

KABIR'S SOCIAL VISION: A STUDY OF HIS ONE HUNDRED  
POEMS (TRANSLATED BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE)

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Kabir Das is one of the three most prominent figures of Hindu Bhakti Movement; the other two are Surdas and Tulsidas. He is widely known for his couplets and songs that connect life and spirituality in a simple yet powerful manner. He has inspired a number of scholars and poets like Rabindranath Tagore. As a religious preacher and a poet, he is surely different from all other poets of his age who wrote before and after him. Foremost among all the mystic poets who occupy the galaxy of Sufi poetry, Kabir was the only poet who was praised by the same people whom he condemned. A fine star of the galaxy of the fifteenth century India, he moved both the educated and uneducated people with the same intensity with his poetic vision. He wrote simple and profound verse and has become the most quoted of all the Indian poets today. During his lifetime Kabir wrote around sixty-one books of which only forty-three have been published. The authenticity of some of these books is doubtful. Only three of these—*Kabir Granthavali* (edited by Dr. Shyam Sunder Das), *Sant Kabir* (edited by Dr. Ram Kumar Verma), and the *Bijak* are supposed to contain the original poems of the poet. The very aim of the present paper is to find the relevance of Kabir's social vision at the present time. The study is mainly focused on the hundred poems of Kabir translated by Rabindranath Tagore.

In order to understand Kabir as a poet and man, one should take note of the historical milieu which served as a background to his songs. Evidences show that he was brought up during the 15<sup>th</sup> century India, a period of political disintegration. The period witnessed a rapid change and fall of ruling dynasties in Delhi. In 1399, the Tughlaq dynasty was replaced by the Taimur dynasty followed by the Sayyid dynasty and finally the Lodis. The Lodis were Afghans and their rise to power was an end to the Turks who had ruled India for more than two centuries. This resulted in the form of commotion and conflict in India. Kabir was born and brought up in this political atmosphere. Kashi and Jaunpur were the two main centers of knowledge reflecting Sufism and Bhaktism at this time. Although Kabir was not a systematic thinker and philosopher, but he expressed something



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which touched the hearts of people directly. He spoke to the people in a direct and spontaneous tone which became capable enough to awake the people from their long sleep of ignorance. What he said during the 15<sup>th</sup> century is very much relevant even today.

Kabir 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 a contemplative life. He never tried to conceal his married life which saints usually attempt to conceal; it was from out of the heart of the common life that he sang his rapturous lyrics of the divine love. Kabir believed in an attributeless, monotheistic God and he addressed Him by various names like Ram, Rahim, Hari and Govind Shahib. His chief focus was on the unity of God with the created world. For this he did not believe in any artificial or hypocritical way, but his focus was on simplicity. He firmly believed that the union with God could be achieved by the individual through mysticism and by following some disciplines in life. Equality of the humankind was the central theme running through most of the songs of Kabir. He strictly condemned the inequality of human beings on the basis of caste, creed, religion color, race and tribe. During the time of Kabir, the Turks and Brahmins were proud of their racial superiority. Attacking on the Turks he says:

Only the one I recognize  
Those who call him two will go to hell  
For they not know the reality.  
All the human beings are sustained by  
the same air and water,  
And are illuminated by the same light;  
All have been formed out by the same  
dust and  
Their creator is the same.

(Kabir, *Pada*, 55)

About Kabir it is said that he never touched the ink and paper with his hands, and never put pen in his fingers. Actually he was very fond of moving from one place to another. During his trips he met a number of scholars and preachers and this made him an experienced poet and philosopher. He used poetry as a weapon to ridicule the trivial customs and traditions prevailing in his society. Poetry to him was a means to express his social, religious, political and philosophical ideas and not an end in itself.



He was not only a religious preacher but a social reformer too. Whatever he thought and expressed through his songs was originally logical. He had the much required sense of self-respect of a poet. Words go that he denied to salute Sikander Lodi in his court and said clearly that he knew only one king and that was lord Rama.

