

Beyond the Intermediary: Vernacular Subversion, *Uttabansi* Rhetoric, and the Philosophy of Kabir

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Abstract

Kabir was a poet and a mystic of the 15th century in North India who is shrouded by the contradictory traditions about him in terms of his biographical details. Even though Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs had always considered him their own, Kabir did not belong to any particular religious tradition. The current essay states that the socio-political criticism by Kabir and his language full of contradictions are two faces of the same philosophical imperative. Firstly, Kabir denied any caste discrimination, ritualism, and the dominance of religious institutions of both Brahmanic and Islamic elites, advocating direct realization of spirituality (*Anubhava*). Secondly, the *Uttabansi* ("upside-down") poems of Kabir used a method of conscious ambiguity which was based on logical contradictions that destroy any normal way of thinking. When considering both the socio-cultural background of Kabir, the vernacular of his poems, the provocative style he used and his influence on other traditions, it will become clear that Kabir was not an advocate of religious syncretism at all.

Keywords: Kabir, Bhakti Movement, *Nirguna Ram*, *Uttabansi*, Desi Vernacular Modernity, Sacerdotal Critique, Institutionalization Paradox.

Introduction

Fifteenth Century India witnessed constant political fragmentation and rising religious tensions. During that time of beliefs and social chaos, a man stood apart. He rejected all rituals and superstitions tied to religion. He taught that the true God lives within each person—the one Supreme Lord. This man is respected by both Hindus and Muslims. He spoke of 'Ram', leaving all other names behind. He is meaningful today as he was five hundred years ago. We know him as Kabir.

Even though he is famous around the world, no one truly knows his real identity. Some call him a *Vaishnav bhakta*. Others say he was a *pir*, a *bhagat*, a *Nath-yogi*, a

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Tantric or even a Sufi. There are many labels or name have been attached to him. The Hindus honor him as '*Kabir-das*', which means 'servant of God'. The Muslims call him '*Kabir Shah*', meaning 'the king'. The Sikhs and the followers of Kabir, known as Kabir-panthis, refer to him as '*Kabir-Sahib*' or 'Master Kabir'.

He was a soul. His vision went beyond the differences between religions. He saw past the rules and traditions that divided people. His words, called Sakhis and padas, are well-known in North India. They are often repeated like proverbs. Many people question whether these teachings truly belong to him. The truth behind his life and writings remains uncertain.

The main obstacle about Kabir is that very little is known about his background, personal life and even his dates. His real identity is clouded by myths and folktales. Now the point is: who was Kabir? What did he preach? Was he really a reformist? Or did he want to establish a religion of his own? The Kabir we get from his compositions is not bound by any doctrines, creeds or practices. He is beyond any labels; he encompasses all creeds but is never bound by one. So Kabir himself suggests what he was- a *premi*, madly in love with the divine.

In this paper, we are going to see that the idea of social criticism and poetic language are nothing but the two sides of the same idea. Kabir attacked the religious authority and logic in the same manner by removing the middleman between a person and god.

Socio-Cultural Background and Vernacular Choice

Now comes the question of ascertaining a date and background to Kabir. Unfortunately, we know close to nothing about Kabir's personal life. Scholars now generally accept 1398 and 1448 as the death and birth years of Kabir, though there are other suggestions also about his dates. The view that Kabir was born in a family of 'Julahas' (weavers), recently converted to Islam, at Varanasi is accepted by most of the scholars. Julahas were a widespread community from Rajputana to East Bengal and from Kashmir frontier to Madhya Pradesh. They were low caste Hindus who converted to Islam between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.¹ Even after their conversion, they retained their old customs; some local Hindu practices amalgamated with Buddhist rituals. Probably this disdain for his community is reflected in Kabir's verses when he ridiculed and criticized both Hindu and Muslim orthodoxy. Charlotte Vaudeville argues that Kabir's principles were dependant on Tantric *Yoga*.² Irfan Habib dismisses the idea that Kabir was a Nath-yogi rather, he refers to him as a monotheist (muwahhid).³ Sehdev Kumar holds the idea that Kabir cannot be bound within any doctrines; he is a man superior to these mere classifications.⁴

The legends attribute the famous Bhakti saint Ramananda as his teacher. One of the legends narrates how Kabir tricked Ramananda to accept as his disciple. He lay down on the stairs leading to the river where Ramananda used to bathe at dawn. The saint threw himself over his body in darkness and shouted out his *mantra*: 'Ram! Ram!' Kabir then approached him to take him as his disciple because Ramananda had transmitted his *mantra* to him. Though there is no historical evidence to prove Kabir as Ramananda's disciple, it is sure that Kabir worshipped the name of Ram.

