

Kabir: Relevance from Past to Present

*Arunima Pati

Post Graduate Student, Department of History, Presidency University, Kolkata, West Bengal

Abstract

The 15th century India is an age of political turmoil and increasing antagonism among different faiths all over the Indian subcontinent. During that era of orthodoxy and unrest, a man denied all rituals and superstitions of religions and emphasized to cherish the God within ourselves- the one Supreme Lord. We know him as 'Kabir', a man who is venerable to the Hindus and the Muslims alike. Despite his worldwide fame, his real identity is quite contentious. Kabir has been called a Vaishnav bhakta, a pir, a bhagat, a Nath-yogi, a Tantric, a Sufi and many more. Kabir himself suggests what he was- a premi, madly in love with the divine. His messages were meant for the entire mankind irrespective of religion. He uttered the primal truth that God is but one even if we call him by many names. His vigorous criticisms of religious orthodoxies and rituals are still unimaginable to us. The present article seeks to highlight the role played by Kabir in his own time and ours.

Keywords: Rationality, Pure Knowledge, Philosophy, Teachings, Mankind, Secularism

Article Publication

📅 Published Online: 15-Jul-2021

*Author's Correspondence


👤 Arunima Pati

📍 Post Graduate Student, Department of History, Presidency University, Kolkata, West Bengal.

✉ arunimapati635[at]gmail.com

🔗 [10.31305/rrjm.2021.v06.i07.022](https://doi.org/10.31305/rrjm.2021.v06.i07.022)

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Introduction:

The pre Kabir era was a period that comprised conflicts among various religions borne out of various interpretations of their individual religious philosophies. The customs and the traditions that were followed wherein the principles although are essentially same were superseded by the religious differences in the period. This conflict continued for long. It led to extremism in religion, comprising materialism and an increase in differences between the rich and the poor. The high and the low caste and the embedding of Brahmanism in the society were with the exploitation of the low caste. This created disparity in the society. The ethics and morality were not on the bases of principle but degraded to fulfill the selfish motive of a group of people. The Varna and the caste system deteriorated the society bringing about social, economic, political, cultural and religious degradation. Vedas, and the schools of thought (*Charvaka, Jain, Baudha, Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisesika, Mimamsa and Vedanta*) have been a part of the Indian religious and spiritual philosophy. The practices of worship and rituals took an all-time importance. This led to many misinterpretations, superstitions and false practices. This took the society away from the true spiritual leanings and rationalistic thought and turned it into a mere lip service to the real principles. Then Kabir came. Sant Kabir tried through various means to take the people back to the original state of things and spread pure knowledge.

Kabir and his Philosophy

Swami Ramananda's first disciple was Kabir. Charlotte Vaudeville argues that Kabir's principles were dependent on Tantric *Yoga*.¹ Irfan Habib dismisses the idea that Kabir was a Nath-*Yogi*. Rather he refers to Kabir as a monotheist (*muwahhid*).²

¹ Charlotte Vaudeville and Harry B. Partin, "Kabir and interior Religion," *History of Religions*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter, 1964), 193.

² Irfan Habib, "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting," *Social Scientist*, Vol. 21, No. 3/4 (March-April, 1993), 83.

Sant Kabir holds a place of great importance in the religious history of India. His Bani is majorly used by the vernacular. The Bani of Sant Kabir helps us in both ways - the social and personal, ethical and spiritual. The philosophy of Sant Kabir addresses social as well as spiritual aspects of human life. The real philosophy of Sant Kabir is not only human and Divine oriented but also social and ethics oriented. Sant Kabir's concepts of harmony, equality and devotion are significant features of his philosophy. In his philosophy the aspect of devotion is predominant with connotation of *Seva*. It is the way of life which embraced people of different gender, caste, class, color and race together in God.