Kabir's poetry is written in a very simple manner and that's why it can be understood with a very simple approach. It requires no intellectual argumentation and critical operation, but a thirstful drinking and assimilated appreciation and enjoyment. It is a call, an invitation, a welcome to those who are seekers not for the sake of aesthetical but of ethical values. Kabir was mainly concerned for the society and its welfare. He strictly ruled out the useless deeds that misguided the common innocent people of the society. Though he was born in a Hindu family and brought up in a Muslim family, but as a poet he belonged to none of these religions. That's why he is very harsh both on the Hindus as well as the Muslims for their mischief and artificial ways of worship. He declared very emphatically that only one's own self could free from the circle of life and death and not the artificial ceremonies of prayer in temple and mosque. Attacking on Hindus he says:

Tell your beads, paint your forehead  
with the mark of your God, and  
wear matted locks long and showy:  
but a deadly weapon is in your heart,  
and how shall you have God?

*(One Hundred Poems of Kabir, LXVII)*

His simple thinking is that if God can be found by worshipping the stone, he would worship the mountain. In the same way, he attacks on the Muslims and says:

The mullah cries aloud to Him: and why?  
Is your lord deaf? The subtle anklets that  
Ring on the feet of an insect when it  
moves  
Are heard by Him.

*(One Hundred Poems of Kabir, LXVII)*

He was of the view that Hindus died worshipping deities and Muslims died going to Haj. He further raises some questions ironically on the approaches of both Hindus and Muslims. He asks:



If God be within the mosque, then to  
whom does this world belong?  
If Ram be within the image which you  
find  
Upon your pilgrimage, then who is there  
To know what happens without?  
Hari is in the east: Allah is in the west.  
Look  
Within your heart, for there you will find  
Both Karim and Ram.

*(One Hundred Poems of Kabir, LXIX)*

Kabir's approach to know God is simple and that's why he preached simple life and suggested the people to focus on purification, forgiveness and service of the suffering humanity:

O Sadhu! Purify your body in the simple  
way.  
As the seed is within the banyan tree, and  
within  
The seed are the flowers, the fruits and  
the shade.

*(One Hundred Poems of Kabir, XLVI)*

He stated that God could be achieved neither by ringing the temple bell nor by worshipping the images of God with flowers and nor by applying austerities in life. He feels that:

The man who is kind and who practices  
righteousness  
Who remains passive amidst the  
Affairs of the world, who considers all  
Creatures on earth as his own self  
He attains the immortal Being, the true  
is ever with him.

*(One Hundred Poem of Kabir, LXV)*

Actually Kabir did not believe in the concept of dualism and denied to accept the existence of Self and God in separation. Perhaps he got the very idea of God from *Upanishadic* non-dualism and the Islamic monism. He feels that everything in the universe is born of Brahma and will ultimately merge into Brahma. God, according to him, is knowledge, truth and light



which can be achieved through love and devotion only. He strongly feels that God is not within the scriptures and can't be achieved by making an intense reading of the religious books of the world. It can be known and achieved by the one who reads the two letters of love i.e. Lord Rama.

Further he lampoons the ways through which people try to know God:

The Kazi is searching the words of the  
Koran, and instructing others: but if  
His heart be not steeped in that love,  
What does it avail, though he be a  
teacher of man?  
The yogi dyes his garments with red: but  
if  
He knows naught of that color of love,  
what  
Does it avail though his garments be  
tinted.

(*One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, LIV)

Kabir is a mystical poet also which is reflected through his several songs. At several places he considers God as his husband and feels himself to be His wife:

Dear friend, I am eager to meet my  
beloved!  
My youth has flowered, and the pain of  
Separation from Him troubles my breast.

(*One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, LI)

In Kabir's songs, we notice his free and frank dislike of all institutional religion and external observance. Thus, from the point of view of orthodox Hindu or Muslim sanctity, Kabir was simply heretic. The simple union with the divine Almighty which he recurrently proclaimed through his songs was independent both of ritual and of bodily austerities. The God whom he knew was neither in Kabba nor in Kailash. Those who pined to seek Him need not go far. He is more accessible to a washerwoman and a carpenter than to a self-righteous and self-proclaimed holy man. The temple and mosque, holy water and scriptures, the Koran and the Purana are mere substitutes for reality:

There is nothing but water at the holy  
bathing places; and I know that they are

useless,  
For I have bathed in them.  
The images are all lifeless, they cannot  
speak;  
I know for I have cried aloud to them.  
The Purana and the Koran are mere  
words;  
Lifting up the curtain I have seen.