There is a shrine attributed to Kabir at Magahar built by Nawab Bijli Khan in 1450. Kabir was most probably married. The Sikh tradition mentions that his wife was Loi and attributes two sons to him- Kamal and Nihal and two daughters- Kamali and Nihali. Moreover, Kabir's decision to use language itself was political in nature. As

scholar Purushottam Agrawal argues, Kabir pioneered an indigenous "Desi Vernacular Modernity" driven by direct personal experience (*Anubhava*) rather than scriptural authority.⁵ Kabir refused to resort to the institutionalized Sanskrit and Persian language used by the ruling aristocrats in favor of using Sadhukkari, which is a mixed vernacular dialect of the commoners. Language, to Kabir, was much more than a means of communication; it was a way of subverting the dominant power structure. By making God's discourse understandable through the language of the people, Kabir secularized religion itself. He essentially denied any exclusive right of interpretation to the sacerdotal classes, asserting that the Supreme God, Nirguna Ram, required no special language to be understood.

The Julaha Identity and Artisanal Critique

Aside from his use of subversive language, Kabir's status as a Julaha was one of the most important parts of his critique. Kabir did not call for a life of abstinence from the world; instead, he made spirituality inherent to the physical labour. Kabir often used weavers' tools as the basis for explaining his metaphysics of spirituality. By elevating the humble occupation of physical labourers to the level of divine meditation, Kabir subverted the prevailing feudal ideology of the time and the Brahminical notion of spirituality that considered

Teachings, Nirguna Bhakti, and Rhetoric

Now the question arises: if he denied all the religions, what did he himself preach? What was his message to mankind? The best answer can be found in his dohas and sakhis recorded in the three compilations of Kabir's words- the 'Bijak of Kabir', the 'Adi Granth', and the 'Kabir Granthavali'. Kabir's insight realized the futility of meaningless rituals and practices. At first, we have to understand that Kabir believed in monotheism. He not only believed in the unity of God but also believed in the non-dualism between God and humans. In one of his shabdas he says:-

"I am
Like a Clay-Pitcher
Floating in the river
Water inside, water outside
Now suddenly
With the touch of the guru
The pitcher is broken
Inside
Outside
O friends
It's all One!"⁶

Some people portray Kabir as a reformer of Hinduism or Islam. In reality, Kabir had respect for neither Hinduism nor Islam. Therefore, it is inaccurate to describe Kabir as a reformer or an apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity. Kabir's ideology did not have any place for idolatry. Not idolatry; Kabir even despised the idea of pilgrimage, sacred places, ceremonies, fasting, circumcision and many other practices. Kabir denied the hierarchy of scriptures; Kabir never regarded the Vedas or the Quran. Kabir despised any system that separated men from men—whether it be religion or caste.

"Adam, who was first, did not know:
whence came mother Eve.
Then there was not Turk nor Hindu:

no blood of the mother, no seed of the father.
 Then there was no cows, no butchers:
 who, pray, cried 'In the name of God'?
 Then there was no race, no caste:
 who made Hell and Paradise?
 No one had the knowledge of the mind's doctrines:
 wisdom was lost, therefore they detailed two religions.
Sakhi: Where there is union there are energies; with dissolution
 energies vanish.
 To satisfy the taste of the tongue man has devised many
 inventions."⁷ (*Ramaini* 40)

The important teaching of Kabir indeed is love. Kabir frequently says the name of God, Ram, to whom Kabir completely surrenders. The merging of the soul with God is an ecstatic experience for Kabir, which he calls *paricaya*.⁸ Joy is a joy that no words can show no scripture can explain. Only those who have known God can feel this joy for real.

