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Issues of Identity among the Valmikis and Ravidasis in Britain: egalitarian hermeneutics from the Guru Granth Sahib

Abstract

This paper aims to discuss issues around the often taboo topic of caste in Sikhism. The Guru Granth Sahibji repeatedly reminds its readers of the egalitarian nature of the Sikh faith. A faith which almost promises to eradicate notions of pollution attached to the lower castes. This paper endeavours to unearth the hermeneutics of the Guru Granth Sahibji in order to assess why lower caste members of the Panth felt that their Mazhabi labelling has prevented their equal assimilation into the Sikh Panth. Two such groups in Britain today are the Valmikis and the Ravidasis. The Valmikis, especially praxis at the Coventry Sabha, pose very interesting dialogue as to who a Sikh is. The Sabha is unique in the fact that it houses a copy of the Guru Granth Sahibji alongside that of Valmiki’s Ramayan. This paper attempts to address the root causes of the Valmikis’ and Ravidasis’ emphasis on a distinct identity from Sikhs. Was this move towards religious autonomy politically or socially motivated?

Introduction

The issue of Sikh Identity has raised many insightful debates and forums amongst academics and the Sikh community at large. Two caste based communities – the Ravidasis and Valmikis present interesting perspectives to the role of caste in the Sikh Panth. Indeed, the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahibji allude to the fact that caste discrimination should not be practised by followers of the Gurus. Then why is it that many of the former Punjabi chamar and chuhras¹ have established their distinct identities from both Sikhs and Muslims? Informant testimonies from Valmikis and Ravidasis have been essential in the ethnography employed to enhance my understanding of these respective communities. I strongly believe that the move towards distinction in terms of identity has primarily resulted from the existence of caste in Sikhism. A discussion of this topic immediately raises many paradoxes: on the one hand Sikhs are encouraged to dismiss the practice of caste differences, and yet on the other, marriages continue to be endogamous. In this respect, one could argue that the Sikh Gurus’ emphasis was on removing the social stigma of prejudice associated with caste rather than obliterate it from society altogether. Also, I argue that, on the British scene in particular, the membership of many Gurdwaras is caste based. There are the Jat Gurdwaras, the Ramgharia Gurdwaras and the Bhatra Gurdwaras – to mention a few. Therefore, were the origins of separate Gurdwaras of the Dalit classes going to an inescapable feature of the British diasporan community anyway? A foreword by Jeremy Corbyn MP in a report on the Dalits and caste discrimination in the United Kingdom, states that he “was horrified to realise that caste
disadvantages have actually been exported to the UK through the Indian Diaspora. The same attitudes of superiority, pollution and separateness appear to be present in South Asian communities now settled in the UK.\textsuperscript{12}

At times conducting research amongst the Sikh, Valmiki and Ravidasi communities can present its own problems. Sometimes informants are very open and talk passionately about their experiences. At other times however, the very taboo subject of caste within the Sikh community and moreso, its prejudice as experienced by the Valmikis and Ravidasis causes some informants to withhold information. To this end, I have examined the egalitarian hermeneutics of the Guru Granth Sahibji and then compared these with actual practice within the British communities of Sikhs, Ravidasis and Valmikis.

**Egalitarian ideologies in Gurbani**

The mass conversion of the lower castes, in particular the \textit{chamars} and \textit{chuhras}, into the Panth from Hinduism was a significant step towards an aspiration to get rid of social (and religious\textsuperscript{3}) stigmas associated with the notion of untouchability. The egalitarian teachings of the Guru Granth Sahibji have important implications when discussing Sikh identity. Both the Ravidasis and Valmikis adamantly voice the prejudice they faced from the higher \textit{zat} Sikhs which thus led to their breaking away from the Panth and seeking social and religious status through their distinct identities as separate from both Hindus and Sikhs. The use of the Guru Granth Sahibji during worship at many Ravidasi centres in Britain is primarily due to the fact that forty-one hymns composed by Ravidas are contained within the Scripture. Ravidasis have alluded to a project currently underway in India whereby the hymns of Guru Ravidas found in the Guru Granth Sahibji and elsewhere will be compiled into one composite volume and this will replace the housing of the Sikh Scripture in many Ravidasi centres. How far this will truly be achieved amongst the more Sikh orientated Ravidasi communities in Britain is yet to be seen. As far as Valmiki centres are concerned, it is primarily the Coventry Temple that houses a copy of the Guru Granth Sahibji. The other centres use the Punjabi Ramayana of Valmiki and/or the Yoga Vasishtha (also believed to have been composed by the Sage Valmiki).