(*One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, XLII)

Apart from his religious pursuit Kabir's emphasis was on the society. He believed in the equality of all human beings as he felt that all human beings were made of the same drop of semen, and had the same bones and tissues. Hence, there should be no discrimination between human beings on the basis of caste, colour, class, religion and race. Attacking on the Turks he asks if they (Turks) were superior, why were they not born circumcised? His main attack is on the Brahmins who discriminated people on the basis of caste. He asks: "If you claim to be Brahmin by birth, born of brahmani, why were you not born in different fashion?" (Kabir, *Pada*)

He further asks, "Do you have milk in your veins while we have blood in ours? If not, how are you a Brahmin and we Shudras?" (Kabir, *Pada*)

Kabir particularly attacked on the feudal class of his time who were land lords belonging to the nobility. He ridiculed them for nurturing false pride and arrogance for taking birth in the high class. These people were proud of their fine-bred horses, their elephants and their lofty palaces. Kabir feels that these were the very people who were responsible for the miseries of the poor class. They made the society a living hell by oppressing the people in all the possible ways. Kabir did not spare the commercial class either. He felt that the people from this class were misusing their money by lending it to the poor at high rate of interest. When the people were not able to pay the money back, they usurped their land and houses. He compared this class with the blood-suckers who sucked the blood of the common people. Apart from inequality, intolerance, arrogance and attachment to worldly objects, Kabir considered lust to be a major reason for the problems of human beings. People in his society were crazy for money, power, name, fame and sex which were the root causes for their sorrow.

The essence of Kabir's songs is that he was deeply dissatisfied with the society of his time which was filled with a number of evils. But the question

is- did Kabir try to do something seminal to remove these evils from the society? Did he seriously try to change the society? Actually Kabir was not a social revolutionary; his chief concern was to establish a society based on equalitarianism, a society without any kind of discrimination which separates one man from another. In fact, we notice some limitations in Kabir as a social reformer. He never talks about the equality of women and seems to favour the practice of Sati in laudatory terms. He also spoke of *Purdah* as a normal practice. Nowhere does he seem to condemn child marriage and polygamy. Also he does not advocate widow re-marriage. This shows Kabir's limitations as a reformer. But we should not forget that Kabir was writing in a very different age which was mainly ruled by the foreign invaders. Hence, his ideas in relation to the condition of women, *Sati pratha*, child marriage and *Purdah pratha* should be understood in the light of the time and period in which he was writing.

So far as his language is concerned, it is very simple and lucid. Since he never touched pen he speaks to us in a direct and uninhibited tone which is capable enough to arouse us from our slumber-like existence. His style is frank and refreshing. The instructions given by him are simple yet deep, obvious yet multi-layered, challenging yet caring, powerful yet empowering, irrelevant yet highly devotional. Indeed, he lived what he preached or he preached what he lived. Like a true artist he revealed the highest truth regardless of the circumstances. In a very simple manner he affirms the intrinsic divinity in each of us and opens up intimate and direct way of communication with each one of us. The language of most of his songs is a mixture of different tongues-Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Punjabi and Marwadi. Hajari Prasad Dwivedi, the prominent Hindi author spoke highly of the language of Kabir and said that Kabir had extraordinary command on language.

To conclude one can say that Kabir was a *sadhak* who sang unparalleled songs in the praise of the Almighty and who gave voice to the voiceless people of his age. His ideas are as relevant today as they were six hundred years before. At the present mundane world his ideas seem to be more authentic and applicable. Like a great artist he belongs to all the societies of all the ages. He can well be defined as an apostle of religious tolerance and of Hindu-Muslim reconciliation. He is sober and didactic in his ideas and his voice is that of an ecstatic, generous saint. He is a great religious reformer. The spontaneous expression of his vision reflected through his



songs has made him an immortal poet of all the ages. Surely, he is, as he says, the child of Allah and Ram.

#### WORKS CITED

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