Begumpura Yatras: Constructing the Ravidassia pilgrimage tradition

Anna Bochkovskaya
Institute of Asian and African Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University,
anna.bochkovskaya@gmail.com

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The southern outskirts of Varanasi / Banaras - as chaotic and noisy as the city, but almost ignored by foreign visitors - become completely transformed in February. Every year, this area turns into a centre of festivities related to Sant Ravidas (see Figures 1 & 2), a medieval chamar poet, philosopher and preacher. The long-term conflict in the Sikh community involving lower castes - predominantly, Ravidassias, chamar (cobbler/tanners) followers of the medieval saint Ravidas - and Jats boiled into an open confrontation after the Vienna incident (May 2009), when one of the Ravidassia leaders was killed by radical Sikhs in a local gurdwara. In 2010, Ravidassias launched their own religion - the Ravidassia Dharam, set up their own scripture - the Amritbani Satguru Ravidas Maharaj, and proclaimed the ultimate place of pilgrimage for the community - the Varanasi-based Ravidas Janamsthan Mandir that bears the name of Begumpura (a city without sorrow), a term used by Ravidas.

Since then, various processions and marches from Jalandhar in Punjab to Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh have become central in constructing the protest identity of Ravidassias. Regular pilgrimages (shobha yatras) cover three populous states of India, and the number of yatra participants has been increasing since 2010. Prominent politicians have successfully been using this opportunity to advertise their activities across North India.

This paper focuses on the role of shobha yatras as a variety of pilgrimage or collective performative action (Freitag, 1989; Kaur, 2005; Brosius, 2006; Jaoul, 2007; etc.) that has been successfully used by Ravidassias in the community’s self-fashioning (Greenblatt, 2005).

Key Words: Ravidas, Ravidassia dharam, Begumpura, Varanasi, pilgrimage, performative actions, self-fashioning

The celebrations of Ravidas Jayanti (birthday) represent a culmination of large-scale activities that simultaneously cover a number of North Indian states. Several days prior to the February date the followers of Ravidas depart for Varanasi either by special trains or in motorcades; some others undertake the journey on foot. Rallies and meetings are organised upon departure, arrival, as well as at intermediate stops during the journey. Initiated in the mid-2000s, such mobile actions or pilgrimages of Ravidas’ followers have been expanding from year to year and have been drawing a widespread response in North India and beyond.

Mobile Actions in Space and Time

Pilgrimages, processions, marches, and other collective mobile actions represent a form of symbolic behaviour that is significant for constructing and maintaining the image of social groups / communities. In the Indian tradition, exceptional importance is given to yatras or

1. Ravidas’ birthday is celebrated on magh purnima (the full moon date in the month of magh, which is January-February) so the February date may vary: in 2016, Ravidas Jayanti fell on February 22; in 2015, on February 3; in 2014, on February 14.
shobha yatras - solemn processions, which are supposed to show the credibility of a community, i.e. its numerical strength, administrative and financial possibilities, political connections, adherence to traditions etc. This is exceptionally important for self-assertion of communities and for their self-fashioning, a term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt (2005) in 1980. In other words, mobile actions - as with other collective activities - are ‘at once ‘political’ and ‘religious’, expressing both elite concerns and popular values’ (Freitag, 1989:14).

Yatras are always positioned by well-defined coordinates. They implicate committed movement from one point to another that connects space and contributes to its ‘appropriation’ by processions’ participants and / or to the assertion of their ‘rights’ to a certain territory - physically and mentally - at the level of the individual and collective consciousness. That is why choosing the route is a task of paramount importance when organising the processions: it virtually defines their essence because territorial claims and other space related issues form a major part of what processions do (Ley, 2005:33).

