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Kabir: An Advocate of Social Reform

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Abstract:

Kabir is a fifteenth century weaver who was a mystic, poet and saint of India. His story is surrounded by contradictory legends that emanate from both Hindu and Islamic sources, which claim him by turns as a Sufi and a Hindu saint. Kabir was dissatisfied with the prevailing system of religious bigotry. He was a hater of religious exclusivism, and sought, above all things, to initiate human beings into the liberty of the children of God. He openly criticized all sects and gave a new direction to the Indian philosophy. Kabir composed his poetry in a pithy and earthly style replete with surprise and inventive imagery. His poems resonate with praise for the true guru who reveals the divine through direct experience, and denounce more usual ways of attempting god-union such as chanting, austerities, etc. The verse form Kabir spoke in is his two-line couplets known as the Kabir's *dohe*. The *dohas* reflect the deep philosophical thinking of the poet-saint. The present paper attempts to deliberate on how Kabir appropriated his poetic talents to bring about social reform in the society while condemning the social evils that were prevalent during his time and how he openly criticized those religious leaders who promoted hatred and intolerance.

Keywords: mystic, legend, Sufi, saint, dohe, religious bigotry, social reform, social evils.

Kabir is one of those leading poets of India whose verses are on the lips of common people. The themes he touched upon are appealing to everyone and therefore his poetry is enjoyed by even a commoner to this day. His poetry touches the soul, the conscience, and the sense of awareness and the vitality of existence in a manner that is unequalled in both simplicity and style. It is by his wonderful songs, the spontaneous expression of his vision and his love, and not by the didactic teachings associated with his name, that he makes his immortal appeal to the heart. In his poems a wide range of mystical emotion is brought into play, expressed in homely metaphors and religious symbols drawn from Hindu and Islamic beliefs. His poems abound in legends, the ideological message of which appealed to the poor and oppressed. Kabir had a humble

upbringing in a weaver's community. The poetry of Kabir presents before a reader the outpouring of a simple weaver hailing from a common background. (Dharwadker: 5). In the overview for Charlotte Vaudeville's historical book on Kabir, the OUP has called Kabir as one of India's greatest religious and literary figures who was a symbol of communal harmony and religious tolerance. Considering him as the medieval counterpart of Mahatma Gandhi, as a poet whose verses continue to enjoy enormous popularity, Kabir has been given the status of a revolutionary poet who prefigures Tyagaraja and Tagore. Born a lower-caste Muslim weaver, Kabir opposed superstition, empty ritualism and bigotry. His writings include scathing attacks against Brahmanical pride, caste prejudice and untouchability, as well as against the dogmatism and bigotry he perceived within Islam. As Vinay Dharwadker in *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs* translates it:

Whenever they touch someone/they bathe to purify themselves.

Tell them who's really the inferior one. (p.149)

I've seen many masters and teachers-/they read their Book, their Quran.

They teach many students their business tricks-/that's all they know. (p.161)

If Khuda inhabits the mosque,/then whose play-field is the rest of the world?

If Rama lives in the idol at the pilgrim-station,/then who controls the chaos outside? (p.203)

Although a large portion of his poetry deals with mystical experiences but simultaneously he tries to rid the society of the diseases which impede its progress. He is a missionary poet and his mission is to reform the world. As Underhill declares, "The poet Kabir is one of the most interesting personalities in the history of Indian mysticism. A great religious reformer, the founder of a sect to which nearly a million northern Hindus still belong, it is yet supremely as a mystical poet that Kabir lives for us....In these poems, a wide range of mystical emotion is brought into play; from the loftiest abstractions, the most otherworldly passion for the infinite, to the most intimate and personal realization of God, expressed in homely metaphors and religious symbols drawn indifferently from Hindu and Mohammedan belief...He never adopted the life of a professional ascetic, or retired from the world in order to devote himself to bodily mortifications and the exclusive pursuit of the contemplative life. Side by side with his interior

life of adoration, its artistic expression in music and words- for he was a skilled musician as well as a poet- he lived the sane and diligent life of the Oriental craftsman. All the legends agree on this point: that Kabir was a weaver, a simple and unlettered man, who earned his living at the loom. Like Paul the tentmaker, Boehme the cobbler, Bunyan the tinker, Tersteegen the ribbon maker, he knew how to combine vision and industry; the work of his hands helped rather than hindered the impassioned meditation of his heart... Again and again he extols the life of home, the value and reality of diurnal existence, with its opportunities for love and renunciation; pouring contempt- upon the professional sanctity of the Yogi, who “*has a great beard and matted locks, and looks like a goat*”. (Tagore: 5-7).

The primary purpose of his legends was “protest against social discrimination and economic exploitation” (Lorenzen: 5-6). It is quite evident that Kabir had a common dislike for the existing systems based on mere ritualism and exclusivism and stressed on the purity of the inner self and the unity of mankind.

Broadcast, O mullah,/your merciful call to prayer-

You yourself are a mosque/with ten doors.

In the name of Allah sacrifice/your anger, error, impurity-

Chew up your senses/become a patient man. (p.121)

Kabir tried to set his people on the same path which Tagore later begged God to grant to his countrymen:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action--

Into that heaven of freedom, My Father, let my country awake. (Gitanjali: 35)

Kabir is one among those sages, saints, poets, writers and thinkers who have shaped, moulded and refined the inner self and influenced the life of both the Hindus and Muslims. With the clarity in vision, simple and balanced philosophy, practical ideas for a healthy, happy and pleasant life, strong opposition to everything unworthy for human beings Sant Kabir became a legend and a common familiar name for poor and rich, literate and illiterate, and foolish, wise or enlightened during his life-time. The Bhakti movement best represented by Kabir's thought critiqued the existing socio-religious assumptions.