Significantly, the consonance of thought between Ravidas and the \textit{bani} of Guru Nanak is probably the major factor for the former’s \textit{bani} being included in the \textit{bhagat bani} of the Guru Granth Sahibji. My contention is that both men can be regarded as adherents of the Northern Sant tradition. This would explain the synonymy between their \textit{banis}. Akin to Guru Nanak, Ravidas believed in the freedom of all humankind and taught about the irrelevance of caste distinctions. His followers adamantly voice that: “Guru Ji succeeded in his aims when the \textit{Brahmins} fell upon his feet after watching his miracles. Even kings and queens became his followers”\textsuperscript{4}. The \textit{bani} of Ravidas, as contained in the Guru Granth Sahibji, is regarded as the most authentic of his compositions by the Ravidasis. Amongst others, substantial compositions by Ravidas are also found in the \textit{Pac-vani}. It is necessary to examine the teachings of the Gurus that promoted parity between the different castes. After all, it is equality that attracted many lower castes to convert to the apparent egalitarian faith of Sikhism.

The hermeneutics of the Guru Granth Sahibji repeatedly stress the importance of God as being reachable by \textit{all} human beings, regardless of one’s caste or social background. The importance of \textit{bhakti} as the universal path to \textit{mukti} is also accentuated. This was in sharp contrast to the practices prevalent in many Hindu
temples where the lower castes were refused entry. Ravidas, in the Guru Granth Sahibji, teaches that:

The Lord fathers no one but him who is in love with Him. (AG 658)\(^5\)

The importance of this loving relationship with God, \textit{bhakti}, is a salient feature of Sikh teachings. Importantly, it emphasized the universality of all human beings in being able to reach God through unconditional love. It could well be argued, as indicated above, that the similarity between the teachings of Ravidas and the Sikh Gurus was as a result of the influence of the Northern Sant tradition. As McLeod has highlighted, the superiority of one’s caste as taking the individual closer to God was a common rejection of the Sant tradition.\(^6\) In many instances, Ravidas in his works contained in the Guru Granth Sahibji alludes to his association with the Sants, tis therefore, could strengthen the contention that both men belonged to the Northern Sant tradition. On this point, Ravidas writes:

\begin{quote}
The Saints who are Thy body, Thy life-breath, O Lord, 
Them, through the Guru-given Wisdom, have I found, O God of gods. 
O God of gods, Bless me with the Society of the Saints and with the Joy of 
hearing their Word and with their Love.   (AG 486)\(^7\)
\end{quote}

The egalitarian hermeneutics of the Guru Granth Sahibji gave the lower castes many enticing incentives to join the Panth in masses. The promise of equality for all who entered the Panth must have been very attractive for the lower castes, who were openly discriminated upon by higher caste Hindus. There is no mention of the Harijans or Dalit classes in the Rig Veda, especially in relation to the Hymn of the Purushukta in which the origins of the four classes of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudra are mentioned. This, to some degree, justified the ancient ill-treatment of the lower castes as being ‘outcastes’ or ‘untouchables’. Basham suggests that the Outcastes were probably of aboriginal tribes which came under the sway of the advancing Aryans. He is of the opinion that the Candalas were the chief group and the term Candala came to be used loosely for many types of Untouchables.\(^8\) Koller is of the opinion that the ‘untouchable was cast out of society, usually for offences against the established dharmas . . .the children of outcastes were automatically outcasts too, and thus their numbers increased’.\(^9\)

Interestingly, Lynch believes that Untouchables were the result of mixed-caste marriages.\(^10\) If we are to accept that the varnas were endogamous, then the offspring of mixed \textit{zat} marriages would be regarded as being ‘impure’. But then how would a Hindu have accounted for individuals from the epics as being accepted into society as a result of mixed caste marriages? It is well to remember here that in the Mahabharata, Dhritirashtra’s half-brother Vidhur was from a Shudra mother. This apparent contradiction was overcome by the acceptance of the \textit{anuloma} marriage where the husband was of a higher class than his wife. Whereas the \textit{pratiloma} marriage, where the wife’s class was higher than the husband’s was always frowned upon.\(^11\) It was against such attitudes that the Sikh Gurus bravely confronted the prejudice of caste based society and endeavoured for all entrants to the Panth to be treated as equals. Their stance on the irrelevance of caste distinctions is perhaps best summarized in the following words from the Guru Granth Sahibji:

\begin{quote}
Recognise Lord’s light within all and inquire not the caste,
\end{quote}
As there is no caste in the next world. (AG 349)

Guru Arjan believed that all castes had equal standing, he taught:

He, who by Guru’s instruction utters the one Name, He gathers the pure glory. The four castes of warriors, priests, farmers and menials are equal partners in divine instruction. (AG 747)

Therefore, notions about the higher castes being closer to God were outrightly rejected by the Sikh Gurus through the hymns of equality in the Guru Granth Sahibji and through the development of the Sikh faith in practice.

