

## CASTE SYSTEM AND *NIRGUN* BHAKTI IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

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This paper is an attempt to study the caste system and its connection with *nirgun* bhakti in medieval India. It shows that *varnasramadharma* and caste system existed in pre-colonial India. The study of *nirgun* ideology helps to understand the aspects of *varna* and caste system. In doing so this paper investigates the legends and poetries of selected *nirgun* saints such as Kabir, Raidas and Dadu Dayal. These saints were existing during the fifteenth and sixteenth century in different parts of north India. The persons who follow *nirgun* (“without attributes”) *bhakti* are fewer in number and generally prefer to worship a divine being who remains mostly unmanifest and non-anthropomorphic.<sup>1</sup> It is to keep in mind that the *nirgun* saints belonged to the lower caste like Dadu Dayal (a *dhunia*), Raidas (a *Chamar*) and Kabir (*Julaha*). Thus, this paper seeks to understand the perspective of selected *nirgun* saints on the caste system in medieval India.

### Legends and Caste system in Medieval Indian History

In pre-colonial India *varna* and caste system has been a historical phenomenon which existed through the ages. Historians have examined the different aspects of it in the society. The work of Suvira Jaiswal is significant to understand the origin of caste in ancient India. She argue that the evolution of the caste system cannot be delinked from the emergence of patriarchy, class divisions, and state; and as this did not happen at the same time all over the subcontinent, one cannot speak of its simultaneous appearance in different regions of the country.<sup>2</sup> The argument which locates its essence in endogamy overlooks the fact that occupational specialization and hierarchical gradation along with the suppression of women as a class have played a no less crucial role in the formation of caste society and in regulating its inter-communal relationships.<sup>3</sup> It shows that caste continued to emerge in ancient India, and it continued to develop in medieval times.

On the other hand, Nicholas B. Dirks argues that colonialism seems to have created much to what is now accepted as Indian “tradition”, including an autonomous caste structure with the Brahman clearly and unambiguously at the head, village-based system of exchange, isolated ceremonial residues of the old regime state, and fetishistic competition for ritual goods that no longer played a vital role in the political system.<sup>4</sup> Further Dirks argues that:

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<sup>1</sup> David N. Lorenzen, *Introduction: The Historical Vicissitudes of Bhakti Religion, in their ed., Bhakti Movement in India: Community, Identity and Political Action*, State University of New York Press, 1995, P. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Suvira Jaiswal, *Caste: Origin, Function and Dimension of Social*, Manohar, 2000, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Invention of Caste: Civil Society in Colonial India*, *The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, No. 25, September 1989, p. 45.

In precolonial India, the units of social identity had been multiple, and their respective relations and trajectories were part of a complex, conjunctural, constantly changing, political world. The referents of social identity were not only heterogeneous; they were also determined by context. Temple communities, territorial groups, lineage segments, family units, royal retinues, warrior subcastes, “little” kingdoms, occupational reference groups, agricultural or trading associations, devotionally conceived networks and sectarian communities, even priestly cabals, were just some of the significant units of identification, all of them at various times far more significant than any uniform metonymy of endogamous “caste” groupings. Caste, or rather some of the things that seem most easily to come under the name of caste, was just one category among many others, one way of organizing and representing identity. Moreover, caste was not a single category or even a single logic of categorization, even for Brahmans, who were the primary beneficiaries of the caste idea. Regional, village, or residential communities, kinship groups, factional parties, chiefly contingents, political affiliations, and so on could both supersede caste as a rubric for identity and reconstitute the ways caste was organized. Within localities, or kingdoms, groups could rise or fall (and in the process become more or less castelike), depending on the fortunes of particular kings, chiefs, warriors, or headmen, even as kings could routinely readjust the social order by royal decree.<sup>5</sup>

The argument of Nicholas Dirks shows that caste was invented in colonial India.

The study of Suvira Jaiswal and Nicholas Dirks indicates towards the lack of historical works in medieval India. This discussion shows that caste was existing in ancient India, and then in colonial India. Here comes the question caste system in medieval India. How to understand the caste system in medieval India? Here the legends of the *nirgun* bhakti saints can be useful to gives better understanding of caste system in medieval India society.

