

The Voice of the Formless: Spiritual Consciousness in the Poetry of Kabir Das

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Abstract

Kabir Das is a mystic and spiritual poet and a great saint of India. He is known to the world today for his poetic and philosophical exploration of spiritual consciousness and search for self. This paper looks at the deep spiritual ideas in the poetry of Kabir Das. Kabir's poems talk about a God who has no shape or form—called Nirguna. He believed that true devotion comes from the heart, not from rituals or religious rules. Kabir's words are simple but powerful. They ask people to look inside themselves to find truth and God. His poetry mixes ideas from Hindu Bhakti and Islamic Sufi traditions, showing that love and truth go beyond religion. By studying his couplets, we see how Kabir used everyday language to express deep spiritual thoughts.

Keywords: Kabir Das, Nirguna (formless) devotion, Spiritual poetry, Bhakti and Sufi ideas, Inner truth, Simple language, deep meaning, Mystical thoughts, Against rituals and caste and Personal experience of God.

About the life and parentage of Kabir Das we have several controversies. The followers of Kabir Das think that he was incarnation of God. Some other followers are of the opinion that the divine light directly came into the lotus and thus through the Lotus Kabir Das was born. According to Wikipedia the years of Kabir birth and Death are uncertain. Some historians favour 1398-1448 as the period of Kabir while others favour 1440-1518. According to the book “Kabir Kasauti”. Kabir Das was born on the Monday of Jyestha Purnima in Samvat 1455, but Pt. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi claimed that the day Monday did not fall on the Jyestha Purnima of 1455. It fell on the next year, i.e. 1456. He declared that the date of the birth of Kabir is Monday of the Jyestha Purnima of 1456; accordingly in 1399 A.D. Kabir died in 1575 at the age of 119; accordingly in 1515 AD. On the other hand, the Kabir Panthies, the disciples of Kabir claim that Kabir lived for 300 years; that he was born in 1205 and died in 1505. On the face of it, the life span of 300 years may not seem to be easily digestible, but the ‘volume’ of the total writing

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is proof in itself that it's not possible to write so much in a mature span of fifty-six year. Moreover, it can't be suspected about Kabir. He was blessed with the Nectar which pours down through the Brahman-Lok situated in our head and is popularly known as Sahasras chakra. Such a person can live for three hundred years. There can't be a doubt about it; yet nobody can claim with confidence that Kabir did live for three hundred years. Naturally, his life span of 119/120 years is accepted in the literally world. Only one thing is certain about Kabir that he was a weaver. It is because at many places he has introduced himself as julaha (a weaver)

The association of Kabir Das with the "Julaha" (weaver) caste stems from historical accounts and traditions, although his exact origins are subject to some debate. Many historical narratives state that Kabir was raised by a Muslim weaver couple. This connection to a weaver family is a recurring theme in accounts of his life. The term "Julaha" refers to a traditional weaving community, and it's widely accepted that Kabir's upbringing was within this social group. Kabir's poetry often reflects his engagement with the daily life and work of a weaver. This suggests a familiarity with the craft, reinforcing the connection to the Julaha community. His teachings frequently challenged social hierarchies and caste distinctions, indicating an awareness of the social realities faced by lower-caste individuals. It's important to note that there are variations in the accounts of Kabir's birth. Some legends suggest he was born to a Brahmin widow and subsequently adopted by a Muslim weaver family. Regardless of his birth, his upbringing within a Julaha family is a widely accepted part of his history. In essence, while the precise details of his birth may be debated, the historical record strongly associates Kabir with the Julaha community, and his life and works reflect that association.

Rabindranath Tagore states that Kabir was born to Muslim parents in Benares and likely became a student of the renowned Hindu ascetic Ramananda about the year 1440 in his early childhood. Ramananda introduced to Northern India the religious movement launched by Ramanuja, the eminent 12th-century reformer of Brahmanism in the South. This resurgence partially emerged as a response to the growing formality of the orthodox worship and partially as a declaration of the heart's needs in opposition to the profound intellectualism of Vedanta philosophy and its excessive monism. Ramanuja's teachings embodied a fervent personal devotion to the deity Vishnu, symbolizing the personal dimension of the Divine Nature: that mystical "religion of love" which emerges universally at a specific level of spiritual development, impervious to the constraints of creeds and philosophies. During the era when the fervent poetry and profound philosophy of eminent Persian mystics such as Attar, Sadi, Jalaluddin, Rumi, and Hafiz significantly impacted Indian religious thought, he envisioned harmonizing this profound and individualistic Muhammad mysticism with the established

theology of Brahmanism. It can be confidently stated that within their teachings, two or possibly three seemingly opposing currents of profound spiritualism converged, akin to the intersection of Jewish Hellenistic thought in the early Christian church; a remarkable aspect of Kabir's genius is his ability to amalgamate these elements in his poetry.

