived several centuries earlier.15 Still another is Ramanand, the Brahmin who is said to have played a critical role in the expansion of bhakti Hinduism by transferring it from its original home in south India to Benares, where he came to live. To judge by the account of Priyadas, the influential commentator who in A.D. 1712 fleshed out the skeleton provided by Nabhadas's somewhat earlier anthology of bhakti saints (the Bhaktamal, ca. A.D. 1600), Ramanand managed to gather around himself a more dynamic circle of devotees than north India has seen before or since. As indicated in a list given by Nabhadas himself, both Kabir and Ravidas were included in their number.16

These and many other traditions about Ravidas's place in the community of bhakti saints abound. Unfortunately, they cannot all be taken at face value. There is some indication, for example, that Ramanand lived a full century before Ravidas, which makes it hard for any but the most committed (who are willing to grant Ravidas a lifespan of 150 years or so) to think that the two could have met.17 Nor is there anything in the oldest collection of Ravidas's poetry to point to Ramanand. With the Mirabai story too there are problems. It appears that the tale concerning her was grafted onto Priyadas's similar but earlier account of a Rajput queen called Jhali who, like Mira, came to Ravidas from the city of Cittor to be initiated by him as his spiritual child. In the course of time Jhali was forgotten as the fame of Mira, the queen's musical counterpart, grew.18 But the debatable accuracy of these stories matters less than the spirit that gave them rise. What is important is that for many centuries after Ravidas, and right down to the present day, there has been a persistent desire to connect the cobbler poet with a larger network of bhakti heroes. Ravidas's low-caste followers are not the only ones to have felt this urge; other writers, including Brahmans, have done the same.19

The reason is that the bhakti tradition by nature runs in families—this is a piety of shared experience, of singing and enthusiastic communication—and each clan, to be inclusive, needs to have at least one representative from the Untouchable castes. In south India, where the bhakti movement can be traced back much farther than in the north, this meant that Tiruppan, an Untouchable, and Tirumankai, a member of the thief caste, were set alongside Brahmans and high-status velalas in building the family of Avars—
devotees to Vishnu who lived from the sixth to ninth centuries A.D. In the west of India one found Cokhamela, the Untouchable who on occasion transported carrion, and Namdev, the lowly tailor, in the company of such higher-caste divines as Jnandev and Eknath. And in north India, Kabir and especially Ravidas filled out the family of saints by providing it with poor cousins from the lower end of the social spectrum. The message proclaimed by this tradition of family associations is that the love of God transcends the givens of the social order, bringing together people who otherwise could not have met and creating an alternate, more truly religious society capable of complementing and challenging the one established by caste. It was often the saints situated on the lower rungs of the social ladder who envisioned this other society most clearly.

Some of the most vivid episodes in the traditional life stories of Ravidas take up this point. They reconstitute society according to a bhakti definition by showing that Ravidas belongs at its religious apex, that is, in the company of Brahmins. In all of these tales, those who are Brahmins by blood are the last to see the point.

The story of Queen Jhali is a good example. According to Priyadas, this pious woman traveled to Benares in the company of a number of her court Brahmins, who were then scandalized at her choice of gurus. They went to the king of Benares for justice, expecting a sympathetic ear, but the wise ruler, who had already had some experience with Brahmins jealous of Ravidas, submitted the matter to even higher arbitration. He brought both the Brahmins and Ravidas into the presence of the royal icon and announced that he would value the claim of whoever could show that the Lord inclined in his direction. The Brahmins chanted the correct Vedic verses, but these seemed to have no effect. When Ravidas began to sing, however, intoning a verse in which he asked God to reveal himself as the one whose nature is to rescue the fallen (*pattri pawan*), the image responded by jumping directly into the poet’s lap.  

Queen Jhali insisted on taking Ravidas to her home in Rajasthan for a time, and the disgruntled Brahmins could do no more by way of protest. Yet nothing could persuade them to share a meal with the Untouchable saint. When the queen prepared a great feast to honor her newfound teacher, these religious aristocrats declined to eat from the same vessels that he did. Jhali bowed to their compunctions by giving them the ingredients separately, so that they could cook their own meal, and Ravidas issued no protest. When they all sat down, however—Ravidas on his side of the hall and the Brahmins on theirs—and the Brahmins raised the food to their mouths, they discovered to their horror that between each of them a Ravidas had miraculously materialized. Evidently he belonged in their row after all. They fled in consternation and challenged him on his right to be there, but when they did so he peeled back the skin from his chest and revealed a golden sacred thread that lay within, clear evidence of his inner brahminhood.