Caste amongst Sikhs

Discrimination based on caste (zat) differences was a feature of Indian society that the Sikh Gurus strongly criticized. A Sikh was instructed to believe in the equality of all fellow human beings. A practice that was exemplified in the lives of the Sikh Guru’s themselves. The creation of the Khalsa itself in 1699 aimed also to promote equality by replacing caste names with ‘Kaur’ and ‘Singh’. With all these rules in place, how ever did the lower caste converts become the mazhabi Sikhs? Why is it that the Jat Sikhs retained their position in the Panth as Jats, the Ramgharia Sikhs remain members of the Ramgharia zat? Caste itself was never intended to be abolished. In theory at least, it was the prejudice and discrimination associated with the caste system that was seen as binding to a Sikh’s spiritual journey. The practice of endogamy ensured and continues to preserve caste distinctions amongst Sikhs. Both the Ravidasis and Valmikis exemplify an outstanding example of the fact that zat identity is a major criterion of Sikh identity itself.

The institution of the langar in all Gurdwaras promotes the very important notion of commensality associated with overcoming prejudice associated with caste distinctions. By encouraging people of all castes to sit and eat together, both Guru Nanak and Guru Amardas were revolting against the Hindu concept of commensality, where members of higher castes would not sit and eat with lower castes in fear of pollution. Singh has strengthened this belief by suggesting that the promotion of inter-caste commensality by the Sikh Gurus was remarkable in obliterating ‘one of the constitutive principles of the caste’. Guru Nanak’s famous story about a rich man, Malik Bhago and a poor man, Lalo, very cleverly illustrates his dislike and discarding of the prejudice associated with accepting food from lower caste individuals. Furthermore, the distribution of karah prasad in the Gurdwara illustrates the Sikh’s acceptance of all, regardless of caste, religion or social background. Additionally, Guru Arjan purposely designed Harmandir Sahib to have four doors of entry, signifying that it was open to all individuals. This was in sharp contrast to many religious places of worship that were unwelcoming to the lower castes. Furthermore, the laying of the foundation stone of Harmandir Sahib by a Muslim Pir by the name of Mian Mir, was further proof that the Sikh faith was for people of all castes and creeds.

The original panj pyare at the creation of the Khalsa in 1699 were all from different castes. They shared amrit from a common bowl: something that would have been alien according to traditional Hindu beliefs about ritual pollution. The eradication of zat names in favour of Singh and Kaur were further steps to illustrate the egalitarian principles of the Panth. Thus, the attraction of undertaking khande-di-
pahul must have been extremely attractive and appealing for those lower castes who sought equality in terms of social and religious status. Grewal is of the opinion that: “The Khalsa had a plebain base. If anything, the spirit of equality, brotherhood and fraternization was reinforced by the Khalsa.”

Despite the efforts of the Sikh Gurus towards the equality of all beings, in theory at least, arguably caste prejudice did and continues to be practised within the Panth. Endogamy ensured and continues to ensure that one’s zat is transparent in relation to the marriages of offspring. There is no indication in the Guru Granth Sahibji, or in the practices of the Sikh Gurus themselves to suggest that the intermarrying between zats were acceptable. Speaking from within the Sikh community, I can say that an inter-caste marriage can bring great shame upon a family’s izzat. As remarked earlier, marriages within the Valmiki and Ravidasi communities continue to be endogamous also. The extent of prejudice towards the lower-caste Sikhs is highlighted by McLeod: “Outcastes were prohibited from entering many gurdwaras and the sacred karah prasad was preserved from their contamination.” This is one example amongst many which may have prompted the lower castes to seek equality elsewhere rather than merely on the sidelines of Sikhism and prior to that Hinduism. To this effect, Ghurye alludes to incidences of the severe beatings of chamars by higher caste Sikhs and Hindus. Surely, a God-loving Sikh would not retain notions of prejudice towards his or her fellow Sikhs? After all, is this not what the Gurus strongly denounced as an evil of society? Maybe the situation in practice could have been different had at least one of the Sikh Gurus been from a zat other than the khatri zat. Caste distinctions and prejudice are still very much present in Sikhism today as they were during the development of the Panth in its post Khalsa period. In the words of Khushwant Singh, ‘Sikhism’s crusade against the caste system has only been partially successful.’