There are legends related to saint Kabir, and these legends can be useful to understand the notion and practice of caste system in medieval India. It also proves that caste is not colonial construction but it also existed in pre-colonial India. In a legend Priya-das mentioned about “two Brahman brothers Tatva and Jiva who dedicated themselves to serving the sadhus. Nonetheless, they were unable to find a guru they could accept. They placed a dry stick in the ground outside their door and watered this stick with the water they used to wash the feet of each sadhu who visited them. They vowed to accept as their guru the sadhu whose “foot nectar” would make the stick sprout green leaves. One day Kabir arrived at their door. When Tatva and Jiva watered the stick with the water used to wash Kabir’s feet, it immediately sprouted green leaves. The brothers asked Kabir to initiate them with the Name. Afterwards, Kabir told them to visit him in Kashi whenever they need help. Tatva and Jiva’s caste fellows were outraged that the brothers had taken

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas B. Dirks, *Caste of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 13.

a low-caste person as their guru. No one would eat in the same “line” with the two brothers or allow their children to marry the two brother children. Tatva and Jiva then went to Kashi and asked Kabir what they should do. Kabir advised them to inter-marry their own children. They accepted Kabir’s advice and returned home to begin the preparations for the wedding. When their caste fellows learned what Tatva and Jiva planned to do, they were even more outraged. In the end, their caste fellows capitulated and agreed to provide Tatva’s and Jiva’s children with marriage partners. Tatva and Jiva returned to Kabir to get his permission for this change of plan. Kabir told them to accept the offer, but to impose the condition that their caste fellows accept the religious path of bhakti. After debating the issue, the caste fellow agreed.”<sup>6</sup> This legend point out that caste was the important marker of identity in the society. The *nirgun* saints belonged to the low caste therefore their social status was considered low. As it shows in the legend that Brahman brothers Tatva and Jiva accepted saint Kabir their guru, but it was opposed and boycotted by the caste fellows of both brothers. This point proves caste ideology was practiced by the people. This reference also shows that caste was not followed rigidly but it was mobile and flexible in nature. Brahman brother Tatva and Jiva accepted low caste saint their guru, could be useful to understand flexible nature of it. It is also shown in the end that caste fellows of Tatva and Jiva accepted the *nirgun* path of devotion.

“In another instance Paramanada-das’s *Kabir Manshur* claims that one day Kabir and some other disciples of Ramananda arrived at Totadari leading a buffalo that carried their blankets and cooking materials. Totadari is a famous sacred bathing place on the way to Rameshvar in the extreme South of India. This place is said to have been the chief seat of Ramanuja and his follower. At Totadari, Ramanuja’s spiritual descendants were all Brahmans and were very careful to observe the rules of caste purity in bathing, cooking and eating. If even the shadow of an Untouchable fell on their cooking places, they would not eat. They accepted that Kabir should eat with them but wanted him to sit in a separate line (*pangat*). Since to insist on this would be impolite, they devised a pretext to exclude him: whoever can recite the verses of the Veda should sit and eat in our line; whoever cannot recite the Veda, should sit apart. Since the low-caste persons have no right to recite the Veda, this should have solved their problem. All the Brahmans recited a few verses from the Veda. Finally, it came Kabir’s turn. He put a hand on the head of the buffalo and said: “Listen, buffalo! Why are you standing there not saying anything? Hurry up and recite well some of the Veda. The buffalo began to recite. Everyone was astonished and begged Kabir to forgive them.”<sup>7</sup> This reference is also significant to understand the caste ideology. It simply shows that Brahman followed caste rules which were based on bathing, cooking and eating. They maintained distance from the untouchable and low caste people. The untouchables and low castes were prohibited to recite the verses of Veda that is an important marker of inequality. This reference provides the nuances of resistance to the popular norms of caste. Like, Kabir was not allowed to chant the verses

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<sup>6</sup> David N. Lorenzen, *Kabir Legend and Ananta-das’s Kabir Parachai*, Sri Satguru Publication, Delhi, 1992, pp. 57-58.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 65-66.

of Veda but his power made buffalo able to speak the verses of Veda. In the end Brahmans were astonished and begged Kabir to forgive them.

