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Kabir: The Articulator *Par Excellence* of Indigenous Indian Modernity

R.P. Singh

Kabir lives in legends which are numerous and demand history-rooted readings, considering the vibrant complexity of the time during which he lived and 'spoke'. One such reading of the popular (one of the most popular, as even illiterate north Indians know it and love to recount it when the truth and falsity of denominational religious faith is under discussion) legend, about Kabir's death in the year 1518 causing friction amongst his Hindu and Muslim disciples on the question of his last rites, contradicts the built-up image of Kabir as a stand-alone ultra-revolutionary religious reformer fighting a losing battle against the religious and cultural practices of a 'medieval' society frozen in time. The Hindus, who insisted on cremation, were led by Raja Virsingh Baghel; and the Muslims, who wanted burial, were led by Nawab Bijli Khan. When these two members of the then feudal families from Kashi and Magahar are historically juxtaposed with Raja Pipa of Rajasthan and Brahmin Suratigopal from southern India, one gets what may be called the real 'mainstream' Kabir.

Kabir through his couplets strongly represented and articulated the indigenously emergent modernity of the Indian society, which was long-brewing owing to the revival of trade, creation and spread of the multi-hued artisanal class, and the accelerated process of urbanisation since the tenth century CE. The exercise of critical reason in matters of caste and conventional religious practices was necessitated by the rising self-confidence of the emerging new classes. The long-standing tradition of argumentation, dialogue and debate in the philosophical–spiritual sphere (*shastrartha*), acting as a 'natural ally', produced a public sphere which was modern in an essentially Indian sense.

The Out-of-Context Reception

Kabir, in one of his *padas* (poems), describes his Hari (god) as a trader who does His trade with natural fairness – *sai mera banian sahaj karae byaupar* (Agrawal 2016, p. 99). In another, he identifies himself as a weaver's son possessed by a weaver's patience – *jaati julaha mati ka dheer, sahaji sahaji gun ramae Kabir* (Mehrotra 2011, pp. 82–83).

These two, the description and the self-identification, go together to create a Kabir who belonged to a particular time and space, though profusely talking about timelessness and eternity. This 'historical' Kabir disrupts his conventional and artificial image (of a *Nirgun* bhakti saint-poet

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who searched for and found a personal God to remember and worship in his heart) built over the years by the western orientalist academic process that started in 1846 with the publication of H.H. Wilson's *Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus*, and culminated in 1909 with its incorporation in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* edited by James Hastings. Wilson is credited with discovering some coincidences in phraseology between Kabir's poems and the New Testament of the Bible. Most notably, Kabir's '*andhe andha theliye, dou kup paraya*' corresponds to the latter's 'When the blind leads the blind both will fall into the well'.

The critical tendency to read Kabir as a spiritually enlightened but socially isolated, abrasive saintly figure living and singing amidst the religious obscurantism and strife of his time, inaugurated by the western scholars, continued in the readings of Indians who, like the former, could not see the wide social base of the listeners to whom Kabir addressed his delusion-dissolving songs. It was assumed uncritically that the songs were an oasis in the desert of frozen time during which he lived and sang. In the last decade of the twentieth century, Dilip Purushottam Chitre, the famous bilingual writer working in Marathi and English, translated into English some of the *abhangas* (poems) of Tukaram, the early seventeenth-century saint-poet of Maharashtra. The translated volume, *Says Tuka*, came out in 1991. In its introduction, the thoughtful translator 'listens to' Tukaram as saying persistently that *mukti* (salvation) is an individual issue, i.e. each seeker-person is responsible for his/her own salvation. It cannot be achieved through belongingness to a sectarian collectivity. He find in this 'medieval' saint a foreshadow of the existential crisis and yearning of the modern man who came into existence some two hundred years later. By way of conclusion, Chitre assesses Tukaram as being very much ahead of his time. This assessment and conclusion can be said to apply to Kabir as well because he, too, had the same spiritual emphasis and telos expressed in his 'rough and powerful voice' (Hess 2001, p. xi).

Rabindranath Tagore, who translated one hundred poems of Kabir into English in 1915 basing himself on Kshiti Mohan Sen's meticulously prepared Bengali collection, wondered at the modern sensibility he found there; but he resolved his sense of wonder with the conclusion that poetic truth is eternally modern.