Eventually, many movements and individual Mazhabi Sikhs began to show their dissatisfaction as not being regarded as on a par with the higher zats within the Panth. At times, it can be argued whether the treatment of the lower zats was any better than had they remained on the peripheries of Hinduism. Many of the Valmiki and Ravidasi informants I have visited remarked at how they were not allowed to prepare langar or karah prasad in many British Gurdwaras. Maybe it is such examples that caused the lower caste Sikhs to find equality in a complete distinction away from the Panth. A significant number of Ravidasis and Valmikis became so without the medium of Sikhism. This could explain many non-Sikh practices amongst the communities.

A distinct identity through the Ad Dharm movement

The wider recognition of Ravidas as Guru can be attributed to the fruition of the efforts of the Ad Dharm movement, the leaders and members of which also belonged to what is formerly referred to as the chamar zat. The Ad Dharm movement is instrumental in promoting a distinct identity for the followers of Guru Ravidas. The Ad Dharm movement began to flourish in Punjab in the 1920’s as the promulgator of equal status for the Scheduled Classes. It gained most momentum however, amongst the chamar zat probably due to the fact that the founder of the movement, Mangoo Ram, also belonged to the same zat. The name Ad Dharm was coined from the belief amongst the Scheduled Classes as being the original inhabitants of India, the Adivasis, before the arrival of the Aryans. The Ad Dharm sought a qaumic identity as being distinct from Hindus and Sikhs for the Scheduled Classes. The first meeting of the Ad
Dharm movement took place in Jullundar in 1925. To the present day I have seen examples of many Ravidasis referring to themselves as Ad Dharmis.

Politically, the existence of the Arya Samaj had its subsequent effects on the anima of the founders of the Ad Dharm, most of whom had been educated in schools established by the Arya Samaj. Dayananda Saraswati (the founder of the Samaj) aimed at converting the lower castes back to Hinduism from Sikhism and Buddhism through the rite of shuddi, which in turn would give them certain rights and privileges. The ideal of equality however, was not adhered to in practice by the Arya Samaj although it promoted the ideal of social status through education. Thus, we see here a great deal of discontentment on the part of the Scheduled Classes who were constantly rejected promises of parity in society. The disappointment resulted in the Ad Dharm’s move towards a distinct identity from both Sikhs and Hindus as early as the 1920’s. One very significant custom that was introduced was the wearing of the colour red. Traditionally the adivasis were banned from wearing red due to its exclusive association with the Aryans. The traditional religious symbols of the Khanda and Aum were replaced by the equality term from the Upanishads ‘Soham’ meaning ‘I am That’. The Ad Dharm was as political as it was religious. It aimed at distinction from other groups in India through political power as a distinct nation of the ‘oppressed’ classes. This led to the formation of the All-India Depressed Classes Association and the All-India Depressed Classes Federation. Both organizations aimed at encouraging the Indian National Congress to remove untouchability.

As remarked earlier the efforts of the Ad Dharm gained most momentum amongst the chamar zat. The position of Ravidas was raised to Guru from mere bhagat as he was regarded by the Panth at large. The census of 1931 was to be instrumental in judging the identity of followers of Ravidas, and indeed, individual members of the Scheduled Classes. The census would have a separate identity option for member of the Scheduled Classes rather than simply enumerate them as Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims. The census the s returns showed that there were 4178, 789 Ad Dharmis in the Punjab in the 1930’s. The leaders of the movement themselves believe that the numbers could have been much higher had it not resulted in intimidation on individuals from higher caste Sikhs and Hindus. The point to emphasise here is that the developments of a distinct identity from Hindus and Sikhs were being promoted, especially amongst the Ad Dharmi followers of Guru Ravidas. The dissolution of the Ad Dharm was gradually beginning due to an over-involvement in politics. The sentiments however, were embedded in the minds of Ravidasis. Evidently, this is shown in their separate places of worship in many cities of Britain such as London, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Coventry, Bedford, Oxford and Glasgow.

Ravidasis and Valmikis in Britain

Both the Ravidasi and Valmiki communities in Britain are well established and Punjabi in origin. The hymns of Ravidas are contained in the Guru Granth Sahibji. Ravidas is referred to as Bhagat by the Panth at large. The Valmikis take Valmiki, the alleged author of the Hindu Ramayana, as their Guru. Both the Ravidasi and Valmiki communities are caste-based institutions, made up of the former chamar and chuhra zats. Marriages within both communities remain endogamous.

