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From *Ram Tirath* to *Valmiki Tirath*: The Making of *Valmiki* Religious Identity in Amritsar

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This paper contextualises the emergence of the *Valmiki Tirath* as a major pilgrimage centre for the Valmiki community in contemporary Punjab. Its inauguration in 2016 has a longer history of contestation and association. Before it was officially established as a '*Valmiki*' *Tirath* through an Act of the state legislature, the site was popularly known as '*Ram*' *Tirath*, associating it with the legendary figure of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. This was despite the site's well-known legendary status as the abode of Sage Valmiki where Sita lived in exile with her two sons. Besides, most important shrines at the *Tirath* were under the control of non-Valmiki *mahants*, which was also the major reason for long-drawn political and legal contestation. However, the recent state recognition given to the site as a *Valmiki Tirath* needs to be placed within the broader contours of *Valmiki* social and political aspirations which can only be understood by paying attention to their demographic spread broadly in Punjab and specifically in Amritsar. This spatial context gets placed in the broader legendary association of the site with the sacred geography of Ramayana and the complexity of contemporary caste politics within which a variety of *Valmiki* castes—*Majhabi, Chuhra, Bhangi, Balmiki*—are placed. Its emergence, therefore, deviates both from the given template of the emergence of *tirthas* or as little traditions getting subsumed into dominant symbols.

Amritsar, Ramayana, Ravidasia, Tirathas, Valmiki

Introduction

On December 01, 2016, the then Chief Minister of Punjab, Prakash Singh Badal inaugurated *Bhagwan Valmiki Tirath Asthan* at village Kaler, 11 kms from Amritsar. This event assumed immense significance since it gave the *Valmiki*s their first major pilgrimage in Punjab. The only other such major pilgrimage site in Punjab is *Dera* Sachkhand at village Ballan near Jalandhar, which is a major pilgrimage shrine for the *Ravidasia*s of Punjab. Both shrines are a product of twentieth century self-respect movements among the oppressed castes who had been placed outside of the four-*varna* division of Indian society and therefore called 'Untouchable'. Though historically, Brahmanism has always been weak in Punjab, particularly the practice of untouchability in the strict sense, caste hierarchies nevertheless operate along the *jajmani* (patron-client) relationship in rural Punjab, where landholders dominated and exploited the labour of 'Untouchable' castes (Jodhka 2017: 239-41). Colonial census enumerators struggled to place these communities within dominant religious categories as they 'switch religions from one decade to the next' (Lee 2011: 43). Their populations could be placed as *Chuhra, Bhangi, Balmiki* among the Hindu and Sikh castes or *Majhabi* among the Sikhs, *Musalli* among Muslim populations and *Masih* among more recent Christian converts. Yet, their religious affiliations were always

fluid.[1] However, religious consciousness in the late-nineteenth century led them to emphasise a separate self-identity for themselves, articulated, for instance, as *Ad Dharmi*s. In the post Partition period, the Indian state chose to classify erstwhile Untouchables as 'scheduled castes', and abandoned the previously used official terms, and social and political nomenclatures like depressed classes, Harijan, *Achhoot*, etc.

The influence of the self-respect movement from the colonial era among scheduled castes continued in the post-Partition period and so did an articulation for a distinctive identity for themselves. These two castes are identified by varied names—*Chamar*s, *Ramdasia*s or *Ravidasia*s and *Chuhra*s, *Bhangi*s, *Mazhabi*s or *Valmiki*s. While the terms *Chamar* and *Chuhra* are used in a pejorative sense by the upper castes, the latter is a self-given identity used for 'modern' self-expression. If we account for all the other scheduled castes of Punjab, a total of 39 communities, they comprise one-third (32 percent) of the total population of the state, and constitute the largest group in entire India (Jodhka 2017: 241). This significant presence of scheduled castes, now dominantly self-expressed as Dalits across India, is juxtaposed to the dominant-caste presence of Jat Sikhs, predominant agriculturist, in the everyday social and political spheres of Punjab (Puri 2003: 2698). Not surprisingly, the Dalit population according to the Census 2001 is also significantly located in rural areas, constituting 75.66 percent of the total scheduled caste population, while only 24.34 percent live in urban areas (see Image-Table 1A and 1B below). This scenario has rapidly been changing owing to depeasantisation of landless agricultural labourers in the last few decades and their migration to urban areas.[2] Image-Table 1A and 1B reflects this transition as the proportion of urban population of dominant scheduled caste population has increased by roughly four percent in 2011. The scenario was not very different in the pre-Partition period, when in addition to Sikh Jats, Muslim Jats also constituted a dominant group.

This dominance was, however, more marked in the rural areas. In the urban context, the dominant groups consisted of *Arora-Khatri* Hindu-Sikh mercantile communities, and a variety of, predominantly Hindu but also Jain castes. In some cases, like that of Amritsar, which was a Muslim-majority city before Partition, and Hindus were not demographically dominant, their political and economically powerful and upper caste-class hegemony nevertheless prevailed. This demographic complex hasn't changed much in the post-Partition scenario—barring the migration of Muslims to West-Punjab (now Pakistan) where Jats similarly dominate the social and political spheres of life. Juxtaposed against these prevailing structures of social and political dominance, the articulation of a Dalit self-consciousness on the Indian side of the Punjab has found expression in the veneration of religious icons and the imagination of a sacred geography that reorients dominant religious frames. Significantly, these reorienting discourses utilise familiar patterns of sacred expressions to invert dominant articulations of religiosity and identity. Among the two major caste communities of Punjab, the '*Chamar*s' (leather tanners) and '*Chuhra*s' (manual scavengers), this self-

[1] Cf. Joel Lee (2021: 43-48) for a historiographic review of debates on conversion among scheduled caste populations.

[2] Cf. Singh and Bhogal (2014) for a recent study on depeasantisation among landless labourers in Punjab.

expression has manifested in a *Ravidasia* identity in the case of the former, and a Valmiki identity in the case of the latter.

Demography and Contours of Identity

Table 1A- Population of two major Scheduled Castes in Punjab										
Census 2001										
			Total		Rural			Urban		
Broad caste category		All Scheduled Castes (SCs)	*Persons*	*% age of total SCs*	*Persons*	*% age of total SCs*	*% age of total ARC*	*Persons*	*% age of total SCs*	*% age of total ARC*
			7,028,723	**	5,318,254	**75.66**	**	1,710,469	**24.34**	**
Ad-Dharmis, Ravidasia & Chamars (ARC)	**1**	Chamar etc.	1,839,032	26.16	1,378,295	19.61	**76.83**	460,737	6.56	**23.17**
	2	Ad Dharmi	1,045,126	14.87	837,632	11.92		207,494	2.95	
		A. Total (1 & 2)	**2,884,158**	**41.03**	**2,215,927**	**31.53**		**668,231**	**9.51**	
			Persons	*% age of total SCs*	*Persons*	*% age of total SCs*	*% age of total BC*	*Persons*	*% age of total SCs*	*% age of total BC*
Balmikis & 'Chuhras' (BC)	**3**	Mazhabi	2,220,945	31.60	1,864,984	26.53	**79.02**	355,961	5.06	**20.98**
	4	Balmiki etc.	785,464	11.18	510,588	7.26		274,876	3.91	
		B. Total (3 & 4)	**3,006,409**	**42.77**	**2,375,572**	**33.80**		**630,837**	**8.98**	
		Grand Total (A & B)	**5,890,567**	**83.81**	**4,591,499**	**65.32**	**	**1,299,068**	**18.48**	**

