

A Comparative and Historical Study of the Concept of Guru Gaddi in the Nirguna Saint Tradition and the Satnam Panth of Chhattisgarh

Dr. Archana Bouddh

*Assistant Professor (History), Chandulal Chandrakar Government Arts and Commerce College,
Dhamdha, Durg*

Abstract—In India's Nirguna (Formless) Saint Tradition, saints such as Kabir, Ravidas, and Nanak established the concept of the “Word as Guru” (Shabd Guru) in place of idol worship. This tradition later evolved in Sikhism through the enthronement of the Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru and in the Kabir Panth and Ravidas Panth through the establishment of spiritual seats (Guru Gaddis) of religious leaders. In the Buddhist tradition, the concept of the Dhamma Seat also recognized the Guru’s seat of knowledge and authority. In the Satnam Panth of Chhattisgarh, Guru Ghasidas established the Guru Gaddi at Bhandarpuri. In opposition to the feudal and caste-based social order that prohibited Dalits from entering temples, this Guru Gaddi became a center for the worship of the formless Satnam. Instead of idols, a white flag is worshipped here, symbolizing the rejection of Brahmanical rituals and ceremonial practices. For the Satnami community, Guru Gaddi worship has served as an instrument of socio-political resistance. Collective decision-making before the Jaitkham, the Satnami Rebellion of 1860, and a parallel system of justice functioning alongside caste panchayats were all associated with this institution. Thus, Guru Gaddi worship is not merely a religious ritual but an autonomous spiritual authority created by marginalized communities. By carrying forward the tradition of spiritual leadership from ancient times, it promotes the democratic values of the saint tradition and serves as a symbol of cultural resistance against feudalism and caste domination.

Index Terms—Guru Gaddi, Saint Tradition, Satnam Panth, Indus Valley Civilization, Sikhism, Buddhism, Kabir Panth, Ravidas Panth.

I. INTRODUCTION

In India’s cultural and spiritual tradition, the Guru has always been accorded the highest respect. In the Indian knowledge tradition, the Guru is not merely a teacher

but a symbol of wisdom, truth, discipline, spiritual guidance, and social consciousness. For this reason, India has often been referred to as the “World Teacher” (Vishwaguru). In ancient times, students from various parts of the world came to India to acquire knowledge and lived in the ashrams, monasteries, and educational institutions of their Gurus. The Guru-disciple tradition has been the very soul of Indian civilization. Within this tradition, the Guru’s seat, throne, or spiritual chair came to be highly revered and eventually evolved into the practice known as “Guru Gaddi Worship.” In the Indian saint tradition, the Guru Gaddi is not merely a seat; it symbolizes knowledge, tradition, spiritual succession, and social leadership. The worship of the Guru and the Guru Gaddi on occasions such as Guru Purnima and Vaishakh Purnima reflects this cultural consciousness. The practice of Guru Gaddi worship holds special significance in traditions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, the Kabir Panth, the Ravidas Panth, and the Satnam Panth.

II. BUDDHIST TRADITION AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GURU’S SEAT

An important source of the tradition of Guru Gaddi worship can be found in the Buddhist Dhamma. For Buddhists, Vaishakha Purnima is an extremely sacred day because it was on this day that Lord Buddha, after attaining enlightenment, delivered his first sermon at Sarnath and set the Wheel of Dhamma (Dhammachakra) in motion. In early Buddhism, idol worship was absent. Instead of the physical image of the Buddha, symbols such as his footprints, seat, stupas, and the Dhammachakra were accorded special reverence. In Buddhist monasteries and viharas, the

seat of the teacher (Acharya) was regarded as a symbol of the spiritual authority and discipline of the Sangha. “Buddhapada” (the footprints of the Buddha) have been especially revered in Buddhism. These footprints are often marked with auspicious symbols such as the Dharmachakra, the Triratna (Three Jewels), and the Swastika. Buddhapada reminds followers that liberation (Nirvana) can be attained by following the same path of Dhamma that the Buddha himself followed. It also symbolizes detachment, compassion, and spiritual emancipation. Beyond India, in countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Japan, the tradition of worshipping the Buddha’s footprints became more developed than the worship of Buddha images. This tradition can also be observed later in the Guru-seat traditions of the Nirguna saints. The installation of sacred footprints beneath the Guru Gaddi may therefore be regarded as a developed form of Buddhist symbolism.