The main scripture used during worship in many Ravidasi centres in Britain is the Guru Granth Sahibji itself. While it would seem obvious that a place of worship which houses the Guru Granth Sahibji is Sikh orientated, it is well to remember that in
this case the hymns of Guru Ravidas, as contained in the Holy Scripture are given prominence during worship. Many Valmiki Sabhas no longer use the Guru Granth Sahibji. Instead they place emphasis on the Valmiki Ramayana and the Yoga Vasistha as the main Scriptural authorities. In these instances, the distinct identity from Sikhs is strongly emphasized amongst the communities. It is pointed out however, that the degree of distinction from Sikhs is more pronounced in some Valmiki and Ravidasi communities moreso than others. There does not seem to be uniformity here amongst all individuals from the two communities. Some individuals actually become quite agitated at the mention of their separation from the Panth and insist that they are Sikhs as much as other followers of the Gurus. On the other hand however, other communities leaders and individuals are adamant that their identity has nothing to do with the Panth – this is even if the informant is a keshdhari!

Many of the practices prevalent in the Valmiki and Ravidasi centres may be regarded as being Sikh in ethos with some additions that make them specifically Valmiki or Ravidasi. The practice of distributing prasad is very important in the Valmiki and Ravidasi centres. This could allude to the principle of equality amongst the followers – something that was not necessarily adhered to in practice upon their mass conversion to Sikhism. The Prasad in the Valmiki Sabhas however, is not always karah prasad. In the majority of Valmiki centres, with the exception of Coventry, it tends to be dried fruit and nuts. The majority of Ravidasi Centres however tend to distribute karah prasad, in line with the practice in Sikh Gurdwaras.

The emphasis on being distinct from Sikhs and Hindus, is best illustrated through the celebrations and practices that take place in the Valmiki and Ravidasi centres. Although diwali and to a lesser degree baisakhi, are marked; it is the celebrations of the birthdays of Guru Valmiki and Guru Ravidasi that are the highlights of the Valmiki and Ravidasi religious calendars respectively. The Southall Ravidasi Sabha celebrates the gurpurb of Guru Ravidas over three days in February by holding the forty-eight hour akhand-path. This is very Sikh orientated. However, the nishan sahib, or rather the chanda as Ravidasis refer to it, is changed on the gurpurb of Guru Ravidas rather than on baisakhi as is the practice in the Panth overall. Here then, the distinction from the Panth is clearly marked. The birth anniversary of Bhagwan Valmik – as he is referred to by the Punjabi Valmikis, is generally celebrated in October. The celebrations generally take the form of special readings from the Ramayana, followed by lectures on the life accounts and stories of the Great Sage Valmiki. There is no marked reading from the Guru Granth Sahibji (where it is present) on this occasion. Generally the whole of the reading of the Ramayana is undertaken as part of the celebrations, this usually takes a week to complete.

The nishan sahibs or chandas of the Valmiki centres are not changed on the birth anniversary of Valmiki, and neither on baisakhi. Instead, the Valmikis have ‘Flag Day’ over different dates in the year – this clearly marks them apart from the Khalsa Panth. Incidentally, it was at the Coventry Valmiki temple where baisakhi is given a special importance and celebrated in a joyous manner by readings from the Guru Granth Sahibji. Diwali is given special prominence amongst the Valmikis due to the origins of the celebration being embedded in the story of Rama and Sita as contained in the Ramayana. Here again, the shift from Sikhism is clearly marked in not associating diwali with the release of the Sixth Guru from Mughal captivation. The case of the Coventry Valmiki temple here again is interesting in terms of their identity. A number of informants at Coventry remarked that they celebrate diwali to commemorate the release of Guru Hargobind from prison.
The recital of *ardas* to mark the end of service both in the Ravidasi and Valmiki Sabhas is again a focal point to suggest the emphasis on a distinct identity. The Valmiki *ardas* is as follows:

*Ardas samey Bhagwan Ji ham hain khade dewar*
*Hath dekar rakhna, benati baram bar*
*Man ki mala chalti jaye suwas suwas par nath*
*Vishay Vikaron se Prabhu rakhna dekar hath.*

This can be translated as:

At the time of *ardas* dear God we are at your doorstep
Keep us always protected, this is our request to you
Help us to continuously devour thee
Keep us protected always.

Ravidasis recite the following *ardas* to mark the end of service in the Sabha:

*Jo boley so nirbhay Shri Guru Ravidass Ji ki jai*

This is translated as:

Fearless is the individual who recites the praise of Guru Ravidassji.

