

Reading Kabir: Situating the Poet Amidst Linguistic and Literary Transition

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ABSTRACT

This paper primarily explores the philological and intellectual dimensions applied to understand, interpret, politicise and problematise Kabir across history, using hermeneutic phenomenology as a credible and rigorous research strategy. From the 14th-15th century to present-day Indian history, I postulate interpretive paradigm research designed to investigate a complex historical trajectory regarding the social, cultural, and religious journeys. The interpretive research paradigm is based on the epistemology of idealism (in idealism, knowledge is viewed as a social construction). It encompasses several research approaches, which have a central goal of seeking to interpret the social world. The decline of Buddhism and the emergence of Nathpanth, Vaishnavism, Nirguna bhakti, Shaivism, Sufism, and many other sects within and outside Hinduism resulted in mixed and multiple cultural groups. Later political upheaval and socio-cultural encounters among communities compound the issue to the maximum. Different cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious identities, too, witness the course of making and unmaking. Humanity has discovered newer themes and crossed many boundaries within this discourse and dialectics about knowledge, meaning, history, and the world. Making and unmaking knowledge is endless, providing multiple frames to visualise and examine knowledge. An attempt has been made to read Kabir and his poetry across history through multiple knowledge frames. Although a historically neglected and marginalised voice in the discourses of modern and post-modern scholarship, his treatment of social/spiritual, inner/outer binaries, and dogma/behaviour makes the poet universal and relevant across history.

Key Words : Bhakti, Caste, Ideology, Kabir, Literary Tradition, Nationality, Nirguna

Kabir, a leading spiritual saint/poet of India, was born and lived in the holy city of Benares and died in Maghar. He is widely known for his intense couplets and songs that connect life and spirituality in a simple yet powerful way. His poetry in a universal language literally and figuratively broke down the barriers to experiencing the divine. Kabir's poetic sensibility and the notion of *bhakti* can be understood from the fact that he is a poet of direct address, calls us to 'listen', and invariably extends this call to 'bhai' (brother, fellow human being). His rejection of caste ideology and Brahmin supremacy is honest and fundamental. Secondly, Kabir interrogates all rights and reflects upon real dilemmas of human existence. Kabir is one of the foremost poets of *Bhaktikaal*.

Bhakti poetry, liberated from the formalism of ancient poetics, feudal culture and the courtly atmosphere, expresses people's cultures—their emotions in their languages. Cultural awareness, ideologies and sensibilities described in the Bhakti Movement and its literature are more closely related to the culture and society of its times than to ancient traditions of Indian culture and literature. The Bhakti Movement recognises the absurdities of social systems. It portrays the anti-human ideologies of feudal society in various aspects and forms and expresses a feeling of rebellion against them. Kabir is a champion advocate of this spirit of rebellion and calls everyone to cast off the cover of the religious and social fabric that distinguishes and discriminates.

An intense inner conviction and an undying trust in his self and his experience distinguish Kabir from other poets of the Bhakti tradition. He challenged and questioned all scriptural teachings, practices, and rituals until he could validate their truth. He is often considered a social or religious reformer who tried to bridge the gap between various sects and castes.

It is widely believed that Kabir was primarily a literary figure, a poet and an orator. But Kabir's life was deeply ingrained in spirituality, and he used poetry and metaphors to convey his teachings. Therefore, his magnificent contribution to Hindi literature is a medium of the spiritual message of his teachings.

Much research on Kabir places him as one of the earliest poets of the Hindi language and literature. But, it is intriguing that there continue to be many unknowns about Kabir's life despite the extensive and global awareness of his verses and sayings. Even the basic information on his life- for instance, when he was born, who his parents were, what his family life was like, and when he died-is shrouded in mystery. The period when Kabir happened to have come down to dwell among humans is still in the dark. Kabir's biographers complicate it further through contrary and contradictory claims where his life span expands from the late decades of the thirteenth century to the mid-fifteenth century. Hence instead of facts, it is speculations regarding the birth and death of the poet. The basis of the belief is hearsay and certain inauthentic couplets because of inconsistent lexicon, form and structure.

