

INDIAN SOCIAL CONCEPTS IN THE LATTER HALF OF THE 16TH CENTURY

The present paper deals with Indian social values and concepts as revealed by a critical study of Hindi poetry of the second half of the 16th century and especially the works of Tulsidasa, Surdasa and Dadu Dayal. Although a detailed comparative study of other forms of literature, particularly in the Persian language, has not been attempted here, this has been taken into consideration in the process of analysing the works of these three poets.

All these writers were religious saints and their theme is essentially devotion (*bhakti*) and godliness. It is accepted that many of the traditional concepts and some of the idealised situations may not necessarily reflect the position as it obtained in the second half of the 16th century. Nevertheless, a cautious and careful examination of poetry, more particularly of the choice of words, does enable us to determine the prevailing attitudes and social concepts. Some of these are briefly referred to in this paper.

The most important social concept that emerges is the necessity of the maintenance of social equilibrium. This means that each element of society has a recognised place which it is necessary to protect and preserve. The need for political power arises out of the importance of ensuring a proper relationship between these different elements. Broadly, tensions in society arise when

Indian Social Concepts in the Latter Half of the 16th Century

one element thereof seeks to deprive the other of its rightful place. Both the state and *dharma* have to subservise this basic purpose.

Tulsidasa considers the confusion of the duties of the various sections or the *varnas* as *varnasankar*. *Varnasankar* is the source of all evil in society; it leads to sorrows, fear, disease and deprivations.¹ Thus, the ideal society is one which is based on *varnasharama* or the four-fold division of society.² Tulsidasa says that during his time, the various categories or *varnas* had ceased to discharge the duties and obligations laid upon them. Tulsi reaffirms the ideal qualities and duties attached to various castes. Thus, according to him, the Brahmans should be the apostles of learning, strictly adhering to the path of *Dharma* and eschewing attachment to worldly pleasures; the duty of a *Kshatriya* was to protect and uphold the state and society from all types of dangers and threats; the duty of a *Vaishya* was to foster trade and commerce; and the duty of a *Sudra* was to serve the other *Varnas*.³

Tulsi contrasts the ideal society based on *varnasharam* to the situation obtaining in *kaliyuga* or the age of decadence which, to some extent, may be equated to the society in which Tulsi himself was living. A typical feature of *kaliyuga* according to him is that the Brahmans lack in learning, stray from an ethical life, become greedy and accumulate riches and live a life based on senses. Thus they foresake the true path and only the sacred thread remains as the outer symbol of a *Brahman*. On the other hand, *Sudras* consider themselves as learned as Brahmans, enter into disputation with them, recite the *mantras* and adopt *Brahmical* practices, such as penance and fasting.⁴

The concept that social equilibrium depended on different sections fulfilling their respective duties and not transgressing upon the duties of another was apparently widely accepted. Abul Fazl divides society into four sections—warriors, artificers and merchants, the learned including the philosophers and scien-

¹ Tulsidasa, *Shri Ramacharit Manasa*. Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 8th ex. V.S. 2027, 7/100; *Kavitavali* 7/850. (The other words of Tulsi are cited from *Tulsi Granthavali*, Vol. II, Kashi V.S. 2004, 3rd ed.)

² *Manasa*. 7/20: "Those who, faithful to their duty, follow the path of the Veda, respect the specific obligations of their caste and the established milestones of life."

³ *Manasa*. 7/98-101, 7/21, 28; 1/154, 1/155/1.

⁴ *Manasa*. 7/98-101.

tists, and husbandmen and labourers. He goes on to say "It is, therefore, obligatory for a king to put each of these in its proper place, and by uniting personal ability with due respect for others, to cause the world to flourish." Other Persian writers have also expressed similar ideas.⁵