The *camars* of Sri Govardhanpur love to tell this story, along with others testifying to Ravidas’s spiritual superiority. Another favorite is the tale of how the Ganges herself, a Hindu goddess with intimate ties to a wide range of brahminical rituals, acknowledged Ravidas’s claim. When the Brahmins of Benares challenged Ravidas’s right to preach as he did, the two sides agreed to let the river goddess decide the case: if each threw something into the water, which would she support on her surface? The Brahmins tossed in a piece of wood, but it sank like a stone. Yet when Ravidas threw a stone into the river, it floated.

The people of Sri Govardhanpur find such stories about spiritual brahminhood congenial enough, but they are understandably reluctant to accept any hint that Ravidas was physically a Brahmin or even that he desired to be adopted into the spiritual care of Brahmins. The story that Ravidas sought initiation at the hands of Ramanand, a Brahmin, is an old one—it is told by Priyadas—but the Untouchables of Sri Govardhanpur deny it. Pursuing the new historical connections first suggested by B. R. Ghera, a retired civil servant living in Delhi who is the intellectual spearhead of the Ravidas mission in Sri Govardhanpur, they insist that Ravidas’s teacher was instead a certain Saradanand, about whom little has hitherto been heard.  

They are even more vehement in contesting the validity of another story told by Priyadas. They refuse to accept that Ravidas was a Brahmin in the life that preceded his incarnation as a *camar*. That they should find such a story offensive is no surprise, since it suggests that no leatherworker can become a saint unaided, but several details reported by Priyadas are particularly heinous. His explanation of why Ravidas was born a *camar* is that in the saint’s former life as a pupil of Ramanand he compromised his teacher’s Brahmin purity by
offering him food donated by a merchant who had been tainted by business dealings with camars. According to the story, Ramanand
could tell instantly that the food was contaminated by its distant
association with Untouchables. Equally offensive is Priyadas’s depic-
tion of what happened when this Brahmin pupil died and was
reborn into a family of leatherworkers. He says that as a baby Ravi-
das refused to receive milk from his own camar mother. Only when
Ramanand heard of the newborn’s distress and came to adopt him
would the child take sustenance.24

No one can deny that such stories are ex post facto attempts to
brahminize Ravidas, and it is hard not to feel exactly the way the
people of Sri Govardhanpur do about the light that they cast on
camars. Still, the desire of Brahmins to claim Ravidas’s charisma as
their own is worthy of note. What galls the inhabitants of Sri
Govardhanpur and other low-caste communities, however, is that
this ecumenical spirit is almost never extended from the realm of
bhakti hagiography into the real world. They had to appeal to the
city government for more than a decade before the road that passes
by the new temple was grudgingly paved. They know, too, that
many of the Brahmins of Benares scoff at the procession that passes
through the city each year on the day they celebrate Ravidas’s birth.
And they have often had to endure humiliations such as those suf-
f ered by a group of Ravidasis who not long ago traveled to far-off
Rajasthan to visit the temple of Mirabai in her natal village of Merta,
only to be denied entrance once they arrived.

Bhakti and Social Protest

The question that lingers here is whether the message of bhakti is a
message of social protest. Is the equality it celebrates fundamentally a
social reality—and therefore something revolutionary in its Indian
context—or is it only spiritual, in which case it can coexist with
brahminical Hinduism even if it does not endorse it?

On the one hand it seems clear that a poet like Ravidas raises
crucial questions about the social order. His perception of Brahmins
and others who set store by standard Hindu texts and rituals is
scarcely complimentary, and he has contempt for all who denigrate
people belonging to other sectors of society than their own.25 He
insists that

A family that has a true follower of the Lord
Is neither high caste nor low caste, lordly or poor.26

The number of times he refers to his own caste position suggests that
he was always mindful of it.27 On the other hand, he does not
propose any religious legislation that would change the current
social order. To the contrary, it often seems that he values his own
lowly position as a vantage point from which the truth about every-
one comes more clearly into view. His bhakti vision seems to be not
so much that God desires to reform society as that he transcends it
utterly, and that in the light of the experience of sharing in God, all
social distinctions lose their importance. At the end of the poem
most recently quoted he speaks of how the person of faith may
“flower above the world of his birth” as lotuses float upon the
water.28 And he often dwells on the miracle that God has come to
him as an implicit sign of how remarkable it is that the holy should
touch any human life.29