On the other hand, some historians have discovered as many as twelve Kabir during the 14th -15th century. So more than just a poet, Kabir appears to us as a phenomenon. He survives in the consciousness of diverse linguistic, literary, cultural, ethnic, and religious groups across eight centuries and is still more relevant than any other poet.

Hindus want him to be a representative of their religion, and Muslims tend to emphasise his Muslim upbringing and initiation into the Sufi traditions. Some dismiss theories of Kabir's illegitimate birth by claiming that his birth mother, even though unmarried had an immaculate conception. The celibate /ascetic sects claim that Kabir never married. Proponents of Tantric traditions point to Kabir songs to show that he was influenced very much by the Kundalini practices.

In summary, each sect's claim on Kabir appears to be self-serving and hence cannot be considered as

providing reliable information on his life. Diverse claims and viewpoints on Kabir's life will likely continue to exist. These controversies are partly attributed to various religious sects' parochial manipulation of his history. But we may safely say that Kabir lived during the 15-16th century.

Given his biographical sketch, it can be said that Kabir's life has been wrapped in myths, speculations and tales. What can be said without any doubt is that he was brought up in a weaver's family and was a weaver by profession. Kabir's poetic sensitivity draws its energy from folklore and the lives of ordinary people. His poetry advocates the equality of all human beings. He is strictly against any tradition that discriminates between man and man. He believes in what he sees and not in bookish or classical knowledge. He is firmly against hypocrisy and pretentiousness and emphasises simple living. His life and experiences as a weaver are visible in his poetry. His poetry raises the fundamental issues of life that are still relevant. Kabir questioned everything he encountered and keenly observed the world around him. It seems that he spent considerable time watching nature and drew much inspiration from trees, animals, birds, rivers, and the ocean.

Religious literature is the chief source of our understanding of Kabir and his poetry. In medieval India, it was widely sung and spread across the country through devotees and wandering ascetics who walked across the country. In all probability, all received versions of Kabir's Poetry have undergone a long phase of oral transmission before being committed to writing. They sometimes result from textual corruption, inconsistent reading or poetic looseness and redundancy. Based on prosody and comparing variant versions, reconstruction of some earlier text is possible. It is argued that the poems may have been composed for a metrically correct recitation, and when they became songs set to musical moods and rhythms, they lost their strict metrical frame under the licenses used by the singers.

One of the most recent translators of Kabir, Vinay Dharwadkar (2003), suggests that the later polished texts as products of "a collaborative textual refinement" are poetically more beautiful than the early versions. He asserts that: Each of the 593 padas gathered from the earliest manuscripts is a piece of poetry polished by several generations of men. In a text of collaborative authorship, each poem is explicitly a palimpsest to be recomposed until all its distinct poetic possibilities have been exhausted.

(Dharwadker 2003, pp. 63-65)

India's diverse socio-ethnic and historical context necessitates multiple and plural grounds of existence and representations that are wider and beyond a monolithic conformation of a poet who probably was appropriated more than by any other poet/Saint/Philosopher in India. The extensive range of Kabir's poetry put him on a ground where he is claimed equally by Hindus, Muslims, Kabirpanthis, Nathpanthis, Ramanandis and quite recently by Dalit Critics.

In the words of Rajender Singh, old Brahminic Hinduism, Hindu and Buddhist tantrism, the individualistic tantric teaching of the Nath Yogis and the personal devotionism coming up from the south mingled with the austere intimations of imageless godhead promulgated by Islam. Every one of these influences is evident in Kabir, who, more than any other poet-saint of the period, reflects the unruly, wealthy conglomerate of religious life that flourished around him.

From the 14th-15th century to today, Indian history presents a complex historical trajectory regarding social, cultural, and religious journeys. The decline and the last phase of Buddhism in the form of Sahjayana and further the emergence of Nathpanth, Vaishnavism, Nirguna bhakti, Shaivism, Sufism, and many other sects within and outside Hinduism resulted in mixed and multiple cultural groups. Later political upheaval and socio-cultural encounters among communities compound the issue to the maximum. Different cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious identities, too, witness the course of making and unmaking. Humanity has discovered newer themes and crossed many boundaries within this discourse and dialectics about knowledge, meaning, history and the world. Making and unmaking knowledge is endless, providing multiple frames to visualise and examine knowledge. I will attempt to read Kabir and his poetry across history through multiple knowledge frames.