While other saints such as Surdasa and Dadu Dayal do affirm fundamental equality of human beings and even condemn untouchability and harsh treatment of the lower order by persons belonging to the higher castes or noble families, they implicitly accept the division of society into classes and castes. Poverty is not considered an important virtue but a source of sorrow and evil to be shunned as far as possible. It is only the saint who is praised for his lack of attachment to worldly goods. Compassion, charity and kindness towards the poor, the helpless and the virtuous including the Brahmans is advocated as an act of virtue.⁷ For example, the merchant, who acquires wealth, is not an object of criticism if he is generous and gives money in charity, and if the merchant is not miserly, his living in an affluent style is considered normal and appropriate. In the same manner, the nobles and the royal officials should not be grasping and oppressive, but they are not expected to live with undue simplicity.⁸

Tension in society arises not only on account of people foresaking their prescribed duties and obligations, but also on account of the fact that the overwhelming sections in society consist of people whose nature is *evil*.⁹ The innate evilness of these sections needs to be controlled both by political authority and by saints and leaders.¹⁰ The duties of political authority and saints thus are not contradictory but harmonious.

⁵ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, tr. Blochmann, p. 4. See also Ziauddin Barni, *Fatawa-i-Jahandari*, tr. M. Habib as 'Political Theory of the Delhi Sultanat,' Allahabad.

⁶ *Shri Daduvani*, ed. Swami Narayandas, 2nd ed., V.S. 2026, No. 10/85, 86.

⁷ Dadu, 15/84; *Manasa*. 7/12/4; *Sur Sagar*, ed N.D. Vaypai, Varanasi, 4th ed. V.S. 2021.

⁸ *Manasa*. 7/23/3, 4.

⁹ Tulsi, *Dohavali* 348; Dadu, 27/15; 33/12, 13.

¹⁰ *Manasa*. 2/304/3, 235; *Sur*. 2/17, 1/297. For details regarding Tulsi's ideas about the role of the state, see Savitri Chandra, *Tulsi's Concept of Rulership* (Paper presented to XXXIII Indian History Congress, 1972).

Dadu says that these saints are the captains who navigate the ship of society, guide it to the correct path and bring it ashore. (15/51). See also 15/96, 118-121.

Indian Social Concepts in the Latter Half of the 16th Century

In the ethnical classification of good and evil, evil is supposed to predominate. While the evil may belong to all groups and classes, the understanding seems to be that they predominate among the poor and the lower sections of society. Tulsi uses the words 'neech' or *kamin* for the evil elements, but these words have been traditionally used to designate the lower sections in society.¹¹ Describing the qualities of such sections, Tulsi says that they are ungrateful by nature and no amount of help or consideration can change their hearts. Such a person becomes arrogant when he amasses a little wealth; his rise to power is harmful to all those around him.¹² Tulsidasa concludes by saying that such persons should be kept firmly under control, and that this can only be done when power is exercised by a high-minded ruler.¹³ Dadu echoes these ideas, though of the three saints whom we have mentioned he is the most critical of the contemporary social and political order.¹⁴

An interesting feature of the writings of these saints is that they present many of the attributes and duties of a king in a manner as if they were the attributes of God-head, and *vice-versa*. Thus, the word *Sahib* or a person in authority; *Swami* or master; *Sultan*, *Badshah* as well as the generic terms of rulers of various categories such as *Rana*, *Rai*, *Rawat*, etc. are also used for God(s).¹⁵ Tulsi's Rama is a *Chakravarti* king as well as a manifestation of *Brahman*.¹⁶ The qualities of compassion and benevolence are attributed to God in relation to his followers who describe themselves as his bond-slaves, or slaves who have been bought. Just as in Mughal times those who were close to the sovereign were described as house-born ones (*khanazad*),

¹¹ *Manasa*. 7/100/3, Sur, 1/120. For further details, see Savitri Chandra, *Social Life in the Age of Akbar as Depicted in the Works of Tulsidasa*. (Paper presented on the occasion of the 400th Anniversary of the Foundation of Fatehpur Sikri, December 1972).

¹² *Manasa*. 4/13/3; *Doha*. 334.

¹³ *Manasa*. 5/58; 6/38/5.

¹⁴ Dadu, 13/24, *pada* 16/280; *Doha*. 513. "In a realm which is badly administered the subjects have to undergo a great deal of hardships. They gradually lose their wealth, and happiness and *their particular vocations in life*. Their life becomes as pitiable as a kite which is knocked about in a storm."