Table-Image 4.1A: Population of two major Scheduled Castes in Punjab (Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011). Image Source: Yogesh Snehi

Ravidasia and *Valmiki* identities have a significantly rural presence. Since the *Ravidasia* were traditionally associated with leather tanning and the skinning of dead cattle—a profession considered unclean, their settlements were located on the margins of rural or urban settlements. In the Census enumeration of 2001, the *Ravidasia* communities in rural areas comprised 31.53 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population of Punjab, constituting 76.83 percent of the total *Ravidasia* population. This rural dominance remains consistent in the Census of 2011 (72.68 percent). During the First and Second World Wars, the leather tanning profession profited the *Ravidasia*s, particularly those from the Doaba region. An increase in the spread of education and rising educational status also opened-up the possibility of their migration to Europe (Juergensmeyer 2009: 36-37). This had a deep impact on the community's ability to reorient and assert their self-identity, in which the medieval *bhakti* saint, Ravidas's identity played an important role (Juergensmeyer 2009: 83-91). Known as the *Ad Dharm* movement, it's leadership emerged from the rural areas of the central Punjab of colonial times (Juergensmeyer 2009: 35). Largely, these 'Untouchables' of colonial Punjab had small land holdings and mostly worked as tenants in the fields of upper-caste landlords. Economic prosperity and rising educational status created a new sense of political and social capital among the *Ad Dharmi* leaders, who were now relatively independent of their traditional social and economic ties to rural areas. The centrality of Sant Ravidas, his teachings and identity, gave them a *Ravidasia* identity.

This movement also emerged as a social response to the Sikh identity, a fact that became clearly articulated when the *Ravidasia* installed an *Amrit Bani Granth* (holy book) that had extracted the poetry of Sant Ravidas from Guru Granth Sahib, which is the sacred *granth* of Sikhs. This assertion was strongly opposed by the supreme representative body of the historical Sikh *gurdwaras*, the *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak* Committee (SGPC), but the *Ravidasia*s nevertheless went ahead and installed their separate holy book at Dera Sachkhand Ballan in the year 2012, at the *Guru* Ravidas *Dham* in Jalandhar.

Table 1B- Population of two major Scheduled Castes in Punjab

Census 2011

			Total		Rural			Urban		
Broad caste category		**All Scheduled Castes (SCs)**	*Persons*	*% age of total SCs*	*Persons*	*% age of total SCs*	*% age of total ARC*	*Persons*	*% age of total SCs*	*% age of total ARC*
			8,860,179	**	6,496,986	**73.33**	**	2,363,193	**26.67**	**
Ad-Dharmis, Ravidasia & Chamars (ARC)	**1**	Chamar etc.	2,078,132	23.45	1,450,607	16.37	**72.68**	627,525	7.08	**27.32**
	2	Ad Dharmi	1,017,192	11.48	799,229	9.02		217,963	2.46	
		A. Total (1 & 2)	**3,095,324**	**34.94**	**2,249,836**	**25.39**		**845,488**	**9.54**	
			Persons	*% age of total SCs*	*Persons*	*% age of total SCs*	*% age of total BC*	*Persons*	*% age of total SCs*	*% age of total BC*
Balmikis & 'Chuhras' (BC)	**3**	Mazhabi	2,633,921	29.73	2,152,231	24.29	**76.36**	481,690	5.44	**23.64**
	4	Balmiki etc.	866,953	9.78	521,099	5.88		345,854	3.90	
		B. Total (3 & 4)	**3,500,874**	**39.51**	**2,673,330**	**30.17**		**827,544**	**9.34**	
		Grand Total (A & B)	**6,596,198**	**74.45**	**4,923,166**	**55.57**	**	**1,673,032**	**18.88**	**

Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011.

Table-Image 4.1B: Population of two major Scheduled Castes in Punjab (Source: Census of India 2001 and 2011)
Image Source: Yogesh Snehi

The *Valmiki*s were also a product of the same identity conundrum that marked the 1920's. Mark Juergensmeyer notes how the *Valmiki Sabha* predates the *Ad Dharm* movement. While both the movements can be classified under the broad rubric of *Ambedkarite* movements, the *Valmiki Sabha*'s discourse also sought to chart a unique identity for them. According to the Census report of 2001, more than one-third (35 percent) of '*Balmiki*s' (check Table 2 below) lived in urban areas. This proportion has increased by roughly five percent to 39.89 percent in the Census of 2011. Among them the 'Hindu' *Balmiki*s constituted 32.06 percent of the urban Scheduled Caste population. Their rural population of 39.18 and 38.80 percent in the Census of 2001 and 2011 respectively has remained stable in the last one decade. The equal distribution in rural and urban areas in the 2011 Census also indicates a scenario where an increasing number of them would identify themselves religiously as *Balmiki*s—a jump of five percent in a single decade. It is among these *Balmiki*s that the Valmiki consciousness is dominantly expressed. Due to this strong urban location of the *Valmiki*s and their requirement in the task of fulfilling municipal administration, the

social and political character of the *Valmiki* identity movement became significantly urban. The religious expression of the community also evolved out of the broader contours of the urban 'Hindu' caste identity. Rural *Valmiki*s, like their '*Ravidasia*' counterparts, on the other hand, remained either small peasants or landless agricultural labourers. The legislation against manual scavenging (The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013), that particularly concerned the disposal of dry toilets, coupled with the introduction of wet toilets, led to partial removal of the overwhelming stigma of 'Untouchability' against the '*Chuhra*' community. But they continued to be employed in tasks that entailed the manual cleaning of sewers, a task which had been a rallying point for a lot of *Valmiki* self-respect movements in urban areas. The unique locations of *Ravidasia* and *Valmiki* self-expression thus provides a fascinating entry point into the making of rural and urban contours of religion in Punjab.

Census 2001						
Balmikis	Total	% age of Total	Rural		Urban	
			Persons	% age of Total	Persons	% age of Total
All religions	785,464	**	510,588	65.00	274,876	35.00
Hindus	559,617	71.25	307,768	39.18	251,849	32.06
Sikhs	223,885	28.50	201,997	25.71	21,888	2.79
Buddhists	1,962	0.25	823	0.10	1,139	0.15
Census 2011						
Balmikis	Total	% age of Total	Rural		Urban	
			Persons	% age of Total	Persons	% age of Total
All religions	866,953	**	521,099	60.11	345,854	39.89
Hindus	657,715	75.87	336,418	38.80	321,297	37.06
Sikhs	207,650	23.95	183,906	21.21	23,744	2.74
Buddhists	1,588	0.18	775	0.09	813	0.09
Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011.						

Table-Image 4.2: Population of Balmikis in Punjab (Source: Census of India 2001 and 2011). Image Source: Yogesh Snehi

The articulation of a distinctive identity among the *Valmiki*s and *Ravidasia*s is a modern expression. According to the Sikh narrative tradition, there have been significant intersections between the dominant castes and '*Chuhra*' and '*Chamar*' individuals.