The preceding service in both the Valmiki and Ravidasi centres would have highlighted the importance of the teachings of Guru Valmiki and Guru Ravidas respectively. This would have been followed by talks about how the two leaders are exemplars for their followers. Ravidasi centres, since they utilize the Guru Granth Sahibji for the hymns of Guru Ravidas may occasionally have a lecture on the lives of the Sikh Gurus. This would not be the case in the majority of Valmiki centres – many of which are void of any art depicting Sikh history and folklore. Here again, the exception is the Coventry Valmiki temple where one can see art depicting the Gurus and the Rangretia connection to Sikh history. Here, particularly on *Sangrand* (when the Guru Granth Sahibji is read from) the lecture may concentrate on the lives of the Sikh Gurus. I found that the Bedford Valmiki temple also has a higher number of *keshdharis* than many of the other Sabhas. Here also, I gained the impression that many community members had no hesitation over claiming that, as followers of Guru Valmiki, they were still members of the Panth overall since they lived by the teachings of the Sikh Gurus also. This however, would seem to contradict the Valmiki code of conduct which states:

Valmiki Mandirs [are] to preach Valmikism only. A Valmiki Mandir must not have any other form of worship except *Puja and readings*, from the Ramayana and Yoga-Vasistha.25

The order of marriage in the Valmiki and Ravidasi Sabhas again is very interesting in terms of the implications that praxis have upon the identities of both communities. As mentioned earlier, marriages within both communities are endogamous. There is generally no inter-marriage between the different Dalit *zats*. The Sabhas are usually the venues for the marriage ceremony itself. Interestingly,
marriages in the Ravidasi community are performed by the couple taking four *pheras* around the Guru Granth Sahibji itself. However, this should not be interpreted as the community’s emphasis on the Sikh union of the couple. The Guru Granth Sahibji is used solely by the majority of Ravidasi Sabhas because it contains the most authentic works of Guru Ravidas. Importantly, nevertheless, it is the Sikh *lavan* hymn that is the prompt for the four circumambulations. It remains to be seen whether this practice will be replaced by a specifically Ravidasi orientated one when, and if, the Guru Granth Sahibji is eventually replaced by a composite volume of Ravidas’s works.

There is no uniformity over the marriage ceremony in Valmiki Sabhas. Here the order of service takes on the preference of the committee in charge of the Sabha. One particular wedding I attended was at the Coventry Valmiki Sabha. Since the Guru Granth Sahibji is present here, the couple took four *pheras* around the *palki* which houses both the Guru Granth Sahibji and the Ramayana of Valmiki. The Sikh *lavan* hymn was recited from the Guru Granth Sahibji. Hence, the form of marriage in this case took on a specifically Sikh character. The desires of the Central Valmiki Sabha in Southall is to unify the marriage ceremony across all Sabhas. To date, it has published a pamphlet entitled: ‘Yoga Vasistha Vich Viyah da Sanklip’, in which the marriage custom in accordance to the Yoga Vasistha is summarized. The Sabha hopes that all Valmki Sabhas will adopt the practices set out in the publication. It does however, have major contentions for the housing of the Guru Granth Sahibji at the Coventry Sabha. Generally, the couple in all Valmiki Sabhas take four *pheras* around either the Guru Granth Sahibji, the Punjabi Valmiki Ramayana, the Yoga Vasistha or, in the case of the Southall Sabha, a life-size statue of Guru Valmiki. The four *pheras*, I was told, do not necessarily correspond to the *lavan* hymn. In the Sabhas that do not read the *lavan* hymn, the four circumambulations indicate the couple’s respect for their religion, the householder’s life, bearing children, and the wife’s obedience to her husband. The Oxford Sabha aims to have planning permission in order to allow marriages to be performed around the sacred *agni*. Hence, the move away from a Sikh (and Hindu) identity here is clearly emphasized through the marriage customs in the majority of Valmiki Sabhas in the United Kingdom.

Both the Ravidasi and Valmiki Sabhas play a very important role in the lives of their diaspora communities. Hence, the centres are referred to as Sabhas since they bring the community members together. It is also at the Sabhas that the younger generation of Valmikis and Ravidasis are made aware of their identity. Interestingly, with regard to identity amongst the youngsters, here again it depends on the background of parents and grandparents. When I spoke to some of the youngsters from both communities – there were some marked differences in what their actual perception of their identity is.

Some youngsters had *keshdharis* in their family, particularly grandparents. For these youngsters their identity was a “type of Sikh that believes in Guru Ravidas/Guru Valmiki”. Some young people remarked that they were neither Hindus nor Sikhs but Valmikis or Ravidasis. The same applied to older informants. Therefore, although the emphasis on distinction is, indeed, promoted through lectures and talks at the Sabhas, the degree to which this is totally adhered to by each and every community member is debatable.