The admirers of Kabir cut across time and space. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one comes across Shankardeva in Assam, Tukaram in Maharashtra, and Nirwan Saheb in Gujarat, celebrating this weaver from Banaras. Then in the eighteenth century, we have Paltudas in Ayodhya; Garibdas and Charandas, and Dayabai and Sahjobai in Haryana, proudly placing themselves in the tradition of Kabir. Each of these was an accomplished sadhaka and poet in their own right. The mention of these few names out of many is intended as a reminder for those admirers of Kabir who 'discover'

him through some translation or interpretation and then treat him as a stand-alone cultural superstar, valiantly fighting a losing battle against stagnant tradition and a decadent society.

To put it in the words of Purushottam Aggarwal, We should rethink some of our ideas about the times of Kabir and the tradition which has so lovingly and reverentially preserved his memories to date. To begin with, it is essential to note that neither Pipa nor Kabir was a stand-alone voice. Kabir is uniquely respected not as some freak miracle of history but as the most important in a galaxy of sadhakas before and after him. Traditionally, he is seen as a participant in an ongoing conversation, in which not only Pipa but Dadu (1544-1603 AD) and many others are also participating in their own right. The admirers of Kabir cut across time and space. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one comes across Shankardeva in Assam, Tukaram in Maharashtra, and Nirwan Saheb in Gujarat, celebrating this weaver from Banaras. Then in the eighteenth century, we have Paltudas in Ayodhya; Garibdas and Charandas, and Dayabai and Sahjobai in Haryana, proudly placing themselves in the tradition of Kabir. Each of these was an accomplished sadhaka and poet in their own right. The mention of these few names out of many is intended as a reminder for those admirers of Kabir who 'discover' him through some translation or interpretation and then treat him as a stand-alone cultural superstar, valiantly fighting a losing battle against stagnant tradition and a decadent society. This 'method' of admiring Kabir, perforce, also becomes a way of either condemnation or condensation for that very society and tradition, which listened to people like Kabir and argued with them carefully.

Kabir is surrounded by multiple layers of meanings and also by numerous controversies. The availability of Kabir's poems in all representative north Indian languages (as if composed originally in them) is broad evidence to realise the presence and significance that Kabir carried. When and how Kabir became popular is again a matter of speculation. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi believes that Kabir was discovered first in the 17th century by Ramanadis and Gorakh Panthis. For an object of study, Angelo de Gubernat is discovered Kabir in 1878. Gubernatis takes us back to Capuchini an friar Marco Della Tomba, who had discovered Kabir in the latter half of the eighteenth century. It is David N. Lorenzen who completes extensive and conclusive research on Kabir taking Tomba and Guberantis's works into context.

Although Kabir's poetry is sung orally across the country, the other source of its survival is *Adigranth* (the religious text of Sikhs), the literature compiled by Kabirpanthis and Nathpanthis. W.M. Callewaert presents a list with a chronological sequence of manuscripts of Kabirspadas from 1570-72 of Mohan Pothi to Pancavani of 1658. He further mentions seven different editions of *Kabir Granthavali* published in the 20th century. There are other random instances of the publication of Kabirgranth in the 19th century by Indians.

Callewaert, Winand Sharma, Swapna and Tailliell, Dieter, edited *Millenium Kabir Vaani* published as late as 2000 has altered with the publication of all available early Kabir-padas. The editors synoptically presented the padas of ten sources between 1572 and 1681. The early material introduced in this edition can guide Kabir's prosody.

To focus and confine, I propose four different frames in which the scholarly interest in Kabir could be expressed. The first one is the Orientalist interest of the Western scholars started by Marco Della Tomba and Angelo de Gubernatis and concluded by David N. Lorezen. Monnier Williams belongs to the same category that attempts to distinguish Kabir from Hinduism and its religious teachings.

