



Kabir And Bhakti Thought In Twenty First Century

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Abstract:

Kabir is a fifteenth century weaver who was a mystic, poet and saint of India. His story is shrouded in contrary legends that emanate from both Hindu and Islamic sources, which claim him simultaneously as a Sufi and as a Hindu saint. Kabir was disappointed 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. 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 Bhakti thought he espoused revolves around the idea that the path to salvation or spiritual fulfillment can be achieved through unwavering devotion and heartfelt love for the divine. It stresses on surrendering ones ego and humility and the acknowledgment of one's limitations in the face of the infinite divine. Therefore Kabir was a true Bhakti emphasizing a deeply personal and emotional devotion to a higher power and carrying a strong sense of love, surrender, and humility. The present paper attempts to deliberate on how Kabir appropriated his poetic talents to propagate Bhakti teachings and how the Bhakti perspective is valid and viable in the contemporary world.

Keywords: mystic, legend, saint, Sufi, austerities, Bhakti Perspective.

Poetry is an art form that has been cherished throughout human history for its ability to capture and express the depths of human emotions, thoughts, and experiences. It has the power to evoke empathy, provoke introspection, and challenge societal norms. Poets can use their words to raise awareness of injustices and to challenge the status quo. They can write about issues such as racism, inequality, war, poverty, and environmental degradation, and they can use their platform to give voice to marginalized or oppressed groups. Many famous poets, such as Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, and Pablo Neruda, were known for their social and political engagement through their poetry. They used their work to critique oppressive systems and to offer hope and inspiration to those fighting for change. In the same breath, mention may be made of poets like Kabir, Sheikh Nooruddin, Tagore, Yeats etc. who used poetry to praise the ultimate creator and uplift the

earthly self to cherish contiguity with the supreme Self. Besides, there objective was to propagate harmony and fraternity among the people and bring masses close to their God.

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. He was truly a champion of Bhakti movement and disseminated Bhakti teachings across the world.

The Bhakti perspective emphasizes the path of devotion and surrender to a higher power or divine being. According to Vinay Dharwadker, Bhakti means “loving devotion to a god or some other appropriate object of worship.” (Dharwadker: 263). Bhakti practitioners cultivate a deep love and reverence for the divine and seek to merge with it through prayer, worship, and other devotional practices. The Bhakti perspective emphasizes the importance of emotional connection and personal relationship with the divine as a means of achieving spiritual fulfillment.

The poetry of Kabir presents before a reader the out-pouring of a simple weaver hailing from a common background. (Dharwadker: 5). 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)

The primary purpose of his legends was “protest against social discrimination and economic exploitation” (Lorenzen: 5-6).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)

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)

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 inharmony; 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 second 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 can be studied as a Bhakti under different criteria. At the core of Bhakti thought is the concept of devotion (Bhakti) and love (prema) for the chosen deity or divine. This love is expressed through prayer, worship, singing of hymns, and other devotional practices. Kabir says,

How can I get to see you now?

Why should my heart be pacified

If you don't let me have a vision of you? (Dharwadker: 140)

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

They will be wise and learned who read and know love

Which has only two and a half letters.(Prasoona:77)

Bhakti thought encourages individuals to surrender their ego and sense of control to the divine. This surrender is marked by humility and the acknowledgment of one's limitations in the face of the infinite divine.

It is needless to ask of a saint the caste to which he belongs;

For the priest, the warrior, the tradesman, and all the

thirty six castes, alike are seeking for the God. (Tagore: 16)

Unlike some other spiritual paths, Bhakti thought emphasizes a personal and emotional connection with the divine. Practitioners often develop a deep and intimate relationship with their chosen deity, viewing them as a friend, parent, or beloved.

O my heart! The Supreme Spirit, the great Master, is near you:

wake, oh wake!

Run to the feet of your Beloved: for your Lord stands near to your head (Tagore; 25)

Bhakti thought often promotes inclusivity and equality by asserting that anyone, regardless of their social status, background, or knowledge, can attain spiritual enlightenment through sincere devotion.

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:74)

Many Bhakti traditions emphasize selfless service (seva) to others as an expression of devotion. Acts of kindness, compassion, and service to fellow beings are considered a way to serve the divine.

Say something sweetly without rage or jealousy so that

The self cools down and others are pacified (Prasoon: 77)

Bhakti thought highlights the importance of cultivating positive emotions like love, joy, and compassion as a means to connect with the divine and achieve spiritual growth.

In moments of happiness and sorrow, truth is revealed.

Just as stars are visible in the night, but disappear during the day.

Looking at the contemporary world which is beset with violence, intolerance, mutual hatred and strife, Kabir's teachings are quite relevant and offer better solution to solve these problems. In a fast-paced and often stressful world, the emotional support and solace provided by Bhakti practices as propounded by Kabir can help individuals cope with challenges and maintain mental well-being. Bhakti practices often bring people together, fostering a sense of community and unity. This is especially important in a globalized world where social connections can sometimes be strained. Bhakti thought promotes ethical values such as compassion, humility, and selflessness, which are relevant for guiding individuals toward a more harmonious and just society. The emphasis on personal transformation through devotion and love can inspire individuals to strive for self-improvement and a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the universe. Therefore it is quite obvious that the Bhakti perspective advocated by Kabir is very relevant and applicable in the contemporary times.

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