

Saint Ravidas

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Source: *The Hindu*

Manifest pedagogy: UPSC in recent times has taken great interest in Bhakti and Sufi movements in both prelims and Mains. There have been many questions ranging from periodisation of Bhakti saints to the specificities of their philosophies. In this context the issue of Ravidas temple demolition can be a good trigger for the examiner.

In news: Following the **demolition of Guru Ravidas temple in south Delhi's Tughlakabad** by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), the Supreme Court (SC) has asked parties to find "better land and location" for construction of new temple.

Placing it in syllabus: Great personalities in Bhakti movement (explicitly mentioned)

Dimensions:

- Ravidas periodisation
- His outlook on Bhakti and his role in it:
- His role in social reforms
- His literary works

Content:

Ravidas periodisation:

- Ravidas, **also called Raidas, of 15th or 16th century,** was a mystic and poet who was one of the most renowned of the saints of the North Indian bhakti movement.
- He was born in **Varanasi** as a **member of an untouchable leather-working Chamar caste.**
- It is said that he was **born in Magha Purnima – the full moon day in the month of Magh month.**
- Guru Ravidas **birth anniversary** is celebrated as per the

Hindu lunar calendar and therefore **has no fixed date attached to it.**

His outlook on Bhakti and his role in it:

Ravidas was a prominent figure in the bhakti movement and a **renowned poet of the nirgun bhakti tradition that valued the worship of a formless God** who could be envisioned without the mediation of human intermediaries.

By the turn of fourteenth century, Muslim rule was well established in India. When **Bhagat Ramanand** (1366-1467 AD) came to Northern India and made Benares as his home, he noted that the Muslim religion had made inroads into Hinduism.

He **initiated the veneration of Universal Brotherhood** and accepted Hindus of low-castes and even invited Muslims to join him in worship, and become his followers. Among his most **noted disciples were Kabir, a Muslim weaver,** and Ravidas.

Kabir was another well-known poet in the bhakti movement who also belonged to the nirgun bhakti tradition. Both Ravidas and Kabir challenged upper caste hegemony. Disciples of Kabir are known as Kabir-panthis.

Mira Bai was another prominent bhakti poet of the **Vaishnava saguna tradition** which proposed that the divine could best be approached through embodied form. She **accepted Ravidas as her preceptor-guru.** The **interaction of Mira Bai and Ravidas provided a platform for dialogue between nirguna and saguna bhakti traditions.**

When **Nanak Dev**, the first guru of Sikhs, visited Banaras he collected Ravidas' poetry and brought it back with him to the Punjab. When the **fifth Sikh guru Arjan Dev** compiled in 1604 the **Adi Granth**, the key religious scripture of the Sikhs, he **incorporated 41 verses of Bhakt Ravidas.**

The **Ravidassia religion** compiled a new **holy book, Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji** which contains **exclusive writings and teachings of Sant Ravidas**. It contains **240 hymns and is used in all Ravidassias temples**.

His role in social reforms:

- Ravidas is considered a **symbol of** caste assertion, Dalit identity, the resilience of Hinduism, and egalitarianism aspect of Sikhism all at the same time.
- He was **vocal against the varna (caste) system** and in his poetry, questioned caste hegemony, valued labour of all sorts, as well as a life of simplicity and morality.
- He imagined an **egalitarian society** called **Begumpura**, means **“land without sorrow”** where there would be no discrimination or exploitation.
- He **initiated conversations with upper caste Hindus** on questions related to caste, social justice, love and forms of worship.
- He acknowledged Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva in his poetry as manifestations of God, but **rejected celibacy, asceticism, penance, austerity, rituals, pilgrimage, idol worship and the authority of texts considered sacred**.
- He formed his distinct identity so his **disciples** came to be known **Ravidas-panthis**.
- In the 20th century, Sikh, Hindu, and even Muslims used to follow his teachings and they came to be known as **Ravidassias**.
- He **chose the middle path between radical separation and assimilation**.

His literary works:

- The **Adi Granth of Sikhs, and Panchvani of the Hindu Dadu Panthis** are the two oldest attested sources of the literary works of Ravidas.
- In the Adi Granth, **forty of Ravidas's poems are**

included, and he is one of thirty six contributors to this foremost canonical scripture of Sikhism.

- His poetry covers topics such as the **definition of a just state** where there are no second or third class unequal citizens, the need for dispassion, and who is a real Yogi.
- The poetry attributed to Ravidas, and championed by his followers from the 17th-20th century, **have a strong anti-Brahmanical and anti-communal theme**.
- The songs of Ravidas discuss **Nirguna-Saguna themes and ideas that are at the foundation of Nath Yoga philosophy of Hinduism**.
- He has frequently mentioned the term '**Sahaj**', a **mystical state** where there is a union of the truths of the many and the one.
- In the Sikh tradition, the **themes of Nanak's poetry** are broadly **similar to the Nirguna bhakti ideas** of Ravidas.