

SHORT ARTICLES

BHAGAT, GURU, AND SATGURU

Some recent issues and trends

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A unique feature of the Sikh scripture is that it contains the Bhagat Bani, "the utterances of fifteen medieval poet-saints of Sant, Sufi and *Bhakti* origin." The issue arose from an advertisement in the *SHER-E-PUNJAB* (June 8, 2001) by Shri Guru Ravi Dass Sabha of New York, Inc., with respect to the celebration of the birth anniversary of "Satguru Kabir Ji Maharaj."

During their lifetime, most of the Bhagats were despised by the highborn Brahmins because of their low castes. Their compositions were also ignored. Not surprisingly, we can read Kabir's offensive attacks on the Brahmins in his compositions in the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS). There was no question (or even a remote possibility) of bestowing the status of "Guru" on the Bhagats at that time. They were all individual seekers who were concerned with their own liberation. They may have some individual followers during their lifetime, but they could not establish any religious communities on a solid footing. This was primarily due to their lack of any sense of mission or the idea of an organized religious community.

By contrast, Guru Nanak and his successors had a strong sense of mission and the idea of an organized religious community. The result is an established independent religion, Sikhism, which is now accepted as one of the five major religions of the world. Guru Arjan included fifteen Bhagats in the first canonical text to underline the pan-Indian and inclusive ideal of the Sikh faith. The status of those poet-saints is clearly defined as "Bhagats" and their compositions are distinguished from the works of the Gurus in the very structure of the Sikh scripture. That is their true status within the Sikh Panth (community) for all times to come.

It is only recently that Bhagat Ravidas and Kabir are now being called "Guru" or "Satguru" by their followers. Even Gurdwaras named after "Guru Ravidas" has come into being. The reasons for this new development are as follows:

First, Sikh religion rejects the caste system theoretically. In practice, the Sikhs have not completely eradicated the caste system. They have failed to integrate the low-caste people such as *Ravidasias* and *Julahas* (weavers) within the Sikh Panth. To a large extent, the discrimination against the low caste people still persists in the rural areas of the Punjab.

They are treated according to the Hindu caste system and the notions of pollution and purity. With the rise of education among the low caste people, however, there has emerged a new sense of identity among them. Bhagat Ravidas has become the "pride" of lower caste people who want to uplift their brethren in the larger society. This self-consciousness has resulted in raising the status of Ravidas from a "Bhagat" to a "Guru." Hence, we have Gurdwaras named after him. To a large extent, Sikhs themselves are responsible for this new development. If they had accepted the lower castes within the Panth on an equal level and celebrated the birth anniversaries of various Bhagats of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the Gurdwaras, then there was no question of this new scenario.

Second, in India, the Dalit movement has come to the fore in the political arena. They needed their role models. The medieval Bhagats provide them with the only examples in their agenda of social uplifting. What better way there could be than to raise the status of these Bhagats to the status of "Guru" or "Satguru"! This new development should be understood in this historical context.

Third, the process of Hinduization of these Bhagats have already taken place in North India (particularly in UP, for instance, in Banaras and adjoining areas) where their followers are now looking at these Bhagats as part and parcel of the Sanskrit tradition. Their *Bhajans* and songs are recited in Hindi and Sanskrit in the temples. A number of verses have now been added in the name of Kabir and Ravidas to their original compilations. By making them respectable as "Gurus" and "Satgurus" a challenge is thrown upon the Sikhs to reflect within. This is part of the large process of assimilation that is taking place in India.

Finally, the Sikhs need not become too defensive on these new titles of Bhagats. They should rather reflect on this new development carefully and stick with the original intention of the Gurus. The AGGS gave a place of honor to these Bhagats when no one else was ready to even acknowledge them during their lifetime. The inclusive ideal of the *Guru Granth Sahib* should be the guiding principle to eradicate caste completely within the Panth. We must treat people with respect and accord them equal dignity in our dealings. The sooner we get rid of the cancer of caste the better it will be!!!