Articulating an 'Originary' Moment

There has been a significant amount of scholarship on the making of the *Ravidasia* identity in Punjab which started as *Ad Dharm* movement for the recognition of a

separate identity (*qaum*) among the '*Chamar*s' of colonial Punjab under the leadership of Mangoo Ram. Some important scholarly contributions in this regard come from the seminal works of Mark Juergensmeyer (1982 [2009]), Harish K. Puri (2003), Surinder S. Jodhka (2016), Ronki Ram (2012), Paramjit S. Judge (2018) and more recently Santosh K. Singh (2017). These research enterprises have explored and critiqued the dominant scholarship concerned with the making of religious traditions in India. In the Pan-Indian scenario, there is a plethora of works that approach the discourse of the Dalit-Ambedkarite movements from an anti-Brahmin perspective. While this important element was in vogue mostly in the Madras and Bombay presidencies, in the Madras presidency, the self-respect movement of 'Untouchables' was also articulated as the claim of being '*Adi*' *Dravidian*s. In the Bombay presidency, this self-respect politics was expressed through demand for temple entry, and later through rejection of Hinduism and mass conversion to Buddhism (Leslie 2018 [2003]: 53). Conversion to Buddhism remained marginal in the case of *Adi Dravida* movements as well as in Punjab (refer Table 2). One of the major shifts in the works surrounding *Ravidasia* and the *Valmiki* movements, was the shift in the discourse from a generalised anti-Brahmanic expression, evident in the works of Mark Juergensmeyer, to a deeper appreciation of the peculiarities of Punjab's historical context where Brahmanism had never a been a dominant social and political force. The *Valmiki* association with Sikhs, for instance, goes back to the leading figure of Jaita (d. 1704) who courageously retrieved the severed head (*seesa*) of the ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur (d. 1675) from Delhi, after the latter was executed on orders issued by Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb (d. 1707). It was Jaita who delivered the severed head to the child Gobind, who later became known as *Guru* Gobind Singh (d. 1708). However, Jaita's contribution has remained peripheral within the discourse of the Sikh memory. Similarly, Ditt Singh (d. 1901), who despite having been born in a *Chamar* household, contributed immensely to the Singh *Sabha*'s print culture during the late 19th century, also remains unrecognisable within the dominant Sikh narrative (Hans 2016: 131-151).

Therefore, as Ronki Ram explains it (2012), while arguing for a distinctive religious identity, the Ad Dharm movement did not place itself within the frameworks of upward social mobility expressed through theoretical tropes like that of Sanskritization propounded by M.N. Srinivas (1956). Instead, the *Ad Dharm* movement uses the prevalent early twentieth century debates on Aryan invasion that argues for a native identity, pre-dating the arrival of Aryans and their religious traditions, variably expressed as Vedic religion, Brahmanism or Hinduism (Trautmann 2005). Imagined in terms of the distinctiveness of an *Ad Dharm qaum* (religious community), this conception envisioned a prehistoric paradise—a place in North India where the original (*adi*) inhabitants of the subcontinent dwelt in amicable equality. Mark Juergensmeyer (2009: 47) quotes from the Ad Dharm Report (p.6):

> In the beginning, when nature created human beings, there was no discrimination. There were no differences and no quarrels. In particular, there were no such concepts as high and low. God [*ishwar*] was meditating; all was in harmony.

Interestingly, the Aryan invasion theory continues to remain in vogue as an important reference of the originary moment for the construction of *Ravidasia* identity, despite

the fact that both historians and geneticists have questioned the veracity of this theory, and have instead looked for more plausible explanations that privilege gradual migration and assimilation, and not invasion (Thapar, et.al. 2019). According to Juergenmeyer (2009: 48-49):

> The Ad Dharm myth [thus] continued beyond the arrival of the Aryans. It reported that the original people (later Untouchables) were subjugated with "so much cruelty and injustice" that they "forgot their own identity".

The *Valmiki* movement, as stated previously, evolved more in an urban context and the urban counterpart of their caste experiences take shape predominantly in an upper caste Hindu-Sikh milieu. The municipal life of urban centres is regulated around norms of purity, hygiene and cleanliness and compared to rural areas; it is in cities that *Valmiki*s are primarily hired in their traditional role as sweepers. Their caste fellows in the village on the other hand serve largely as landless labourers since the availability of fields for sanitary purposes renders caste-based sanitation tasks largely unnecessary (Juergensmeyer 2009: 169). The first *Valmiki Sabha* was established in Jalandhar in 1910 and the Arya Samaj played an important role in stimulating its growth. Although in the initial years *Valmiki Sabha* leaders like *Mahatma* Fakir Chand and Gandu Ram worked in close alignment with Ad Dharm, but yet, they evolved independent religious notions and concepts about the community's identity formation (Juergensmeyer 2009: 171). Along with their traditional veneration of Bala Shah, Lal Beg, and various shrines associated with Sufi saints and popular 'Hindu' deities (Snehi 2019: 183), the association with *deras* and *jatheras* (Singh 2019) co-constituted a dominant political and social identity for them, they found expression in the figure of 'rishi'/ sage Valmiki, a legendary figure who authored *Ramayana*, dated variedly from between the fourth century CE to the sixth millennium BCE (Goldman and Sutherland 1985: 14).

Julia Leslie (2018 [2003]) has explored Valmiki's narrative in detail, which includes their association with the *Valmiki*s in Britain. Her scholarship emerged out of an interesting debate. On February 21, 2000, the Central Air Radio Limited (Birmingham, UK) broadcasted a Panjabi phone-in programme by Vikram Gill. Responding to a letter from a listener, Gill referred obliquely to a widely believed story about saint Valmlki, about how he was once a 'dacoit'. The British *Valmiki* community representatives subsequently made a formal protest at the radio station, demanding an apology for the disrespect shown to them as the worshippers of Valmiki. They also demanded that a public retraction of the dacoit legend relating to their God—*bhagwan* Valmiki be formally made (Leslie 2018 [2003]: 1). A similar case was filed at the Punjab and Haryana High Court (P&HHC) in 2020 when a 'Sikh' lawyer Simranjit Kaur Gill, while addressing a political audience, compared Valmiki to a Punjab gangster-turned-reformer called Lakha Sadana. This led to the registering of an FIR complaint under the Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code and section 3(1)(v) of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. This was followed by the lawyer surrendering herself to the police, and being remanded in police custody. The case lingered on for more than a month and the lawyer was finally released on a regular bail. The case did have a similarly important bearing on claims about Sage Valmiki's ancestry and his association with the Valmiki community that considers him a Godly

figure (*bhagwan*) and not merely *rishi* (sage). Within the *Valmiki* community, Sage Valmiki is revered as a divinized poet-saint, who composed two of the most important sacred classical Sanskrit texts of India: The *Valmiki Ramayana* and the *Yogavasistha Ramayana* (Leslie 2018 [2003]: 7).

A Sacred Geography for the *Valmiki*s

Temples associated with *Bhagwan* Valmiki are widespread across the urban areas of Punjab. However, Baba Gian Nath's *Valmiki Ashram at Ram Tirath* (now *Valmiki Tirath*) near Amritsar constitutes a major pilgrimage centre for the *Valmiki* community in Punjab. Juergensmeyer describes this place as a Valmiki Ashram that is situated (2009: 172):

> …at the side of a clean, attractive, bathing tank and near other ashrams occupied primarily by higher caste holy men. People of various castes stop at the small Valmiki temple there, which includes representations of various Shaiva and Vaishnava deities as well as an icon of 'rishi' Valmiki. Comfortably settled among the gods, Valmiki receives garlands and offerings of food, incense, and money in the Hindu manner.