Secondly, the scholars of Indian nationalism like Pitambar Barthwal, Shyam Sunder Das, Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Ayodhya Singh Upadhyay Hariaudh, along with many other significant writers of Hindi language and literature, come under [this] category. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi is considered the first prominent critic of Hindi language and literature who introduced Kabir as among the first-generation poet of *Bhakti kaal* and secured a position as the poet in Hindi literature. Parasnath Tiwari attempts to create a comprehensive compilation of Kabir's poems. Thirdly, Rajender Singh and Vaudaille jointly worked on Kabir to liberate him from the control and domain of Hindi writers and attempt to reinterpret Kabir for the audience of the English language. The other scholars are Horstmann and Vinay Dharwarkar. Finally, Dalit and subaltern critics comprise the fourth group, and the prominent critics are Dr Dharamveer and Milind Wakankar.

I may have included only a few more significant contributions here because my primary objective is to draw different dimensions applied to understand, interpret, politicise and problematise Kabir across history. The existing literature on Kabir has already added immensely

to the vast knowledge of and about the poet. The scholarly and intellectual enquiry on Kabir in India that begins in the twentieth century is part of another enquiry into Nath and saint traditions, as essentially a component of medieval India's religious and cultural history. Within this larger tradition of the Bhakti movement, Kabir is discovered as one of the earliest *bhakt*/saint poets after Gyneshwar Namdev and Tukaram. Pitambar Dutt Barthawal, Parashuram Chaturvedi and Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, among others, conducted extensive research to establish the Nath and Saint traditions as a movement within Hindu intellectual tradition and Kabir as one the prominent Hindu mouthpiece. Hence, he is included in the frame of Indian nationalistic discourse:

....it was instead his uniquely Hindu and Indian way of being proclaimed by Dwivedi as the great event in Indian history. (Wakankar 82)

After Dwivedi, we come across many more critics of the Hindi language and literature like Namvar Singh, Purushottam Agrawal, and others; they also read Kabir within the given frame of Indian nationalism. Other prominent scholars like Vaudeville, Rajender Singh, and Monika Horstmann have further elaborated the Western Indological understanding of Kabir. Still, the image they draw of the poet revolves around the one already drawn by Dwivedi and other early Hindi scholars. In the words of Purushottam Aggarwal, Naturally, Kabir is seen frozen at a certain point to be discovered, delivered, and ultimately used in some 'modern' project.

The first radical challenge to this nationalistic frame of research on Kabir is provided by Dharmvir, who critiques the notions and ideas of Dwivedi through a Dalit perspective and inaugurates a new debate on the appropriation of Kabir. Dharmvir instead claims that Kabir was neither a *Vaishnavabhakt* nor a saint-poet of Hindu tradition, but he was a god of Dalits and founded a new religion for them. Thus, all his poetry and philosophy attempted to channelise contemporary discourse to rescue the caste-oppressed people of his time. Hence, Kabir is essentially a Dalit messiah who rejects the idea of a superior caste and rescues their people from the long bondage of social and cultural domination:

Kabir is then a Dalit god because he seeks himself. And in this way, the modern reign of the self-surrounding subject that had flourished in the era of nationalism finds itself reversed, albeit minimally, in a new religion (Wakankar 85)

Kabir is essentially a humanist and a poet par excellent; listening to such people carefully, we realise that Kabir was never treated as a failure or a marginal voice by his society and tradition. We can also see that Kabir was not speaking to a decadent and stagnant community, waiting for colonial modernity for its deliverance. Kabir and Tukaram seem 'modern' not because they were running ahead of their times but because their times were witnessing the emergence of indigenous modernity in Indian history. If vernacular sources are adequately read, a genuine engagement, even with Sanskrit and Persian sources, refutes the image of a stagnant Indian society and an unchanging, eternal caste system. In the specific context of Kabir, we must also realise that much more poignant than his widespread iconoclasm is the dialectics of anguish which permeates his oeuvre just as 'fragrance permeates the entire body of a flower' (as Kabir describes the presence of his Rama in the entirety of existence). His justly celebrated social criticism flows from this dialectic.

On the one hand, he suffers from the longing for the beloved with whom he has 'experienced' such a spontaneous relationship that makes caste and other hierarchies irrelevant. On the other, he experiences social reality quite contrary to this spontaneity. Inside, he lives in a world of love, but the outside world conducts itself based on the accident of birth. And it is not caste alone; it is also the idea of 'piousness' determined by faith. You are 'impure' if you do not have the right kind of faith and dogma. Then, there are rituals, which are empty as much as they represent only mechanical observances bereft of any deep meaning. Facing all this on all sides, Kabir vehemently criticises almost everything.

