

Sree Jamlal's Book

ANDREW EAGLE

Village police officer and secretary of the local indigenous association in Dinajpur's Ghoraghat, Sree Jamlal Robidas, 60, is proud to show a copy of a manuscript he has. The simple book which is not grander than a basic exercise book, has well-decorated but worn and faded pages. Nonetheless, in his modest family home, it's treasured. It's a religious text.

He says the Robidas community in Bangladesh, whose ancestors inhabited a stretch of territory from Bhojpur in India's Bihar to Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, speak Nagri language. "We Robidas can be found in many districts. Around 200 families live in Ghoraghat."

Nagri or Nagari is a term used to describe an ancient writing script of northern India and collectively its descendant languages and scripts, which include Bengali. The historical script of Sylheti is called Syloti-Nagri.

But the term Nagri is also a commonly used synonym for the Devanagari script of Hindi; and it is Hindi or perhaps Bhojpuri, another Devanagari-script-based language native to the region of Sree Jamlal's ancestors, which would appear to adorn the tired pages. He suggests both Hindi and Bhojpuri are alternative names for their language.

While the Devanagari script may be common in South Asia, the religion that is the subject of Sree Jamlal's book is more unique.

"We are not Hindu," says Baduram Robidas, the 47-year-old religious secretary of the national Robidas Development Association. "We don't believe in protima (the religious statues common to Hindu temples) and we don't observe their pujas. We have two gurus, Sheo Narayan Swami and Ravidas."

Baduram similarly estimates that about 200 Robidas families, whose men by custom take the name Robidas while the title Robi is included in many women's names, live in his home town of Gaibandha.

Their principle guru Ravidas was a radical mystic of the fourteenth (or fifteenth) century who challenged the caste system and idea of untouchability. Born into the dalit Chamar caste in a village near Varanasi, Ravidas taught that one is not distinguished by caste but personal action.

"If you have an honest heart you have no need to go to the holy Ganges," Baduram quotes of Ravidas, "The water in your little pot: that will be your Ganges water."



Sree Jamlal Robidas with his family in Dinajpur's Ghoraghat. He estimates that there are 200 Robidas families in the area.



The book of teachings, rules of worship and mantras of the religion of the Robidas, worn and faded but treasured at the home of Sree Jamlal Robidas in Dinajpur's Ghoraghat.

"If you are born a Brahmin but don't have the true spirit or knowledge then Ravidas says you are not Brahmin," he explains. "If you are born a Robidas and your heart is good it does not matter."

Ravidas believed everybody had a right to read sacred texts and worship God, in contrast to traditional Brahminical belief. He also emphasised

the value of honest labour – another challenge to the established hierarchy. He was something of a rebel theologian.

According to Baduram, the motto of Ravidas's teachings is *shohong sotho nomo*, which means "To live with truth."

Ravidas is also followed by Sikhs, with 41 verses of his poetry included in the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib. "Even Guru Nanak studied Ravidas," says Baduram with pride.

However, theological differences in Punjab over whether Ravidas was a guru, although he was born

Chamar could be killed and that their bodies were left in the street to be eaten by dogs and foxes," Baduram says, "Sheo Narayan Swami named the religion of Ravidas as the true religion."

Swaminarayan is indeed famous for considering and helping the poor and vulnerable, but while some say he worked towards ending the caste system he was not entirely against it like Ravidas. A bigger difference might be that while Swaminarayan protested animal sacrifice and preached lacto vegetarianism, Ravidas's family were tanners, an occupation often associated with Chamars.

The Robidas of Bangladesh, like the family of their guru Ravidas, traditionally work with leather. "Leather and shoe-making are our custom," says Sree Jamlal, whose yard features a pile of drying goatskins. "But most Robidas are poor, living hand-to-mouth, and they take day labour or rickshaw driving jobs." He estimates only 2 percent of Ghoraghat's Robidas families are solvent and that the literacy rate is "almost zero."

His own son studied up to class 8. "It's difficult for our children to complete their education," says Sree Jamlal, "due to our financial condition."

Similarly, Baduram's father was a cobbler, and from adolescence he used to help with the family trade. But Baduram was more fortunate, being able to complete his BA. Subsequently, he landed a job

with famous footwear manufacturer Bata, where he still works as the Lab and Quality Assurance Officer at their Savar factory.

In his spare time Baduram hopes to contribute to his community, which is not officially recognised as either an ethnic or religious minority in Bangladesh. Baduram's primary concern, however, is that knowledge of their unique religious traditions is being lost.

"The new generation has mostly been converted to Hinduism," he laments, "because they can't read the script of Nagri." Baduram is writing a book to address the issue. His book, "Guru Grontha" – "The Book of the Guru" – written in Bangla, aims to make accessible to a Bangla-reading Robidas youth their true religious heritage.

It can be that before too many days have gone by there'll be a volume of new pages at Sree Jamlal's house – a new book that is equally treasured but this time written in everyday, familiar, Bangla letters.



Goatskins in Sree Jamlal's yard. The Robidas of Bangladesh are tanners and cobblers by tradition.

before the first Sikh guru, or merely a holy man, brought about a schism resulting in the Ravidassia religion. Punjab's Ravidassias call their house of worship a *bhawan* or *gurughar*.

Though in essence the same religion, how much this subsequent Punjabi history is reflected in the localised traditions of the Robidas in Bangladesh is uncertain, especially given Baduram's inclusion of the second guru, Sheo Narayan Swami.

More commonly known as Swaminarayan, this later guru born in 1781 founded the Swaminarayan Hindu sect in Gujarat – but he was born in Chhapaiya village near Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, about 170 kilometres from Gorakhpur. The proximity of his birthplace to the ancestral home of the Robidas may explain, in part, his influence.

However, according to Baduram there is another reason for venerating Swaminarayan, a guru who had followers from several religions. "Sheo Narayan Swami observed the position of dalits and how Brahmins mistreated them. He saw how easily a