They are used for fixing place within a public space through the involvement of ritually charged actions (Freitag, 1989; Van Der Veer, 1996). It is no mere chance that yatras are often introduced by their organisers and perceived by participants as a type of pilgrimage procession aimed at binding together certain communities, especially those geographically dispersed. In this sense, such processions ‘reflect a supra-local level of the integration’ (Veer, 1996:155). Such is an approach used by Christiane Brosius (2006) in analysing the all-Indian yatra (svarna jayanti rath yatra) organised in May-July 1997 by Lal Krishna Advani, a senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The yatra was timed with the golden - semi-centennial - jubilee of India’s independence. Introduced as ‘patriotic pilgrimage’ (rashtra bhakti ki tirtha yatra), this large-scale two-month-long mobile action embraced 20 out of 28 Indian states and covered over 15,000 kilometres from Mumbai to Delhi. It played a crucial role in mobilising the communities and social groups who were supposed to support the BJP in the 1998 parliamentary elections. According to Brosius, Advani’s ‘patriotic pilgrimage’ represented a ‘ritual of possession’ (Brosius, 2006:257)[2] intended to show BJP’s full dominance both in the territory covered by the yatra participants and beyond, considering the all-Indian scale of the action. This and other similar actions of right-wing Hindu parties should be regarded as concrete attempts to designate a symbolic territory through sacralising various events and places, in particular the ones related to the liberation movement (Kaur, 2005:17-18; Köpping et al., 2006:28).

The time-related features of yatras are stipulated, firstly, by the fact that any ritual is a recurrent action. Besides, the idea of a yatra presupposes a repeated return to certain (sacred) places. Nicolas Jaoul (2007) in his detailed account of history and current specifics of Dalits’ (low-castes’) mobile actions in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh concludes that, for example, as early as in the 1930s, in Kanpur the regularity of the events (i.e. Ravidas processions and festivals) helped the Dalit community to claim their existence publicly through the regular occupation of urban space as well as to take their due place in the local calendar of festivals (Jaoul, 2007:178).

Importantly, since the early 2000s, Ravidas Jayanti has been included in the official list of public holidays in India under the section of ‘restricted / optional holidays’.

Secondly, yatras allow people to feel their ties with other times and even epochs, especially when they focus on the adherence to traditions and / or are built around images of real or invented historical characters. Researchers dealing with Indian religious and quasi-religious processions in different temporal and spatial (regional) contexts (Brosius, 2006; Jaoul, 2007; Ley, 2005; Freitag, 1989) point out their pageantry. This might partially be regarded as honouring tradition, since a majority of such mobile actions use the theory and practice of tirtha yatras, i.e. pilgrimages to sacred places with centuries-old histories (Glushkova, 2000). At the same time, architects of contemporary yatras are well aware of the fact that the attractiveness of a proposed show will define the potential ‘return on investment’: there are both regular yatras aimed at constructing requisite images along with once-only processions tackling momentary tasks. The attractiveness of the events is achieved by using outer effects (performance of procession participants) and also by involving the audience, either directly (as participants of processions, rallies etc.) or indirectly i.e. with the help of mass media. Christiane Brosius notes the role of propaganda materials that were

released after the 1997 ‘golden’ yatra and allowed all those interested to get a feeling of participation in it:

Because it was only the BJP leaders that undertook the pilgrimage as a whole, and most of the people followed the spectacle only at one site, or through the distant lens of mass media, both the pamphlet and the video (released shortly after the yatra was over) were significant in order to finally create the idea of an overall ritual, and to convey the story of its ‘success’ (Brosius, 2006: 168).

Thus, yatras or pilgrimages act as large-scale shows or performances which bind territories and connect time - the past and the present. To draw on the concept proposed in Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), a majority of public processions and pilgrimages in contemporary India are a manifestation of invented traditions (Basu, 2010; Werbner, 2010; etc).

This paper therefore focuses on the role of shobha yatras as a variety of pilgrimage or collective performative action successfully used by Ravidassias - a religious community from the Indian state of Punjab - in fashioning their identity in the 21st century.

**Sant Ravidas and His Followers**

The history of the Ravidassia community is closely linked to the history of Sikhism. In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, many low-castes in Punjab, including chamars (cobbler / tanners), became followers of Baba Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the new faith and the first Sikh guru, who spoke about justice and caste equality. With the development of Sikh doctrine, the chamar Sikhs started to worship the holy Guru Granth Sahib[3] that comprised hymns of the first Sikh gurus along with those of medieval bhakta poets, including Sant Ravidas.

