

Contemporary India and Relevance of Bhakt Kabir's Poetry

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Received: 22 February 2017

Accepted: 03 March 2017

Published Online: 23 March 2017

Keywords

Socio - political, Socio - cultural,
Mysticism, Communalism.

ABSTRACT

The paper intends to study the relevance of Bhakt Kabir's Poetry in revival of our nation and illumination of its murky vision. India today faces huge challenges on many levels, including social, political, economic and religious. Endangering communalism, caste and class divisions, a chasm between rich and the poor and growing rigidity about nationalism are the issues threatening the nation's entire fabric. The situation is aggravated further by growing population, its economic expectation, move towards westernisation and vote bank policies of the governments. The youth of the nation is trying to escape reality by living a life of transient pleasures. All this demands an urgent re-orientation of the policies at government level in order to salvage the country from catastrophic destruction and further worsening. Such a scenario needs spiritual strength which could be seen in the philosophical insight of Bhakt Kabir's poetry which has two key themes: Mysticism and the spirit of social reform.

Contemporary India is facing enormous challenges at multiple levels: social, political, economic, and religious. Menacing powers of communalism, divisions of caste and class, growing rigidity about nationalism, and abysmal economic divide between the rich and the poor are some of the aspects which are threatening the overall fabric of the country. Worsening the scenario are challenges posed by a burgeoning population, its economic aspirations, mindless march towards westernisation, and vote-bank oriented policies of successive governments etc. All these issues have found manifestation in wide spread unrest, and crimes of unprecedented nature and magnitudes; trying to choke the nation that has been inhibited by spiritually inclined, culturally rich, socially bonded, morally strong, and emotionally well-rooted people. Efforts are being made to push it on the path of mindless perusal of attaining material gains as directed by the imperial West. Deceitful language suggesting discernible improvement in the living standards of the population has effectively camouflaged the decline of social-moral values and ethics in the Indian society.

A close analysis of the country's much acclaimed journey towards modernisation during the last few decades would reveal that in terms of the price (from social and moral perspectives) paid for the development is concerned, it has not been a very prudent bargain so far. An all-pervading sense of disquiet resulting from plummeting moral-cultural standards and increasing sense of insecurity (caused by the factors mentioned above) have set up Indians for a grave internal conflict between their rich heritage and insatiable material aspirations. At a complete loss, they are either looking up to political demi-gods or fake spiritual guides to lead them through growing anxieties and alienation in personal and social lives. The youth is trying to escape the reality by leading a life of transient hedonistic pleasures. All this necessitates an urgent re-orientation of the policies of governments and thought-process of the people so that the social and political fabric of

the country can be saved from irreparable harm. In such a scenario, the social and philosophical wisdom contained in the poetry of Bhakt Kabir, one of the greatest poets of Bhakti Movement, and certain legends about his life may be re-read, re-considered, and adopted in life to provide sustainable solutions to the current issues. His poetry as well as biographical details have the potential to equip us morally and spiritually to fight and win battles, both inside the minds and outside.

Poetry of Kabir can be construed for two major themes: its mysticism and spirit of social reform. His mysticism can be prominently observed in his promulgation of the idea of surrender to a single divine that did not belong to any institutional religion. Pande highlights his emphasis on abandonment of "the ceremonies and rituals and bringing the individual in direct relation to God" (233). Fearlessly challenging the socio-political and religious idiom of contemporary India, Bhakt Kabir contested the caste hierarchy prevalent in Hindu religion and called for building a casteless and classless society. Very prominently, he refused to surrender to the prevalent order and fearlessly spoke against inequalities and abuse of power that was rampant in India of those times; striving "to create an egalitarian society" (ibid. 234). He composed poetry of resistance and exerted powerful social influence on the prevalent order which significantly contributed towards change in the social climate of the country and value system of its people.