III. THE NIRGUNA BHAKTI MOVEMENT AND GURU GADDI IN THE KABIR PANTH

During medieval India, the Bhakti and Sufi movements popularized the importance of the Guru among the masses. The Nirguna saints placed greater emphasis on the Guru than on God because the Guru is the medium through which the truth and knowledge of God are realized. Saint Kabir said:

“Guru Govind dou khade, kake lagun pay;
Balihari Guru aapne, Govind diyo batay.”

(When both the Guru and God stand before me, whose feet should I touch first? I bow first to the Guru, for it is he who showed me the path to God.) In this couplet, the Guru is placed even above God because the Guru alone reveals the way to attain the Divine. Consequently, the worship of the Guru Gaddi or the Guru’s seat acquired special significance within the Kabir Panth. Kabir further emphasized the dignity and discipline of the Guru-disciple relationship:

“Kabir Guru naam hai ganya ka, shishya seekh le
soy;
Binu pad binu marjada nar, Guru shishya nahin koy.”

According to Kabir, a true Guru is one who imparts the knowledge of truth, and a true disciple is one who

receives and practices that teaching. Thus, the Guru Gaddi becomes not merely an object of worship but a center of discipline, tradition, and the preservation of knowledge.

IV. GURU GADDI WORSHIP IN THE RAVIDAS PANTH

In the tradition of Saint Ravidas, the Guru Gaddi symbolizes devotion, equality, and social consciousness. In the Ravidas Panth, the Guru Gaddi is regarded as the sacred place where the Guru’s teachings, spiritual ideas, and wisdom are enshrined. It serves not only as a center of religious faith but also as a symbol of social awakening and human dignity. Saint Ravidas opposed caste discrimination and economic inequality and advocated equality and respect for all human beings. Therefore, the Guru Gaddis of the Ravidas Panth evolved as centers of social harmony, dignity of labor, and Dalit consciousness. These institutions hosted devotional singing, spiritual gatherings, recitations of sacred teachings, and community events, fostering brotherhood and social unity. Saint Ravidas’s famous verse:

“Aisa chahun raj main, jahan mile saban ko ann;
Chhot-bado sab sam basen, Raidas rahe prasann.”

(I desire such a kingdom where everyone has food to eat, where the small and the great live equally, and where Ravidas remains content.)

This verse presents the vision of an egalitarian society. Here, “kingdom” signifies not merely political power but the ideal of social justice and equality. Thus, in the Ravidas Panth, the Guru Gaddi becomes a symbol of socio-spiritual leadership. Near Jalandhar in Punjab, one of the principal Guru Gaddis of the Ravidassia community serves as an important center for the propagation of Saint Ravidas’s teachings. Numerous Ravidas missions across North India continue to preserve and promote this tradition.

V. THE TRADITION OF GURU GADDI IN SIKHISM

In Sikhism, the Guru Gaddi symbolizes spiritual succession, leadership, and the preservation of the faith. From the First Guru, Guru Nanak, to the Tenth

Guru, this tradition evolved continuously. A distinctive feature of Sikh tradition is that the position of Guru was not hereditary; rather, it was bestowed on the basis of merit and spiritual worthiness. The Sikh Gurus not only imparted religious teachings but also struggled against injustice and oppression. The culmination of this tradition came when the Guru Granth Sahib was accepted as the “Living Guru.” The Guru Granth Sahib includes the hymns and teachings of Saint Kabir, Saint Ravidas, and several Sufi saints, reflecting the inclusive and syncretic character of the Indian saint tradition.

VI. SATNAM PANTH AND GURU GADDI WORSHIP

In Chhattisgarh, the Satnam Panth constitutes an important link in the Indian saint tradition. The term Satnam is believed to be a transformed form of Sachchanam (True Name), which is associated with the tradition of truth and the remembrance of the Divine Name. Some scholars also connect it with the Sachchanam sect of the Buddhist tradition. From this perspective, Guru Gaddi worship in the Satnam Panth is not a new institution but rather a developed form of the Buddhist, Kabir, and Ravidas’s traditions. The founder of the Satnam Panth in Chhattisgarh was Guru Ghasidas. By his time, the teachings of Kabir and Ravidas had already spread widely throughout the region. This is why the devotional Panthi songs of the Satnami community frequently mention Saint Ravidas and Saint Kabir.

