

Kabir: Love, Mysticism and an Alternative Vision

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Editorial comment

: In today's highly polarised climate there is little space for civilised disagreement. However we hope that the response given to the article below will prove us wrong and instead provide a fertile ground for creative interpretations and dialogue between those who agree with the views expressed in it and those who do not.



["Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that"](#)- Martin Luther King Jr.

While many wise persons through the centuries the world over have spoken about love and its transformative value, in India, the message of love has been passed down from generation to generation by different saints. But one saint- poet that stands out is Kabir. Kabir, through his teachings, poetry and life became the most influential proponent of the value of love. And his message has left a deep imprint on the culture and philosophy in India. 28th June, 2018 marked the 500th death anniversary of the mystic poet, reformer and saint. Kabir's ideas are as relevant and revolutionary today as they were during his times. Through this article, the author attempts to revisit the message of Kabir in the present context and the complex challenges it poses.

Kabir has a huge following in northern India across communities. He is quoted by scholars and laypersons alike. The Prime Minister of India is no exception. On the occasion of Kabir Jayanti, PM Modi slammed the opposition by pointing out to their lust and greed for power. ["Those who opposed Emergency are trying to form alliances with the Congress. It showed their lust for power and lack of principles. Some political parties do not want peace and harmony in society. Such people are cut off from ground realities"](#), he said (The Pioneer, 2018) . Quoting Kabir's famous [doha](#) to emphasis on his government's promise of [sabka saath, sabka vikas](#) (development for all), he said, ["Kabir khada bazaar mein, maang raha sabki khair, na kahe sae dosti, na keh sake bair"](#) (Stood in a marketplace, Kabir wishes all well. Looking neither for a friend, nor for an enemy) (The Pioneer, 2018.) It is rather interesting to see that the ruling dispensation is invoking Kabir, an iconic thinker and prime example of communal harmony in India, when the General Elections 2019 are nearing. Nonetheless let us take this opportunity to examine the tall claims that the government has incorporated the message of Kabir in their policies against Kabir's own philosophy and teachings.

Kabir's ideas:

Kabir, a saint-poet, was one of the tallest figures of the Bhakti movement in India. Though his birth year is contested, he is believed to be the contemporary of Sikandar Lodhi. It is believed he was born in a Hindu family but raised by Muslim weaver family. He grew up to be a mystic poet in Varanasi where he sharply critiqued not only the inequality and social hierarchy in the Hindu philosophy but also the orthodoxy in Islam. Through his life and [dohas](#)

, he encourages others to think critically about social hierarchies and embrace love, compassion and honest introspection of self and the world. Kabir's fundamental message is love. One of his most famous

[dohas](#)

which encapsulates this message so beautifully is:

[Poti padh padh kar jag mua, Pandit bhayo na koye, dhai akshar prem ke, jo padhe so Pandit hoye](#)

(scholars were never made from reading countless books, but the one who understands love is greater than any learned scholar).

Though, the message of love seems to be simplistic yet it is revolutionary for the times torn by conflicts, identity politics and inequalities. The time he was living in was marked by the dominance of Brahmins, rigid religious traditions, rituals and customs, feudal laws and orthodoxy. These hierarchies and rigidity were an anathema to love and humanism which Kabir sought to underline. Kabir, in response, provides a broad overarching framework of love, compassion and mysticism which was extraordinary yet rebellious in a way that defied tradition. He urged the people to re-imagine a world order based on honest introspection and beyond materialistic aspect. He had an alternative socio-political vision characterized by transcendence, humility and spirituality marked by submission which comes across clearly through his

[dohas](#)

["Kabira Garv Na Keejiye, Uncha Dekh Aavaas, Kaal Pairon Punyah Letna, Uper Jamsi Ghaas."](#)

(Kabir, don't be so proud and vain, living in your high mansion. Tomorrow, you'll be lying beneath the ground, with grass growing on top that animals will chew).

One aspect of Kabir that can't be ignored is that he was not just a saint-poet but also a reformer and his contribution in this area needs more elaboration. As mentioned above, he was against the social hierarchies and injustice and thus has a large following amongst the Dalits even today. He critiqued the dogmas and superstitions in the Hindu philosophy. One example of where he took on the orthodoxy and defied tradition was his decision to move to Maghar from Kashi (Benaras). While Kashi is a holy city for the Hindus and the belief is that it is a gate way to heaven, it is believed that Maghar is a gateway to hell. In order to explain his move he says,

“

Kya Kaasi, Kya Ookhar Maghar Ram Riday Jao Hoi” – “What's the difference between Kashi and a barren Maghar when divinity resides within?”
(Singh, 2018)

Similarly, Kabir tore into the orthodoxy of Islam too. He bitterly criticized the rituals and rigidity in Islam. Criticizing the clergy, he says,

“Mullah, why so loudly Do you call? Ram-Rahim vibrates in all. I wonder Who your Lord is! Mullah in the mosque Calls out so loud, Is your Lord deaf.”

He advocated the oneness of God. This God can be realized through devotion to God without the need of any pandit or mullahs (priests). He rejected organized religion and emphasized on a humanistic approach towards religion. **Relevance of Kabir today:** The need for Kabir's vision and love is acutely felt in today's polarized society. The fault lines in our society are being sharpened along the divides of caste and religion. Identities based on religion and castes are entrenched fracturing social cohesion and social justice. The State which is duty bound to promote equality, fraternity and liberty of all citizens has failed to do so. However, some phenomena that are taking place in the country which needs to be discussed in the light of the teachings of Kabir. One of the most serious is the prevailing caste system.