There are hagiographical details of Raidas that can be useful to understand the prevalence of caste in medieval India. In the *Pothiprembodh* text an instance is described which explained about the test of *salagrams* between saint Raidas and Brahmans. As he mentioned that “once the Brahmans of Banaras went to the king to complain that Raidas was worshipping a *salagram*, but that as an untouchable he had no right to worship in this way. Raidas was summoned to the court to explain his actions whereupon he told the king that it was the right of all alike to worship God. In order to decide the case Raidas suggested that whoever’s *salagram* could float on the Ganges would have the right to worship God in that form. When the Brahman threw their *salagram* into the Ganges it sank, but when Raidas threw his into the water it floated around like a duck on water. This shamed the Brahmans and Raidas was allowed to worship his *salagram*.”<sup>8</sup> The Brahmans complained of Raidas to the king show that the untouchables were living the margins in the society. They did not have right to perform worship to the god, and lower caste entry to the temple was also prohibited. This narrative indicates towards the oppression of lower caste.

These details show that caste existed prior to the eighteenth century which was the one of the important ways to understand the differentiation in the society. Most of these narratives are related to the low caste saints which point out the caste-based discrimination. The low caste *nirgun* saints were facing discrimination such as Brahman refused to sit with the *nirgun* saints in the same line. To maintain their caste purity, Brahmans were carefully observing the rules of caste based on bathing, cooking and eating. If the shadow of an Untouchable fell either on them or their cooking places, they would not eat. In the narrative of Kabir, it is shown that lower castes were prohibited to chant the verses of Vedas that indicate towards a kind of discrimination happened with lower castes. And, the idea of maintaining caste purity was an important way to understand the caste-based discrimination.

### **Caste and *Nirgun* Poetry**

The poetry of *nirgun* saints is useful to understand the nuances of caste system in medieval India. This section focuses on the poetry of *nirgun* saint which are very insightful for the understanding of caste ideology and its philosophy. The presence of such poetries proves that caste was the historical phenomenon which also existed in medieval India. One can know about the basic functionality of caste through these poetries. The prevalence of untouchability can also be examined by these poetries which bring the notion of caste purity and impurity. However, the caste and untouchability are two side of same coin. It means that one cannot discuss caste by ignoring untouchability.

In his first poem Kabir tells that

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<sup>8</sup> Winand M. Callewaert and Peter G. Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas, Mahohar, 1990, p. 29.*

Brahma was given the universe  
seven islands, nine-part earth.  
Vishnu, firmly fixed in the truth,  
was put in charge of three worlds.  
The Shankar with his lingam  
nailed earth to the seventh hell.  
Next came the eight-limbed lady,  
brining three worlds under the spell.  
Her second name was Parvati,  
she got Shiva by austerity.  
There is just one man, just one woman.  
From them the four life-forms,  
Four castes,  
three qualities,  
earth and sky.  
From the egg of Om  
the whole cosmos spread.  
Kabir says, we're all women to Ram,  
the husband, the steady man.<sup>9</sup>

In this poem Kabir explained different aspects of Hindu mythology in which he also points out that caste plays crucial role. In the context of Hindu mythology Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are important god but four caste system also provide basic structure to the Hindu system. But the worship of Ram is absolute truth, and he is above all god.

Further in the second poem Kabir tells that

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<sup>9</sup> Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh, *The Bijak of Kabir*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 83-84

Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge.

Tell me where untouchability  
came from, since you believe in it.

Mix red juice, white juice and air—  
a body bakes in a body.

As soon as the eight lotuses  
are ready, it comes  
into the world. Then what's  
untouchable?

Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels  
decay into dust, while the potter  
keeps slapping clay  
on the wheel, and with a touch  
cuts each one off.

We eat by touching, we wash  
by touching, from a touch  
the world was born.

So, who's untouched? asks Kabir.

Only she

Who's free from delusion.<sup>10</sup>

In this poem Kabir used conventional double meaning of body and clay pot, initiates the metaphor of pot and potter which is worked out in this poem in detail. In north India the potter is considered untouchable, and his clay vessels are considered unclean. The potter made vessels that

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

people use in their life for eating and washing. Ultimately, he was challenging the idea of untouchability.