It is said that Guru Ghasidas established the Guru Gaddi at Bhandarpuri in 1848. This Gaddi was not merely a religious center but also a focal point of social organization and leadership. Within the Satnami community, positions such as Mahant, Rajmahant, Bhandari, and Guru functioned as instruments of social administration. The traditions of Akhara (martial training grounds) and weapon training were also prevalent. Consequently, the Guru was regarded not only as a spiritual guide but also as a community leader. Thus, in the Satnam Panth, the Guru Gaddi appears comparable in status and function to a royal throne.

VII. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GURU GADDI AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

In Indian tradition, a close relationship between the Guru and political authority can be observed in many contexts. According to some scholars, the Indus Valley Civilization possessed the concept of a priest-king or royal preceptor (Rajguru), where religious and social leadership were concentrated in a single authority. This tradition continued in various forms within later saint traditions. The word Das should not be understood merely as “servant”; it can also be interpreted as an honorific title. In names such as Kabirdas, Raidas, and Ghasidas, the term Das signifies both spiritual devotion and leadership. Therefore, the Guru Gaddi represents not only a religious symbol but also an alternative socio-cultural authority.

In Chhattisgarh, Satnam is regarded as a derivative of Sachchanam, a term used as a form of greeting in the saint tradition. Sachchanam is also considered by some scholars to have been one of the sixty-four sects of Buddhism. Over time, it came to be known as Satnam, Satyanam, and Satnami. Consequently, Guru Gaddi worship in the Satnam Panth is not a novel development but a continuation of the traditions associated with Ravidas, Kabir, and Guru Nanak. Since the teachings of Ravidas and Kabir had already spread throughout Chhattisgarh before Guru Ghasidas, references to Saint Ravidas frequently appear in Satnami devotional songs. Guru Ghasidas is believed to have established the Guru Gaddi at Bhandarpuri in 1848. The concept of the Guru here closely resembles that of a Rajguru because the Satnami community practiced martial traditions, and social administration was conducted through Mahants, Rajmahants, Bhandaris, and Gurus. The Guru served as the supreme leader whose word was universally accepted. Therefore, the Guru Gaddi occupied a position comparable to a royal throne.

VIII. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SATNAM DHAM

Guru Ghasidas constructed a large building in the center of Bhandarpuri village, where the Guru Gaddi was established. This site later became famous as Satnam Dham. It is said that the temple’s finials and decorative battlements were made of gold, reflecting its grandeur and religious significance. Followers of

the Satnam Panth gathered there to attain spiritual peace, seek liberation from sins, and express their devotion to the Guru tradition. Consequently, the site came to be revered as “Bhandarpuri” or the “Guru Gaddi.” Until 1903, a grand Satnam fair was organized there. Satnami devotees traveled from distant regions to participate. According to tradition, pilgrims drank water believed to have been sanctified by the touch of the Guru’s feet or toe. They also offered one rupee as a token contribution known as Chaudhari. Later, due to financial difficulties and excessive expenditure, Satnam Dham became heavily indebted. Some successors of Guru Ghasidas were considered extravagant, and as a result Bhandarpuri eventually came under the control of moneylenders. During the same period, the temple’s golden finials and battlements were stolen, diminishing its former magnificence.

IX. EXPANSION OF GURU GADDIS

After Bhandarpuri, another Guru Gaddi was established at Ratanpur, which became an important religious center for the Satnam Panth. Large fairs were also organized there, attracting numerous followers. Similarly, a Guru Gaddi was established at Telasi, where the Guru Darshan Festival is celebrated during Vijayadashami. At Bangoli, a fair is held on Magha Purnima, while Kunwabodsara hosts religious gatherings and fairs on Magha Panchami.

X. SYMBOLISM OF THE SERPENT IN GURU GADDI

Images of hooded serpents can also be seen in the Guru Gaddi at Bhandarpuri, where they are symbolically regarded as protectors of the sacred seat. In Indian tradition, serpents symbolize not only snakes but are also associated with ancient Naga dynasties and power traditions. On this basis, some scholars argue that just as Naga rulers in ancient times patronized Buddhism and other popular religious traditions, Satnami Gurus may likewise have received support from various local dynasties and communities. This interpretation is considered culturally and symbolically significant.

