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Sant Kabir : A social and Religious Reformer

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Abstract

Sant Kabir Das is considered as the most influential and most remarkable poet of the Bhakti and Sufi movement in Northern India. He was strictly against the practice of hypocrisy and didn't like people maintaining double standards. He always preached people to be compassionate towards other living beings and practice true love. He always objected the ritualistic and ascetic methods as a means of salvation. He openly criticized all sects and gave a new direction to the Indian philosophy, with his straight forward approach on various aspects of human existence. He exposed uselessness of all the superstitions, everything that can be termed supernatural and everything that is unverifiable in principle. It is important to point out that Kabir was not preaching against any religion but against the hypocrisy being committed by people in the name of religion. He, thus, tried to bridge the gap among various castes and religious sects. It is for this reason that Kabir is held in high esteem all over the world.

Key Words : Vedanta, Sufism, Vaishnavism, Nath sampradaya, hypocrisy, ritualism.

Sant Kabir Das is considered as the most influential and most remarkable poet of the Bhakti and Sufi movement in Northern India. The name Kabir comes from Arabic Al-Kabīr which means 'The Great' - the 37th Name of God in the Qur'an and Das means 'slave' or 'servant' in Sanskrit. He lived during the close of the 14th century and in the beginning of the 15th century. The birth of Kabir remains shrouded in mystery and legend. Authorities disagree on both when he was born and who his parents were. According to one legend, his mother was a Brahmin who became pregnant after a visit to a Hindu shrine. As she was unwed, she abandoned Kabir, who was found and adopted by a Muslim weaver named Niru. When he grew up, he

became disciple of Ramanand Swami. Kabir's life was centred round Kashi, also called Banaras (Varanasi)

Amongst the several saints that have blessed our country, Kabir Das, the well known mystic poet, deserves a major credit for bringing about a social and religious revolution. He was a man of principles and practiced what he preached. People called him by different names like Das, sant, bhakta etc. As Das, he was referred to as the servant of humanity and thus a servant of divinity.

In the popular book called '*Kabir: the Great Mystic*' the author Issac Ezekiel says,

"Kabir's songs seek no body's approbation. They seek no sanction, ask for no approval, search for no popularity, invite no commendation, and crave no compliment. They stand independent of these considerations and they constitute the most uninhibited literature, the freest of the free writing, ever produced by a saint."

Kabir was strictly against the practice of hypocrisy and didn't like people maintaining double standards. He always preached people to be compassionate towards other living beings and practice true love. He urged the need to have company of good people that adhere to values and principles He supported the idea of minimalist living that was advocated by the Sufis. Kabir's poetry is a reflection of his philosophy about life. His writings were mainly based on the concept of reincarnation and karma. Kabir's philosophy about life was very clear-cut. He believed in living life in a very simplistic manner. He has very beautifully expressed his values and beliefs in his writings that include dohas, poems, Ramainis, Kaharvaas and Shabads.

Sant Kabir was against the caste system imposed by the Hindu community. He said that there should be no discrimination on the basis of caste, and rejected the authority of both the Veda and the Koran. He laid great emphasis on the equality of men. He has beautifully expressed it in one of his Sakhiyans :

"Unche kul ka janmiya, je karni unch na hoi,
Subaran kalas sura bhara, sadhu ninda soi."

(Tagore, 1.11)

He preached a religion of love which aimed at promoting unity amongst all castes and creeds.

He even did not believe in idol worship. On the contrary, he advocated the Vedantic concepts of atman. He was also against the performance of rituals and superstitions or pilgrimage to **the so-called holy places**.

He says,

"Mauko kaha dhundhe bande, mein to tere paas mein
Na mei deval na mei masjid, na kabe Kailas mei
Na to kaune kriya karm mei, nahi yog bairag mei
Khoji hoi to turte miliho, pal bhar ki talaas mei
Kahe Kabir suno bhai sadho, sab svaso ki svaas mei"

(Tagore, 1.13)

Kabir is believed to have lived and worked in the period from 1399 to 1495. This was a period of great upheavals in the Indian subcontinent. The people were already under the influence of various religions such as Nath, Buddhism, Yogi, Shaiva, Shakt, Vaishnav, etc., while Islam and Sufism had also gained ground. Of these, the state power was under the domination of Islam. There was fierce conflict amongst the advocates of various religions and each one was preoccupied with extending the influence of his particular religion over the masses. This conflict was giving rise to a process of unification on the one hand, while leading to the development of a purist and ritualistic process of religion on the other. Each religion was promoting its own specific rituals and this was hindering the unification process. Kabir targeted these rituals and in the process, he did not spare the rituals of any religion.

Kabir was full of humility and was the first saint to reconcile Hinduism and Islam. He sincerely tried to emphasise the unity of Islam and Hinduism by preaching those virtues which were common to both religions. He made no distinction between Hindus and Muslims. To Kabir, Allah and Rama were but different names for the same Supreme Being. To him, Hindus and Muslims were "pots of the same clay". He had a strong faith in the concept of oneness of God. He advocated the notion of Koi bole Ram Ram Koi Khudai.... The basic idea was to spread the message that whether you chant the name of Hindu God or Muslim God, the fact is that there is only one God who is the creator of this beautiful world.

Kabir played the role of a teacher and social reformer by the medium of his writings, which mainly consisted of the two line verses called Dohas. He had a strong belief in Vedanta, Sufism, Vaishnavism and Nath sampradaya. He applied the knowledge that he gained through the various experiences of his life. He was always in the pursuit of truth and nothing could hold him back. Kabir was well known for his religious affiliation. In an introduction to her book 'A Weaver Named Kabir', Charlotte Vaudeville rightly stated, "Kabir is one of the best known and most revered names in Indian tradition. From the Punjab to Bengal and from the Himalayan frontiers to South India, he has long been hailed by Hindus and Muslims alike as a great mystic and bold religious reformer."