Ravidas’s bhakti, then, is an answer to caste Hinduism, but not
explicitly a call for its reform. Even though he speaks of a kingdom
“where none are third or second—all are one” and where the resi-
dents “do this or that, they walk where they wish,” still he admits
that it is his “distant home,” and he issues no direct call for realizing
it here on earth.30

Indeed, when he speaks of earth his emphasis is quite different. He
characterizes life in this world as an inevitably difficult journey and
asks God for help along the way.31 Death stands waiting at the end
of the road, he knows,32 and when it strikes, even one’s closest
relatives scurry to keep their distance.33 As for the body, it is a
fiction of air and water, nothing more than a hollow clay puppet.34
About all there is to do in such circumstances—as bewildering to
human beings as the wider world is to a frog in a well—is cry for
help.35 Fortunately, remarkably, there is a friend who answers that
blessed call, someone who is at times confusingly, disconcertingly
near, someone to whom people are tied by what Ravidas calls on
several occasions “the bonds of love.”36 That friend, of course, is
God.
POEMS OF RAVIDAS

I've never known how to tan or sew,
though people come to me for shoes.
I haven't the needle to make the holes
or even the tool to cut the thread.
Others stitch and knot, and tie themselves in knots
while I, who do not knot, break free.
I keep saying Ram and Ram, says Ravidas,
and Death keeps his business to himself.

Who could long for anything but you?
My master, you are merciful to the poor;
you have shielded my head with a regal parasol.
Someone whose touch offends the world
you have enveloped with yourself.
It is the lowly my Govind makes high—
he does not fear anyone at all—
And he has exalted Namdev and Kabir,
Trilocan, Sadhna, and Sen.
Listen saints, says Ravidas,
Hari accomplishes everything.

Oh well born of Benares, I too am born well known:
my labor is with leather. But my heart can boast the Lord.
See how you honor the purest of the pure,
water from the Ganges, which no saint will touch
If it has been made into intoxicating drink—
liquor is liquor whatever its source;
And this toddy tree you consider impure
since the sacred writings have branded it that way,
But see what writings are written on its leaves:
the Bhagavata Purana you so greatly revere.
And I, born among those who carry carrion
in daily rounds around Benares, am now
the lowly one to whom the mighty Brahmins come
And lowly bow. Your name, says Ravidas,
is the shelter of your slave.

A family that has a true follower of the Lord
Is neither high caste nor low caste, lordly or poor.
The world will know it by its fragrance.
Priests or merchants, laborers or warriors,
halfbreeds, outcasts, and those who tend cremation fires—
their hearts are all the same.
He who becomes pure through love of the Lord
exalts himself and his family as well.
Thanks be to his village, thanks to his home,
thanks to that pure family, each and every one,
For he's drunk with the essence of the liquid of life
and he pours away all the poisons.
No one equals someone so pure and devoted—
not priests, not heroes, not parasolled kings.
As the lotus leaf floats above the water, Ravidas says,
so he flowers above the world of his birth.
Mother, she asks, with what can I worship?
   All the pure is impure. Can I offer milk?
The calf has dirtied it in sucking its mother's teat.
   Water, the fish have muddied; flowers, the bees—
   No other flowers could be offered than these.
   The sandalwood tree, where the snake has coiled, is spoiled.
The same act formed both nectar and poison.
   Everything's tainted—candles, incense, rice—
   But still I can worship with my body and my mind
   and I have the guru's grace to find the formless Lord.
Rituals and offerings—I can't do any of these.
   What, says Ravidas, will you do with me?

Your name: the act of worship
   with the lifted lamp, Murari;
   without the name of Hari all the universe is a lie.

Your name: the throne on which
   the deity sits, your name the grinding stone,
   the saffron that is ground and daubed upon the gods.

Your name: the holy water,
   your name the sandal for sandalwood paste.
   Grinding, chanting, I take that name and offer it to you.

Your name: the little lamp, the cruse,
   your name the wick.
   Your name is the oil that I pour into the ritual lamp.

Lighting your name:
   the flame in the lamp
   brings the glow that lightens all the corners of the house.

Your name: the garland;
   your name the string, the flowers.
   Beside them wither all the blossoms of the wilds.

Your handiwork: the world;
   what could I offer more?
   I can only wave your name like the whisk before the gods.