Between Tagore and Chitre, the eminent Hindi poet Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh, known for combining the high poetic standard with his Marxist empathy with the common downtrodden humanity, found himself confronting the insistent question while reading the medieval Hindi poetry – 'Why is it that Kabir and other *nirgun* poets . . . appear to be relatively more modern than Tulsidasji?' He felt the need to 'properly know and understand the cultural history generated by the basic dynamic social forces of the age' to which those poets were responding and reacting (Muktibodh 1998, pp. 288–89; translation and italics mine). Unfortunately,

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Muktibodh could not go in the direction of trying to know that which he so intensely wanted to know.

The Indigenous Indian Modernity

Thus Kabir, through his poems, appears to be 'relatively more modern' to the modern creative-critical minds because he seems to be foreshadowing the existential problems of the modern age. But the connected conclusion that he was ahead of his time is an avoidable refusal to raise some vital questions regarding the socio-economic and cultural conditions of his time, which is a consequence of the acceptance of the orientalist position that modernity in a non-western society can come only through its contact with western civilisation. The essential question is: what kind of society was it in terms of its sense of tradition, capital of cultural memory and epistemology, which was so attached and guided by a man who not only rejected the Hindu and Islamic theological traditions and scriptures but also the entire institutional structure associated with organised religion? The legends of Kabir are indicative of the deeply reverential attachment his coeval listeners and their numerous later generations had with him. He continues to live in the folk memory of the Indian masses, particularly in North India, as pithy pieces of wisdom for ready guidance in matters of spirituality distracted by religious ritualism. This wisdom comes out from the independent individualistic thinking expressed frequently through his poems. This thinking is marked by a clear exercise of reason and intellect in the act of cognition of the final reality which is indisputably spiritual in nature. At one place (*Kabir Bijak*, edited by Shastri and Prasad, p. 118) we find him equating the intellectual faculty of discrimination (*vivek*) with God Himself – '*kar bandagi bibeku ki, bhesh dhare sab koy*' (pay obeisance to the all-pervading spirit of rational thinking). Sharply argumentative-combative questions, addressed both to the *pandit* and the *qazi*, which cannot receive fuzzy answers and demand rational responses abound in Kabir's corpus. A typical example, driving home the irrationality of the difference and strife- prone sectarian identity consciousness, can be taken from the perceptive English translation of Kabir's poems done by Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh:

> If circumcision makes you a Muslim,
> What do you call your women?
> If putting on the thread makes you a Brahmin,
> What does the wife put on?
> That shudra's touching your food, pandit,
> How can you eat it?
> Hindu, Muslim – where did they come from?
> Who started this road?
>
> (Hess and Singh, pp. 69–70)

The question for us today is, what was the cognitive temper of Kabir's

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time with regard to the inessential societal divisions prevailing then vis-a-vis the essential oneness of humanity in need of knowing and experiencing the Supreme. Through the various legends about Kabir we get a definite idea of this temper as we learn from them that his listeners were receiving his 'worldly' spiritual truths with interest, love and respect. The historicity of legends is a subject of research, but more important than this is their socio-cultural indicativeness, because they are the process through which historical memory enters into the public consciousness. Therefore, it is safe, rather necessary, to depend on them to get an understanding of the consciousness, thoughts and concerns of an age or a society. They read like a cultural language. The rough debunking of the false, i.e. the societal segregations along the caste–creed lines as well as the theological–scriptural controversies and disputations, was taken to heart by his contemporaries as reflective of their own aspirational existence. Kabir's insistence that without *jnana*, which for him was not the scriptural knowledge of spiritual entities but knowledge gained through the individual's own exercise of his/her reason and intellect, *bhakti* (the experiential devotion to god) is not possible had there not been a deep resonance with the traders and artisans who were growing in number during that time.