Sant Kabir never doubted the existence of God. According to him God dwells in our hearts. There is only One God. There are two aspects of God. One is *Sagunatva* and other is *Nirgunatva*. Again, *Nirgunatva* has two meaning, viz., Absolute Being and *Nam*. Absolute Being is an independent entity. *Nam* is the basic and fundamental concept of God in Sant Kabir's philosophy. Thus, change in basic concept of God automatically changed the way of worship and idea of salvation. To get on the pathway to God realization the role of Guru becomes very essential. Only with the grace of Guru one can achieve salvation i.e. the state of *Jivanmukta*. There are no bondages like caste, class, gender or economic or political status to achieve the *Jivanmukta* state in the philosophy of Sant Kabir.

Sant Kabir talks about basic elements with which the world is constituted, viz., water, fire, air, earth, and space and three gunas, viz. Sat, Rajas and Tama. He talks about seven regions and three worlds and fourteen abode. Sant Kabir talks about the body is created with five major elements and three gunas, viz., Sata, Raja, and Tama. Having a body is not enough to operate in the world but we do need four internal sense organs as well. These are *Marta* (mind), *Buddhi* (intellect), *Citta* (sentience) and *Abankar* (self-consciousness). According to Sant Kabir it is neither easy nor do we get birth as human frequently. Therefore, one should use very wisely the human life. Realizing God and using birth for search of inner Self and doing service - the '*Seva*' to needy is the ultimate supreme goal of human life.

Sant Kabir is well known for his critique of social norms and for his social philosophy. He was instrumental through his *Doha's*, *Sabda*, and various chapters in *Bijak* i.e. *Ramaini*, *Chautisa*, *Kabara*, *Vasant*, *Hindold*, *Vipramatisi*, *Birabooli* and various *Angas* in *Kabir Granthawali* and *Bani's Salokas*, *Sabda*, and *Gauris* in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, in bringing about changes in society political, social, religious and cultural.

No one is born great. An aristocrat behaving in an unethical way is same as an animal that has no ethical values or any concept of society. In the philosophy of Sant Kabir there is no place for asceticism and passivity. In Sant Kabir's ideology no religion and or no ritual is greater than that of Humanity. Being a human is more important than being a Brahman, wealthy, healthy, beautiful person worldly life. One should respect the other person of the society without any criteria attached to him i.e. his birth, wealth, sex etc.

Idol worship is not acceptable in Sant Kabir's philosophy. He says that you are praying to a stone and offering it flowers and fruits that are alive and sensitive. Sant Kabir says that a devotee with sound knowledge in spiritual field is rare in the world. If your mind is not under your control then what is the use of being an ascetic man.

Sant Kabir advocates the path of *Ahimsa*. He says those who follow *Ahimsa* obey the natural rules and leave all out-world worldliness. Be just to all. If you believe in One God and that God dwells in all animals and creatures in the nature, then why are you killing them?

Sant Kabir was a social revolutionary. Sehdev Kumar holds idea that Kabir cannot be bound within any doctrines; he is a man superior to these mere classifications.³

³ Sehdev Kumar, "Kabir: Communicating the Uncommunicable," *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June, 1983), 207.

The Teachings of Kabir

Kabir not only believed in the unity of God but also believed the non-dualism between God and human. In one of his *Shabdas* he says:-

“I am
Like a Clay-Pitcher
Floating in the river
Water inside, water outside
Now suddenly
With the touch of the guru
The pitcher is broken
Inside
Outside
O friends
It’s all One!”⁴

The ideology of Kabir did not have any place for idolatry. Not only idolatry, he even despised the idea of pilgrimage, sacred places, ceremonies, fasting, circumcision and many other practices. He never believed in the hierarchy of scriptures. It is not surprising that he denied the caste system; Kabir despised any system that separated men from men- whether it be religion or caste.