Kabir comes in the line of those religious teachers who preached *Bhakti* (or devotion) like Surdas, Mirabai or Chaitanya. But unlike them, Kabir's devotion flowed to a formless God. Kabir's Ram is different from Surdas's or Tulsi's; His Ram is neither the king of Ayodhya nor the hero of the *Ramayana*. He is the one who dwells within every soul, and the devotee's love to him leads to merging with Ram. Some attempt to distinguish Kabir from other Bhakti saints who worshipped a *saguna* God. But Kabir did have no problem in loving an attribute-less God like his *saguni* counterparts. In contrast to saints such as Surdas and Mirabai who used persuasion and comfort in their methods, Kabir had his own way of practicing Nirguna Bhakti, characterized by 'confrontational rhetoric,' according to Karine Schomer.⁹ Instead of comfort and devotion, Kabir provided startling and sharp warnings (*Khabardari*), designed to awaken people spiritually. This type of devotion was confrontational in nature and was designed to break one's ego.

There is undoubtedly a good deal of similarity between his teaching and their philosophy. Hence, some experts reiterate it as Sufism's influence on Kabir. The Sufis, unlike mainstream Islam, have a pantheistic concept of God who resides within our hearts. They also emphasize an unquenchable love for the Supreme Being; a union so powerful that the soul merges within God. During Kabir's time, Sufism was well-established in India. So Kabir's thoughts and teachings could not but be somehow influenced by it.

But there are certain points where Kabir differs from Sufism. He did not accept the Sufi notion of predestination or God's choice of a man's destiny. Rather, he emphasized the doctrine of *Karma* and transmigration, which says a man's destiny is the result of his own deeds.¹⁰ The Sufis also revere the Quran, which Kabir ardently criticized.

Kabir developed a monotheism of his own which is neither Hindu nor Muslim, neither Sufi nor Tantric. It is unique, with his teachings beyond mere categories.

Kabir's Vanis: Reassessing Social Dissent

Kabir's hatred towards the caste system can be found in the social status of his community, the Julahas. The Julahas (weavers) were considered *shudras*; hence, they were despised by the upper caste Hindus. It is not easy to determine whether they were

already attracted to Buddhism. The Julahas converted to Islam between the 12th and 14th centuries probably to avoid Brahmanical oppression, but still they were despised by upper class Muslims. Conversion did not change their social status much. So, Kabir's crusade against the caste system perhaps got its base within this social oppression. Now, can we assume that Kabir's denial of caste was a dissent against the hierarchical structure of society? Was his utterance a revolt against Brahmanical supremacy? Kabir's vigorous attacks on both Hinduism and Islam go beyond criticism. David N. Lorenzen opines that he was planning to take an ideological stand independent of both religions.¹¹ Kabir's preference for an attribute less (*nirguna*) God also shows his disdain for Brahmanical orthodoxy because worshipping a God with attributes (*saguna*) means worshipping some anthropomorphic deities whose mythologies were controlled by the Brahmanas and were codified in scriptures written in Sanskrit, inaccessible to lower class people like Kabir. But still, Kabir did not want to initiate a social movement. He never tried to establish his own religion or attempted to connect with the masses, as we can see in the case of Chaitanyadeva. Unlike him, Kabir neither preached his ideas nor tried to preserve his sayings. It must be admitted that Kabir's verses did have discontent against the contemporary social system, but he never tried to turn it upside down by a sect of his own.

Utabansi Poetry and Systematic Ambiguity

Instead of viewing Kabir's Utabansi (upside-down) verses as just linguistic puzzles or gibberish, Hess describes Kabir's paradoxical poems as a method of "systematic ambiguity."¹² By deliberately disrupting logical constructions, such as "the goat eating the lion," Kabir gives his audience a mental shock. This leads the listener to give up traditional logic, scripture, and social conditioning in favor of immediate enlightenment.

Utabansi is a unique and very interesting genre of poetry among Kabir's other verses. *Utabansi* is made of two words: 'ulat' or upside-down and 'bansi' or speech/language. *Utabansi* usually means verses comprising absurd or unreal language, e.g. 'rain falls from earth to sky', 'the cow is suckling the calf's teat', 'son born from a sterile womb', etc. At first glance, these seem weird and meaningless but reveal amusing philosophical implications when interpreted. Some scholars oppose calling them 'upside-down' as they do not seem upside-down or reversed after explaining. *Utabansis* predate Kabir by more or less 3000 years in Indian religious literature. Sahajiya Buddhists used to write *Sandhabhasha*, whose finest example is available in the *Caryapadas*, which are the earliest example of the Bengali language. The Tantric and Yogic traditions also have similar imagery like *utabansis*. The most interesting fact about *utabansis* is that one cannot understand their implications if he or she cannot figure out the metaphors. They actually express complex philosophical and spiritual ideas through metaphors. Some examples will help to understand this absurd poetry:-