Chamars had a special feeling towards Ravidas, the tanner (Figures 1 & 2), as he was one of them. Born in Varanasi, Ravidas spent most of his life (possibly, 1450–1520)[4] in the holy city. In his emotional hymns, Ravidas expressed feelings towards God and reflected on the injustice of the social order. He described his ideal of a just society as Begumpura - a city without sorrow, fear, pain or suffering; a place where all people were free and equal.[5]

Ravidas’ chamar followers worshiped the Sikh gurus as well; possibly at that time, there was no open opposition of lower and higher castes affiliated with Sikhism (McLeod, 2004:1-19). Besides, the early Sikhs were treated in society as one of numerous Hindu sects, and Ravidas’ followers hardly differed from worshippers of Kabir, Namdev and other bhaktas.

The situation began to change in the late 19th century when Ravidassia’s tanning business began to bring profit: the number of troops deployed in Punjab substantially increased after annexation of Punjab in 1849 and the transfer of control from the Government of India to the British Crown in 1858. Ravdassias supplied the troops with leather equipment, and quite a number of them managed to save enough money to emigrate. At the turn of the century Ravidassia communities began to grow in Canada, the US, the UK, Italy, Austria, and some other countries.[6] Simultaneously, the first Ravidassia deras headed by non-Sikh gurus appeared in Punjab, which contributed to community consolidation (Ram, 2009:4).

3. Compiled in the early 17th century.
5. A Russian translation of some of the hymns is available in Bochkovskaya (2013).
The contradiction between new financial capabilities and low social status of the Ravidassias along with the ongoing stratification of the Sikh community increased the disagreement between Ravidas’ followers and mainstream (high-caste) Sikhs, predominantly Jat landowners. The 1947 partition of India contributed to this as almost all Punjabi Muslims, mostly low-castes, found themselves in Pakistan or had to migrate to their new country, while the Punjabi Sikhs and Punjabi Hindus in India lost an important ally in their opposition with Jats (Puri, 2009:6). After the Punjab-Haryana split in 1966 and the Green Revolution launch in India’s northwest in the 1960s, the conflict between Jat landowners and low-caste Sikhs escalated to a qualitatively new phase. Besides, the 1960s witnessed another migration wave of Punjabis, especially the Sikh Dalits, as young people from almost every third Dalit family left India in search of a better life (Puri, 2009:8). Their remittances became an extremely important source of income for the Indian-based part of the community. With the beginning of economic reforms since the early 1990s, the Ravidassia diaspora received a better opportunity for investing funds in various projects in India and for supporting their community in Punjab.

Currently, many Ravidassias as well as some other Punjabi low-castes boast higher living standards in comparison with Dalits who reside in other parts of India,[7] nevertheless, their social status remains low. ‘Our problem is humiliation, not deprivation’ (cited in Puri, 2009:10) - these words of Kanshi Ram (1934-2006), a prominent Dalit leader and founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), express the essence of today’s conflict between Ravidassias and the higher castes.[8] Their main battlefield lies in the ritual sphere: Punjabi Dalits complain of the fact that though Sikh gurdwaras are supposed to be open to everyone, the lower-castes are forced to sit separately near the entrance and stay at the end of the queue in langars (community kitchens); they are not allowed to use common cremation grounds etc. But, the biggest insult for the lower castes is that the Sikhs often refuse to give them copies of the Guru Granth Sahib from gurdwaras to perform rites at home.[9]

Owing to the above, the formal distancing of lower and higher caste Sikhs has become inevitable. Headed by their own gurus, Ravidassias have been actively constructing their own temples to avoid any further dependence; they name them gurderas, gurghars or bhawans in opposition to gurdwaras. As an alternative to the Guru Granth Sahib, they have begun using their own scripture based exclusively on Ravidas’ hymns.

Distancing From Sikhism: Ravidassia Dharam and Its Attributes

By the early 21st century, Punjab was a location for over 100 Ravidassia deras (Ram, 2009:4), the main one being dera Sachkhand Ballan situated not far from Jalandhar, the administrative centre of the Punjabi Doab (between Beas and Sutlej rivers), which is an area with a very high proportion of Scheduled Castes (over 35%).[10] In addition, the Doab is closely connected with the diaspora and is often called the Non Resident Indians’ (NRI) hub[11] owing to the huge number of migrated descendants.