In third poem Kabir tells that

It's a heavy confusion.  
Veda, Koran, holiness, hell, woman and man,  
a clay pot shot with air and sperm...  
When the pot falls apart, what do you call it?  
Numskull! You've missed the point.  
It's all one skin and bone, one piss and shit,  
one blood and one meat.  
From one drop, a universe.  
Who's Brahmin? Who's Shudra?  
Brahma *rajas*, Shiva *tamas*, Vishnu *sattva*...  
Kabir says, plunge into Ram!  
There: No Hindu. No Turk.<sup>11</sup>

In this poem Kabir explained his idea of monotheism, and counter the multiple values and paradigms of Hindu and Muslim religion. Kabir shows that there is huge confusion of holiness or hell, men or women, Hindu or Turk, and Veda or Koran. But people missed one point that it is all one skin and bone, one blood and one meat. All belonged to one Ram. In doing so he pointed out that Brahman and Shudra identity did not matter in the society.

In fourth poem Kabir tells that

It is needless to ask of a saint the caste  
to which he belongs;  
For the priest, the warrior, the tradesman,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67.

and all the thirty-six castes,  
alike are seeking for God.  
It is but folly to ask what the caste  
of a saint may be;  
The barber has sought God, the  
washer woman, and the carpenter  
Even Raidas was a seeker after God.  
The Rishi Swapacha was a tanner by caste.  
Hindus and Moslems alike have  
achieved that End, where remains  
no mark of distinction.<sup>12</sup>

In this poem Kabir clearly mention that it is useless to ask the caste of saint which actually indicates that caste was an important marker of identity. There were thirty-six castes in the society which had their different occupations such as barber, washer man, carpenter and tanner. The lower caste can also attain God by their worship. One can simply show that caste was existing as a significant identity.

The poems of Kabir are useful to get the insight of caste and *nirgun bhakti*. His poems prove that caste played important role in the Hindu culture, and people were divided on the basis of caste structure. The first poem of Kabir simply points out the existence of four castes in Hindu culture which is actually the indication towards the *Varna* system. As we know that there are four *Varna* (*Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*) in the Hindu religion. In the second poem Kabir is challenging the notion of untouchability, and proclaims that it is delusion that nobody is untouched. In the third poem Kabir shows that people bother for being Hindu and Turk but they forget that their origin is from one Ram. Similarly, Brahman and Shudra caste did not matter because all trace their origin from one God. The fourth poem is significant to understand the medieval society because it points out the caste as important marker of identity. Simultaneously, it mentions that thirty-six were existing in the society in which different castes were involved in their occupation. So far, it is clear that the poems of Kabir provide important insight to understand the caste system in India.

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<sup>12</sup> Rabindranath Tagore trans., *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, Macmillan and Co., Limited, London, 1915, pp. 1-2.



On the other hand, the verses of Dadu Dayal are significant to understand the caste and *nirgun bhakti*. The *nirgun* saint Dadu Dayal asserts that all human beings have the same essence or spirit derived from Brahma; difference based on colour, caste and name are meaningless. Comparing Brahma to a flowing river, he says the water of the river contained in different pots is the same.<sup>13</sup> Further Dadu Dayal said that

The whole world gathered to see him,

But he was interested only in meditation.

Scorning the caste-divisions like dust,

he was immersed in Hari, like a son of God.<sup>14</sup>

Both the verses show that medieval society was divided on the basis of caste lines. For *nirgun* saints, caste did not matter in social life. According to *nirgun* saints all human beings were equal before God.

So far, the discussion shows that caste played important role in the society, and people were known by the name of their caste. These poems and verses are useful to understand the *nirgun* philosophy. One can simply point out a thing that these *nirgun* saints did not believe in the caste system. They discarded the norms and rules of caste system which were based on the discrimination and exploitation of lower castes in the society. Rather they believed in the equality among different castes. The next section will elaborate *nirgun* philosophy in detail.

### **Caste and *Nirgun bhakti***

“The *nirguni poets* composed thousands of songs, couplets, verse dialogues, and verse narratives in which they preach a religious message of *nirgun bhakti*, devotion to a God without attributes, coupled with reverence towards the saints and gurus of the movement and toward the *guru vani*, the words of these saints and gurus. This religious message is combined with a social message that rejects, with greater or lesser directness, the hierarchical ordering of society into inherited caste.”<sup>15</sup> “In North India, a more significant alternative value system is embodied in the religious and social ideology of the *nirguni* movement. The *nirguni* poets sharply contest the dominant social ideology of mainstream Hinduism, the hierarchical ideology of *varnasramadharm*, propose a more egalitarian social model that I have elsewhere described as ‘non-caste Hinduism’.”<sup>16</sup> The *nirguni* saints also suggest that the way of *bhakti* can liberate the low caste. It shows that low castes can uplift their social status through the devotion of formless

<sup>13</sup> Savitri Chandra Shobha, *Medieval India and Hindi Bhakti Poetry: A socio-cultural study*, Har-Anand Publications, 1996, pp. 17-18.