"O Sants, when waking, sleep.
Such Kal will not devour, nor troubles hem them
round: the body will not waste.
In contrary wise Ganga⁷ sucks⁶ up the ocean⁸: the
moon⁷ swallows the sun.⁸
A sick⁷ man destroys the influence of the nine planets,⁹
the sun's orb⁷ shines in water.¹⁰

Without feet they range in all directions, and without eyes survey the world.

In contrary wise the she-goat¹¹ devours the lion⁹: let who can solve the marvel.

Upside¹ down the pitcher does not fill with water: but upright the vessel fills.

For one object men have tried this way and that: only by the Guru's gift will they cross safely.

Sitting in their cave³ they see the whole world: outside it they understand nothing.

In contrary wise the arrow strikes the archer³: let the brave understand.

They who call themselves singers sing not: the dumb² are ever singing.

They see the scenes to be jugglers playing, and deepen their love for the secret of secrets.

Discussions and controversy, be they what they may, are but an meaning tale.

In contrary wise the earth⁴ transfixes the heaven³

This is the word of the Purusha.

Without cup⁵ the Amrit is drunk: the river⁴ keeps its waters full.

Says Kabir, They live from age to age, who drink the unmixed the juice of Rama."¹³ (*Shabda 2*)

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|---------------------------|----------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1- <i>Maya</i> | 4- Scriptures | 7- Soul | 10- The Ocean of the World |
| 2- <i>Brahma and Jiva</i> | 5- Destruction | 8- Supreme Being | 11- <i>Jiva</i> |
| 3- Mind | 6- World | 9- <i>Maya and Kal</i> | |

Let us look at another interesting example:

"O knower of Brahm, swing on.

Heavily, heavily the rain was outpoured, but never a drop of water fell

To the foot of an ant¹ an elephant² was tied: the goat³ devoured the wolf²,

From the midst of the sea³ came a water fowl¹, demanding a spacious house.

The frog¹ and the snake² dwell together, and the cat⁴ is wedded to the dog¹.

Even the lion² joins battle with the jackle¹; here is a wonder that cannot be told.

Doubt as a deer besets the forest of the body: the arrow² aims the archer¹.

The ocean⁵ is burning and consuming the forest⁶: the fish¹ is angling for its prey⁷.

Kabir says, This knowledge is stupendous: who can understand this knowledge?

The Jiva that can fly without wings in the sky, that Jiva will never know death."¹⁴

(Shabda 52)

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|----------------|---------------------------|-----------|
| 1- <i>Jiva</i> | 4- <i>Maya</i> | 7-Desires |
| 2- <i>Kal</i> | 5-The Ocean of this World | |
| 3- The World | 6- Body | |

This poem follows the same pattern to the previous one. For our reference we can see the lines ‘the goat devoured the wolf’ and ‘the lion joins battle with the jackle’. These lines follow the similar pattern as before, like smaller and weaker beings overpowering larger and stronger ones. So, according to the footnotes, these revered images are showing the relationship between the *jiva*(soul) and *kal*(death/time)or *Maya*(illusion). Naturally, the soul is weak, trapped, and this is controlled by the time, death and worldly illusion. But Kabir argued that the soul can never be controlled or trapped by *Kal* and *Maya*. The argument made by Kabir can be seen in the final line, “The Jiva that can fly without wings in the sky, that Jiva will never know death.”

Once again, Kabir did not explain this idea with logic rather, he used some strange and impossible images to break the reader's natural way of thinking. In the same way, he suggested that the priest and scholars are not needed to understand the meaning of this poem. The readers are enough to understand the poem on their own.

But there are differences of opinion regarding the explanation of certain words. The same word can be used in different senses in different verses. The *Uttabansi* poems have always intrigued scholars because of their surprising implications. The use of animal characters and daily life incidents makes them popular even among the masses. P. V. Kvaerne calls the *Uttabansis* ‘systematic ambiguity’¹⁵ because they are not some haphazardly chosen words but very powerful metaphors to convey an idea through riddles.