**The case of the Coventry Valmiki Sabha**

In terms of identity, the Valmiki Sabha in Coventry raises some very interesting connotations. It is the only Valmiki place of worship in Britain to house both a copy
of the Guru Granth Sahibji and Valmiki’s Ramayana side-by-side in the main prayer hall. This has caused unrest from the part of the Central Valmiki Sabha in Southall which insists that this practice should not be taking place within a Valmiki place of worship. It is also one of the Sabhas that proudly exhibits artwork relating to the Rangretia connection to Sikh history. The severed head of Guru Tegh Bahadur was carried by a member of the *chuhra zat*, Bhai Jaita (also known as Bhai Rangreta) and taken to the young Gobind Das. It was as a witness to Rangreta’s courage in taking the head from the Mughal invaders that the child Gobind, who also became the tenth Sikh Guru, spoke the famous words: ‘*Rangreti Guru ki beti*’. This event marks a substantial expansion of the Panth by members of the lower *zats*, especially the *chuhras*. However, a degree of hypocrisy overshadows the apparent egalitarian nature of the Panth. The distinctiveness of the lower *zats* within the Panth was salient by the use of the term *mazhabi* Sikhs for the lower castes. Therefore, how does one define the Coventry community? Are they Sikhs, Hindus or neither? Interestingly, many *kesdhari* Valmikis are present at the Centre also.

The Coventry temple was the first to be established in 1978 as a Valmiki centre in Britain. However, the first community of Valmikis was established in 1960, in the Bedford house of the late Bhagat Singh. This is also where the first Valmiki programme was held. Bhagat Singh had migrated to Britain from Singapore: there, too, he had been involved in the organization of the Valmiki community of Singapore. A few others worked closely with Bhagat Singh to organize the Valmiki communities in Britain. One of these men was Mr Niku Kalyan, who had migrated from Kenya. I was told that he had already built a Valmiki temple in Kenya before coming to Britain. Others included Mohan Lal Garewal, and Mahendar Lal Kalyan (President of the Bedford temple). Literature for the community at that time was being written by Pandit Bakshi Ram. Having their own places of worship is seen as a milestone by the Valmikis, and Ravidasis; bearing in mind that the lower castes were refused entry to the Hindu temples during Indian history.

During my visits to the Coventry Valmiki Temple, a substantial number of worshippers were adamant to state that there was no difference between them and Sikhs of the Panth. Some of the worshippers actually became quite upset at my questioning over whether they considered themselves as being outside of the Panth, as Valmikis. Interestingly, other worshippers at the centre proudly declared that they were apart from both Hindus and Sikhs and were Valmikis. A small number of worshippers said they were a type of Hindu as followers of the Great Hindu Sage Valmiki. So what does one make of the overall identity of the Coventry Valmiki community? And is it really appropriate to define the boundaries of identity into which the *kesdhari* Valmikis (and, indeed, *kesdhari* Ravidasis) can be neatly placed?

On the one hand, the very housing of the Guru Granth Sahibji would indicate that the Coventry Valmiki Sabha is a Sikh place of worship. However, in its contradiction of the Sikh Rehat Maryada, the Sabha also houses the Valmiki Ramayana within the same *palki*. There is a higher number than elsewhere of *kesdharis* amongst the Coventry Valmiki community. In my opinion, it is not possible or feasible to provide clear-cut boundaries in which to define all Valmiki followers. They are followers of Guru Valmiki who also follow the principles of Sikhism such as belief in the One Waheguru and the display of the forms of the Khalsa. In the same way that there are very often issues over defining a non-Khalsa Sikh as a ‘Sikh’, in the same way a substantial number of Valmikis would be excluded from a rigid definition if one were to be provided for the community as a
whole. The mazhabi Sikh connection at Coventry is further promoted by the proud representation of the Rangretia connection to Sikh history. A number of homes I visited of members of the Coventry community also had pictures of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh in their homes. Additionally, there were also scenes from the Ramayana illustrated in artwork in the same homes.

The celebration of Guru Nanak’s birthday by the Coventry Valmiki Sabha is again an indication of the percentage of mazhabi Sikhs in the community. Is it possible to be both a mazhabi Sikh and a follower of Guru Valmiki? In this case, I would say that individuals concerned have no issue over this. Paradoxically, an informant from the Southall community had remarked that the Sikh Gurus have no real significance for the Valmikis. They are regarded as saints and reformers only. What is clear is that the links with Sikhism, when taking the Valmiki community as a whole, have not been completely severed. The continued connection with Sikhism at the Coventry Valmiki Sabha is best illustrated through the words of its community members:

The congregation in Coventry also included a high percentage from Sikhs who chose to stay within Valmiki community and therefore it was decided to allow worship of Guru Granth Sahib along with the Holy Ramayan and Yog Vasisth. Last twenty years in Maharishi Valmiki Temple [Coventry] have seen a perfect harmony between Sikhs and other Valmiki members which cannot be found amongst other Hindus and Sikhs in UK. . . this temple caters for the needs of Sikhs along with Valmikis whereas other temples are only and purely for Valmiki community.  

