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Sabar Upore Manush Satya- A Quest For Humanism: A Brief Analysis Of The Thought And Philosophy Of Sant Kabir

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Abstract: Kabir's religious philosophy is simple and free from any rigidity and conventional custom. His noteworthy contribution, apart from the field of literature, is that he was the one, who took the initiative to synthesise Hinduism, Islam and other non-Hindu religions by going beyond the dogmas of the then orthodox society. This endeavour of Kabir to surpass all traditional religious boundaries not only makes him a true precursor of those holy religious sects of India, which have been voicing for humanism rather than communalism, but also brings him closer to the ideals propounded by the great social reformer Sri Chaitanya.

Keywords: Humanism, Sufiism, Buddhiism, Vedanta, Vaishnava.

Among the 'sant' poets of the fifteenth century, Kabir has been provided the highest stature. His noteworthy contribution, apart from the field of literature, is that he was the one, who took the initiative to synthesise Hinduism, Islam and other non-Hindu religions by going beyond the dogmas of the then orthodox society. This endeavour of Kabir to surpass all traditional religious boundaries not only makes him a true precursor of those holy religious sects of India, which have been voicing for humanism rather than communalism, but also brings him closer to the ideals propounded by the great social reformer Sri Chaitanya.

Being a true exponent of the Bhakti tradition, "Kabir refined and clarified the devotional movement of Indian spirituality known as bhakti. He founded Nirguna Bhakti, the practice of loving devotion



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to the formless Divine. Prior to Kabir, bhakti had been practised and understood through the lens of Sarguna Bhakti or devotion to the multiple physical forms that the Divine took.” (Das 16)

The impact of several religious cults and their doctrines finds expression in the verses of Kabir. Beginning with old Brahmanic Hinduism, Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism, teachings of Nath yogis and the personal devotionism from South India mixed with imageless God of Islam- all are splendidly juxtaposed in the lyrics of Kabir. Though there is no historical evidence of the fact that Kabir used to consider himself as the synthesizer of Hinduism and Islam, his social philosophy is a sheer manifestation of the synthesis of the two religious doctrines, namely Hinduism and Islam-

I am neither a Hindu nor a Muslim.

I am a five-element puppet in which divine power plays. (Das 15)

Kabir's religious philosophy is simple and free from any rigidity and conventional custom. According to Kabir, life is an interplay of personal soul (Jivatma) and God (Paramatma). It is Kabir's view that 'Jivatma' is always in quest of 'Paramatma' and salvation is the process of making a union of these two divine principles. Besides, Kabir had complete faith in the concept of 'interior religion', according to which one should surrender oneself to The Supreme Lord, who dwelt in the heart.

From Hinduism Kabir borrows the idea of reincarnation and the law of Karma, while Islam enriches him with the outer practices of Indian Sufi ascetics and Sufi mysticism. His social thought and philosophy have not only influenced Muslims and Hindus, but also plays a significant role in the formation of a new religious cult called Sikhism. Though there are no historical evidences that Kabir met with Guru Nanak, for their life spans do not overlap in time, some western scholars, by tracing out the several verses of Kabir in the Sikh scripture, have mistakenly addressed him as the predecessor of Nanak as well as the forerunner of Sikhism (Jayaram):

O Lord Increate, who will serve Thee?



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Every votary offers his worship to the God of his own creation:

Each day he receives service—

None seek Him, the Perfect: Brahma, the Indivisible Lord.

They believe in ten Avatars; but no Avatar can be the Infinite

Spirit, for he suffers the results of his deeds:

The Supreme One must be other than this.

The Yogi, the Sanyasi, the Ascetics, are disputing one with
another:

Kabir says, "O brother! he who has seen that radiance of love,
he is saved. (Tagore 16)

Kabir neither did classify himself as Hindu or Muslim, Sufi or Bhakta, nor did he support the religious exclusivism. As Evelyn Underhill in the introduction of the book *Songs of Kabir* writes that in his lyrics a "wide range of mystical emotion is brought into play: from the loftiest abstractions, the most other worldly passion for the Infinite to the most intimate and personal realization of God, expressed in homely metaphors and religious symbols drawn indifferently from Hindu and Mohammedan belief. It is impossible to say of their author that he was Brahman or Sufi, Vedantist or Vaishnavite. He is, as he says about himself, "at once the child of Allah and of Ram." That Supreme Spirit Whom he knew and adored, and to Whose joyous friendship he sought to induct the souls of other men, transcended whilst He included all metaphysical categories, all creedal definitions; yet each contributed something to the description of that Infinite and Simple Totality Who revealed Himself, according to their measure, to the faithful lovers of all creeds" (Tagore 5).

