

Dimensions of Bhakti Period

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Abstract: *For studying the Dimensions of Bhakti period, Kabir, the great saint and mystic has been chosen as matter of study with the objective to study, specifically, the role of Kabir in shaping the then society which is called the Bhakti period. The study covers the Bhakti period, which started in the 7th Century – 8th century in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Later it spread to Karnataka, Maharashtra and it reached North India in the 15th Century. For conducting the present study, data has been collected from different volumes of Kabir 'Bani'. Kabir composed thousands of songs, many of which are orally known, but not yet included in any anthology. According to Kabir the human body is the Universe in miniature and the trained mind can see in it the regions of saints, celestial beings and other spheres of unsurpassed beauty and divine music. Kabir locates the Supreme Being, Ram, in the Chakra situated in the crown of the head which he calls Sat-Loka. It may be stated that all this is described in the pre-Buddhist mysticism of India. Unlike other Hindu saints, Kabir condemns idolworship and sees no meaning in rituals and pilgrimages.*

Keywords: Bhakti, Soul, Enlightenment, Social Reform, reincarnation, Karma

Introduction: Mohammad bin Tuglak (1325-1351) left the Moslem Empire in India in a state of chaos. Reducing the people to a state of great poverty and misery through his maladministration and fanatical religious intolerance, he left behind him a country in the grip of famine, plague, and rebellion. In 1398, Timur invaded India and put to the sword thousands of innocent men, women and children, and carried away most of the wealth of the country that he could lay his hand on. The destruction of their temples and the outrages on their sacred-traditions by the north-western invaders did not shake the faith of the Hindus in their religion. In many instances, it was a period of great religious upheavals. The bhakti or devotional school of thought acquired strength and a great wave of devotion of the heart to Vishnu or Hari swept through the land. Shankaracharya, the supreme exponent of Hinduism, had stressed the importance of bhakti as a means to purify the heart; but his main theme was knowledge or gnosis which alone, according to the Vedic doctrines, leads to inner enlightenment and ultimate deliverance of the soul from the bonds of nescience. Ramanuja (A.D. 1100), a southern teacher of great erudition and a monk of pious character, developed the school of devotion in his commentary on the Upanishads, the Gita and the Vyas Suttras. Northern India adopted the bhakti school of thought, and the bleeding soul of the Hindus of that time found consolation in the wisdom of compassion, benevolence and self - surrender to Krishna or Ram. Men, women and children found aesthetic, moral and spiritual food in the personality of Krishna and received the spiritual upliftment and ecstasy which made them forget the horrors of their environment and in some cases brought real and abiding peace to their hearts.

Objectives: The objective of this research is to study, specifically, the role of Kabir in shaping the then society which is called the Bhakti period. This period had suffered great poverty, misery and fanatic religious intolerance.

Data Source and Sample Size: For studying the Dimensions of Bhakti period, Kabir, the great saint and mystic has been chosen as matter of study. The study Covers the Bhakti period, which started in the 7th Century – 8th century in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Later it spread to Karnataka, Maharashtra and it reached North India in the 15th Century. This movement reached its peak in the 15th Century and 17th century. The time of Kabir was 1398-1518. Some people are of the view that he was born in 1440 and died in 1578 (Maghar) at the age of 78. For conducting the present study, data has been collected from different volumes of Kabir „Bani“. Every era has its vision and the poet receives the food for his speech through this vision. The saint literature of Bhakti, period found its expression in religion and oneness philosophy.

Research Methodology: This study has been done on the basis of original work of Kabir and its translations done by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and Kunwar Anil Kumar. The method sprung from the traditional qualitative approach. Onion method has been used by its five main layers, which served step by step to reach the conclusion. Firstly, philosophy of Kabir was studied and evaluated, then his approach towards society was taken into account. Grounded theory was used as a strategy and then time horizon or the period of that time was taken into consideration. In the end his philosophy was evaluated by keeping in view the society, rituals and culture of that time. The above methodology was used to reach to the point that Kabir, was not only a saint but prominent social reformer. The main purpose of this research is to prove that Kabir is not of an age but of all ages. Couplets and sakhis written by Kabir were read and its evaluation was studied broadly via books and websites. A deep observation was made of the data collected in the search light of Bhakti period, when Mughals invaded India and society was at upheavals. The stepping in of Kabir into the Bhakti movement proved fruitful in bringing about reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims. The study of his sakhis prove that Kabir followed the path of mysticism, the bhakti and the sufi tradition.