The poems of Kabir Das are very simple and comprehensible but some of his poems are so complex and profound that they call for our cerebral gymnastics to understand its connotations and suggestions. On some occasions the poetry of Kabir becomes very mystical and spiritual which go beyond the understanding of common man of Knowledge.

The thoughts and visions of Kabir Das seem to have come from his parents whose nurturing of the child provided the foundation of spiritual journey. Growing up in a weaver community also exercised a great influence on his small personality. It exposed him to the reality of everyday life, the hypocrisy of religious orthodoxy and, above all, the struggles of the working class. This experience saved his critical perspective on social and religious level which became the central theme in his poetry. His verses are generally called “dohas and Sabdas”. They are the testament to his profound spiritual knowledge but what matters most in his writing is his acidic and satiric vision of different religious practices prevalent at contemporary time. He opposed and sometime rejected ritualistic practices and gave importance of inner devotion and the unity of God. He made criticism vehemently both Hindu and Muslim religious leaders for their dogmatic and hypocritical behavior. He pleaded for a direct and personal connection with the divine. The central theme of his teaching is the oneness of God regardless of the names and forms attributed to him from different religions. Evelyn Underhill rightly observes:

Next, he is protected from the soul destroying conclusions of pure monism, inevitable if its logical implication are pressed home: that is, the identity of substance between God and the soul, with its corollary of the total absorption of that soul in the Being of God as the goal of the spiritual life and the true object of existence is the making patent of the latent identity, the realization which finds expression in the vedantist formula “Thou art thou”. But Kabir says that Brahma and the creatures are “ever distinct yet ever united”; that the wise man knows the spiritual as well as the material world to “be no more than his footstool.” The soul’s union with him is a love union, a mutual inhabitation; that essentially dualistic relation which all mystical religion expresses, not a self-vengeance which leaves no place for personality. (Underhill, 18)

It is interesting to note that Kabir Das famous book “Panchivani” that is songs of the vibe is a classic work of literature and philosophy. The Penchant or ‘songs of the Five’ is an early collection from the ‘western’ tradition. It is found in several recessions, of which the earliest

we know is from 1614. The Panchvati has over one thousand songs – by Dadu, Kabir, Namdev, Raidas and Hardas clustered around different ragas. A.K.Mehrotra rightly observes:

The Kabir Padas in the recessions vary in number from 348 to 393. The same one do not recur in all recessions and even when they do there are variations between them. Some Padas are found in all three traditions – the Bijak, the Adi Granth. Its Bijak and Adi Granth versions, however, have only one line in common. This is not unusual, but it has made Kabir's actual history 'one of the most complex to be associated with a single author in world literature. (Mehrotra XVI)

So far as the language of Kabir Das is concerned, it is very simple, and comprehensible. The images and symbols are highly suggestive. He used the everyday language of the common people, employing metaphors and smiles drawn from their daily lives, making his teachings accessible to all. This accessibility was crucial to his social reforms. He challenged the rigid caste system and promoted equality, advocating for a society based on love, compassion and understanding. His message resonated with people from all walks of life, transcoding religious and social features. Ultimately, the uncertainty subsiding Kabir's birth and parentage reinforces him universal appeal. He is not conferred on any specific religious or social identity. He belongs to humanity as a whole. His life and teachings serve as powerful reminder that true spirituality lies in the heart not in external rituals or social status. His legacy continues to inspire millions, reminding us of the enduring love, compassion and the pursuit of truth. In the 'foreword' Mystic Songs of Kabir, G. N. Das rightly observes:

The mystics or Sufis are close to the saint of Bhakti Movement. While Sufis laid emphasis on love, the saints emphasized devotion. Some of the spiritual stages of the Sufis (mystics) have parallels in the saints of Bhakti Movements. Aboodiat of the Sufis is 'Sewa Bhav' of the saints, meaning selfless service, similarly, Zuhd is 'Tapassiya', meaning asceticism, Passawar is 'Dhyan', Habs-i-dan is 'Pranayam', meaning Yoga on breathing exercise, Zikr is 'Simran' , meaning repetition of Name, wisely is 'Milap', meaning union and fanned is 'Abhedta' meaning merger with the Divine.

Kabir opposed all forms of inequality throughout his day. That is why Kabir is now essential for eradicating societal problems and for the cleansing of both the inner and outward self. The only difference between his age and ours is the rule of crime, growth of criminals and the birth of terrorists. Even during his time, war was there, and the worst sufferers were the soldiers and giants, lustful and jealous and the persons, who ran after wealth and physical pleasure. They are even now. They indulge in all sets of crime for accumulating wealth and in the process lose everything else: love, respect, peace, health, happiness and the most important 'Character'.