Another feature of Kabir is worth noting, that he laid great emphasis on earning by one's own labour. Throughout his life, he never gave up his work as a weaver. He was staunchly supporter of the working people and he remained the saint of the masses all his life. A significant feature of the Bhakti movement is that most of its activists were from the toiling sections of society, especially the craftsmen. Most of the saints were from the untouchables and backward (dalit) castes. In a sense, this may be understood as an ideological-philosophical protest by the toiling masses of India of the Middle Ages, against the old ideas and the old power structure.

The toiling masses had an entirely different outlook on life from the upper classes of society. They spoke of the oneness of the soul and god, of unity and equality of human beings. They spoke of harmonious co-existence and sharing of weal and woe. Pretence, demonstrativeness, ritualism, all this had no meaning for them. Kabir never spoke of running away from the struggle of life and becoming a mendicant (sanyasi).

He spoke of devotion to god while leading a domestic life and working for one's living. He says:

Sai itna dijiye, yame kutumb samaaye

Mein bhi bhukha na rahu,sadhu na bhukha jaye

(O Lord, give me as much as is needed to fulfill the needs of my family, that I may not go hungry and the saint who comes to my door does not go hungry.)

(Tagore, 1.16)

If there is too much water, the boat gets flooded. The same is true of the home. If you have more than you need, then give with both hands; that is the wise thing to do. Here he talks of social wealth not being merely to fulfill one's needs; if there is excess, then it should be given back to society. This is the value system of the new society based on serving social needs, not of capitalist society based on individual greed. Kabir's partisanship for the poor comes out very powerfully in the following words: *Brave is he who fights for the rights of the weak and poor, who gives up everything but loyally carries on the struggle.*

(Hess, 2.33)

For Kabir, the need for food comes first, then the need for spirituality. He says: *On a hungry stomach one cannot worship the Lord, so take away your rosary.* (Tagore, 2.18)

Kabir is often considered to be a social or religious reformer who tried to bridge the gap among various castes and religious sects. Even though Kabir showed a healthy disregard for conventional boundaries of society and organized religion, his intrinsic pursuit was rooted in spirituality and spirituality alone. In the process of conveying the innate spirituality of all of creation, Kabir, in all likelihood, had to deal with and overcome prevalent parochial barriers.

In fifteenth century, Benaras was the seat of Brahmin orthodoxy and their learning center. Brahmins had strong hold on all the spheres of life in this city. Thus Kabir belonging to a low caste of Julaha had to go through immense tough time of preaching his ideology. Kabir and his followers would gather at one place in the city and meditate. Brahmins ridiculed him for preaching to prostitutes and other low castes. Kabir satirically denounced Brahmins and thus won hearts of people around him. There is no doubt that single most famous important person from the city of Benaras today is none other than Saint Kabir.

As far as Kabir's style is concerned reverend Dr. W. Orr stated: "for sheer vigour of thought and rugged terseness of style, no Bhakti writer can be brought into a comparison with him."

The reason for his forceful and fearless language is easily understood when we realize that priest craft held sway. Religion was reduced to commercial activity for the priest to earn living. They did not instruct people in the religious way of life. They also scorned people of the low-castes from entering temple and reading holy books. They were not given an education. The priest themselves committed evil actions and killing. They formulated elaborated rituals that did not mean anything to the average person. He observed this in both major religions of Hinduism and Islam. He felt that there was no place in spiritual life for such behaviour and he thus spoke out often in confrontational and challenging language, to try to awaken the people to the realization of their errors. He was famous for his contrary sayings (ulti Bani) and challenged the priests to see if they had the spiritual wisdom to supply the right answers.

Kabir through his couplets not only reformed the mindset of common villagers and low caste people but give them self confidence to question Brahmins. It was 100 years after him that Tulsidas broke the hegemony of Brahmins by writing Ram Charitra Manas, a poem of Ramayana at Banaras which went against the tradition of Brahmins. Kabir was in fact first person to go against Brahmins and be so successful. Banaras was devastated by an attack by a Muslim invader Tamur Lang or "Tamur the lame" during his time. Kabir also denounced mullahs and their rituals of bowing towards kaba five times a day. Because of open condemnation of established and popular religions, Kabir became an object of the wrath of both Hindus and Muslims in and around Banaras. Kabir travelled in and around Banaras to preach his beliefs. He spent his last 40 days living in a place where it was believed that if you die you will born as a Donkey in next life.

It is not surprising that Kabir's satire was brought to bear not simply on the vices and weaknesses of men but reached through and beyond them to the very system themselves. It was the authority of Vedas and Quran that more than the authority of Brahmin or Qazi which Kabir attacked. He rebelled against the pretension of resolving by the means of books or by way of authority, the mystery of human conditions and the problem of liberation (Moksha).He says.”

“Pothe Padh Padh Jag Mua, Pandit Bhayo Na Koye

Dhai Aakhar Prem Ka, Jo Padhe so Pandit Hoye”

(Vaudeville, XXXIII)

In summing up we can say that Kabir’s poetry reflects a reformist’s zeal to change the society by challenging idolatry, blind rituals, unhealthy customs and the very concept of God. As a true humanist, he rationally proves the futility of all religious rituals and social customs. He questions the very logic of all these senseless rituals practised by people blindly. Kabir advocated the need of humanist values. He exposed uselessness of all the superstitions, everything that can be termed supernatural and everything that is unverifiable in principle.

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