Historically, Kabir lived during the period when Sikandar Lodi (1489-1517) of the Lodi Dynasty ruled Delhi. An Afghan by descent, Sikandar was an ambitious ruler whose reigning years are known for three major trends. First, he, like his predecessors and earlier Muslim invaders, fought several wars to expand his territorial control. He founded the city of Agra and spread his kingdom to various parts of India, as far as

Gwalior, Bihar and Bengal. Secondly, besides establishing territorial stronghold over various regions of India, he facilitated spread of Islam, a movement which had been started (prior to his aggression) by the earlier Muslim invaders who "had been waging warfare up and down the sub-continent, taking over kingdoms and propagating their faith through the points of the sword" (Hess 5). Hindus were often forced to convert to the religion of the invading rulers, and there was wide-spread political unrest. Thirdly, the socio-cultural scenario of India was replete with hegemonic tendencies of Brahmins and landlord elites. Caste system, religious fundamentalism, and oppressive taxation were rampant. Making the scenario more complex and multi-dimensional were attempts to create opportunities to trade, participation of dalits in certain trade activities and their efforts to gain social and economic upward mobility; things which had never been expected earlier. Kabir, who himself was born in a so-called low caste 'julaha' (weaver), and had adopted the profession of his father, used to sell his products in the much famous textile market of Benares. The socio-economic changes initiated a reaction by Brahmins, high caste land-lords, and traders whose businesses were affected. Several protest movements by dalits demanding their rights in a highly prejudiced caste system added to the tension in the society.

Contemporary India is exhibiting certain conspicuous similarities with the India of Kabir's times. Similar to those days, it is deeply engaged with the issue of heightening religious fanaticism, communal intolerance, caste related tensions, and widening economic chasm. Seeds of religion related issues were sown when the Muslim state of Pakistan was carved out at the time of the country's independence from the British rule, a catastrophic event that was accompanied by incidents of large scale communal riots. Partition of India has the notorious distinction of being the most violent official division (on religious grounds) of any country in the history of mankind. Afterwards also, India has witnessed several secessionist movements initiated in the name of religion in different states. There have been communal riots instigated by religious sentiments in different parts of the country from time to time; serving as crude reminders of the country's past marred by communal conflicts. Like the India of the 15th-16th century, adding fuel to the fire of religious passions have been issues such as wide-spread caste system, social and economic divide between the rich and the poor, and high-handedness of the ruling class etc. Features such as rigid linguistic divide and escalating crimes of unprecedented nature against women and other marginalised sections of the society are unique to contemporary India. As discussed above, all these issues have been contributing towards the depletion of religious, social, and moral values of the society; making it un-peaceful. Globally, India has been engaged in territorial and trade conflicts, and disputes regarding illegal migration of people with some of its neighbouring countries. Similarly, upward mobilisation of hitherto suppressed sections of the society (including dalits and women) has caused uneasiness among the established power structures.

The influence of Kabir's socio-political persona in his own times is clearly reflected in his verses containing observations about the tenacious issues during the times of

history when he composed them. He was celebrated for his recalcitrant teachings about social structure, moral values and religious beliefs. He often highlighted the failings of the established Indian religious system that clearly divided people as either Hindus or Muslims. Mocking the leaders of both religions for their double standards, he says:

Hindus through worship of idols are ruined,
And Mohammadans through bowing of head,
Those are burnt, these buried-neither has
realization of Thy mystery. (1371)

This couplet holds special relevance in the context of the contentious Babri Masjid issue which involves a bitter confrontation between the two religious groups. Hindus want a Rama temple to be re-erected at the place where the Masjid stands now, claiming it to be the birth place of Lord Rama which had a temple in place for centuries before getting demolished by Babar, the first Mughal Emperor. In a so-called attempt to correct the history, Hindus attacked and demolished the mosque after four and a half centuries in 1992, fuelling the centuries old bitterness between the two communities. This couplet is a scathing commentary on the futility of organised religion and the following one further elucidates his religious ideology:

If Allah abides in the mosque alone,
Whose is the rest of space?
The Hindu conceives the Divine Reality in idols
to abide,
Neither has realized the Essence. (2701)

Lorenzen refers to Bhakt Kabir's poetry as "protest against social discrimination and economic exploitation" (5). Kabir was particularly severe in his attack on the prevalent caste system among Hindus; a very strictly prescribed hierarchy in which the *Brahmin* was at the top and the *Shudra* at the bottom. He taunts the *Brahmin* as he says:

In lodgement in the womb exists neither family
pride nor caste:
All beings from the divine essence have been
created.
Say thou Pandit! When did Brahmin originate?
Do not make waste of thy human incarnation,
By boasting of thy Brahmin origin.
If thou dost claim to be a Brahmin by thy birth
from a Brahmin woman,
Why was thy birth not from a different source?
Why are you Brahmins and we Shudras?
How were we made of mere blood and you of
milk?
Saint Kabir: Among us is he alone known as
Brahmin,
Who the Supreme Being contemplates. (679)

He further intensifies his attack on the *Brahmin* and says:

If all birth causes impurity,
They know, in water and on earth incessantly is
creation going on.

Impurity attaches to birth also to death-
All mankind by superstition of impurity is ruined.
Tell us, thou manikin Brahmin! Who then
remains pure? (694)

He takes pride in his social status that is considered 'low' because of his caste; and expresses his belief that God is closer to him. He says:

All make fun of my caste.
I to this caste am a sacrifice wherein the Creator
I have contemplated. (2729)

Emphasising non-violence and vegetarianism, Kabir questions:

Call not Vedas and the Koran False;
One who contemplates not these false:
If you say God in all beings abides, why kill a
hen? (2702)

Kabir undermines formal education undertaken by the *Brahmins* as he believes that education is useless if it does not help one to attain oneness with the Creator.

What good reading and study,
And listening to Vedas and Puranas?
What good comes of reading and listening,
Unless realization of God be attained? (1374)

Nearly 500 years since, his social principles have been carried forward by the legendary figures of modern day India like Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, Deen Dayal Upadhyay and Ram Manohar Lohia. Several efforts are still being made at the grass root level through films, documentaries, songs, organisation of festivals, and celebration of Kabir Jayanti etc. to remind modern Indians of Kabir's message of communal harmony. Shabnam Virmani, a journalist and film producer has made documentaries on Kabir and has also initiated *Project Kabir* in order to spread the great saint's wisdom. Sudha Narasimhachar, another journalist, quotes Virmani and states: "the simple style of rendering deep abstract philosophical truths is what attracted me to Kabir. His poetry is beyond the barriers of religion, caste and geography. Many of his couplets are relevant even to this day and contemporising them to suit today's generation is our aim under Kabir project" (The Deccan Herald). Narrating the circumstances that made her ponder and inclined her thought towards Kabir, Virmani says: "I was a helpless witness to the riots, as I was then in Ahmedabad. I was shocked and moved. I set out on a journey exploring Kabir Das, who was known to have composed hundreds of couplets taking man to a spiritual level above all these plain politics. He is widely sung by Hindus and Muslims alike" (ibid.). Further recollecting her experience of witnessing the bloodshed and her turning to Kabir for solace, she states: "On being a mute witness to the carnage in Gujarat, I felt Kabir calling out, 'Sadho, dekho jag baurana' (Oh seekers, see the world's gone mad!), as if expressing what I then felt" (The Deccan Herald). An Indian-American composer Aks brought out a music album titled *Kahat Kabira* in 2014. His couplets have also been used by film makers in the dialogues of their films, e.g. in *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge* in 2000:

Duniya badi baawari, pathar puja jaye ... ghar ki chakki koi na pooje, jaako piso khaye, which means that the world is insane as it worships stones, but ignores the grinding stone of the house that is used for grinding the grain for food; and

Pothi padh padh jag mua, pandit bhayo na koye, dhai aakhar prem ke padhe so pandit hoye, which means that no one can become wise only by reading the scriptures, it is only by loving the fellow humans that wisdom accrues.