¹⁵ *Manasa*. 2/254/1, 1/50; *Doha*. 123; Sur, 1/40; Dadu, (*pada*) 9/232.

¹⁶ *Manasa*. 1/28/3, 5; 7/28/4/7/20/4, 2/1; *Kavitavali* 6/23; Tulsi, *Hanuman Babuka*, 11, 14, 16, *et al.*; Dadu, 25/72, 12/145, 22/1 (for Chakravarti); Sur, 1/53, 145 (Chakravarti or Sultan among kings).

similarly Tulsi and Dadu describe themselves as house-born slaves to God.¹⁷ Kindness to the poor, and releasing prisoners from prison-houses are also considered to be the attributes of Rama in the form of a ruler.¹⁸ The heavenly court which is described in some detail is patterned on the courts of the contemporary rulers. This forms the religious basis of political and social attitudes.

All the writers emphasize the fundamental unity of god-head and the futility of sectarian strife.¹⁹ However, they adopt different approaches to bring out their concept of the underlying unity of all religions. Thus, Dadu strongly denounces attachment to external forms and ceremonials, e.g. fasting, feasting, pilgrimage, taking dips in the holy rivers, idol-worship, ceremonial worship such as going to temples and mosques, performing *namaz*, etc.²⁰ No distinction is made in this between followers of different faiths, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. Book learning is considered a hindrance for true devotion,²¹ which should be based on the relationship of love between the lover and the beloved.²² He is sharply critical of the pandits or *brahmans* on one side and of the *sheikhs* and the *mullahs* on the other,²³ i.e. those who take their stand on the letter of the scriptures, and lose sight of the truth. He regards both of them as being hypocritical. For a saint or a true man of religion, there should be no sectarian differences.²⁴ Tulsi, who may be considered the most traditional of these writers, says that one should not ask the caste of a saint, nor should a saint ask anyone else his

¹⁷ Tulsi, *Vinaya Patrika* 78, 134, 135/2; Dadu, 25/90: 21/17, 18; *pada* 2/6: "O God, you are my master and I am your slave, Your slave by choice, your disciple, my poor obedient self. Lord God compassionate, you are the crown of my head I am your servant, most High Priest, the son of the house."

¹⁸ *Vinaya*. 146; Sur. 1/113, 1/1081; Dadu, 34/13: "Dadu is a captive, you the agent who frees the captive, Now the compassionate Lord no longer holds me prisoner."

¹⁹ Dadu, (*pada*) 9/232; *Manasa*. 1/55/2; Sur, 1/5.

²⁰ Dadu, 13/42-45. Dadu warns Hindus against going to Dwarka, Kashi & Mathura and the Muslims against going to Mecca & Medina. All the Holy places, he says, are within oneself (*pada* 9/309).

²¹ Dadu, 13/130.

²² Dadu, 3/46-50.

²³ Dadu, 14/33, 34.

²⁴ Dadu, 16/27.

Indian Social Concepts in the Latter Half of the 16th Century

caste. For him a Rajput and a person belonging to a weaver caste are the same.²⁵ What matters is their spiritual attainments. Echoing the same strain, Surdasa says that amongst the devotees of Rama there is no distinction of caste, sect, family or name: beggars and rulers are alike when they worship Rama.²⁶ Both Tulsidasa and Surdasa quote instances from the lives of Rama and Krishna, as well as from a mythology, to show that God loves his devotees irrespective of caste or status. In fact, they consider a devotee to be intrinsically superior to everyone else in society. Thus Tulsi says that a *chandal* or a person belonging to the lowest range in the caste hierarchy is superior to a man of a high status (*kul*) if the former is a devotee of Rama and the latter is not. Similarly, a *sadhu*, even if he belongs to a low caste, is superior to a person of high status (*kulni*) since the former recites the name of God every day.²⁷

The concept that everybody, irrespective of caste or status, can attain God, or escape from the bondage of birth and rebirth, and that all true believers are equal, must be regarded as one way of escape from the iniquities of the caste system, even though it was realised that it could be availed of by limited sections of society. As such, its social significance in the medieval Indian context can hardly be under-estimated.