While making an analysis of Kabir's philosophy J. Das, an eminent academician on Kabir, writes that the message of Kabir:

is essentially to know the Self, the eternal Spirit that is the core of our being. We are emanations of the Divine, but we do not realize it. It is our religious/spiritual duty to know who we really are, and remove ourselves from doubt and delusions. Kabir did not tolerate



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false piety, hypocrisy, superstition, and the externalities of religions. He exhorted us to awaken to Self-knowledge in this life and be free. We need to realize that we are never separate from God. He taught the equality of all, universal love and brotherhood, regardless of religious, caste, or social status. In these poems you will note that he is always addressing the audience from a point of authority, yet he had no formal education. He spoke of what he realized. Great teachings such as Kabir's are a treasure for our development. They are like a torch lighting the way so we do not stumble on our journey. Kabir's poems are like that torch, showing us the path to Divinity. It is up to us to pay attention. (Das 13-14)

Kabir's collection of poems is accumulated in his greatest work *Bijak*. The anthology contains his universal view of spirituality, which is an amalgamation of the extractions of the decent aspect of the different religious doctrines. His language is vernacular and is simple in nature, like his philosophy. His vocabulary is impregnated with ideas of Karma and incarnation, which he espouses from Brahmanism and Hinduism. He was not a blind pursuer of the philosophies propagated by *Quran* and *Vedas*, rather he was the preacher of the 'Sahaja Path' or the Simple Way, according to which one can obtain the blessings of the Supreme Master by pursuing the 'Sahaja Path' with profound bhakti (Das 15). Here Kabir's idea of 'Sahaja Path' resembles with that of the idea of 'Sahajiya Sadhana' of Sri Chaitanya, the founder of the Gaudiya Vaishnava sect. Sri Chaitanya, like Kabir, was also against any kind of religious rigidity and orthodoxy. He was always of the opinion that mercy of the Supreme Lord could also be achieved by practicing 'Sahajiya Sadhana', that is, by continuously chanting the holy name of Krishna.

Kabir's verses clearly expose his faith in the Vedantic idea of atman. But unlike the earlier Vedantists, he induced logic in his philosophy to its coherent end. As a result of that inclusion, he was easily able to pluck out the Hindu societal caste system and the practice of worshipping of murti (idol) from his doctrines to demonstrate his clear faith in bhakti and Sufi ideas. The major part of Kabir's work was gathered by the fifth Sikh master, Guru Arjun Dev, and forms a part of the holy Sikh scripture *Guru Granth Sahib*.



Kabir's songs and poems are the embodiment of deep wisdom. Instead of bearing the name of any human Guru, whom Kabir blindly admired, his verses reveal his intense love for the 'Sad-Guru' or the true guru. According to Kabir true guru is one, who would work as a medium of interaction between 'Jivatma' and 'Paramatma' by relating the divine experience directly. From several hagiographies, it is known that the Vaishnava saint Ramananda is held to be his guru. (Jayaram) Therefore it is quite natural that he was influenced by the thought and philosophy of Vaishnavism. Here it is noteworthy to mention that it is never possible to analyse Kabir's doctrines under the light of a single philosophical school, yet some of his verses quite clearly suggest his keen attachment with the Vaishnava theology. For instance, if we make an analysis of the following lyric we shall be amazed to find the influence of *Gita*, one of the foundation texts of Vaishnavism. In the song we shall see the brilliant synthesis of 'Jnana Yoga' (Yoga of Spiritual Knowledge), 'Bhakti Yoga' (Yoga of Loving Devotion) and 'Karma Yoga' (Yoga of Action), which stemmed from his own inner realization and identification with the Divine:

I went searching for the beautiful colour of my Beloved,
and then discovered the colour manifesting everywhere.

Even as I searched for it,

I too had been coloured by its beautiful hue. (Das 15)

Apart from that, the emphasis on the idea of 'Sabda', which is considered to be one of the important doctrines of Kabir, is actually a borrowing from the thought and philosophy of Vaishnavism. However, it is true that while in Vaishnava teaching the word 'Sabda' connotes divine inspiration and the word of the teacher, in Kabir's view it is purely oral, with nothing committed to writing.