The world contains the vessels
   for your sacred rites—
   the scriptures, the direction points, and all the sacred sites—

But your name, says Ravidas,
   is the lifting of the lamp;
   your true name, O Hari, your food.
The walls are made of water, pillared by air,
sealed together with the mortar of blood,
A cell of veins and meat and bones,
a cage to hold this poor bird.
Who cares what is yours or mine?—
for we nest in this tree only briefly.
As high as you can build, as low as you can dig,
your size will never swell the dimensions of a grave;
Those lovely curls, that turban tied so rakishly—
they'll soon be turned to ash.
If you've counted on the beauty of your wife and home
without the name of Ram, you've already lost the game.
And me: even though my birth is mean,
my ancestry by everyone despised,
I have always trusted in you, King Ram,
says Ravidas, a tanner of hides.

[AG 19]

It's just a clay puppet, but how it can dance!
It looks here, looks there, listens and talks,
races off this way and that;
It comes on something and it swells with pride,
but if fortune fades it starts to cry.
It gets tangled in its lusts, in tastes
of mind, word, and deed,
and then it meets its end and takes some other form.
Brother, says Ravidas, the world's a game, a magic show,
and I'm in love with the gamester,
the magician who makes it go.

[AG 12]

This bodily world is a difficult road—hilly, overgrown—
and I've only this worthless bullock to rely on.
This request I make of Ram:
protect my wealth as I go along.
Who is a peddler for Ram?
My daily pack is loaded—
I am a peddler for Ram;
I traffic in his easy ecstasy:
I've loaded myself with the wealth of Ram's name
while the world is loaded down with poison.
You who know both shores of the sea,
chart my course through heaven and hell
So Death will not ambush me with his stick
nor trap me in his snare.
The world's a fading yellow dye, says the tanner Ravidas,
but Ram is an indelible red.

[AG 4]
Peddler,
the first watch of night.
What's this body's business?
Hari, the child-god:
you paid him no heed—
simpleton, such a foolish, childish way to think!
Simpleton, such a foolish, childish way to think—
you ignored the net of illusion,
simply paid it no mind.
What's that? Why repent?
All that water everywhere,
and once the sails are loose, you're gone.
Peddler,
so says Ravidas the slave:
simpleton, such a foolish, childish way to think.

[Fatehpur, p. 190]

Peddler,
the second watch of night.
You went chasing shadows of yourself.
You paid him no heed—Hari,
the child-god—
didn't board his boat.
Didn't board Hari's name—
you couldn't, all bloated up
with youth.
Desire so dulled you,
you couldn't see the line
between the woman that was yours
and someone else's.
Well, Hari will straighten the accounts;
you'll pay in full.
You'll burn if that's what's right.
Peddler,
so says Ravidas the slave:
you went chasing shadows of yourself.

[Fatehpur, p. 191]

Peddler,
the third watch of night.
The breath has gone slack.
Peddler, the body is bent
and what to do?
Bad thoughts have settled inside.
Bad thoughts have settled inside,
evil fool—a life completely lost.
Now was the moment,
but you shunned what was right
and the time will never come again.
Your frame is weary,
your body frail,
and still you won't rethink your ways.
Peddler,
so says Ravidas the slave:
The breath has gone slack.

[Fatehpur, p. 191]

Peddler,
the fourth watch of night.
The body shivers, it quakes.
Peddler,
the Master is going to settle accounts.
Abandon your perverse old ways.
Get wise,
abandon the old fort.
He may adorn you, he may feed you to the fire.
Death himself is at large:
he's sent to have you bound,
you smuggler. It's death's door.
The road ahead is hard,
and you'll travel it alone.
Where are the ones you once loved?
Peddler,
so says Ravidas the slave:
The body shivers, it quakes.

[Fatehpur, p. 192]
The day it comes, it goes;
whatever you do, nothing stays firm.
The group goes, and I go;
the going is long, and death is overhead.
What! Are you sleeping? Wake up, fool,
wake to the world you took to be true.
The one who gave you life daily feeds you, clothes you;
inside every body, he runs the store.
So keep to your prayers, abandon “me” and “mine,”
now’s the time to nurture the name that’s in the heart.
Life has slipped away. No one’s left on the road,
and in each direction the evening dark has come.
Madman, says Ravidas, here’s the cause of it all—
it’s only a house of tricks. Ignore the world.

The regal realm with the sorrowless name:
they call it Queen City, a place with no pain,
No taxes or cares, none owns property there,
no wrongdoing, worry, terror, or torture.
Oh my brother, I’ve come to take it as my own,
my distant home, where everything is right.
That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,
where none are third or second—all are one;
Its food and drink are famous, and those who live there
dwell in satisfaction and in wealth.
They do this or that, they walk where they wish,
they stroll through fabled palaces unchallenged.
Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free,
those who walk beside me are my friends.