Study Content: During Bhakti period, poets of outstanding ability and of a cosmopolitan outlook on life sang of Krishna and Rama in their sweet and immortal songs in the Hindi language, the language of the masses. Many of these spiritual singers were contemporary of Kabir, and it is certain that the child Kabir, born in 1398, heard these sweet devotional lyrics when he was rocked in the cradle by his mother. The school of bhakti abolished the rigid caste rules, and it was commonly held that anybody who worshipped God belonged to God irrespective of his caste and birth. A shoe-maker,

Raidas, was hailed as a saint and worshipped by all on account of his self-transcending love of God.

The Hindu Saint whose influence molded the life of Kabir was Ramanand (1400-1447), a great teacher. His holy life was a source of inspiration to many. Among his disciples were numbered Sena, a barber, Dhanna, a peasant, and Raidas, a leather worker. Having travelled through Northern India, teaching the doctrine of devotion, Karma, reincarnation and personal piety, Ramanand lived in the holy city of Kashi (Benares) when Kabir was a child. Hundreds flocked to him every morning to join him in his devotion. Though India of the time of Kabir was characterized by misrule and chaos, yet there was great religious activity and literary upheaval in the vernacular. Benares has ever been the seat of learning and religious fervor in India. Its gorgeous temples, the slow current of the Ganges, the processions of monks, the debates of scholars and the stately flights of steps cannot but impress the mind of one who lives there as well as even the casual visitor. Kabir is said to have passed his

boyhood in this city of Lord Shiva, in which Shakya Muni, Buddha "turned the wheel of, Law" some 1500 years before Kabir.

Like the lives of other great religious teachers of the past - excepting Mohammed, the life of Kabir is full of legends. The following account may be taken as reasonably correct. A Brahman virgin widow is said to have given birth to the child who was subsequently called Kabir. The birth is said to have been miraculous. All followers of Kabir admit that Kabir was brought up in the house of Moslem named Nur Ali or Nura, a weaver, whose wife was named Nima. It is said that a Hindu monk named Ashranand, who had knowledge of the real parentage of Kabir, took care to teach him Hindu ideas and ideals when he was a child. Kabir was a precocious child. He was sent to a Moslem teacher. But he was not satisfied with the teachings given and left him. From his childhood, the religious quest seems to have been his favorite pursuit. The traditional accounts of the birth of Creation and other such matters did not satisfy him. "On my tongue Vishnu, in my eyes Narayan, and in my heart Govind dwells.....My meditation is with Hari." When Kabir was hardly a young boy, Ramanand was preaching his doctrine of absorption in God through pure devotion and benevolence. Evidently, Ramanand Swami was a magnetic personality. He had thousands of selfless disciples and was held in great esteem by those who knew him. Ramanand was in love with rituals and preached .bhakti as the means to God-realization. Kabir heard him in the streets of Benares and was profoundly impressed with his teachings and personality. Knowing well that a teacher less mystic is not fitted for a life of higher devotion and contemplation, Kabir applied to Ramanand for initiation. It was after hesitation and trial that Kabir was accepted as a disciple by Ramanand. It is stated by some writers that Kabir was a sufi and disciple of some Moslem teacher. Professor Wilson, a great authority on the subject, does not hold this view. Kabir served his teacher personally with devotion, and learned from him not only the theoretical side of the Hindu doctrine, but also the mystic Yoga which he seems to have practiced with great patience.

Kabir was not a pandit; probably he did not know Sanskrit at all. Having listened to the philosophical controversies that were held between the Benares pundits and his Guru, Kabir acquired a thorough knowledge of Vedanta and Sankhya. In his private life, Kabir continued to work as a weaver, spending a part of his earnings on charity and hospitality to the „sadhus“ and part to Nura. Once he mysteriously disappeared, full of light, peace and joy. Kabir married a woman named Loi. Her name figures in many of his songs. We see reference to Kabir's marriage in the “Adi Grantha”, the Sikh holy book; "His first wife was ugly, of low caste, of ill-boding feature..... The present wife is beautiful, intelligent, of auspicious features, easily child-bearing." (Quoted from G.H. Westcott, Kabir and the Kabir Panth). There are several references by Kabir in his songs to his son Kamal; some traditions credit him with two sons. During the early days of his devotion, Kabir encountered much opposition from his family. His mother often reproached him with neglecting his work and insisted on his giving up his religious devotions and study. His outspoken criticism of the rituals, of both Hinduism and Islamism, brought on him the wrath of his fellow-citizens and caused annoyance to his family. After his father's death the burden of supporting the family fell on Kabir. His mother opposed him and wanted him to mind his family affairs only. A true seeker after God is above all dogmatism, sectarianism and fanaticism. We find Kabir in the company of a Muslim teacher, Taqi of Jhusi, near Allahabad, participating in his devotions. Taqi gave his full spiritual