We're all one skin, one bone, one shit, one piss/one blood, one intestine.

All of creation's composed from a single point of origin-

Then who's a Brahmin, who's a Shudra? (p.171)

The life of Kabir is both worldly and spiritual. He saw, felt, experienced, conjured up and boldly expressed all that happened around him. According to Professor Prasoona, "Kabir advocated the positive qualities and attitude, good work, purity and propriety, which he thought to be essential for balanced and full living; for exemplary happiness, humility and contentment...During the time of Kabir, as usual, four distinct classes of people lived at places in harmony; and at other places jealousy and enmity was growing. The ruler and higher class used to get disproportionate share in wealth and respect, the powerful from the higher class and the business class formed the 2nd biggest and most dominant middle class. Though the formers were respected earned enough to live well within means, but the poor, and the people from low caste were not getting square deal. They were neither working in the right direction nor getting the right support...In his time, Kabir fought against all disparities. That is the reason that Kabir is today needed most for wiping the social evils out and for the purification of inner and outer self. (Prasoona: 69-72)

Kabir is a mystical poet whose primary concern is search for the supreme God but since he lives among people in a society, therefore he closely watches the working of social structure he lives in and feels deeply hurt at the suffering of the common people. He focuses on societal problems and tries to rectify them. Social reform is his main concern. Kabir "never loses touch with diurnal existence, never forgets the common life. His feet are firmly planted upon the earth; his lofty and passionate apprehensions are perpetually controlled by the activity of a sane and

vigorous intellect, by the alert commonsense so often found in persons of real mystical genius. The constant insistence on simplicity and directness, the hatred of all abstractions and philosophizing, the ruthless criticism of external religion: these are amongst his most marked characteristics". (Tagore: 13)

Kabir not only highlighted the faults of the people, but suggested remedies too. He is a great satirist whose aim is to reform the people. Therefore he does not hesitate in launching scathing attacks on the perpetrators of vicious crimes. "The most important aspect of Kabir's life and thought is that, he not only pointed out the maladies and medicines but also fought hard to make the men of his time more human and at least a bit divine. He raised fingers and pointed out the blunders. Kabir is very open-minded and positive. He clearly suggests that *those who will plant thorny acacia (babool) will not get sweet and juicy mangoes (ama) to eat*. The struggle between the minority and majority; higher caste and lower caste, forwards and backwards, the rich and the poor, the owners and servants and between the employers is at their worst. The people are mad after money, wealth, cosmetics, clothes, cars and clubs. Out of four manly deeds, they have forgotten Religion and Salvation. Kabir has many things to say to them: *What is the need of changing the hut into tall marbled buildings when one is not sure when he/she will die? Why should I get temples and palaces constructed when I can't live in it even for a minute after death? Why to go for acres and hectares of land when at the end only 6 feet land is needed for cremation? Kabir suggests that one should neither boast nor try for more. He should possess land according to his physical need...* A person born in the family of a Brahman is definitely a Shudra if he has failed to refine and purify himself. Kabir asserts and makes it clear for all, that the system of birth is the same: *All take birth through the womb; all have blood in their veins, only Shudras don't have blood and the Brahmins don't have milk*". (Prasoon: 73-74)

Kabir is a champion of peace. He does not approve of killing any living creature. He wants the world to be an abode of calmness and tranquility. He wants balance in everything which is the only solution for lasting peace and abiding health.

In wakefulness and sleep, brother, /you've squandered your life.

You've stacked up wealth and material things-/ all of which are someone else's. (p.118)

But “Unfortunately, those so called civilized and cultured people are behaving in the most wild and savage way, killing animals and men, uprooting and cutting forests and destroying life for money and pleasure. They have become cannibals and killing children for flesh, they are the ‘merchants of death’ and human organs. Kabir would never have approved of any such heinous crime. He would have fought hard to eradicate such evils. With the sole aim at improvement and emancipation, Kabir wrote and taught the people to reject the vile nature and sinful acts. He denounced excessive indulgence in sex which takes the very energy and sap from life. He makes the people conscious towards the lust and sensuous pleasure. *The sensuous persons lose the religious spirit only for the momentary pleasure of the senses. They lose the diamond and waste the life. (Prasoon: 76)*

Kabir is conscious of the trouble caused by improper use of language like as backbiting, slandering, cursing, swearing etc. therefore he suggested that one should always speak well that too in a sweet manner. This, according to Kabir, is a mark of real learning which will help in improving human relations.

While reading the books people died but failed to become learned.

They will be wise and learned who read and know love (prem) which has only two and half letters.

Say something sweetly without rage and jealousy

So that the self cools down and others are pacified. (Prasoon: 77)

Kabir’s poetry is now read and appreciated worldwide with each passing day. His message has got more relevance in the modern times when the world is beset with new challenges of extremism and violence. As the growing interest in exploring the past heritage will stimulate the researchers to work on Kabir again, his universal teachings and advocacy of social reforms will attract the interest of more readers in the times to come.

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