The objective of this research paper involves an extensive analysis of selected works of Kabir to find out the style and pattern in which language use and its mechanics work out to refashion language per se in the first and how it evolves as an expression of larger public consciousness in terms of its knowledge about self, society, environment, and the nation. Much of Kabir's poetry is consciously critical of its culture, but literature's place and role in society are broadly unknown for different reasons. From Buddhist monk Sarahapad to Nathpanthi's *Sidhayogi* and Aamir Khusrau, Hindi philologists believe Hindi/Hindawee achieves its maturity in the language of Kabir poetry. Hence a computational analysis of lexical and syntactic forms leads us to an area where we might reach specific formulations about

the nature and pattern of language use across North India during and after Kabir's. Further, an examination of the syntactic and stylistic aspects of Kabir's language is carried out to discover a pan-Indian consciousness within the domain and influence of the language. The claims about Kabir made differently by different class/caste identities as to be their own might be problematised, so we further reach some newer conclusions about the more excellent humanistic politics and establish him as a poet. The more comprehensive project is to research the facts and points of convergence and where the poet, his poetry, and the language emerge in a secular and nonsectarian manner to present a picture of a more significant and unified nationalism of medieval north India.

Kabir points out that caste, religion, and other social institutions perpetuate misery and subjugation among the larger masses. With his excellent knowledge about the creation of human life on earth, he enables a human being to understand the same so that the shadows of *Maya* and ignorance do not translate human life into constant hell. His use of language in an upside-down manner (*ulatbhasi*) complicates reality to its maximum and compels us to agree to his vision, where he looks back at it from a counter perspective. Kabir's long-standing traditions and sects in the states of Bengal, Bihar, U. P., Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Punjab indicate the outreach of Kabir or his disciples to those places.

One of the most complex categories of Kabir poems is known as *Ulatbhasi*, poems in 'upside down language'. They are absurd and paradoxical in nature yet meaningful. They have a profound traditional source and reflect an intimate and immediate understanding of surrounding reality. Rajender Singh says, "There are obvious paradoxes and upside-down situations: cow drinks milk from calf, the son is born of a sterile womb, rain falls from earth to sky. There are poems full of animal characters; sometimes, in upside-down situations, snakes guard frogs, and lions swim in the sea. It illuminates the aspect of Kabir poetry, which attempts to say that the unsayable, to tell the *akasha-katha*, the untold story"(318).

Ult does not precisely mean upside down, and the meaning of *Ult* is closer to reversal /reversed. There are instances of role reversal, personalities, and even the law of nature. I was critiquing the dual nature of society and lamenting and targeting the degeneration of social customs, morals, manners, and rituals through such *ulatbhasi* poems.

Many critics and scholars of Kabir question the authenticity and symbolic significance of these Ulatbhasi poems. A brief enquiry of these *Ulatbhasi* poems reveals that they are fascinating; the images stick in the consciousness even when their meaning eludes the mind, initiating a dialogue between the reader and poet and between the reader and himself. In the words of Sukhdev Singh: "Riddles and their extension, the paradoxes and enigmas of *Ulatbhasi*, besides being effective rhetorical devices are teaching devices...a problem the student can't solve and can't escape, a matrix of verbal impossibilities in which a transparent truth lies hidden..."(14).

To conclude the arguments raised in the paper, Prof. Manager Pandey says, "Many scholars who have studied the history of Indian culture, literature and society believe that building up nationalities started in India's 11th and 12th centuries. The emergence of nationalities meant the beginning of the dissolution of feudalism, the growth of mercantile capitalism and regional languages and literature. Changes in the economic base of society bring about changes in the balance and relationship between various social classes. During the early stages of the formation of nationalism, the power of the farmer, artisans and the trading class increased. Change in the society's economic base and relations of production transform the ideological forms, and new possibilities appear for the evolution of art, culture, and literature. The classes affected by this new change in economic growth and relations of production play a vital role in literature, art, and culture. There is a very close relation between the Bhakti Movement and literature, on the one hand, and the socio-economic changes taking place at the beginning of the 12th century. The formation of nationalities began with the simultaneous disintegration of feudalism, which led to a pervasive movement comprising the rise of people's culture".

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