

Political Ideas of Kabir

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Kabir, a popular saint poet belonged to of the era of Bhakti movement which became popular in north India during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He identified himself with the poor, their condition is reflected through his *dohas*/couplets. Researches on literary, cultural and historical aspects of Kabir have been conducted by scholars on religion, literature, philosophers, and historians. But there is lack of focussed study on his political ideas or critique of state His origin, family and even death happens to be shrouded in mystery and controversy. In contemporary times, however, there are three commonly mentioned years: 1440 -1518, 1398-1518 and 1398-1448. He was a resident of Kashi and died in Maghar in eastern Uttar Pradesh. However Kabir is a saint poet, not a social reformer, his emphasis being reform of the individual under the guidance of a true guru or teacher.

Society:

Kabir's discourse on society, polity and state should be analyzed in the backdrop of the context and age in which he was writing because this is a well-accepted fact that a writer will always write his times. Kabir, a contemporary of Sikandar Lodi, his couplets belong to the age of rising trade which led to the birth of a mercantile class. The emergence of this new class had its impact on the traditional caste and hierarchical social structure; consequently, leading to linking of towns and villages which facilitated opportunities for vertical-horizontal mobility of individuals and bringing in new ideas and technology through these exchanges. The impact of this development can be observed in Kabir's couplets. Kabir transcends caste structure of his times to focus on the classes which is reflected in his writings. Kabir is critical of the trading class/*baniya*, and remarked in one of his *dohas*; the traders, shopkeepers or mercantile class are rogues.

Kabir was equally, in fact more critical of the zamindari system. Since majority of the population was rural and was associated with agriculture, and they were a source of surplus extraction made possible through cultural hegemony and dominance. The resistance against

taxation/rent collection was starkly visible in everyday existence in different ingenious forms devised by the subjects. Kabir expressed this primary social contradiction of the classes in his poetic manifestations. Similarly, in the urban areas, the dominant class composed of big traders, shopkeepers, financiers, administrative personnel, and priestly section. There was a thorough repudiation of economic and cultural exploitation in his verses, not restricted to any religion or sect.

Polity:

Kabir remained a rebel throughout his life. His critique of judicial administration and revenue administration emanates from his observation of the exploitation of the poor by the state and its linkages with clergy. His imagined ideal polity *Begumpura* is a reflection of his ideas as a rebel. *Begumpura* is an ideal, mental-construct of a village society, free from sorrow, private property, taxes or hierarchy. This political utopia was to be constructed through *Bhakti*, i.e. through collective participation of people in decision making and in social construction which necessitates a break-off from the prevalent socio-economic divisions (Singh 2001). *Bhakti* means collective participation and sharing. It was a saintly method to transcend the social divisions of the age.

Spiritual Experience:

Kabir was not familiar with Hindu *Shastras* (scriptures) because he was unlettered and from a low origin. But the knowledge that he had gained over the years and the truth which he had realised was the result of his own spiritual experiences and not evoked from *Shastras*. Based on his experiences he questions the *Pandits* that there can be no meeting point of their minds as whatever he says is based on his personal experiences whereas *Pandits* speak from sacred books: *Tum Kahte Kagad Ke Lekhi, Hum Kahte Ankhan Dekhi* (what you speak is from books, I speak from what I see from my own eyes).

According to Kabir, seeing, hearing and touching the reality oneself, results in joy that is special. The analogy in his couplets are inspired by simple objects surrounding us that we observe in our daily lives. For example, he compares in depth experience with pearls, acknowledging the fact that deeper the experience, the richer it is, just like the pearls which are not found at the shore but at deep sea. The tone and tenor underlying his preaching

usually start from everyday happening and proceed from there matter of facts into cosmic process.

Religion:

Kabir did not care for any formal religion; he interchangeably speaks of *Allah, Ram, Krishna* in his expressions. Like Nanak, Kabir made a strong plea for Hindu –Muslim unity. He strongly denounced idol-worship, pilgrimages, bathing in holy rivers or taking part in formal worship, such as *namaz*. Nor did he consider it necessary to abandon the life of a normal householder for the sake of a saintly life. Though familiar with *yogic* practices, he considered neither ascetism nor book knowledge important for true knowledge.

Since Kabir belonged to a community of *Julahas* (weavers) which was not favoured either by the Hindus or Muslims, therefore, he was free from all dogmas associated with either religion, which helped him to pursue his faith with full vigour and self-confidence. His couplets and his views of God as his mistress, show his affinity with the Persian Sufi poets Hafiz, Rumi and the massively mistranslated Omar Khayyam. (Canalos 1970).

Equality:

Kabir believed in equality of all human beings and considered the followers of all religious faiths as one. His criticisms of the fanatic practices prevalent in Islam and Brahminism were inspired by his undaunting love for fellow human beings. Kabir strongly denounced the caste system, especially the practice of untouchability and emphasized the fundamental unity of man. He was opposed to all kinds of discrimination between human beings, whether on the basis of caste, religion, race, family or wealth.

It was not too unusual for a man of Allah to have a Hindu guru, because for a true seeker there never was any dogma, no matter how mindlessly the Brahmin temple priests and Muslim scholars could get (ibid.)