In an effort to broaden his appeal, and to establish harmony among all sections of people, Dadu goes the furthest. He says that he wanted to be considered neither a Hindu nor a Muslim. He is not concerned with the revealed scriptures of the two, such as the Vedas and the Quran. Nor is he willing to identify himself with any of the established schools of philosophy such as the Six Schools (*shat-darshan*²⁸). In a bold bid to rise above

²⁵ *Kavita*, 7/106:

"Lowly or intelligent, Rajput or weaver, they are all equal in the eyes of God."

²⁶ *Kavita*, 7/107; *Vinaya*, 255/2; *Sur*, 1/11, 12, 15, 19, 21:

"Rama loves the devout who utter his name
Nothing else matters to him, neither caste, nor condition,
Nor family, nor name, nor the fact of being king or pauper."

²⁷ Tulsi, *Vairagya Sandipani*, 38, 41:

"Tulsi says: a devout person, even if an untouchable, is worth more than another because night and day he recites the name of Rama."
Sur, 1/34, 35, 233:

"I prefer an untouchable who adores the feet of God
to one twice-born (Brahman) who is ignorant of the name of Gopala."

²⁸ Dadu, 16/36, 37:

"Dadu says: I am neither Hindu nor Muslim,
I am not attached to any philosophical school but only to God (Rahman)."

the disputations of the various religions and sects of his times, Dadu puts forward the concept of '*nipakh*'.²⁹ According to Dadu, *nipakh* implies foresaking the narrow limitations of sectarian beliefs and concentrating on the One Reality which he calls differently as Rama, Rahman, 'Sai,' Sahib, Brahma, etc. He complains that the followers of the various faiths (*pakh*) had cut up the one Brahma into pieces, and having given up to the belief in the whole, are sticking to their mistaken notions (*bharam*).³⁰ The Hindus consider their religion to be superior and the Turks (Muslims) theirs so that it is difficult for a wise man (*sadhu*) to decide which of them to prefer. That is why he advocates the path of *nipakh* or rising above '*pakh*'—i.e. sectarian beliefs. A person who believed in '*nipakh*' did not need to go to a temple or a mosque, but found the Reality within himself.³¹

Dadu admits that the path of '*nipakh*' advocated by him was a difficult one, since every one was attached to one '*pakh*' (established faith or sect) or another.³² He was also conscious of the tension between sections of the Hindus and the Muslims. In fact he compared them to two maddened elephants fighting each other.³³ He says ever since he adopted the path of '*nipakh*' everybody had become hostile. The religious readers of the two main faiths were pursuing him like two "black faced dogs of the kali-age." However, Dadu says that due to the grace of the *Sat-Guru* (God), he was neither pleased nor saddened by this.³⁴ One who abandoned the narrowness of the faiths (*pakh*) and

²⁹ Dadu, 14/33:

"Dadu says: without Rama the yogi, lingayat, sevda, Buddhists, ascetics, Muslim priests, The adherents of the six philosophical schools, All represent only the mask of deceit."

³⁰ Dadu, 15/50, 16/10:

"In cutting Brahma up into bits the sects have divided Him."

"Dadu says: abandon limited thought in favor of the unlimited and become non-sectarian (*nipakh*)."

³¹ Dadu, 13/48; 16/53, 54, 55; 16/44.

³² For example, Man Singh is reported to have told Akbar, "I am a Hindu. And if I am to become a Muslim, your Majesty ought to say so—but besides Hinduism and Islam, I know of no other religion. (*Badauni, Mumtakhah-ul-Lubab*, ii/363.)

³³ Dadu, 16/45, 47.

³⁴ Dadu, 16/56, 16/49:

"Dadu says: since I am non-sectarian, the people are all in anger against me."