According to Evelyn Underhill; "The poetry of mysticism might be defined on the one hand as a temperamental reaction to the vision of Reality: on the other, as a form of prophecy. As it is the special vocation of the mystical consciousness to mediate between two orders, going out in loving adoration towards God and coming home to tell the secrets of Eternity to other men; so the artistic



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self-expression of this consciousness has also a double character. It is love-poetry, but love-poetry which is often written with a missionary intention. Kabîr's songs are of this kind: out-births at once of rapture and of charity. Written in the popular Hindi, not in the literary tongue, they were deliberately addressed—like the vernacular poetry of Jacopone da Todî and Richard Rolle—to the people rather than to the professionally religious class; and all must be struck by the constant employment in them of imagery drawn from the common life, the universal experience. It is by the simplest metaphors, by constant appeals to needs, passions, relations which all men understand--the bridegroom and bride, the guru and disciple, the pilgrim, the farmer, the migrant bird--that he drives home his intense conviction of the reality of the soul's intercourse with the Transcendent. There are in his universe no fences between the "natural" and "supernatural" worlds; everything is a part of the creative Play of God, and therefore--even in its humblest details—capable of revealing the Player's mind” (Tagore 5).

Underhill further writes about Kabir in the introduction of the book *Song of Kabir* that despite having a wide and rapturous vision of the universe Kabir never loses touch with the common life, his feet are firmly planted upon earth; his lofty and passionate apprehensions are perpetually controlled by the activity of a sane and vigorous intellect, by the alert commonsense so often found in persons of real mystical genius. The constant insistence on simplicity and directness, the hatred of all abstractions and philosophizing, the ruthless criticism of external religion:

these are amongst his most marked characteristics. God is the Root whence all manifestations, "material" and "spiritual," alike proceed; and God is the only need of man--"happiness shall be yours when you come to the Root." Hence to those who keep their eye on the "one thing needful," denominations, creeds, ceremonies, the conclusions of philosophy, the disciplines of asceticism, are matters of comparative indifference. They represent merely the different angles from which the soul may approach that simple union with Brahma which is its goal; and are useful only insofar as they contribute to this consummation. So thorough-going is Kabîr's eclecticism that he seems by turns Vedântist



and Vaishnavite, Pantheist and Transcendentalist, Brahmin and Sûfî. In the effort to tell the truth about that ineffable apprehension, so vast and yet so near, which controls his life, he seizes and twines together--as he might have woven together contrasting threads upon his loom--symbols and ideas drawn from the most violent and conflicting philosophies and faiths. (Tagore 10)

In his influential book *Kabir the Great Mystic* Isaac Ezekiel writes: “Kabir’s songs seek nobody’s approbation. They seek no sanction, ask for no approval, search for no popularity, invite no commendation, and crave no compliment. They stand independent of these considerations, and they constitute the most uninhibited literature, the freest of free writing ever produced by a saint . . . Banter, ridicule, sarcasm, wit and humour—these are the weapons he wields! Nor does he hesitate to hit straight-from-the-shoulder, hitting hard, ceaselessly and without stop, till the face of false piety and hypocrisy is battered out of shape and exposed to the view of the general public for general laughter” (Das 17).

Kabir holds a place of great importance in the religious history of India. He was an exponent of Nirguna Bhakti. As J. Das writes in the Introduction of his book *Kabir: Songs of the Divine* – “Kabir refined and clarified the devotional movement of Indian spirituality known as bhakti. He founded Nirguna Bhakti, the practice of loving devotion to the formless Divine. Prior to Kabir, bhakti had been practised and understood through the lens of Sarguna Bhakti or devotion to the multiple physical forms that the Divine took.” (Das 16)

According to Gertrude Emerson Sen, Kabir was not only a saint but a “stern reformer, hating religious cant and hypocrisy, as can be gartered from his terse and often caustic verses which are still sung all over Uttar Pradesh and Punjab.” He further says:

His (Kabir’s) rejection of rituals and image worship might well have been inspired by the tenets of orthodox Islam, and his ridicule of caste might as easily have sprung from the underlying Islamic doctrine of social democracy. But when he attacked fasts and ablutions and pilgrimages as useless performances and found the outward insignia of religion just so



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much foolishness, he attacked both orthodox Islam and orthodox Hinduism. Added to this he proclaimed that Allah and Rama were names of one and the same God, that he was to be found neither in the temple nor in Mosque, neither in Banaras nor in Mecca, but only in the heart of his devotees. (Sen)

Kabir laid great emphasis on the idea of Bhakti for he believed that it is through bhakti one's soul can obtain 'Moksha'. As if echoing the teachings of his great contemporary Sri Chaitanya, Kabir propounded the message that without having complete devotion or bhakti, it was not possible for the soul to surpass the complexities of the mundane world. As he said "Neither austerities, nor works of any kind are necessary to obtain Bhakti (fervent devotion) and perpetual mediation on the Supreme—His names of Hari, Ram, Govind being ever on the lips and in the heart. The highest end is absorption in the Supreme and reunion with Him from whom all proceeded, and who exists in all" (Purnima).

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