XI. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GURU TRADITION –

It is evident that the Guru tradition occupies a position of great importance within the Satnam Panth. The glory of the Guru is frequently celebrated in Panthi songs, folk narratives, and religious compositions. Not only in the Satnam tradition but also in the writings of Kabir, Dadu Dayal, Guru Nanak, Sundardas, and other saints, the Guru is regarded as the ultimate source of spiritual knowledge. Similarly, the highest status of the Guru is acknowledged in Sufi traditions, Sikhism, Nath yogic traditions, Vaishnava sects, and numerous other saint traditions. Many scholars believe that the concept of Guru Gaddi in the Indian saint tradition was influenced by ancient Buddhist and folk-religious traditions. To understand concepts such as Satlok and the Guru principle within the Satnam Panth, it is necessary to study various streams of Advaita philosophy, folk religion, and Buddhist thought. Thus, the Guru tradition in the Satnam Panth represents not merely a religious institution but also a center of social, cultural, and spiritual consciousness.

XII. ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE GURU IN THE SATNAM PANTH

In the Satnam Panth established by Guru Ghasidas, the Guru occupies a highly respected and significant position. The Guru is not merely a religious guide but also a guardian of social order and a moral leader of the community.

1. Moral and Social Responsibility- The Guru is expected to observe strict moral standards. His conduct must be disciplined, exemplary, and consistent with the values of the community. As a source of inspiration for followers, the Guru is expected to embody high ethical principles and self-restraint.

2. Social Order and Justice - The Guru is responsible for maintaining social discipline within the community. Decisions regarding social exclusion or reinstatement into the Satnam Panth fall under the Guru’s authority. The Guru also determines disciplinary measures, thereby ensuring social order.

3. Religious and Social Rituals - The Guru conducts various religious and social ceremonies, including

marriage, naming ceremonies, and other rites. During the naming ceremony, the Guru places a Kanthi (sacred necklace) around the child's neck, symbolizing entry into the Satnam Panth and religious identity. The Guru need not personally attend every ceremony; many are conducted during community gatherings.

4. Processions and Public Honor - In earlier times, large crowds gathered to witness the Guru's processions. These processions were magnificent, involving elephants, horses, camels, and other vehicles. Riding an elephant symbolized royal authority and special privilege; therefore, the Guru's elephant procession reflected his high social prestige and influence.

5. Devotion of Followers - Satnami followers offered prostrations before the Guru and presented gifts according to their devotion and capacity. These practices strengthened the spiritual and social bond between the Guru and the community.

6. The Bhandari and Chhadidar System - Special assistants known as Bhandaris or Chhadidars supported the Guru. These representatives were stationed throughout Chhattisgarh and collected gifts, materials, and contributions from Satnami households on behalf of the Guru. This system strengthened the organizational structure of the Satnam Panth.

7. The Guru as Rajguru - The position of the Guru was not confined to religious leadership alone. The Guru enjoyed a status comparable to that of a Rajguru (Royal Preceptor). He functioned as a guide, judge, and cultural guardian of the community. The Guru occupied an exalted position and served as the central figure of unity and social order.

XIII. CONCLUSION

The significance of Guru Gaddi worship in the Indian saint tradition is extensive and multidimensional. It is not merely the veneration of a seat but a tribute to knowledge, tradition, social consciousness, equality, and spiritual leadership. From Buddhism to Kabir, Ravidas, Sikhism, and the Satnam Panth, the Guru Gaddi has provided moral direction to society. Particularly within the Satnam Panth of Chhattisgarh,

the Guru Gaddi has functioned as a center of social organization, self-respect, and community leadership. The tradition established by Guru Ghasidas conveyed the ideals of social equality, truth, morality, and self-dignity to the Satnami community. Thus, Guru Gaddi worship remains a living symbol of continuity within the Indian saint tradition and of enduring social consciousness. In its truest sense, Guru Gaddi worship is meaningful only when individuals embody the teachings of the Guru in their lives and strive to establish the values of equality, brotherhood, and humanity within society.

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