Indian Social Concepts in the Latter Half of the 16th Century

concentrated on the Name, would always stand face to face, that is in proximity to God. On the other hand, a person who having adopted the path of 'nipakh' again identifies himself with a particular faith, would go to hell.³⁵

Tulsi and Surdasa while adopting a broad approach in their doctrine of devotion or love, do not however consider it necessary to forsake belief in the religion in which they were brought up. Even Tulsidasa has no anti-Muslim bias. He says that the saint had no caste nor should be bound by any religious rules of conduct. He could beg from anyone (irrespective of his caste or religion), or sleep anywhere, even in a mosque.³⁶ Tulsi does not, however, consider the Vedas as contradicting the path of true devotion, or of standing in the path of communal harmony, Surdasa, too, does not reject the scriptures, but his love transcends all.³⁷

The broad tolerance and humanism of these writers finds a striking parallel in many Persian works of the period. It undoubtedly forms a background to Abul Fazl's concept of sovereignty according to which a true ruler does not allow sectarian differences "to raise the dust of strife," and considers all his subjects equally dear to him, irrespective of their religious beliefs.³⁸

Both Tulsi and Dadu are sharply critical of those religious personalities who are hypocritical or use their religious positions for worldly ends, and who emphasise the externalia of religion but neglect its spirit.³⁹ Dadu vehemently condemns various religious swamis (religious heads or mahants) who lead a luxurious life by exploiting the superstitions of their followers. In condemning the fake religious personalities, he pointedly attacks both Hindu and Muslim religious elements of this type. Among these he criticises Yogis, Jangam, Buddhists, and Sanyasis on the one hand, and 'Sheikh,' 'Mushaikh,' 'Auliyas,' 'Paigambar,' and 'Pirs' on the other. Tulsi too condemns various Yogis, Sidhs, etc., who mark their true-self (wicked self) in the garb of sadhus and yogis, and enjoy a most materialistic living.⁴⁰ Here it may

³⁵ Dadu, 16/48, 49, 51.

³⁶ *Kavita*. 7/106.

³⁷ Sur, 2/38, 1/187, 10/1000.

³⁸ Abul Fazl '*Ain-i-Akbari*' (tr. Blockmann) p. 4-7.

³⁹ Dadu 14/27, 28; *Doha*. 550, 548; *Kavita*. 7/177.

⁴⁰ Dadu, 14/32-34.

be pointed out that in spite of some dissimilarity in outlook, Tulsi and Dadu do not have different attitudes towards those who may be considered truly saintly. All of these saints attack those sects whose exponents exploit the superstitious poor.⁴¹ This incidentally brings to the fore the dilemma of those who, on one hand, reject the externalia and on the other hand condemn those who stick to externalia of the faith while ignoring the basic values.⁴² The only objective standard of conduct could be measured in terms of traditional values and yet it was too apparent that there were many who conformed to such norms but went against the true spirit. On the other hand, those who rejected the formal aspects of faith also traded on the superstitions of the common people and were thus condemned as charlatans.⁴³ However, the attitude towards the Jains falls in a different category. They are condemned not only because they reject the concepts of God and scriptures, but also they do not accept the caste and the *varnashram-dharma* which was the basis of the ethical values of society.⁴⁴

It is considered virtuous, even necessary, for a saint not to be involved in a family life. But it is obvious that celibacy could not be advocated for the common people.⁴⁵ Therefore, people are told that the virtuous life is not inconsistent with a family life. The Indian tradition of the combination of *yoga* and *bhoga*, or of detachment and indulgence is also reiterated.⁴⁶ At the same time, woman is considered to be the embodiment of Maya or worldly attachment. She is considered deceitful and the cause of lust.⁴⁷ A virtuous man therefore should be cautious of falling a prey to the cunning of woman, because a woman would leave no stone unturned to entice a man.⁴⁸ She should, therefore, be kept under strict control and in a position of dependence.⁴⁹ A rich and powerful man, of course, could take

⁴¹ Dadu, 14/4, 16-19; *Kavita*. 7/119, 121.

⁴² Dadu, 14/22-24.

⁴³ Dadu, 14/25, 26.

⁴⁴ *Manasa*. 7/100/1.

⁴⁵ Dadu, 15/78-81.

⁴⁶ *Manasa*. 1/17/1; *Dadu*. 19/37, 38, 39. The sense of detachment towards worldly goods is termed '*Avanchit*.'