<sup>14</sup> Winand M. Callewaert, *The Hindi Biography of Dadu Dayal*, Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, 1988, p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> David N. Lorenzen, *Praises to a Formless God: Nirguni Texts from North India*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1996, pp. 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

god Ram. *Nirgun* saints criticised Pandits because they were the head of brahmanical authority. One can observe that *nirgun* bhakti stands against the caste system and also to its various elements. The *nirguni* saints attested the resistance and protest to the caste ideology. Further this paper will take up this issue in detail.

The *nirgun* saints contested the idea of *varna* and caste. As Kabir mentioned that

Qazi, what book are you lecturing on?  
 Yak yak yak, day and night.  
 You never had an original thought.  
 Feeling your power, you circumcise—  
 I can't go along with that, brother.  
 If your God favoured circumcision, why didn't you come out cut?  
 If circumcision makes you a Muslim,  
 What do you call your women?  
 Since women are called man's other half,  
 you might as well as Hindus.  
 If putting on the thread makes you Brahmin,  
 what does the wife put on?  
 That Shudra's touching your food, pandit!  
 How can you eat it?  
 Hindu, Muslim—where did they come from?  
 Who started this road?  
 Look hard in your hear, send out scouts:  
 where is heaven?  
 Now you get your way by force,  
 but when it's time for dying,  
 without Ram's refuge, says Kabir,  
 brother, you'll go out crying.<sup>17</sup>

In this poem Kabir challenged the idea of being Muslim and Hindu, and criticised aspects of both the religion. This poem shows that Kabir questioned the Brahman authority, and also to the untouchability. It proves that Kabir contested the idea of *varnasramdharma* and caste system.

Another *nirgun* saint named Raidas also criticised the idea of *varna* and caste. As he mentioned that

refrain for the family in which there is a pure devotee  
 it counts not if he is caste or outcaste,  
 destitute or wealthy  
 he shall be considered of pure lineage.  
 One may be a Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya or Sudra,  
 a woman, Candal or Malech.  
 Through the praise of Bhagavata one becomes pure,

<sup>17</sup> Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pp. 69-70.

saving oneself and both families.  
 That village, that birth-place, that land are holy,  
 all the people are virtuous who are their companions.  
 Of warrior, pandits, kings, emperors and poets,  
 there is no other that equal a devotee.  
 Absorbed in the essential essence, the Bhagats wisdom blossoms  
 They renounce *sansar* which they know to be like dross.  
 Just the water-lily leaves remaining near the water,  
 Say, Aadhar, so are the devotees in the world.<sup>18</sup>

This poem proves that *varnasramadharm*a did not matter for a true devotee. As it is written in the poem that a true devotee through the praise of his god becomes pure, it points out that lower castes can also attain holy wisdom through their bhakti. This point shows that *nirgun* saints rejected the idea of *varna* and caste system.

By opposing *varnasramadharm*a and caste system, *nirgun* saint put forward the notion of egalitarian society through their poems and verses. This notion is significant because it rejected the hierarchical structure of society. They discarded the hierarchical gradation based on *varna* and caste system. In the context of egalitarian society *nirgun* saints believed in the equality of all human being.

A verse is written in the *Dadu Janma Lila* of Jan Gopal which is significant for the notion of equality in the society. As it is mention that

From that moment he become indifferent to the world,  
 Day and night he meditated and reflected.  
 He made no distinction between ants and elephants,  
 gold and iron were equal to him.<sup>19</sup>

This verse represents the idea and activity of Dadu Dayal, and it indirectly depicts the hierarchical division of the society. It points out that Dadu Dayal did not bother the distinction of high and low status. For him all were equal. By using the context of ants and elephants, Dadu is making his point clear.

Kabir also mentions the poems of egalitarian themes

The maker himself became a potter,  
 the potter shaped all kinds of pots.  
 He set them in one place, the creator—  
 carefully he made those pots!  
 He baked them in the belly's fire,  
 guarding them the whole while.  
 Then carefully he brought them out  
 and “Shiva”, “Shakti,” named them all.  
 If the son of the house is stupid,

<sup>18</sup> Winand M. Callewaert and Peter G. Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 165.