blessings to Kabir and kept a friendly eye on him throughout his life, they say. Tradition says that Kabir travelled far into Central Asia and met many Moslem teachers there. But there is no historical evidence to establish this. Kabir was once summoned by Sikandar Lodi, the reigning sovereign of Delhi, to answer to the charges of infidelity preferred against him both by Hindus and Moslems. The Moslems complained that the weaver outraged the ears of the faithful Muslims with his cries of "Ram, Ram," in the streets. The Hindus complained that he unlawfully used the „tilak and Janeu“ (sacred thread). When brought before the king, Kabir refused to make obeisance. After a short conversation, the king was convinced of the innocence of Kabir and let him go. The doctors of Moslem law (Qazi) demanded that Kabir should live as a true Moslem and threatened him with penalty of death if he did otherwise. Kabir was not to be daunted. He had overcome all fear of death. He answered: "Know only one Lord animating the hearts of both Hindus and Moslems. He is not the monopoly of either of them. I worship him in any form I see Him." They asked him why he called himself Kabir which, in Islam, is one of the names of God. Kabir answered:

**"My name is Kabir; the world knows this. In the three words is my
name, and happiness is my abode. Water, air, the season, thus I
created the world. The unstruck wave
thunders in Heaven, and keeps time. I made manifest the
seed of Brahma....God, men and 'rishis' (sages) do not find my end.
Kabir's saints alone can find it..... Hear, O
Sikandar, I am a 'Pir' of both religions."(Great Men of
India,P-522)**

Kabir was condemned as a heretic because he openly condemned the religious dogmas of both Hindus and Muslims.

**Muslims and Hindus are running toward their
Mosques and Temples respectively in search of their Gods.
But the incorporeal and the defect less one who
Cannot be seen with the external eyes, the
embodiment of truth- God- resides in the body
itself. It is not possible to know about him fully.
(L008X-V trans. Kunwar AK p304)**

For such utterances, having been bound with chains, he was thrown into the river. The tradition says that the bonds could not hold him nor the water could drown. He was thrown, bound in chains, before infuriated elephants. But the elephants did not hurt him as Kabir was protected by the power of the name of „Hari“. Kabir lived to the age of 120, and voluntarily gave up his body in a town near the holy city of Benares. "Ram is in Benares and also in every other place," said Kabir, when his disciples asked him about the reason to go to Benares to die. Tradition says that a dispute arose as to the disposal of Kabir's body, between the two rivals-Hindus and

Mohammedans. An appeal to arms seemed imminent. A passing holy man appeared and bade the rivals to raise the sheet that covered the saint Kabir's body. They did so, and to their great surprise, found beneath a heap of fresh and fragrant flowers. Kabir was a great singer. Dressed as a poor wandering devotee, drunk with the love of God, he used to go about with a hand-drum, pouring forth his heart in his songs.

**Where is the need of words, when love
 Has made drunken the heart?"**
**I have wrapped the diamond in my cloak; Why open it
 again and again?**
**When its load was light, the pan of the
 Balance went up: now it is full,
 Where is the need for weighing?**
**The swan has taken its flight to the lake Beyond the
 mountains;**
**Why should it search for the pools and Ditches
 anymore?**
**Your Lord dwells within you: why need Your outward
 eyes be opened?**
**Kabir says: "Listen my brother! my
 Lord, who ravishes my eyes, has united Himself with me. (Songs of
 Kabir trans. Tagore II. 105.)**

He composed thousands of songs, many of which are orally known, but not yet included in any anthology. According to Kabir the human body is the Universe in miniature and the trained mind can see in it the regions of saints, celestial beings and other spheres of unsurpassed beauty and divine music. Kabir locates the Supreme Being, Ram, in the „Chakra“ situated in the crown of the head which he calls „Sat-Loka“. It may be stated that all this is described in the pre-Buddhist mysticism of India. Unlike other Hindu saints, Kabir condemns idol-worship and sees no meaning in rituals and pilgrimages. He says:

**If it had been possible to come in contact with
 God by worshipping idols, made of stone, I would start
 Worshipping a huge mountain of stone, which
 Probably would yield better results. But all these
 Things are meaningless. Even a quern is better Than these
 stone made idols which grinds
 Wheat for the people of the world and provides flour to them.
 (1008K V trans. Kunwar AK p.300)**