In order to popularise secular teachings of Kabir, a few young artists; Neeraj Arya, Raman Iyer, Mukund Ramaswamy, and Viren Solanki, have formed a musical band Kabir Café. They sing Kabir's verses in modern tunes and explain them in a way that is likely to appeal to the young minds. It is a lamentable fact that modern Indian democracy is featured by increasing intolerance to dissenting views; something that was not there in earlier times when there was ample scope for disagreement in a truly democratic setup. The political powers build narrative aimed at gaining votes and challenge the validity of any narrative that contains dissent. On the one hand, technology, development of a global culture, and some secular voices are trying to build an atmosphere of harmony; but on the other hand, technology, rise of religious right wings in several countries, and fanatic voices calling for annihilation of any 'other' are spreading the message of 'exclusivity' and 'hatred'. Spread of the idea of exclusivity through social media platforms is exerting deep psychological impact on the minds of people who begin to harbour hatred for people they do not even know. The need of the hour is to combat the spread of hatred by spreading the message of love for humanity; and it can be potently achieved by popularising Bhakt Kabir's poetry which transcends national, ethnical, and religious frontiers. The timelessness and relevance of the wisdom poured out in his couplets can be the panacea for the maladies that are afflicting the contemporary India.

Besides performing his role as a social critic, Kabir also preached about transcendental nature of religion that was above and beyond social, political, and economic considerations. His mysticism added to the challenge he posed to the existing system and established him as a revolutionary. Kabir fascinates the liberal and globalised people of our age as much with the mystic detachment that he preaches as he does with his concept of an all-encompassing, egalitarian society. His spontaneous verses compel us to reject religion in its rigid form, rethink about it as a manifestation of the spiritual and discover the common thread that binds all humanity. He says:

God first created Light; all else to His might
subject.
Since from one Light is the whole world created-
who is noble, who inferior?
Folks, brethren! Be not lost in illusion.
The creator is in the creation; in the creation
abides the creator,
Pervasive everywhere. (2701)

Also rejecting the discriminatory attitude towards women, he says:

All women and women created are Thy forms,
Lord!
Kabir is the child of Rama-Allah;
And the holy teachers are ours.
Saint Kabir! Listen you males and females!
With the Sole Lord seek shelter! (2701)

Kabir's belief in potential union of soul with the divine transcends all religious and ideological differences. Artists have also attempted to represent Kabir's life and philosophy through paintings and sculptures. S. Rajam, a painter, has portrayed Kabir, weaving cloth while sitting among his devotees who appear to be both Hindus and Muslims. Lord Rama can be seen as painted behind Kabir with an arrow in his hand. It suggests that God protects all those who are devoted to him; and can shoot down the disharmonious feelings. Though Bhakt Kabir uses 'Ram' (a word that refers to a Hindu deity and has strong Hindu connotation) frequently in his verses, its denotative meaning refers to the truth or an inner experience that all humans must strive to attain. He asserts that his birth in a low caste does not make a difference at all as long as the God is in his heart and proclaims:

So I'm born a weaver, so what?
I've got the Lord in my heart.
Kabir: secure in the arms of Ram, free from
every snare. (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 58)

Lakshmi Chandrashekar Subramanian explores the idea further and observes: "His mention of being born a weaver problematizes the idea that one's birth determines one's religious status. The indication here is that bhakti is an active choice rather than a matter of birth or legacy; it is something that one has to cultivate. His nonchalant tone conveys a bold stance: bhakti should be accessible to all. But there is a prerequisite, which is to have the lord in one's heart" (2016). He goes on to say that Rama is the ultimate protector of humans who are devoted to Him. Subramanian goes on to clarify: "Having God as protector or guardian is a common theme in bhakti literature, and it is this sentiment that is reflected in Kabir's epigram. Hindu Deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, Durga and Hanuman are known for their protecting disposition, and the list includes Lord Rama. The image in Kabir's poem of being 'secure in the arms of Ram' conveys the notion that once devoted to God, the devotee will be taken care of, "free from every snare" (ibid). Though Kabir is widely known for his concept of formlessness of the Divine, which he promotes through 'nirgunbhakti', his "use of corporeal imagery is intriguing as the "heart" and "arms" indicate the physicality associated with bhakti, as well as the *sagun* ("with qualities") nature of God. This reminds us of the body-mind argument raised by the issue of jati in the first half of the epigram, in which Kabir advocates mind over matter, although in this instance, imagery concerning the body is used in a positive context" (ibid).