<sup>19</sup> Winand M. Callewaert, *the Hindi Biography of Dadu Dayal*, P. 36

clever ones don't follow him.  
 I'm telling you my own truth,  
 Madmen follow others' dream.  
 Hidden and visible—all one milk.  
 Who's the Brahman? Who's the Shudra?  
 Don't get lost in false pride.  
 False is the Hindu, false the Turk.  
 The one who made this picture  
 is the true artist.  
 Kabir calls him a good man  
 who can see this art.<sup>20</sup>

In this poem Kabir wrote that the creator (like potter) made all equal but they classified as Brahman and Shudra in the world. The clever people did not follow such false claim of religion of Hindu and Turk.

Kabir wrote one more poem on egalitarian theme in which he mentions that

Only the one I recognize  
 Those who call him two will go to hell  
 For they know not the reality.  
 All human beings are sustained by the same air and water,  
 and are illumined by the same light.  
 All have been formed out of the same dust,  
 and their Creator in the same.<sup>21</sup>

This poem simply shows that all human beings sustained by the same air, water, light and dust, and their creator is also the same. This poem proves the equality of all human being.

In medieval India bhakti was not the monopoly of upper castes but lower caste people were involved in this practice. However, lower caste people were not allowed to do the bhakti. The *nirguni* saints believe that lower caste people can also improve their social status through bhakti. The *nirguni* saint Raidas called their god as the “uplifter of the fallen” which indicates that the notion of *nirgun* God was based on the idea of reforming social status of lower castes. As it also points out that *nirgun* saints were contesting the norms of *varnasramadharm*a and caste system through this.

Refrain is there no Uplifter of the fallen?  
 Why forsake Hari and meditate on others?  
 I was unhonoured but due to Hari I became honoured.  
 I found the incomparable Name.  
 Recount the grammars of all eighteen sciences,  
 in the three ages master the six philosophies-  
 if there is no loving devotion in your heart,

<sup>20</sup> Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> Savitri Chandra Shobha, *Medieval India and Hindi Bhakti Poetry*, p. 17.

concentration is scattered.  
 The enemy of dogs (Valmiki) was blessed,  
 he had his heart at Hari's feet.  
 He won renown in this world,  
 liberation after death and an abode in heaven.  
 I am an offender, born in lowly home,  
 my kinsfolk laughs at me.  
 Raidas says: let my tongue chant ram,  
 it cuts the snare of death.<sup>22</sup>

This poem shows that low caste can improve their social status by following the path of bhakti like Valmiki. After death Valmiki got salvation and took an abode in heaven. Through bhakti he renowned in the world, and improved their social status.

refrain Madahav! I take refuge in Your company,  
 Life of the world, Krishna, Murari!  
 You are shiny red silk, Four-armed  
 I am a wretched silk-worm.  
 Drinking the nectar from the flower on the branch,  
 through company with elixir I became a bee.  
 You are a sandel-tree,  
 I am a wretched castor-oil plant,  
 that grows near you.  
 As your fragrance pervaded my bad smell,  
 I turned from a low plant into a lofty tree.  
 My caste is low, my birth is low,  
 my trade is low,  
 I am in the refuge of King Ram,  
 says Raidas the wretch.<sup>23</sup>

This poem helps to understand that the lower caste people like Raidas can improve their social status devotion of God in the society.

**Conclusion:** - This paper argues that caste system is an historical phenomenon of Indian history, and caste also existed in medieval India. The presence of *nirgun* saints and their ideology help us to understand the elements of caste system in India. In the starting this paper discusses various legends of *nirgun* saints which reflect prevalence of caste system. Later, this paper focuses on the verses and poems of the *nirgun* saints which are useful to understand the functionality of caste system. This paper also discusses the important aspects of *nirgun* philosophy such as contestation of *varnasramadharm*. In order to that this paper also studies the *nirgun* view of egalitarianism and also the aspect of upward mobility. In general, it shows that caste occupied

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<sup>22</sup> Winand M. Callewaert and Peter G. Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidas*, p. 144-145.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 130.

important place in medieval social structure, and the works of *nirgun* saints played important role to understand it.