Conclusions

Was the distinction in identity and separate places of worship inevitable among the Ravidasis and Valmikis in following trends amongst other Sikh caste groups? Although the other zats do, indeed, very often have their own caste based Gurdwaras in Britain, they still nevertheless claim to belong to the Panth. Therefore, it could be harsh discrimination from higher caste Sikhs that caused the mazhabi Sikhs to distance themselves from the Panth. Paradoxically, however, many Valmikis and Ravidasis whom I have spoken to are rather hesitant about the emphasis on moving away from a Sikh affiliation. They are well aware nevertheless about the reference to their places of worship as the chamar and chuhra Gurdwaras. This follows on from the fact that many Gurdwaras in Britain are caste based and referred to as the Jat, Bhatra and Ramgharia Gurdwaras.

From within the Valmiki and Ravidasi communities themselves the general consensus has been that bitter treatment by the higher zat Sikhs has led to the former mazhabi Sikhs finding equality through their distinction as Valmikis and Ravidasis. Movements such as the Ad Dharm have been politically influential in enabling the lower zats to gain recognition at a time of political unrest in the Punjab. Although the movement gained most momentum among the former chamars, the other Dalit zats soon followed in the aims towards egalitarianism. Increasingly, the younger generation are made to be aware of their distinction from Sikhs, and Hindus. However, the issue of identity is not so clear-cut. There are still individuals of the Valmiki and Ravidasi community who will refer to themselves as Valmiki Sikhs and Ravidasi Sikhs. This may be due to there being mazhabi Sikhs within the extended or immediate family. The perception of identity among the younger generation especially is interesting. In their study of the Valmiki and Ravidasi communities in
Britain, Jackson and Nesbitt highlighted a young child’s view of her religious orientation:

I know what culture I am, Hindu, but it’s not as if we’re restricted to Hindu because we believe in Sikhism as well. It’s just one thing really.28

This echoes similar views amongst slightly older Ravidasi youngsters. A teenager from the Southall community told me that:

The whole religion of Sikhism is divided by caste, therefore you would only visit the Gurdwara which your caste visits. The caste system also has limitations over whom I can and cannot marry.

The very use of the word ‘Gurdwara’ to describe the place of worship where this young Ravidasi lady visits is interesting. She went on to tell me that her Sabha in Southall is very often referred to as the chamar Gurdwara by others. She herself explicitly told me that she belonged to the chamar zat. On this point, a significant number of older Ravidasi and Valmiki community members did not want to be associated with the Panth at all and adamantly declared that as Valmikis and Ravidasis they are completely distinct from both Sikhs and Hindus. Nevertheless, the existence of many Sikh practices amongst them raises issues over their separation from the Panth. And here again, one is faced with the problems of trying to provide clear-cut boundaries in which to place the whole of the Ravidasi and Valmiki communities.

The Coventry Valmiki Sabha has raised its own argument on defining the religious identity of its community members. Although the Sabha does, indeed, house the Guru Granth Sahibji, it still also places emphasis on reading from the Valmiki Ramayana with the exception of sangrand. Then, of course, there are the significant number of keshdhari Valmiki and Ravidasis. Does their adherence to Khalsa ideals superimpose a Khalsa Sikh identity upon them? Can they be both Valmiki/Ravidasi and Sikh at the same time? The views of the Southall Sabha, which acts as a central administrative unit, shed light on the view that they are unhappy with Coventry’s housing of the Guru Granth Sahibji. After all, the aim of the Sabhas is to promote distinction from Sikhs rather than assimilation within the Panth. The Guru Granth Sahibji has no importance in any of the Valmiki Sabhas in the United Kingdom other than in Coventry.

I end this paper with the point that Article 25 of the Indian Constitution suggests that Sikhism is not a separate religion. The constitution states that Sikhism is a part of the Hindu religion. Therefore, it is far too early in their development to suggest that the Valmiki’s and Ravidasis are two distinct faiths?
Notes

1 These terms are regarded as derogatory by the Ravidasis and Valmikis respectively. They are mentioned here merely in terms of their chronological usage.
2 Dalit Solidarity Network UK Report, July 2006. Commissioned by the Barrow Cadbury Trust, p.3.
3 The Laws of Manu especially sanction caste distinctions and treatment of the lower castes of Hinduism.
7 Sri Guru Granth Sahib, translator Gopal Singh, p. 481.
13 Ibid., p. 2437.
21 Ibid., p. 23.
22 Ibid., p. 77.
23 An exception here is the Valmiki Sabha in Coventry, England. The practices of this particular Sabha are highlighted below.
24 This takes the form of a spiritual dialogue between Lord Rama and the Sage Vasistha. The Yoga Vasistha is believed to have been composed by Valmiki.


Information from a panel of speakers at the Coventry Valmiki Temple.