Idea of a Supreme Being:

Kabir constantly generates the awareness among the humanity about the abiding presence of God in everything around us. His belief in a Supreme Being is the foundation of his teachings but in his couplets he asserts that it is very difficult to define that Supreme Being. The Lord is

beyond speech and sight and therefore to describe him is to achieve the impossible. The almighty is beyond our comprehension, all pervading and permeates the whole universe as butter permeates milk. The Supreme lord is indivisible, indestructible, colourless, without body and cannot be measured by time and space, as expressed by Kabir in the following couplet: *Jas kathiye tas hote nahin jas hai taisa soyi* (What you speak of him, that he is not, he is what he is, (Kabir Granthawali: 310, cited in Tiwari1978: 85)

The Supreme Lord exists in everything around us and anything else beside him is nothing but an outcome of illusion and is artificial as the reflection in a mirror. In one of his couplets, Kabir is hinting at his all pervasiveness:

Sunu Sakhi Pihu main Jihu basai, Jihu main basai ki pihu. (O tell me my friend, whether the heart is in the beloved or the beloved in the heart).

Kabir has no doubt that the creator is in the universe and the universe in the creator and therefore wherever he sees, he sees him alone). Apart from God, the world animate or inanimate, has no separate existence or reality of its own. (Tiwari 1978: 86). Kabir does not believe in the incarnations (Avtaar of Hindu Gods). He sung in the glory of Krishna, Ram, Narsimha but denied their existence as Avtaars because Kabir believes that the supreme creator is beyond birth and death. For Kabir truth in God is beyond *Sagun* and *Nirguna*.

Bhakti:

Kabir deeply believed in *Bhakti* or love for the Lord as the only desire for gaining salvation. For Kabir, it is only love which can help to delve into divinity and the vision of Lord. It is love through which one can rise above the petty thinking of 'I and mine.' Individuals who are not aware of the charisma of *Bhakti*, are oblivious of this reality because they are trapped under *Maya*, that is deception of appearances and his own elusive nature. Once he frees himself from this *Maya*, he realizes that he is in all and all are in him and there is none else but 'he.' This realization will not come through philosophy or reasoning but through *Sahaj*. *Sahaj* has been defined as freedom from the dominance of five senses in sensual life and diverting them in the service of Lord to attain him.

Importance of Guru:

For all individuals on the path of Bhakti, should learn from a Guru that is 'guide.' Without Guru, one cannot proceed on spiritual path. He goes a step further to say Guru is important, so one must have patience and not act in haste while choosing his guide. Likewise, guru should also think before deciding about his disciple. The Guru, who has himself learnt to know God, is greater than Lord because it is by grace of Guru that the disciple learns about the Almighty. It is Guru who will provide guidance on practice of *Sahaj Yoga*, which is important for achieving salvation.

Sabad or word occupies the most important place in the doctrine of Kabir. For those who wish to know the truth will have to investigate the *Sabad*. Kabir says that the world is born of the *Onkar* and destroyed by *Vikara* (disintegration) (ibid.: 87). Kabir conveys his preaching in local dialect, simple and lucid style, easily understandable by the common man.

Concluding Observations:

It is said that since Kabir was unlettered, his utterances were compiled by his disciples some 75 years after his death. In fact, the compilation of Kabir's work has been *add continuum*. Different *Bhakts* in different centuries, in different regions wrote in their own languages and in their literary forms. Therefore there is every scope of his utterances getting mixed up with those of other saints. There have been interpolations too, so it is a difficult task to distinguish the authentic from the spurious. Mainly his three writings, *Bijak*, writings of Kabir in the *Adi Granth* of the Sikhs and *Kabir Granthawali* occupy a place of honour in the socio-religious-politico thought. Kabir was a radical thinker, a rebel who challenged the prevailing political order, was subversive and anti-authority.

His writings sometimes are coated in absurdity due to the metaphysical tone underlying the verses. This art of writing makes Kabir beyond the understanding of the simple and the learned alike.

Kabir is criticized on the ground of gender equality in his discourse (Bahuguna 2003:241). In his *dohas*, there was glorification of an ideal wife within the patriarchal values but Kabir on the other hand, protests against the patriarchy for not recognizing the woman's labour within the households by glorifying the ideal wife.

Nevertheless, Kabir a great teacher and religious reformer, occupies a place of considerable importance in the religious-politico history of India. His critique of state, particularly revenue and judicial administration was based on his observation of the functioning of the state and its linkages with elites. This system perpetuated propertied relations and social divisions resulting in the oppression of the poor. He presents *Begumpura* as an alternative to the existing socio-politico order. *Begumpura* is an imagined stateless polity, corruption free, without surplus extraction. It meant the sovereignty of the citizens and equality among them which translates into freedom for all.

In the social domain, he rejected discrimination at all levels, opposed dominance and was against hierarchy based on caste. He espoused equality and freedom for all. The basis of his secularism is monotheism and syncretism.

In the field of religion, Kabir rejected idol worship and opposed the idea of King as the representative of God on Earth. He believes in the idea of one God and invokes God to protect the poor and the helpless. He rejected the four stages of life, fasting or alms giving. The mission of Kabir was to preach a religion of love which would unite all castes and creeds. He rejected those features of Hinduisim and Islam which were against this spirit and which were of no importance for the real spiritual welfare of the individuals.

His verses reflect the repudiation of past cultural, religious, ritualistic legacies. Bhakti was an alternative and a method of protest against the existing social order. His Bhakti and worldliness are not separated from each other, rather fused into one. His works still imprints the academic discourse, folk traditions and radical praxis. For centuries, Kabir has been an inspiration to a huge mass of people in India and is still alive in the faith of a large number of his followers.

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