“Adam, who was first, did not know:
whence came mother Eve.
Then there was not Turk nor Hindu:
no blood of the mother, no seed of the father”⁵

(Ramaini 40)

The most important teaching of Kabir, indeed, is love. He frequently says the name of God, especially Ram to whom he completely surrenders. Kabir comes in the line of those religious teachers who preached *Bhakti* (or devotion); saints like Surdas, Mirabai or Chaitanya. But unlike them, Kabir’s devotion flowed to a formless God. Despite this difference they all spread the message of love; unconditional love to the Supreme One.

The dignity of the human being as male or as female was affirmed in the teachings of Sant Kabir. Sant Kabir preached equality. According to him any kind of discrimination on the grounds of birth, race or even gender is immoral.

Sant Kabir was against discrimination among humans. He denied the necessity of identifying anybody as Hindu or Muslim as both are inhabitant of same earth. We should not create artificial differences among them.

Influence of Islam and Christianity on Kabir

Kabir was acquainted with the principles of both Islam and Christianity. We can find references to the Quran, Mecca, masjid, the fasting of Ramjan in his verses. He was not unaware of Islamic practices but ardently criticized them. There are no indications that he appreciated orthodox Islamic theology or philosophy. But the scene is extremely different with the Sufis. The Sufis, unlike mainstream Islam, have a pantheistic concept of God who resides within our hearts. During Kabir’s time, Sufism was well-established in India. So Kabir’s thoughts and teachings could not but be somehow influenced by it.

⁴ Kumar, “Kabir: Communicating the Uncommunicable,” 214.

⁵ Ibid, 72.

But there are certain points where Kabir differs from Sufism. He did not accept the Sufi notion of predestination or the God's choice of a man's destiny. Rather he emphasized the doctrine of *Karma* and transmigration which says a man's destiny is the result of his own deeds.⁶ The Sufis also revere the Quran which Kabir ardently criticized.

Kabir developed a monotheism of his own which is neither Hindu nor Muslim, neither Sufi nor Tantric. It is unique with his teachings beyond mere categories.

The question of Christian influence has been much debated. There has been Christians in South India from a very early period of the Christian era. India was probably in contact with the Nestorian Christians in Bactria.⁷ But the spread of Islam from the 13th century onwards, prevented further progress of Christianity in India. Some scholars suggest some similarities between certain verses of Kabir and passages of the Bible. But we must understand that there are certain ideas that are common to every religion of the world. These cannot be referred to as influence. Moreover, Christianity grew stronger in India only after the demise of Kabir. So, there is little possibility that Christianity had much or any influence on Kabir.

Kabir's Influence on Other Sects

Kabir's teachings almost swept the entire northern India. So, it is quite normal that Kabir obviously influenced a large number of sects that succeeded him.

The most famous of them is Sikhism. Sikhism is founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1538) who was a younger contemporary to Kabir. Kabir-*Panthis* claim that he was a disciple of Kabir who appointed Nanak as the head of the sect in Punjab. But later Nanak and his followers broke away from Kabir. Obviously, there is no historicity in this story but we may say that Nanak was somehow influenced by Kabir.⁸ It is evident from the large number of verses attributed to Kabir in the Guru Granth. Both Kabir and Nanak emphasize the unity of God and His ubiquity. Men of all castes and races are but sons of the same Supreme Being. Nanak also admits the necessity of a guru in order to find salvation. But Nanak, unlike Kabir, did not criticize the practices of Hinduism and Islam.

The Dadu-*Panthis* also revere Kabir as a guru. They rejected caste system, the Vedas and idolatry like Kabir. The *Pancavani* literature of the Dadu-*Panthis* contains a number of verses attributed to Kabir.

The *Sadhs* are found in the upper part of the Doab region, south of Delhi. The sect was founded by Birbhan in 1543. His teachings were very similar to Kabir, most probably influenced by him. The *Sadhs* also had another important teacher named Jogi Das. There is a set of hymns attributed to Birbhan in the form of *Sakhis* and *Shabd*s.

Charan Das (1703-1782) was a *baniya* (trader) by caste, founded a sect in Delhi in 1730. His ideas show direct influence of Kabir. He also emphasized devotion to God, the repetition of the God's name, the necessity of having a guru and the futility of idol-worship. He himself composed many Hindi verses.