Established over a century ago by Sant Pipal Das (?-1928), dera Sachkhand Ballan began to expand since the 1990s, owing to increased diaspora funding (mostly from the UK), and gradually became the headquarters and the think-tank of the Ravidassia community. The community’s growing financial potential and popularity didn’t remain unwatched by the mainstream Sikhs, primarily by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), controlling almost all gurdwaras in India except those in Delhi. The Sikhs’ anxiety was founded in both ideological and economic considerations: the influence of local gurus among the lower-castes grew dramatically while a huge amount of funds bypassed the SGPC because Ravidassia gurderas had no formal obligations to pay part of the received donations to the SGPC. Ideologically, more hazardous for the Sikhs was the tremendous role played by Ravidassia preachers / gurus. However, in the 2000s, the Ravidassia community was not included by the Sikh authorities in the list of ‘most dangerous’ deras adhering to the living guru principle and was not proclaimed illegal in Punjab.[12] In spite of the standoff between the Ravidassias and the mainstream Sikhs, the

7. Ref. to (Ram 2009: 3). In many cases Punjabi Dalits have changed their traditional occupations and almost left agricultural labour to migrants from other - poorer - states of India (Jodhka, 2004; Puri, 2009).
8. For details, see (Jodhka, 2004; Puri, 2009; Ram, 2009; Bochkovskaya, 2007).
9. Since the Guru Granth Sahib is treated by the Sikhs not as a book or a text, but as a human being / living guru, it requires special conditions (a separate room) for accommodation at home. Gurdwara officials often motivate their refusal to give the scripture to Dalits by the latters’ ‘inability’ to take proper care of the Granth and also by the fact that they lack ‘requisite conditions’ at home.
10. Average figure for Punjab is 28.8% while for India it is 16%.
SGPC authorities tried to make compromises with the Ravidassia community[13] to bring them back to Sikhism.

However, radical mainstream Sikhs refused to share the SGPC’s point of view and insisted that any attempt at ‘apostasy’ should be ruthlessly suppressed. They confirmed this stand in action in May 2009 in a Vienna-based gurdera by shooting dead Sant Ramanand, a leader of Punjabi Ravidassias, who was preaching there during his foreign tour (Lum, 2009). This tragedy became a turning point in Ravidassia’s self-determination: in return, on January 30, 2010, they officially announced their own religion, the Ravidassia dharam. The announcement was made in Varanasi, the birthplace of the chamr singer (Suman, 2010:46), and the new faith was supposed to have nothing in common with Sikhism and boast a full set of its own attributes, including a scripture, a symbol / emblem and a salutation (Bochkovskaya, 2013). The key component of the ‘symbolic set’ was proclaiming Ravidas’ birthplace as mahan tirthasthan or ‘ultimate place of pilgrimage’. The proposed place had already been marked by a gurdera - Shri Guru Ravidas Janamsth Mandir built in Varanasi (Figure 3). It is often named Begumpura,[14] ‘a city without sorrow’ that symbolises freedom and justice - a term borrowed from a hymn by Ravidas.

Thus, the Ravidassias remain in a complicated process of setting up a protest identity - on the one hand, they are trying to assert their rights for Sikhism while on the other, they are demonstrating a full split from their mother faith through the intricate process of self-fashioning. One instrument used for this purpose is the shobha yatra - well-organised processions and marches from Jalandhar to Varanasi that are presented as pilgrimages to the birthplace of Guru Ravidas. In the past decade, the importance of this pilgrimage has constantly been increasing; the ritual has been developing against the background of growing caste (Jats versus Dalits) confrontation in Punjab and neighbouring states, as well as the overall rise of the Dalit movement in India.