Table 3: Population of major Scheduled Castes in Amritsar district

Spatial distribution		Population totals		% age of total in each section		% age change
		1991	2011	1991	2011	
Punjab	Total	5,742,528	8,860,179	**	**	**
	Rural	4,562,442	6,496,986	79.45	73.33	-6.12
	Urban	1,180,086	2,363,193	20.55	26.67	**6.12**
Amritsar	Total	701,444	770,864	**	**	**
	Rural	539,471	464,984	76.91	60.32	-16.59
	Urban	161,973	305,880	23.09	39.68	**16.59**
1. Ad Dharmi	Total	841	1,109	**	**	**
	Rural	499	254	59.33	22.90	-36.43
	Urban	342	855	40.67	77.10	**36.43**
2. Chamar, Jatia Chamar, Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi, Ravidasi*	Total	22,127	30,349	**	**	**
	Rural	5,711	3,378	25.81	11.13	-14.68
	Urban	16,416	26,971	74.19	88.87	**14.68**
3. Balmiki, Chuhra, Bhangi [Valmilki]	Total	23,500	30,757	**	**	**
	Rural	2,440	1,131	10.38	3.68	-6.70
	Urban	21,060	29,626	89.62	96.32	**6.70**
4. Mazhabi **	Total	583,222	526,333	**	**	**
	Rural	493,465	354,655	84.61	67.38	-17.23
	Urban	89,757	171,678	15.39	32.62	**17.23**

Source: Census of India, 1991 and 2011

* Census 2011 has expanded the scope of this category and now also includes caste denominations like Ramdasia, Ramdasia Sikh, Ravidasia, Ravidasia Sikh under this category.

** Census 2011 has expanded this category and now also includes Mazhabi Sikh.

Image-Table 4.3: Population of major Scheduled Castes in Amritsar (Source: Census of India 1991 and 2011). Image Source: Yogesh Snehi

It is important to have a broader understanding of the reasons for the emergence of the *Valmiki Tirath* and the sacred geography around which the place was situated, imagined, claimed and transformed. Situated close to the city of Amritsar, the shrine has figured for a long time among the holy places of Hindu and *Valmiki* religiosity. Its transformation in the last decade needs to be placed in a socio-demographic and contemporary political context. The *Valmiki* population of Amritsar district is mostly urban and if we were to take into account the Valmiki population of the entire district (3.35 percent of the total SC population of the district in 1991), 89.32 percent of them lived in urban areas in 1991 and 96.32 in 2011. The largest population of scheduled caste in the district is that of *Majhabi*s (83.15 percent in 1991), out of whom 84.61 percent lived in rural areas in 1991 and 67.38 percent in the 2011 Census. These *Majhabi*s have originated from the same caste—of '*Chuhra*s'. This spatial spread of (Hindu) Valmiki and (Sikh) *Majhabi* population is curious to note. There are very few *Ad Dharmi*s in the district—most of them being known as '*Chamar*s', etc. who also mostly live in urban areas. Between 1991 and 2011, the district has experienced a significant migration of its scheduled caste population to urban areas. This pattern is consistent among all, but is prominently marked among *Majhabi*s, who have the largest population and 17.23 percent of them migrated to urban areas in the last two decades. *Balmiki*s in the 2011 Census are overwhelmingly urban. The *Valmiki*s, therefore, plays an important role in the urban socio-religious context of Amritsar and their identity follows from their placement in a predominantly urban context that is predominantly Hindu. It is in the experience of the immediate and dominant Hindu or Sikh hegemony that *Valmiki* or *Majhabi* identities emerge.

Before the emergence of *Valmiki Tirath*, Amritsar city already had two major pilgrimage sites, namely (a medieval) *Darbar Sahib*, also known as the Golden Temple, founded by *Guru* Arjan in the year 1588, and (a modern) *Durgiana Tirath* catering to the needs of the Sikhs and the Hindus, which was established in the mid-1920's. There were several smaller shrines as well—*takias, dargahs, mandir*s*, gurdwaras, shivalas* and *thakurdwaras*—spread in and around the walled city. *Valmiki* settlements in contemporary Amritsar are predominantly located on the periphery of upper-caste colonies. These settlements are mostly spread along Hall Gate, Hathi Gate, and Lahori Gate, and are located on the edge of the various *Katra*s (internally segmented localities) of the walled city. Many of these *Katra*s, like the Islamabad *Katra*, were Muslim settlements before the Partition in 1947. This indicates to the fact that many of the *Valmiki*s in these *Katra*s are post-Partition migrants from the Pakistan side of Punjab. The walled city also contains a large number of *Valmiki* shrines.

The emergence of the self-respect movement among the *Valmiki*s has been expressed through an appropriation of the extant legend that surrounds Ram Tirath, a site believed to be the abode of *Rishi/Bhagwan* Valmiki where Sita, the wife of Rama took refuge. It is here that she apparently gave birth to Rama's two sons, Lav and Kush. The legend also associates the emergence of Lahore and Kasur cities in today's Pakistan Punjab to Luv and Kush respectively. The *Gazetteer of the Lahore District, 1883-84* narrates this legend in the following manner:

> By local Hindu tradition the origin of Lahore, like that of most of the princely houses of India, is traced to Rama, king of Ayodhya (Oude), the hero of the Ramayana, whose two sons Lav or Loh, and Kash, are said to have founded the neighbouring cities of Lahore and Kasur. (1894: 264-65)
>
> From the above and other similar traditions of Rajput origin it may be inferred that the founders of Lahore were of the Rajput race, and that the city was probably the capital of one of the earliest of the Rajput States established in the west of India; and this inference is corroborated by the fact that, at the earliest dawning of reliable Indian history,—the period of the Musalman invasions in the seventh and tenth centuries,—we find Lahore the capital of an important Hindu principality, exercising a kind of feudal superiority over other States. (1894: 266)

This *Ramayana* legend has been in vogue for a long time and was invoked to claim a Rajput ruling lineage in Punjab even during the Mughal period. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (2005) contextualises this legend and traces its origin in the genealogies of the Sikh *Guru*s, articulated in a discussion on *Bichitra Natak*, a work authored by *Guru* Gobind Singh. She explains how the *Guru* contextualises himself within the framework of the Valmiki *Ramayana*, and traces the origins of the other cultural centres of the Punjab—Lahore and Kasur—to Lav and Kush, the "sons of Sita". She elaborates as follows (Singh 2005: 21):

> In cantos 2–6 of the *Bicitra Natak*, the author traces the lineage of the Sikh gurus to King Aju, who is known to have descended from Raghav, a brilliant star of the Solar dynasty. Guru Gobind Singh describes the forefather as "a fabulous warrior and a fabulous archer" (*BN*, 2:20). But the guru admires King Aju for leaving behind all his wealth and power to King Dashrath and retreating to the forest to meditate. The combination of secular and spiritual aspirations is the striking characteristic of all the ancestors he mentions in the *Bicitra Natak*, be they Sodhis, Bedis, or the forefather King Aju himself.
>
> Sita surfaces in the Sikh guru's memoir as the progenitor of civilization in northern India. He praises those cities of *madra desh,* the region between the Rivers Beas and Jhelum: "[S]uch is the grandeur of Lahore and Kasur that Lanka and Amravati were put to shame" (2:24). Sita's offspring gave birth to new cultural centers that would draw people from different geographical, linguistic, religious, and social backgrounds…. He reminds us that "It was [Dashrath's] first wife who gave birth to Prince Rama" (*BN* 2:22).