He had little patience with asceticism either. No wonder he incurred the hostility of the orthodox by his sharp condemnation of the outer practices of Hinduism. He did not favor the Moslims either and condemned their Namaz and recitation of the Quran:

**A Maulvi crows (calls God at a very high pitch) From the
mosque, but God is not deaf.
O Moulvi! One for whom you crow is in your heart
I.e. God is not a separate entity and is
Not away from you. That supreme consciousness and
The embodiment of truth, which is your soul,
Is present in you and the prayer offered to him should be with a peaceful
mind. (1008K V trans. Kunwar AK p304)**

Kabir condemns the caste system of the Hindus. To him a Brahman who reads the Vedas and cultivator who tills the ground are equal. All mankind is one family and God is the supreme head of it. The doctrines of Karma and transmigration, the basic Hindu teachings, are upheld by Kabir. They should assume many forms according to its merits. After birth and death its gains come to a body. Kabir believes in man's ability to see God, in this very life. We can see from his words that the claims to have seen God, the fountain-head of all Joy, Truth and Beauty. Here is the personal testimony of Kabir as translated by Tagore:

**"I have known in my body the Sport of the Universe: I have
escaped from the error of this world.
The inward and the outward are become as one sky;
The infinite and the finite are united; I am drunk with the sight of All"
(Songs of Kabir, trans.Tagore.III)**

In another song quoted in the Adi-granth of Nanak, Kabir says:

**"I have met God, who dwelleth in the heart. When a
stream is lost in the Ganges,
It becomes the Ganges itself. Kabir is similarly lost in God by invoking Him; I have
become the true One and need not go elsewhere."
(Great Men of India Page.526)**

Students of the Hindu Upanishads will see that Kabir speaks the language of the „rishis“ of the Himalayas. Kabir is one of those Hindu saints who speak the language of the Quran and he quotes, approvingly, many of its teaching. He disapproves of the rite of circumcision and discourages pilgrimage to Mecca.

"They fast all day, at night they slaughter the cow.
 Here murder, there devotion; how can this please God? O Qazi thy
 One God is in thee,
 Thou beholdest him not by thought and reflection.
 Thou gainest nothing by reading and study,
 O madman, since thou regardest
 Him not in thy hear..... If thou prayest with deception in thy heart,
 What availeth thee thy pilgrimage to Mecca?"
 (Great Men of India Page.527)

The influence of Kabir is noticeable in many sects of India. The Sikhs of Punjab, the noble followers of Guru Nanak, perhaps one of the disciples of Kabir himself acknowledge Kabir as one of the great Mahatmas and sing his hymns daily. The „Vairagis“, the „Udasees“ and others are all lovers of Kabir and read his 'literature. Kabir is quoted by the Moslim sufis freely. In the mystic circles of the Yogis he is regarded with reverence and his exposition of the Chakras is used by them. **Summary and Conclusion:** The main study swirls around Kabir and his writings.

As far as Indian political system was concerned, it was under Muslim rule. During the period of Muslim empire, the Hindu religion was suffering shackles of danger. The cruel and ruthless sultans (Kings) often carried out massacres in large number and destroyed Hindu shrines. Some forced Hindus for conversion into Muslim religion. That was the time when saints like Kabir and others raised their voice to protect humanity. Such saints considered religions and religious places as false way of worship and said, "Jat pat puche nahi koi, Hari ko bhaje so harika hoi" Nobody ever asks for caste or religion, the one who worships God, merges in him." (trans by self). There is no doubt that a poet is the production of his age. Kabir is no exception to this fact. The age in which Kabir lived, exhibited three types of life features:

1- Caste system 2. Bigotry 3. Religious conflicts

Kabir raised his voice against all the vices, which can be summed up in the following way:

1. God is one and Brahman and Kabir are one. Without understanding this truth, one cannot find God.
2. We should serve our Guru devotedly, as there is no difference between God and Guru.
3. Never curse or speak bad about any one because we are the creation of one God and human soul is the abode of God.
4. Kabir condemns religious dogmas, fanaticism and bigotry.
5. According to him God is not to be searched in temples, Mosques or other religious places.
 The one who seeks or peeps inside the temple of body, will find him, as „Soham“.
6. While condemning outward pageantry or ostentation, he satires bitterly, whether of Hindus or Muslims.
7. Kabir raised his voice for the upliftment of women.
8. Kabir was highly against caste system, which is the main hinderance in reach of God.

9. To Hindus he says, if God can be found by worshipping a stone, I should worship stone grinder as it grinds the grain for our food.
10. To Muslims he says, they build Mosque by piling up stones and pebbles and then crow like a cock as if God were deaf.

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