12. The SGPC list includes Nirankaris and Namdharris - two communities originating from the 19th century, and also four deras that were set up later, namely, Radhasoami Beas, Noormahali, Dera Saccha Sauda, and Dera Bhaniarawala.  
14. The mandir is located on the southern outskirts of Varanasi in the Seer Goverdhanpur village. A team of experts from dera Sachkhand Ballan studied the place in the early 1960s and defined a site which might have been the birth place of Ravidas. This plot of land was bought from the UP authorities, and the construction began. The gurdera was inaugurated in 1974. Since the early 1990s, its activities have been receiving regular media coverage, and after the official launch of the Ravidassia religion in 2010, the Varanasi-based gurdera became the main pilgrimage centre for Ravidas’ followers.
Along with the *Begumpura Express*, lots of colourful trucks with pilgrims arrive at Varanasi from other states, primarily from the UP, Punjab and Haryana, as well as from Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Uttarakhand. According to Ravidassia estimates, up to one million pilgrims participated in the yatras bound for Varanasi in 2012-2013.\(^{18}\)

After arriving at ‘the Mecca for Dalits’ (a recent cliché for Varanasi), the pilgrims head to the southern outskirts of the city to cover the remaining distance of their *yatra*. They walk barefoot from the Guru Ravidas Gate to the Ravidas Janamsthan Mandir along a narrow street, which is constantly cleaned by thousands of volunteers (*sevadars*). The *Ravidas Jayanti* celebrations also include the passage of pilgrims along the streets surrounding the temple. It is impossible to make a round near the *gurdera* as the buildings are very close to each other; so the processions have to move along a lengthy and twisting route. They carry flags with Ravidassia symbols and portraits of Ravidas.

The pilgrimage also involves a large number of ‘static’ performances, i.e. preaching by the community head, singing *kirtans* (religious songs) and participating in rallies inaugurated by well-known politicians. The latter has become possible owing to the recent commissioning of the huge Ravidas Park on the bank of the Ganges, not far from the *gurdera*.

Among the annual pilgrimages, especially important was the 2008 *shobha yatra* when the European Ravidassia community presented to Begumpura the golden palanquin (*svarn palki*), which actually resembled the spectacular canopies housing the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the main Sikh *gurdwaras*. In the *gurdera*, it was supposed to host a full-size sculpture of Ravidas. The palanquin worth over US $200,000 and boasting at least 15 kg of gold was manufactured in Punjab (*OneIndia News*, February 20, 2008).

Since 2000, pilgrimage processions to the Varanasi-based Ravidas Mandir have become permanent and timed with Ravidas’ birthday anniversaries that are celebrated under the auspices of the Guru Ravidas Janam Sthan Public Charitable Trust. In this connection, a special train called the *Begumpura Express*\(^{17}\) is arranged to cover the distance between Jalandhar and Varanasi. The train arrives at Varanasi a couple of days before the main celebrations as many participants of the *yatras* are willing to stay there for at least a week. To accommodate the pilgrims, the Charitable Trust has built a four-floor *ashram* and a huge *langar* hall that serves food to all visitors.

\(^{15}\) Niranjan Das has been heading the community after Garib Das’a demise in 1994.

\(^{16}\) In office in 1997-2002.

\(^{17}\) The first special-purpose train departed from Jalandhar to Varanasi in 2000. The *Begumpura Express* covers a distance of 1,050 km across three North Indian states (Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh) and makes stops at Ludhiana, Ambala, Saharanpur, Moradabad, Lucknow and Sultanpur. There also is a regular (daily) *Begumpura Express*, which is in no way connected with the *yatra*; it runs between Jammu and Varanasi.

\(^{18}\) The figures come from different Ravidassia websites, in particular, from (Sachkhand Ballan) and seem to be exaggerated.
Upon arrival at Varanasi, the *shobha yatra* headed to Ravidas Janamsthan Mandir, circled the *gurdera*, after which the golden palanquin was placed on a platform in the Ravidas Park where it was inaugurated by Mayawati and Niranjan Das. Then the palanquin was installed in the second floor of the *gurdera* in an enclosed place with bullet-proof glass. A couple of years later a full-size statue of Ravidas was also placed inside while photos of the ‘golden’ *yatra* were fixed on the walls. Thus, the main tasks of the mobile action - self-advertising, self-promotion and display of the community strength - were fully accomplished.