The *Bhatt*s, the genealogists of the Sodhi *Guru*s provide an interesting discussion on the genealogy of *Guru* Ram Das, the founder of Amritsar. They compare these *Guru*s to Ram, identified with the *Raghu* lineage. Hardip Singh Syan details this association further (*Adi Granth*, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*, cited in Syan 2017: 496-497):

> Guru Ram Das is described as '[He Guru Ram Das is Ram] the handsome scion (*tilaku*) of the Raghu lineage (*Raghubansi*) born in the house of Dasratha; the rishis (*muni*) seek shelter [with Guru Ram Das]'. In laudation of Guru Nanak, the *Bhatts* say that Parasurama's pride was subdued by

> Ram: 'his [Guru Nanak's] praise is sung by Parasurama, the son of Jamdagani, whose axe (*kutharu*) and passion (*teju*) were snatched by *Raghu*'. In another *Bhatt* hymn, 'Ram of the *Raghuvans*' is recalled as the major incarnation of the second *Yuga*. As discussed earlier, Raja Janak was integral in the *Bhatt* compositions. There was an association with the Sikh Gurus and the great kings of the solar dynasty, especially Ram, in the *Bhatt* compositions. Taken together with the pride of place, the Sodhis held in the Guruship for the *Bhatts*, it could be inferred that there was a belief that the Sodhis belonged to the solar dynasty.

The urban sacred geography of the Majha region—Amritsar, Lahore, Kasur—is interspersed with Sikh and Hindu inheritances. While the *Valmiki* claim recognises these inheritances, it seeks to invert them by foregrounding *Rishi* Valmiki and elevating him to the status of God or *bhagwan*. Rama, therefore, becomes peripheral in this narrative, despite the fact that his genealogies remain critical for Hindu and Sikh inheritances in the region. It is *bhagwan* Valmiki, who is foregrounded as the creator and caregiver of Sita and her two sons. Before the site's emergence as *Valmiki Tirath*, *Ram Tirath* was predominantly a large water tank—a desolate site that became active only at the times of major festival celebrations associated with Rama and Valmiki. There are extant shrines associated with Sita and Valmiki that express long-standing disputes between the *Valmiki*s and *Sanatani*s, and *Nirmala*s, *Udasi*s, etc. who seek to control the entire site. A major part of the site is now under the management of the Punjab *Bhagwan Valmik Ji Tirath Sthal* (Ram Tirath) Shrine Board, instituted by the Government of Punjab through an Act issued by the Punjab Legislature in 2016. The emergence of this site intersects with the long-pending demand of the *Valmiki* leadership, and Gian Nath's *Valmiki Ashram*, through which a predominantly urban community of *Valmiki*s managed to transform this neighbouring rural site into a *Tirath* (a pilgrimage).

Centre and Periphery of the Sacred Tank

The *Valmiki Tirath* site is set around a large tank (*sarovar*), and is a place of expression of a variety of religiosities. Interestingly, such sharing of *sarovars* and wells in Punjab does not invoke violent reactions as it does in the Gangetic plains. The water bodies, particularly wells, rivers, ponds and oceans are considered to be a source of purity and immortality in Punjab and Sindh. Ranging from the indigenous belief in Varun *devta* to transoceanic belief in Khwaja Khizr, the belief that these water deities are source of healing and immortality allows the sacred spaces, particularly those associated with water bodies to be appropriated and reconfigured into mainstream beliefs. It is therefore interesting to note that all the three significant religious places of Amritsar—*Darbar Sahib*, *Durgiana Tirath*, and *Valmiki Tirath*—are all located in the midst of a sacred *sarovar* associated with ritual bathing by a variety of religious communities. The *Gazetteer of the Amritsar District, 1892-93* records this place as the site of an annual religious fair which is known to be "more a Hindu than a Sikh fair, and is largely attended by Hindus from the city [of Amritsar]" (1893: 42). In contrast to how the historical site of *Ram Tirath* earlier remained desolate for most part of the year, and was attended to mostly by pilgrims during the four-day fair held annually on a full moon night (*puranmashi*) in November, the place now bustles with pilgrims and tourists

throughout the year. It has become similar to the two other major pilgrimage sites—Golden Temple and *Durgiana Tirath*, located in Amritsar city.

Image 4.4: Ram Tirath before Valmiki Tirath. Image Source: Punjab Tourism[3]

As mentioned earlier, the site is traditionally linked with the hermitage of sage Valmiki who is said to have composed *Ramayana* epic over here. Despite this traditional association, the site has generally been of lesser significance in both the religious and political landscape of contemporary Punjab, coming alive mostly during the annual fair. *The Punjab District Gazetteer: Amritsar* (1976: 606) in fact states:

> … the origin of [the site] ... is obscure. There is a big tank of a peculiar shape which is said to have been dug by Hanuman- the famous devotee of Shri Ram Chandra. He is said to have dug it with *dhai tap* (i.e. with two and a half cuts), two lengthwise and a half breadthwise. The circumference of the tank is about three kilometres. There are some small temples on its sides. There is a *baoli* [step well] after the name of Sita, the wife of Shri Ram Chandra.

Extolling the narrative of the *Ramayana*, the *Gazetteer* further states that after Rama returned from exile, Sita apparently spent her life in exile at this place, in the cottage of *Rishi* Valmiki. The *Valmiki Ramayana*'s *Uttarkanda* details how Sita gracefully accepted the sage's hospitality. Here Sita gave birth to her two sons, Lav and Kush, and the great epic *Ramayana* was composed. Twelve years later, her sons confronted Rama while he was performing the *ashwamedha* ritual (a ritual that establishes kingship). The site was also associated with skirmishes between Rama's army and Lav

[3] Surkhab Shaukin photographed *Ram Tirath* for the Punjab Tourism department (Government of Punjab) in 2013-14: https://punjabtourism.punjab.gov.in/ram-tirath.php. Accessed 05 November 2021.

and Kush. Finally, Sita returned to Rama, and Valmiki attests to her utter blamelessness, and to the legitimacy of her twin sons (Goldman and Sutherland 2016: 20). *Maharaja* Ranjit Singh (d. 1839) got the site renovated in the first half of the 19th century. A big fair (*Turki Mela*) is also held, about a fortnight after the *Diwali* festival (*Punjab District Gazetteer* 1976: 606). The *Ram Tirath* Improvement and Development Committee (Amritsar) carried out yet another construction in 1961 that entailed the renovation and electrification of the bathing *ghat* for women. During the 1990's, a saint popularly known as Baba Bhuri Wala started staying at this site and built a *serai* (inn) for pilgrims. Over a period of time, the temples, and the tank along with its surrounding structures were renovated, and the site developed as a place of pilgrimage tourism. A clearer picture of the *Turki Mela* held at the site and nature of pilgrims who attended it, emerges from the *Supplement to the District Gazetteer of Amritsar* published in 1992. According to the *Gazetteer*, there is a lot of significance attached to the holy dip in the sacred tank, supposed to be undertaken at the early hours of the *puranmashi* (full moon) night. This is followed by a thirty-feet wide circumambulation (*parikarma*) around the tank, all the while chanting *mantra*s and exchanging the salutations "Rama-Rama". On the same night, women light lamps (*tullas*) made out of kneaded flour and place them on leaf plates or boat-shaped carriers so that they can be released in the tank. The place is abuzz with charity, entertainment and the congregation of religious and social organisations.