They realize it at the end when they are powerless to undo the wrong. It's a general tragedy. As a result, there is no peace or no happiness in the family: the burring of brides; increase in different castes; murder; suicides; rapes; kidnappings, divorces; separations are all vehement proofs of the restless, heedlessness, cruelty and animosity that is prevalent in society. The climax is that usually fingers are raised against the character integrity and deeds of the politicians at helm and the grass root; officer on top level and in local self: industrialists and businessmen; of course, the security people both military and police. It's clear and openly jungle raja; it's not human life. Humanity has gone out of human beings. Srikant Prasoon rightly says:

The most important aspect of Kabir's life and thought is that he not only pointed out the maladies and medicines but also fought hard to make the men of his time more human and at least a bit divine. He raised fingers and pointed out the blunders. Kabir is very open minded and positive. He clearly suggests that those who will plant thorny acacia (babool) will not get sweet and juicy mangoes (ama) to eat.”
(Prasoon, 73)

The spiritual potency of Kabir was evident, consistently illuminating the uninformed and redeeming the transgressor. Currently, the location of Kabir Choura in Kashi was once the site of Kabir's residence, surrounded by many brothels. Although Kabir was indifferent to their presence, the disreputable ladies wanted him to go so that his nocturnal singing of prayers would not disrupt their illicit activities. Faced with Kabir's refusal to comply, the ladies ignited his hut one night. Kabir emerged from the hut and stood serenely seeing it engulfed in flames, all the while chanting the name of Rama. A spark from the flames suddenly ignited all the adjacent tents of the prostitutes. The frightened ladies fled, seeing that their lovers were vanishing without helping, and sought safety at Kabir's knees. He empathised with them and somehow preserved their shelters from complete annihilation. Through his compassionate instruction, they were diverted from their immoral behaviours.

As Kabir deepened his spiritual practices, he increasingly saw the need to have a formal Guru. He was profoundly captivated by the prospect of having Swami Ramananda of Kashi as his Guru. He believed that his Muslim background could deter Ramananda from initiating him. One early morning before dawn, he positioned himself on the stairs of a ghat on the Ganga, when Swami Ramananda arrived for his daily ablutions. Unintentionally treading on Kabir's head in the darkness, Ramananda vociferously proclaimed the name of God as 'Rama.' Kabir arose, reciting the same Name as his mantra. Ramananda was profoundly moved by the intense longing and devotion shown by this pupil. Kabir subsequently remarked on this significant event:

When I got Ramananda as my Guru, my sorrows were destroyed, and my doubts disappeared. Such is the power a grace of the Guru! (Urvashi Surati)

Kabir, as a key student of Ramananda, followed him on pilgrimages throughout India. They visited many locations, including Puri, Rameswaram, Kanchi, and Vijayanagar. Mathura, Vrindavan, Haridwar, Broach, Dwarka, Chitrakoot, and Prayag.

Kabir imparted Nirguna Bhakti, including Sankara's Advaita—the unity of Jiva with the Supreme Self—the yogic disciplines of the Natha Yogis, the Sufi doctrine of love, Islam's principle of human brotherhood, and the notion of a formless God. He emphasized that God's grace is vital for spiritual enlightenment. He emphasized the need of purging the mind of its wants and adhering to a life characterized by candour, simplicity, and self-discipline. Kabir referred to his God as 'Nirguna', indicating that He transcended the three Gunas and their derivatives, such as ego, mind, and senses. Although a Jnani by nature, Kabir advocated to the masses that the love of God signifies the ultimate spiritual enlightenment.

Kabir did not accept either the Avatars of Hinduism or the 'last and best messiah-hood of Mohammed.' He preached against all exclusiveness, privileges and priestcraft in Hinduism as well as in Islam. He preached against the habits of meat-eating and consuming intoxicants, and spoke strongly the time of death he sang in joy about God, his Beloved:

It is said that, just before his ultimate departure, Kabir reclined, enveloping himself with a blanket, and subsequently died. Shortly, his Hindu and Muslim adherents began to dispute whether his remains should be cremated or interred. They suddenly heard Kabir's voice instructing them to remove the covering and observe. Upon doing so, they were astonished to see a mound of flowers in place of Kabir's corpse! The two parties then buried and partially incinerated these antiquities. The Master had, in fact, endeavoured to foster unity between the two groups even posthumously.

Similarities between Kabir and Swami Vivekananda are also significant. Both of them wanted a 'root and branch' reform in the Indian society but on the basis of spirituality. Both preached morality as the foundation for all spiritual life and progress. Both used a very strong language against oppressors and charlatans. Both upheld the need for a new approach and application of religion under the changed conditions of Indian society. Both preached Yoga to the masses along with Jnana and Bhakti. In fact, Swamiji spoke of Kabir as his ideal of 'reformation through spiritual upliftment. (Gautamananda, 127-28)

Kabir Das's poetry gives us a timeless message: God is not found in temples or books, but within ourselves. His poems teach us to go beyond outer appearances and connect with the formless spirit through love, truth, and self-awareness. Kabir's voice is bold yet gentle,

questioning blind faith and encouraging personal understanding. Even today, his words inspire people of all backgrounds to seek peace and truth in their own hearts. His poetry is not just literature—it is a spiritual guide for anyone searching for deeper meaning in life.

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