Sectarian Lineages and the Institutionalization Paradox

Kabir's teachings almost swept the entire northern India. So it is quite normal that Kabir obviously influenced a large number of sects that succeeded him.

The most famous of them is Sikhism. Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1538), who was a younger contemporary of Kabir. Kabir-Panthis claim that he was a disciple of Kabir who appointed Nanak as the head of the sect in Punjab. But later Nanak and his followers broke away from Kabir. Obviously there is no historicity in this story but we may say that Nanak was somehow influenced by Kabir.¹⁶ It is evident from the large number of verses attributed to Kabir in the Guru Granth. Both emphasize the unity of God and His ubiquity. Men of all castes and races are but sons of the same Supreme Being. Nanak also admits the necessity of a guru in order to find salvation. But Nanak, unlike Kabir, did not criticize the practices of Hinduism and Islam.

The Dadu-Panthis also revere Kabir as a guru. Its founder, Dadu Dayal (1544-1603), was born in Ahmedabad but spent most of his life in Rajputana. He also rejected the caste system, the Vedas and idolatry, like Kabir. The *Pancavani* literature of the Dadu-Panthis contains a number of verses attributed to Kabir.

The *Sadhs* are found in the upper part of the Doab region, south of Delhi. The sect was founded by Birbhan in 1543. Birbhan was the disciple of Uday Das, who was a disciple of Rai Das, one of the disciples of Ramanand. His teachings are very similar to Kabir's, most probably influenced by him.

The Satnami sect that was founded before the middle of the 17th century was revived by Jagjivan Das around 1750. He himself was a Kshatriya, but his sect

flourished among outcasts. This sect emphasizes only the True Name, the name of one God. But the Satnamis recognise the names of Hindu Gods, even the incarnations of Gods. Jagjivan is said to have composed many Hindi verses.

There are many more sects around northern India like the Lal Dasis, the Baba Lalis, the Siva Narayanis, the Garib Dasis, the Rama Sanchis, the Paltu-Panthis etc. who were also much inspired by Kabir. All the sects discussed above were directly or indirectly influenced by Kabir. But the history of these sects shows that there lies a major contradiction. Kabir spent his entire lifetime fighting the establishment of religion, sacerdotalism and ritualistic space. But after he died, his followers formed these sects like Kabir-Panth, with the presence of temples, gurus, and rituals. The effort of these sects in retaining Kabir's teachings was, thus, ironic in the sense that it institutionalized a philosophy whose very essence lay in its negation. But it has to be admitted that most of them have failed to retain their ideologies and somehow have compromised with orthodox Hinduism and Islam.

Conclusion

Kabir is still a mystery even after these ages. The Hindus regard him as a Vaishnav, the Muslims as a pir. Instead of pursuing his teachings, the quarrel goes on over his religion. Some treat Kabir as an apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity but Kabir appreciated neither Hindu nor Muslim. His messages were meant for all mankind irrespective of religion.

Kabir is unique in many respects. Unlike his contemporaries of the Bhakti movement, Mirabai, Surdas or Tulsidas, who preached profound devotion to a *saguna* God, Kabir also preached pure devotion but to his *nirguna* Ram, who was all-pervasive, ubiquitous, yet dwelt in every heart. Kabir's radicalism is, indeed, a wonder of Indian history. His vigorous criticisms of religious orthodoxies and rituals are still unimaginable to us even 500 years later. Kabir's own life was, in his language, an 'untellable story' (*akatha katha*). His entire life was a quest for whom, who is unseen, unheard, unfelt, indescribable, yet resides in every soul. We need to include a final verse to understand how Kabir defines life.

"I've burned my own house down,
the torch is in my hand.
Now I'll burn down the house of anyone
who wants to follow me."¹⁷

From this verse, Kabir means the idea of giving up everything that usually defines a person. He warns that a person should relinquish caste, religion, social status and even the comfort of belonging to a group. This last verse is everything this paper has argued. Kabir's fight against caste and religious authority, and his strange poems like the *Ultabansi*, were not different in any way but the same thing done in two ways. Both were about removing anything that stood between a person and God. Burning down his own house is the final version of the act.

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