In 1992, around one lakh pilgrims visited this fair. A large number of *jatadhari* (matted hair) *sadhu*s also attended the fair and sat here in meditation. A considerable number of Sikhs, mostly from rural areas, and *Balmiki*s from all over the state took special interest in the celebrations and took out a special procession on the concluding day of the fair. According to the *Supplement to the District Gazetteer of Amritsar (*1992: 38-39): "Women outnumber[ed] men because of the popular belief that issu[e]less women beget children if they take a dip in the *baoli* [step well] known as *Mata Sita di baoli* on the full moon night". The Punjab Roadways operates special buses between Amritsar and *Ram Tirath* and a large number of hawkers put up stalls. The tank occupies a central place in the ritual practice among followers of the different religious traditions here, and the most important sites of worship are located along the tank. The *parikarma* or circumambulation of the tank takes place in the clockwise direction and starts from the left of the first shrine (*Mandir* Shri Jagannatha Puri), a small temple, managed by the incumbent *mahant* (priest) Vaishno Dass. The *parikrama* route then progresses to the *Prachin* (ancient) *Mandir* Radha Krishna *Ji*, possibly also managed by *mahant* Vaishno Dass. Both these *Sanatan* (Hindu traditional) temples situated 'on' the *parikarma* route, can be dated back to the early 20th century. Moving further, one notices the temple of *Siddh Shri Baba* Balak Nath *Ji*, managed by the *gaddi nishin* (presiding priest) *Bhagat* Jagat Ram *Ji* and located on the edge of the *parikarma*. This temple also runs a *langar* (community kitchen). Adjacent to it is the Gaugopal *Mandir*, and a *Ramtirath Gaushala* (menagerie for cows) managed by the institution (*dera*) established by *Nirmala Sant Baba* Har Singh *Ji Maharaj* (*Bhaudewale*). As one turns ninety degrees from the *Gaushala*, one encounters a fairly large temple dedicated to *Mata* Lal Devi *Ji*, managed by a trust based in Model Town, Amritsar. Further on, comes a vacant plot of land, and adjacent to it, a large institution named *Gian Ashram Valmiki Tirath*, established by Gian Nath *Maharaj Ji*, a revered figure from the *Valmiki* community. The current head of the institution is the fourth successor *Sant* Girdhari

Nath *Ji*. This institution is important in order to understand the transformation that the site, *Ram Tirath* underwent in recent times. The institution contains congregation halls, a shrine for Gian Nath, a *langar* hall and a large open space. All these monuments belong to the latter half of the 20th century.

Image 4.5: Gian Nath Ashram, Valmiki Tirath. Image Source: Yogesh Snehi

Right opposite to the Gian Nath *Ashram*, on the *parikrama* route, one encounters the small shrine *Kutiya* Sita *Mata ji*. It contains a small shrine for Sita *Mata* and is managed by *Pandit* Devkalash Tiwari. The next institution is the *Valmiki Dharamshala* (public rest house) and the *Bridh Ashram* (public old age home), managed by *mahant* Malkit Nath *Ji* who is the *gaddi nishin* of the *Dhuna Sahib* Trust that runs a *langar* during the time of the *parikarma,* situated right opposite the second entrance to the shrine complex. Adjacent to this *Bridh Ashram* is a set of three shrines from the 19th century. The first one is identified as Lav Kush *Pathshala* (school). The Sita *Mata* ki *Kutiya* which is also considered the *Janamsthan* or birthplace of Lav and Kush. This is followed by a *Valmiki* temple known as the *Valmiki Dhuna Sahib* said to be the place where *Sant* (Sage) Valmiki apparently penned the *Ramayana*, followed by a stepwell, and two smaller votive shrines. The stepwell and votive shrines are managed by *gaddi nashin mahant* Manjeet Giri and his control of these shrines has recently been under legal dispute. Right across these shrines, along the *parikrama* route, there is another temple dedicated to Sita, identifying it as her place of meditation. This shrine is located under a large Banyan tree, also identified as the site where Lav and Kush tied Rama's *Ashvamedha* horse, when confronting Rama and challenging his claim to sovereignty.

There is another small Sita shrine, adjacent to this shrine which looks like a 19th century structure.

Image 4.6: Ambedkar, Valmiki, Luv and Kush in the Courtyard of Gian Nath Ashram. Image Source: Yogesh Snehi

There are a few more *Sanatan* shrines along the last section of the *parikrama*, one of which is the *Sanatan Dharma Mahabir Dal* that houses a cave temple dedicated to Hanuman and containing a 55 feet-high statue of Hanuman within its premises. The statue was inaugurated on November 13, 2007, by Vijay Chopra of the Punjab Kesari Group (a Jalandhar based news agency). Further on than this are shrines and institutions related to popular religious traditions that originated in Amritsar. The first one is a temple dedicated to *Baba* Lal Dayal *Ji*, managed by *sevadar* (caretaker) Raj Kumar Das. The second one is the *Sachkhand Ruhani Satsang Dham*, dedicated to the female saint figure of *Shri* Aarti Devi *Ji Maharaj*. This temple houses a shrine, an old-age home and a *serai*. This temple is in addition to another shrine-temple that is dedicated to *Mata* Lal Devi *Ji*, mentioned earlier and having roots in Amritsar. The right side of the *parikarma* is vacant. The last major shrine on the route is *Mandir Gufa Mata* Sita *Ji*, managed by the *Shri Ram Tirath Sudharak* Brahmin *Sabha*. The shrine is believed to be the place where *Mata* Sita was engulfed by the earth. It has a *tap asthan* (place of meditation) that organises the worship of *Mata* Sita. The last temple on the *parikarma* route is a small shrine dedicated to the Ram *parivar* or family (Ram, Sita and Lakshman).

Image 4.7: Tall Idol of Hanuman erected by Sanatan Dharma Mahabir Dal. Image Source: Punjab Tourism

Emergence of the *Valmiki Tirath*

The *Ram Tirath* site is thus a kaleidoscope of various sacred shrines, situated around and along its *parikarma* route. Ranging from *Nath*, *Nirmala*, *Valmiki* and *Sanatani* institutions, the site has also been the centre of various community-based struggles for the control over older shrines. Several of the *Sanatani* shrines may not fall under the category of typically Hindu religiosities, these are mostly local cultic centres that

revolve around modern saint figures like *Mata* Lal Devi, *Baba* Lal Dayal, *Shri* Arti Devi *Ji Maharaj*, etc. Most non-Valmiki shrines are controlled by 'Hindu' *mahant*s, or religious trusts based in Amritsar. However, the site has also been claimed to be the sovereignty of *Bhagwan* Valmiki and therefore the Valmiki claims have been central to the demands of converting the shrine into a Valmiki Tirath. Even before the large contemporary temple dedicated to *Bhagwan* Valmiki in 2016 had been constructed, a votive shrine of the saint figure that had been instituted in the centre of the pond was already extant for some time (Image 5).

Image 4.8: Valmiki shrine in the midst of the pond with the Gian Ashram seen in the background. Image Source: Punjab Tourism

The earliest plan to imagine a large *Valmiki* temple in the midst of the tank dates back to the year 2003, when the then Chief Minister of Punjab, laid the foundation stone for it. The project design was prepared by an Amritsar-based architect Sarbjit Singh Bahga and submitted in 2004. But this project did not take off. Meanwhile a two-decade old conflict over control of the *Dhuna Sahib* (supposed to be the place of meditation of *Bhagwan* Valmiki) and Lav Kush *Pathshala*, continued to linger between the existing *mahant* Baldev Giri and *mahant* Malkeet Nath of the *Bhagwan Valmiki Dhuna Sahib* Management Trust, despite the 'Hindu' *mahant* Baldev Giri winning a legal battle in 1993 that gave him legal possession of the shrine that was hitherto occupied by *mahant* Malkeet Nath. This resulted in anger among the *Valmiki* organisations who demanded that the shrines be handed over to the *Valmiki*s. The *Valmiki*s received support in September 2014 from Om Prakash Gabbar, a councillor of the Municipal Corporation in Amritsar, who was affiliated with the then ruling party—the *Shiromani Akali Dal*. A compromise was finally reached between both the groups with the intervention of Amritsar police. According to this compromise, the Lav Kush *Pathshala* and Sita's place of meditation would be henceforth managed by *mahant* Baldev Giri, while the *Dhuna Sahib* (the place of meditation of *Bhagwan* Valmiki) would be handed over to *mahant* Malkeet Nath. This arrangement was not acceptable to the *Valmiki* organisations. It is, however,

interesting to note that in the current scheme, all sites associated with *Bhagwan* Valmiki are now being managed by the *Valmiki* community.