A blend of mysticism and spirit of social reform, is a unique feature of Bhakt Kabir's poetry as Mohiuddin observes:

"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" (43). Mohiuddin further quotes Tagore for his reverence for Bhakt Kabir, who according to him, remains in touch "with diurnal existence" and "never forgets the common life" (45). Kabir is a poet who is firmly grounded and whose "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" (45-46) Kabir's "constant insistence on simplicity and directness, the hatred of all abstractions and philosophizing, the ruthless criticism of external religion" are his greatest philosophic inputs to the modern world" (46).

In today's times, there can be observed two parallel inclinations among the people; first, to reject traditional religiosity and embrace a more universal approach towards it; and the other, in which violence and hatred in the name of religion has been escalating. The scenario renders it pertinent to decode the reasons behind the two contrary approaches, understand the selfish motivations that fuel the latter and counter it with a selfless, egoless attitude as recommended by Bhakt Kabir. He stands firm as a lighthouse and his verses have been showing path to generations after they were first recited. Kabir's couplets compel humans to trace their roots that had love, cordiality, and care for one another. Expressing his indebtedness to the great Saint, Dharwadker says:

When the weaver departed from his house, he left his unfinished weaving on his loom with fables, allegories, sermons, satires, aphorisms, riddles and songs stretched out as a warp "in progress". In the centuries since his departure, his collaborators have made the journey to his workshop and sat at his frame, shedding and picking, beating in the weft thread by thread, finishing the great design that he began. (95)

Another extremely relevant aspect of Kabir's verses is the emphasis on personal virtues which are timeless in nature. He says:

*Bada hua to kya hua, jaise ped khajoor,
Panchhi ko chhaya nahi, fal laage ati door!*

In the above couplet, he moderates the importance of social status and material wealth and says that it is of no use to attain height like a tree of dates which can neither give shelter to a traveller, nor can its fruit be accessed by anyone. In today's capitalist world, it is not difficult to come across such 'trees of dates', i.e. the people who are rich and enjoy high social status but neither their riches are of any use to humanity, nor their status can soothe a human heart. In another couplet, he says:

*Bani aisi boliye man ka aapa khoye,
auran ko seetal karae, aaphu seetal hoye!*

In this couplet, he emphasises on the quality of one's speech as he says that the speech should convey no ego of the speaker. If one's speech can soothe others, it will have a soothing effect on the speaker as well. These lines remind us that words that escape our mouth must be kind and should reflect no ego at all. The lyrical beauty of his poetic outpourings of love for the Divine have the power to bring about understanding, harmony, and trust among diverse people that India is home to.

As discussed above, Kabir's poetry focuses on pointlessness of religious customs, transience of life, need for a spiritual guide, and harmonious co-existence while trying to keep the Hindu/Muslim binary at bay. He ridiculed the idiocies, formalities, and narrow tenets of both religions; and questioned the modes of worship which obstruct one's realisation of the oneness of the soul. Kabir also holds the credit for bridging the gap between various classes by using the vernacular so that religion and spirituality can be made accessible to common people across society. Praising Kabir's use of the vernacular, A. K. Ramanujan (qtd. by Subramanian) says: "Sanskrit is as the water of a well, but the vernacular (*bhashya*) [is] like a running brook" (2016).