Kabir against social hierarchies:

Somewhat direct criticism of caste system by Kabir can be found in these couplets:

If you say you're a Brahmin

,

Born of a mother who's a Brahmin,

Was there a special canal

,

through which you were born?"

"Were the Creator, Concerned about caste, we'd arrive in the world With a caste mark on the forehead."

(Rumi, 2015)

The Dalits in India are still violently denied the equal opportunities and rights inspite of the constitutional provisions. The dominant Hindutva politics which also shapes the policies of the ruling dispensation upholds the caste system and the hierarchy it seeks. Atrocities against Dalits are common news in the media almost every day. Ghastly violence is perpetrated against Dalits on account of reasons like marrying persons from upper castes, using wells or roads used by the upper castes, wearing new clothes or showing any sign of wealth or sporting a moustache- all these actions considered as prerogatives and privileges of the upper castes.

One is compelled to then think if Kabir's teaching on equality is what the ruling dispensation really adhere to? The violence against Dalits is not merely physical assaults by one off individuals. These assaults are manifestations of the deep-rooted hatred and mindset of the society which still believes in the notion of inferiority based on pollution. To add to this dehumanizing idea, is the concoction of nationalism that is promoted by the right-wing extremists which makes cow holy and which justifies and normalizes violence against Dalits. Dalits and others are severely punished on the suspicion of cow slaughter. Cow becomes a religious symbol to be revered and protected over human beings. This symbolism and ritualism is precisely what Kabir sought to counter. He wonderfully captures the need to self-introspect and not project hatred towards others in the following couplets:

Bura dekhan main Chala, bura naa milya koye, jo mann khoya aapna, toh Mujhsa bura naa koye

(I set out to find flawed men and couldn't find any, when I finally peered inside myself though, there was nobody more flawed than me!) [Kabir- A Bridge between Cultures](#): The iconoclastic saint, Kabir, is a symbol of syncretic culture in India. Kabir didn't identify himself as a Hindu or a Muslim. He renounced the orthodoxy in both religions.

Chahe geeta bachiye ya padhiye quran, tera mera pyaar hi har pustak ka gyaan!
(Whether one reads the Geeta or the Quran, all holy texts essentially speak of love)

"My one God is devoid of all attributes; He is neither Hindu nor Muslim; I perform no puja nor namaz"

"Brother, where have these Gods come from; who has misled you; Allah, Ram, Karim, Keshav Hari, Hazrat, they are all the names of The One" (Mukhia, 2015)
For Kabir, love and compassion for all was more important. However, one can't say that this legacy of love is carried out untainted in India today. The social fabric of India is under immense tension due to communal violence, distrust, hatred and overwhelming stigmatization of communities based on religious identities. The boundaries of religious identities are hardening creating political binaries. The dominant discourse that is being promoted is that of homogeneity. The Hindutva ideology which proclaims that Hindus are the original and rightful citizens of the country has set its own standards and litmus test for nationalism. Its idea of nationalism is based on upper caste Hindu traditions and negates the pluralism firstly in Hinduism itself and secondly in culture of India which has borrowed from different religions and traditions.

Kabir's teachings as opposed to the below, provide space for inclusion of multiple narratives because he recognized multiple truths. The Hindutva supremacists attempt to shrink this inclusive space and uphold one narrative of homogenization. This is being manifested in the constant vicious attack on Muslims in the form of mob lynching and also attacking or discrediting the contribution of the Muslim community to Indian culture. For example, the history of India is sought to be rewritten or renaming of roads and monuments named after Muslim rulers.

This hatred is spread to an extent that there are 60 violent incidents of lynching according to the India Spend report from 2010 to 2017 (Abraham & Rao, 2017). Most of these incidents have taken place in BJP ruled states. The most recent incident took place in Hapur in Uttar Pradesh in June 2018. Two Muslim men, Qasim and Samayuddin were attacked by a mob allegedly over rumors of cow slaughter. Qasim who was brutally attacked was seen dragged by the mob in the presence of the UP police and succumbed to injuries. Samayuddin was also seen pleading with the mob which was unrelenting. This case unfortunately is not unique in its brutality. Such cases of mob lynching starting from Mohammad Akhlaq in Dadri to Afrazul in Rajsamand have been heart wrenching tale of inhumanity and pure hatred. In Dadri, the call to attack Mohammad Akhlaq was given from the temple!

If the government was indeed forging forward on the message of Kabir, it would have worked on multiple levels to arrest this trend. On one level there would be an honest quest for justice. Here the state is levelling charges against the victims instead of the perpetrators. On another level, it would work for social harmony and cohesion by treating all religions equally. Hindu Rashtra influenced by Hindutva would not be the stated objective of the ruling dispensation which is directly antithetical to “

Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas

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It is unfortunate if not surprising that BJP seeks to appropriate Kabir given his colossal legacy and following amongst the marginalized. A similar attempt is made to appropriate Ambedkar and other tall leaders by the Party for electoral gains. However, one hopes that Kabir's ideas are remembered in earnest and not for political gains. His idea of love has the power to work as an antidote to the violence that is sought to be normalized and polarization that is prevailing in the society. Kabir's deep spirituality which rests on love and self-introspection offers an alternative to bigotry and hatred spread under the name of religion and caste. He defied traditions to imagine and construct a vision of the society based on love, devotion and humility. This also demands courage to see the truth and accept multiple truths- include and love others. This humanist approach to society will help us to remould our society to make it more humane and harmonious.

Perhaps this last couplet will better convey his message of this courage, transcendence and love:

Bhala hua meri matki phoot gaye mein to paaneeyan bharan se choot gaye

(Thank you Lord! That this pitcher is broken, no more filling it up, no more guards now and worries none)

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