Image 4.9: Sanctum Sanctorum of the new Valmiki Temple. Image Source: Yogesh Snehi

In 2013, the then Chief Minister of Punjab Sardar Prakash Singh Badal paved the way forward for the construction of *Valmiki Tirath*. A large temple of *Bhagwan* Valmiki now stands in the centre of the *sarovar*, (Image 9), housing a larger-than-life sized idol of the saint as a Godly figure (Image 10). This state-sponsored project entailed the rechristening of the site from *Ram Tirath* to *Valmiki Tirath*, and the enactment of The Punjab *Bhagwan Valmiki Ji Tirath Sthal* (Ram Tirath) Shrine Board Act, 2016. The Board comprises the representatives of the state government, as also of various religious organisations. In addition to its official members, the Act made an additional provision to nominate seven non-official members of the *Valmiki*/ *Majhabi* Sikh community in the Board. This was a significant departure from several other religious institutions and their managing committees in Punjab, where only exclusive religious communities were represented, the SGPC being one such example. The recognition of both the *Valmiki* and *Majhabi* Sikh community and their inheritance of *Bhagwan* Valmiki reorients the separation of these communities that had taken place on religious lines since the late 19th century, and instead, foregrounds the caste genealogies that are shared by both these communities. The fact that the state sought to recognize these overlaps should also be seen as a corrective measure to mitigate a potentially controversial electoral risk to the government, affected by derecognizing *Sehajdhari* Sikhs in the SGPC elections. A large constituency of these *Sehajdhari*s are *Majhabi*s and this correction was attempted in order to consolidate the *Majhabi* vote in the 2017

elections to the Punjab Legislative Assembly. But in this process, the *Majhabi*s were distanced from the Sikh tradition.

Conclusion

There is a long history of claims and contestations that inscribe *Ram Tirath* and *Valmiki Tirath* in the vast complex spread around the sacred pond at village Kaler near Amritsar. Recent academic interest in the study of *Valmiki*s has led to the emergence of some significant studies on *Valmiki*s in the diaspora. To mention a few, the scholarship of Eleanor Nesbitt (1990), Opinderjit Kaur Takhar (2016), and Julia Leslie (2018 [2003]) have helped us to understand the shaping of *Valmiki* identity in the diaspora, and its relationship with dominant Hindu and Sikh traditions. Takhar (2016), for instance, investigates the fractured histories of the *Valmiki* and Sikh-Hindu identity, indicating a community trend towards expressing an exclusive *Valmiki* identity that is distinctive from Sikh and Hindu narrative traditions. It might be tempting to state that the diaspora informs the shaping of *Valmiki* identity in the Punjab religion, due to the diasporic influences on the home region. However, the fact is that the movement had roots in the colonial contexts and took a strong footing after the end of the Sikh militancy. The rise of charismatic leaders like *Guru* Gian Nath (d. 1998), is therefore fundamental in this process. While his *ashram* at *Valmiki Tirath* isn't the only symbol of *Valmiki* identity in Punjab,[4] its persistent presence has definitely contributed towards the consolidation of the modern *Valmiki* identity. One of the main contentious issues, however, concerns the question of *Valmiki* sacred texts.

Valmiki temples affiliated with the *Gian Nath Valmiki Ashram*, both in the diaspora and in India, venerate the *bani* (poetic compositions) of *Guru* Gian Nath and the *Valmiki Ramayana*. Both these texts are placed inside the respective *palkis* (palanquin-alter) of their temples. *Bhagwan* Valmiki as the progenitor of Rama's tale, a benevolent being who gave protection to Sita, brought up her brave sons Lav and Kush, and who defeated Rama's army and even tied up Hanuman, places the sage Valmiki above the narratives of the Hindu tradition. This transcendence of *Valmiki* narrative shapes *Valmiki* temples in the diaspora too. The *Valmiki sangat* (community congregation) at Birmingham in the UK, which was registered in 2011 had also actively engaged with the *Ashram* in Amritsar for a very long period.[5] In fact, the earliest video recording of *Guru* Gian Nath is related to his visit to the UK in 1982 and must have been recorded by the *sangat* over there. Interestingly, the bodily identity of *Guru* Gian Nath is conflated with that of a *Nath jogi*: sporting matted hair locks, *rudraksha* necklace, and ears adorned in the *kanphata* style (pierced ear lobes). He lived the life of an ascetic and his *Ashram* follows the practice of spiritual succession. A living *Guru* is central to

[4] There are other organisations such as the *Bhartiya Valmik Dharma Samaj, Jai Valmiki Majhabi Sikh Sanstha*, *Dhuna Sahib Trust*, and *Adhas Samaj* to name a few.

[5] *Jagat Guru Valmik Ji Maharaj Mandir Gian Ashram* (UK) was registered as a trust on April 19, 2011 and it states the following as part of its charitable objectives: "To advance the Valmiki religion in the UK for the benefit of the public through the holding of prayer meetings, lectures, public celebration of religious festivals, producing and/or distributing literature on Valmiki teachings to enlighten others about the Valmiki religion with particular emphasis on the works of: Bhagavan Valmiki (Ramayana and Yog Vasistha); and Sri Sri 108 Sat Guru Gian Nath Ji Maharaj (*Dharm Shastar*)." Register of Charities, Charity Commission for England and Wales: https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/5024893/governing-document. Accessed 05.03.2023.

the practices of the community, with the Punjabi vernacular being used as the medium of his teachings. *Guru* Gian Nath's *bani* and *Dharm Shastar* have been composed in Punjabi. Valmiki here is imagined as an omnipresent monotheistic God.

The shaping of the *Valmiki Tirath* is also attributed to the efforts made by yet another important institution: the *Aadi Dharm Samaj* (*Aadhas*) based in Jalandhar. The movement came into being in 1994 and has ever since been playing an important role to ensure educational progress among the *Valmiki*s in the past several decades. It states the following among its major objectives:[6]

> This movement is built around weaving an aboriginal past, similar to Dravidian movements of South India & Naagvanshis of North India, whereby section of Valmekins through reformulating the ideas about past seek to renegotiate their present which is rooted in their everyday experience. It is being accomplished through writing of a new tract, a new flag [sky blue], a new symbol Aadi Paavan Satya, new rituals Yogamrit (Satsang), Aatamyog (Vivah-Nikah marriages) and inventing a new calendar through naming the days and months of year more in tune with the Aadi-Culture. This process of reformulation of the past involves the repositioning the figure of Lord Valmeki as Aadi-Guru, Srishtikarta Valmeki Dayavaan, the first among the lineage of the Aadi-icons from the Aboriginal Golden Age when the 'Aadi' people ruled before the advent of Aryans in India.