It is possible that the wide media coverage of this and other Ravidassia pilgrimage processions triggered different *yatras* outside India - especially in Europe and North America - where new *gurderras* are being set up one after another. In a sense, this might have also encouraged the Sikh radicals who perpetrated the Vienna shooting in 2009. In turn, the qualitative change in the conflict brought about changes in the ‘quality’ of pilgrimage processions.

First, their ideological support has substantially improved. For example, a novelty of the 2012 pilgrimage procession (railway *yatra* from Jalandhar to Varanasi) was *darshan* of the sacred book - *Amritbani Satguru Ravidas Maharaj* - that comprises 240 hymns by Ravidas, including 40 hymns from the *Guru Granth Sahib* (Bochkovskaya, 2013). In 2010, it was officially proclaimed as the Ravidassia’s scripture, instead of the

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19. A year before that the *shobha yatra* was ‘rehearsed’ in Punjab: in 2007, the Ravidassia community of Birmingham presented a similar palanquin to *dera* Sachkhand Ballan: the procession coincided with Ravidas’ birth anniversary. It moved from Phagwara (Kapurthala district), where the palanquin had been manufactured, to Jalandhar.

20. Mayawati held the post of the UP chief minister in 1995, 1997, 2002-2003, 2007-2012. It was largely due to her efforts that the BSP became extremely popular in North India, especially in Uttar Pradesh during the 2000s.
Guru Granth Sahib, and was placed in many gurderas. Along with advertising an alternative text, the darshan during the 2012 pilgrimage was supposed to end the discussion taking place both in Punjab and among the diaspora about the future use / disuse of the Guru Granth Sahib by the Ravidassias (though, the discussion is still underway).

Secondly, in the past four years the Ravidassia pilgrimages have become more numerous, considering the number of organised yatra participants and also those travelling to Varanasi on their own. Along with the Begumpura Express, in February 2014 another dedicated train, the Amritbani Express, departed from Jalandhar to Varanasi carrying a large group of pilgrims onboard (The Tribune, February 13, 2014). The number of Ravidas’ foreign followers (primarily, from the US, Canada and the UK) visiting Begumpura in February has also increased. Some of them travel directly to the destination, but some people visit dera Sachkhand Ballan first and then take the pilgrims’ train to Varanasi. Thus, the Begumpura yatras are becoming more internationalised.

In addition to the main pilgrimage vector which gets good media coverage across several states, there are many other, less pompous, yatras advertised only in gurderas and in the local press. During my visits to the Varanasi-based gurdera in 2012 and 2014-15, I saw posters and photographs informing visitors about cycling yatras from Punjab to Varanasi, the first pedestrian yatras, and other local versions of pilgrimage.

Thirdly, the pilgrimage processions as well as other mobile actions should be examined within the context of the general development of Dalit awareness in North India and in UP since the turn of the century - a trend supported and headed by the BSP (Jaoul, 2007:190). In a way, Ravidassias are in a beneficial position in comparison to other Dalits in Punjab and neighbouring states as they have got a ‘historical’ guru and ‘his’ sacred territory in Varanasi. The Begumpura chalo! (Go to Begumpura!) slogan is laconic and well understood by all followers of Ravidas without any special explanations and is, therefore, very convenient to use. The fact that pilgrimage processions from Punjab to Varanasi cross the most populous and religious-prone territories needs no additional comment. That is why Ravidassias’ shobha yatras have become a priority for the community’s self-assertion and self-fashioning.

**Conclusion**

Recent decade has been crucial for the Ravidassia community: contemporary followers of the medieval saint Ravidas have made a decisive step in distancing themselves from mainstream Sikhs and in constructing their protest identity by establishing their own religion, along with adopting an alternative scripture and the main pilgrimage centre in Varanasi. Well-organised shobha yatras or pilgrimage processions to Varanasi-based Shri Guru Ravidas Janamsthan Mandir have become an integral part of Ravidassia rituals. These collective performative actions aimed at the community’s self-assertion boast a constantly increasing number of participants both from India and from abroad, and substantially contribute to the development of Dalit awareness in North India.
References