Today's India is a curious place, home to all kinds of incongruities that can possibly exist in a human society. It is inhibited by people of different religions, ethnicities, cultures, languages, food preferences which have become perennial sources of animosity among them. Lack of political will and lackadaisical approach of its citizens appears to have rendered further complexity to the situation. Several specific details related to Kabir's personal life that have been widely debated by scholars and remain masked in mystery till date, however, hold a poignant key to the prickly issues. It is pertinent to delve further into these details in order to understand this better. Two prominent biographers Anantadas (in *Kabir Parchai* composed around 1625) and Priyadas (in *Bhaktirasabodhini* composed around 1712) have compiled details of his life. A few religious manuscripts such as *Adi Granth* and *Goindval Pothis* (two Sikh scriptures), the *Kabir Granthavali* (Dadu Panth), and the *Bijak* (Kabir Panthis) also contain facts about his life. However, these compilations, though well-documented, can at best, be referred to as transmissions from oral tradition which took written form nearly after a century of his demise (Educational Insight). Among several other researchers, some (following the views of the Kabir Panthis, the organised community of Kabir followers) claim that he was a child magically born to a widow Brahmin, whereas some others claim him to be the son of a Muslim couple Neema and Neeru. The time period in which he was born also remains debatable. Some researchers believe that he was born in the early 15th century in the north Indian city of Banaras (in present day Uttar Pradesh) and lived for nearly 120 years (up to the second decade of the 16th century). Others claim him to have been born around the middle of the 15th century and having lived up to nearly the same time as claimed by the former group. There are various stories prevalent regarding his married life. Some researchers claim that he married a woman named Loi and had two children named Kamal and Kamali. Some others claim that Loi is only a symbolic figure in his verses and kamal and kamali

were two children whom he had brought back to life from death with his spiritual powers.

At the same time, there are certain other aspects such as his bringing up by parents who were weavers by profession and who belonged to a 'low' caste which are common to all versions of his biographical details. First of all, there is a consensus regarding the time period during which he composed his verses, i.e. from last two decades of the 15th century until death. The incidents surrounding his death are well-known and acknowledged by all his biographers and other scholars. They narrate as to how his adherence to the idea of a single God had invited the wrath of both Hindu and Muslim religious leaders while he was alive; and how, ironically, he was posthumously claimed as theirs by both of them. It is believed that when he passed away, the two factions (Hindus led by King Vir Singh Baghela and Muslims led by Nawab Bijli Khan) argued about his religious associations and contested to perform his last rites in accordance to their respective traditions. As per a legend, eventually, when the contesting factions entered the tent in which he had breathed his last, all they found was a pile of flowers and petals that they divided between themselves. All the hagiographical tales about the birth, life, and death of the mystic strongly hint at oneness of God and pointlessness of religious institutions which encourage division. Kabir's radical stance on the issue of religion annoyed both Hindu and Muslim religious leaders. Muslim clergy were particularly unhappy as they believed that he was spoiling the image of their religion by saying that Khuda (God) was not in the Mosque, and by claiming himself to be the image of God. His embracing a Hindu saint Ramananda as a guide and recommending vegetarianism also annoyed the Muslim. He proclaimed that those who ate meat were sinful people who would be punished by God and would be sent to hell. Thus, Muslim leaders reported to Sikander Lodi for him being a heretic, alleging that he was misinterpreting Islam and misguiding the Muslims. Legend has it that multiple attempts to kill the outspoken poet, who was no stranger to oppression, were orchestrated by Lodi. His preaching and praxis of monotheism and criticism of idolatry also did not go down well with Hindu religious leaders.

To sum up, it may be stated that all the tales about Kabir's life prove that no arguments about parentage, caste, religion, or occupation of Kabir or his parents can demean the wisdom that his poetry expounds. Incongruously, the prevalent doubts about the issues have the potential to illuminate the minds with a realisation that it is the merit of a person's thought that counts; not his birth, parentage, caste, or occupation. Instilling such thoughts in the minds of its people can settle several contentious issues that presently blemish the country. In other words, what makes his personal details, conflicting or not, relevant, is the fact that if probed at a deeper level, these details contain potential for beginning of a renewed attempt to interpret Kabir's life and philosophy as panacea for several maladies which contemporary India is inflicted with. Spirituality that was once the hallmark of Indian life has paved the way for unabashed perusal of material and physical desires by people in the name of development. Matters have been made worse for Indians by spine-less, self-seeking political leaders and fake gods men who exploit the need for a sense of security, solace,

and guidance of the gullible public. People who once took shelter in spirituality during testing times, grope in the dark and resort to violence and crime in order to resolve contentious issues. A directionless lot, present day India may look up to its saints like Kabir to show light and to combat the sectarian and

totalitarian forces. His teachings and life can help India regain its spiritually inclined ways of the past as Prasoos says: "Kabir is today needed most for wiping the social evils out and for the purification of inner and outer self " (72-73).

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