Evidently, *Aadha*s aims to organise itself along the lines of the *Adi* movement. We are already aware of such strong movements in the Madras presidency called the *Adi-Dravida* movement (Trautmann 2006), the *Adi-Andhra* identity, and the strong anti-caste movement among the *Mahar*s of Maharashtra, all of which are based on a colonial narrative of the Aryan invasion in India (Jaffrelot 2003). Unlike the *Guru* Gian *Ashram* tradition of venerating Ramayana, the *Aadha*s leader Darshan Ratan Ravan believes that the *Valmiki Ramayan* that centres on Rama's figure—an Aryan, and the demonisation of Ravana—an aboriginal figure, renders the text ineffective in terms of the function of articulating a respectable identity for *Valmiki*s.[7] Instead, Ravan centres the movement around a lesser-known text called *Yoga Vashistha* which was also written by Valmiki. *Aadhas* has published a summary version of the text calling it *Adi Nityanem*, and made the chanting of the text a mandatory part of everyday rituals among followers. *Yoga Vashishtha* has been dated to a period that is as early as the sixth or seventh century BCE and on the other hand, to a period even as late as the 14th century. It contains over 29,000 verses, and the principal protagonists of the *Yoga Vashishtha* are Rama and Vashishtha. The text consists of spiritual instructions that are given to Rama by the sage Vashishtha. In the beginning of the text, Rama laments that there is no pleasure to be found in the world. Disgusted with the prospect of continuing in his worldly duties, he approaches Vashishtha for knowledge and to gain the

[6] Cf. 'For dignified acceptance of Dalit identity': http://aadhasbharat.com/about-us.php. Accessed 05.03.2023.

[7] Cf. Yogesh Kumar (2022) for details about the role of Darshan Ratan 'Ravan' in raising *Valmiki* consciousness in Punjab. The latter also authored a book on the status of the *Valmiki* community (Ravan 2010).

experience of liberation.[8] The text, therefore, humanises Rama and unlike the Ramayana which identifies him as an incarnation of Vishnu, the *Yoga Vashishtha* places him as a pupil of sage Vashishtha.

Image 4.10: The golden idol of Bhagwan Valmiki holding a pen. Image Source: Yogesh Snehi

[8] Cf. Chapplel's "Introduction" (1984: ix-xi), in Venkatesanand's *The Concise Yoga Vasistha* (1984).

Among the major tasks of the organisation, the *Aadhas* seek to liberate all such Valmiki *tirathsthalas* (pilgrimage sites) in India languishing under 'the bonds of orthodox Hindus' and help these to adopt titles and identities from their own aboriginal pasts. It is in this role that the *Aadhas* emerges as an important player in the imagination of the *Valmiki Tirath*. Darshan Ratan Ravan is an important figure supporting the emergence of the *Valmiki Tirath*. Even *Sardar* Prakash Singh Badal attended his congregation in 2016 that took place just one year before the assembly elections.[9] It is through Darshan Ratan Ravan's intervention that the *Yoga Vashishtha* and not the *Ramayana* found a place in the *palki*, along with the institution of a life-sized idol of *Bhagwan* Valmiki in the central hall of the *Valmiki* Temple situated in the midst of the *sarovar* at the *Valmiki Tirath* (Image 7). Thus, it was both the Gian Nath *Ashram* and the *Aadhas* that played an important role in the emergence of *Valmiki Tirath*. In fact, there has already been a significant circulation of ideas and ideals concerning the *Valmiki* identity mediated by Dalit intellectuals. Mention should be made over here of Omprakash Valmiki's book *Safai Devta* (2019) and Sanjeev Khudshah's book *Safai Kamgaar Samuday* (2005), in which they both lament the dormant status of the *Valmiki*s. They further lay out a forward direction, facilitating the articulation of a distinctive aboriginal identity for *Valmiki*s. The emergence of *Valmiki Tirath* as part of the *Valmiki* self-respect movement, is now also included in the imagined sacred geography of Amritsar, as a shrine that transcends the *Ram Tirath* identity.

The emergence of such *tirthas* in India follow the recounting of repetitive tales that are associated with epic and *puranic* texts and each such place is inscribed in a regional (*sthala*) *puranic* tradition. As Diana L. Eck states, it is often in the rendition of its *mahatmya* (exaltation of the greatness of a particular place) that a local *Tirtha* will subscribe to the larger all-India tradition, by linking its sanctity to the great events of the Epics and *Purana*s. She adds (Eck 1981: 336):

> This might be seen as the geographical equivalent of Sanskritization. The forest sojourn of the Pāṇḍavas or the adventures of Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa are especially suited to this kind of local subscription …. In this way countless local *tīrthas* claim their part in a larger tradition. And in each case, the stories told recount not a generalized sense of divine presence at the *tīrtha*, but a very particular sense of the circumstances, the crisis, the place, and the person involved in the appearance of the deity there. Every *tīrtha*'s tale is of hierophany, the residents of heaven breaking in upon the earth.

Valmiki Tirath, while placed within the same generalised pattern of its emergence, however, deviates from the above stated pattern. In its placement as the abode of Valmiki, both the *Guru Gian Ashram* and *Aadhas* do not subscribe to the scheme of the Sanskritization of the sacred complex. Instead, *Valmiki Tirath* can be placed as a critique of dominant Brahmanic tradition. The ritual practice at the shrine departs from Brahmanic ritualism, as well as its sacred symbols. The shrine complex appears to be

[9] Cf. 'There is no need to make an appeal, community knows whom to vote for', in *Indian Express* (Chandigarh Edition), 02.12.2016: https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/valmiki-temple-prakash-singh-badal-there-is-no-need-to-make-an-appeal-community-knows-whom-to-vote-for-says-darshan-ratan-ravana-4406047/. Accessed 05.03.2023.

closer to the *Nath panth*, a medieval tradition that was also critical of Brahmanic ritualism, before it became *Sanatan*-ized in the 20th century. Except for the *Guru Gian Nath Ashram*, the temples dedicated to *Mata* Lal Devi *Ji*, the shrines associated with Lav, Kush and Sita, and the two smaller temples towards the entrance of the *parikrama* route, and all the other mostly *Sanatan* spaces, have mostly emerged during and after the 1990's. While the parallel imagination of *Ram Tirath* and *Valmiki Tirath* might still continue to be articulated along the periphery, it is the identity of *Bhagwan* Valmiki that has found its central place in the *Tirath*.

Valmiki Tirath, thus, subverts the majoritarian project to box Dalits as *Sanatani* Hindus. However, in the Sikh majority state of Punjab this self-expression also makes a space for *Majhabi*s whose exclusion from The Sikh Gurdwara (Amendment) Act 2016 inversely explains their continued association with the Valmiki self. Assertion of *Valmiki* identity also offers a critique of what Joel Lee (2021) terms as 'deceptive majority'. Thus, despite the reformist attempts to dissuade the scheduled castes of north India form venerating their Muslim patron saints, mystics and ancestors like Lal Beg, and subsuming them within the broader contours of Hinduism, the 'Untouchables' castes continue to articulate an independent identity which is facilitated by the broader contours of representative democracy in India. In addition to this, unlike Mircea Eliade's schematic argument on the 'process of infantilization' that marks the subsuming of the popular/lower traditions in the dominant symbols (1967: 443-44), the emergence of *Valmiki Tirath*, on the contrary, destabilises the all-subsuming *Sanatani* discourse. This articulation is embedded as much in the trans-regional expression of a Dalit self, as much as local/ regional contours of socio-religious and political space of Punjab.

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