There are many more sects around northern India like the Lal Dasis, the Baba Lalis, the Siva Narayanis, The Garib Dasis, The Rama Sanchis, the Paltu-*Panthis* and Satnami sect etc. who were also much inspired by Kabir. All the sects discussed above were directly or indirectly influenced by Kabir. But it has to be admitted that most of them have failed to retain their ideologies and somehow have compromised with orthodox Hinduism and Islam.

Kabir in Modern Days

Apart from the Kabir-*panthis*, there are some other people who cherish Kabir's teachings and find peace in Kabir's verses. Shabnam Virmani is one of them. She initiated a project named 'Kabir Project' in 2003 to explore Kabir's

⁶ F. E. Keay, *Kabir and His Followers* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1931), 91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

influence in different regions of India. She and her team travelled various states of India and interviewed a number of singers, artists, scholars and Kabir-Panthis. Shabnam Virmani is now one of the most eminent Kabir scholars in India.

Prahlad Singh Tipanya is unmatched in performing Kabir *bhajans*. He is an Indian folk singer from Madhya Pradesh and himself a Kabir-Panthis. Tipanya is a well-known name in folksong, especially in Kabir *bhajans*. He has performed at countless music festivals, music conferences in India as well as in foreign. Prahlad Singh Tipanya appeared on three out of four documentaries of Shabnam Virmani.

Mahesh Ram Meghwal is another famous name in the sphere of Kabir *bhajans*. Mahesh Ram is a well-known voice in upholding Kabir in Rajasthan. He primarily sings Kabir *bhajans* available in the Rajasthani recension. Mahesh Ram performed in the music festival 'Rajasthan Kabir Yatra'.

Farid Ayaz is a lover of Kabir from beyond the borders. He belongs to Karachi, Pakistaaaan where he sings the *bhajans* of Kabir as well as sufi poets like Rumi, Bulleh Shah, Zaheen Shah and others. He is revered not only as a singer but also as a true knower of Kabir.

These people have helped to keep alive the true essence of Kabir in modern world. It shows that he is as pertinent today as 550 years ago; immune to any barriers of time.

There is a great impact of Sant Kabir's philosophy on the today's social life. He combined Bhakti with service to society. He reached out to the masses, wrote in the language known to the masses and freed them from the clutches of casteism.

A significant and outstanding contribution towards social transformation in the philosophy of Sant Kabir is the critical evaluation of the social strata of that period. This also drew attention towards the mal practices and social instability of that society. Even today the roots of casteism, racism have not been eradicated from the society. 72 years after the commencement of constitution of democratic India and various laws to remove unequal strata of the society, the mindset of the mass shows little improvement. Hence to create a liberal view and brotherhood in society and to develop the inner self of an individual, the path shown by Sant Kabir's couplets and *Sabdās* need to be studied with an honest effort.

Conclusion

Kabir is still a mystery. The Hindus regard him as a Vaishnav, the Muslims as a pir. Instead of pursuing his teachings, they quarrel over his religion. Some treat Kabir as an apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity but Kabir appreciated neither Hindu nor Muslim. After his death both Hindus and Muslims regarded his philosophy. Kabir's radicalism is, indeed, a wonder of Indian history.

Kabir is regarded as one rebellious soul who fought against oppression, absolutism and forcing. He was the messenger of love, peace and harmony. His ideas and philosophy of life have been incorporated in great aspect in the spiritual and secular life of India. Hence Kabir is as relevant today as 550 years back.

Acknowledgement

Firstly, I would like to express my deepest regards and sincere thanks to Mr. Gourav Lama sir for his dynamic support and proactive guidance which played a pivotal role in shaping this article.

I am also deeply indebted to my family members specifically my dad and my friends for their faithful support, continuous motivation and constant belief that I could finish this.

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