⁴⁷ Dadu, 12/5, 13, 25, 30, 156, 157; *Manasa*. 3/43; 1/202/2; 4/16/2.

⁴⁸ Dadu, 12/120, 155, 158, 161, 163, 165; *Manasa*. 7/99/1, 3/17/3, 5/59/3.

⁴⁹ *Manasa*. 4/15/4, 3/37/5; 4/15/4; Dadu, 12/96-98.

Indian Social Concepts in the Latter Half of the 16th Century

many wives or mistresses, even transgressing the bounds of caste. But he should not run after other people's wives.⁵⁰ A woman who was true to her husband, even to the extent of becoming a Sati, is lauded.⁵¹ But it is regretted that such women were only too few. Sex is, therefore, distrusted. At the same time, love is considered a fit simile to explain the devotion of man to Divinity.⁵²

It appears from a study that Tulsi and Dadu in particular reflect basically the cultural values of the city-dwellers. It is possible that this urban culture had acquired such a dominant position that even saints like Tulsi and to a lesser extent Dadu reflect this urban thinking and look upon the villager as uncouth and ignorant.⁵³

The frequent use by Dadu of Persian, Panjabi, Sindhi, Gujarati languages even though basically he was a writer of Brij and Dingal might well indicate that he was addressing himself to the traders from different parts of Northwestern India and possibly shared some of their outlook.⁵⁴

However, this does not mean that these writers have no familiarity with village life. Surdas, who seems to have lived in a village, dwells lovingly on various facets of village life—the fairs and festivals, house-hold chores such as butter-making, village attitudes and values.⁵⁵ He also shows considerable familiarity with the processes of and knowledge of the technical terms used in assessment and collection of land revenue. His sympathies are with the simple villager, for he considers the various officials—*wazir*, *mustaufi*, *moharrir*, *thakur*, *patwari*, *amin*, *kotwal* etc.,⁵⁶ as harsh and grasping. He is thus a poet of rural

⁵⁰ *Manasa*. 1/182, 5/38/3; 6/30/3.

⁵¹ *Manasa*. 3/5/5, 5/12/2; Dadu, 24/57.

⁵² Tulsi mistrusts women. He does not consider even a sister, mother, beloved or wife as being loyal to a man. Dadu on the other hand considers that a mother or sister would be trustworthy, but not other women. Surdasa is the only saint who does not seem to despise women. In fact he goes as far as to describe approvingly the natural attraction of men towards women. Lord Krishna is not only engaged in love-making with his beloved Radha but flirts with innumerable village belles. Sur, 10/683-691; 10/1399-1460; Dadu, 12/119, 121.

⁵³ *Kavita*. 7/30, 39; *Doha*. 328; Dadu, 5/1/12/42, 25/58; Sur, 1/325, 957.

⁵⁴ Dadu, 4/219-224. (in Persian); *pada*. 1/26 (Punjabi); 1/20, 2/123 (Gujarati).

⁵⁵ For instance Holi, Diwali, Basant, etc. Sur, 10/2851, 2852, 2893, 2894.

⁵⁶ Sur, 1/64; 1/143.

life. Tulsi also shows some familiarity with village life. He uses many similes from village life, bringing into relief the misery of the peasant on the failure of rains or on account of floods, or other natural calamities. His familiarity with village life is also apparent from his use of the word *pabi*⁵⁷ to designate non-resident cultivators who occupied a lowly position in village life. He also mentions a large number of crops including oil-seeds, sugar-cane and shali rice — the best quality rice which was generally consumed by the upper classes in cities.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Tulsi's entire emphasis is on city-life and on urban values.

It will be apparent from the above that a careful analysis of the literary works of the period will be helpful in understanding the social concepts, value system, patterns of behaviour, etc., during the medieval period in India. The present paper is a contribution towards this goal.

⁵⁷ *Doba*. 478.

⁵⁸ *Doba*. 25, 101, 198, 205, 342, 402; *Vairagya*. 39; *Kavita*. 7/73, 99, *et. al.* See Savitri Chandra, "*Social Life*," *loc. cit.*