The Everyday Society

Kabir lived in the period which has been credited with the phenomenon of '*arthashastrisation* of *dharmshastra (*secularisation of religious law-books) because law freed itself from spirituo-religious concerns and became a tool in the hands of the state to assert its superior authority over all social organisation' (Mathur 2007, p. 12). An important point in Jack Goody's *The East in the West* is that in the everyday practices of the medieval Indian society, contrary to what was written in the Brahmanical texts, the traders and merchants had gained much importance. As it happens in every society, here too it was the human world which first freed itself from the 'text-built' prison-house of societal locations and obligations, and the legal emendations and provisions followed under the pressure of the politico-economic needs of the changing social relations. The period between the eighth and the fourteenth centuries saw vigorous churning both in the economic-social life of the common Indians as well as in the textual world of the Sanskritic scholars concerned with the urgency to keep the normative prescriptions of their *dharmashastras* updated in accordance with what actually prevailed before their open eyes . The rise of the newer classes of traders and artisans of various sorts, who catered to the material needs of the common consumers and the state, created a social condition in which the normative social system implied by the word *dharma* as the adherence to the birth-based occupational–professional obligations showed visible cracks. The spiritual–temporal mechanism of the divine reward and retribution had developed glitches, resulting in disorders, big and small,

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in the functioning of the textually desired-for and ordered social universe.

The situation given birth to by these intractable actualities necessitated what a writer has termed 'enlightened rebellion' which expressed itself in drastic updating of the *dharmashastric* injunctions related with the different aspects of the material life of the *homo-hierarchichus* who had taken the road to also being the *homo-economicus*. The work of such updating was very comprehensive as it covered almost all the dimensions of the worldly life from marriage and family to market and interest as well as crime and punishment. It was so comprehensive that the above-named period (eighth to fourteenth centuries) came to be known as the age of digests and commentaries on the Hindu *dharmashastras*. The important texts and their authors (their times as assigned by P.V. Kane) can be enumerated as, – the *Mitakshara* of Vijneshwar (later half of the eleventh century), *Dayabhaaga* of Jimutvahana (first half of the twelfth century), *Kritya Kalpataru* of Lakshmidhara (1100–50), *Smriti Chandrika* of Devana Bhatta (1150–1225), *Vivad Ratnaakar*, *Vyavahar Ratnakar* and *Rajniti Ratnakar* of Chandeshwar (the third and the last quarters of the thirteenth century), *Manvarth Muktavali*, a brief commentary on the *Manu Smriti* of Kulluuka Bhatta (between 1150 and 1300), Haradatta's (1100–1300) commentary on *Aapastambiya Dharmasutras*, and *Vyavahar Nirnaya* of Varadraja (thirteenth century). It is historically notable that some of these commentators were powerful functionaries with public dealings under different royalties and, therefore, they were closely aware of the administrative need to adapt their laws to the changes occurring in the social world under their administrative jurisdictions. Vijnaaneshwar and Chandeshwara served as ministers in the courts of the Western Chalukya king Vikramaditya VI and Harisimhadeva of the Karnata dynasty of Mithila respectively, and Lakshamidhara was the chief justice in the court of the Gahadwal king Govindachandra of Kannauj.

The importance of these Sanskritic revisions for understanding Kabir as an articulator of the cultural–spiritual tendencies in the thoughts arising out of the real, ground level socio-economic changes is to emphasise the fact of the modern condition evolving in the Indian society. The salience of this condition was expressed and underlined not only in the Indian vernacular religio- poetic strains from Sarahapa the Siddha to Kabir the iconoclast, but also in the classical juristic canon (*Sanskrit Chinta*) of the socio-cultural elite. Kabir's description of his Ram as a trader (*baanian*) and a dyer (*rangrej*) and his not infrequent recourse to the metaphors of trade and business – meaningful completion of the earthly sojourn expressed as the successful business of the vendor of the day who does not need to return to the market-place (*poora kiya bisaahuna, bahuri na aavaun haat*) and, conversely, useless (*Ramless*) passing of the days of life likened with the loss of profitable business opportunity (*kahai Kabir kachhu banij na kiyau,aayau thi yahi haati*), are the spiritual mirroring and deployment of the social forces which led Devana Bhatta to clearly and legally opine

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that 'not even a hundred sacred sayings (*vachana shatenaapi*) can alter the practical arrangements of trade and commerce' (Mathur 2007, p. 14). Kabir also warns the people to be ever vigilant regarding the difference between the real and the unreal in terms of the trader's temptation to risk and lose the principal for uncertain and false profit (*laahe kaarni mool na khoi*). These metaphoric references to trade practices must not lead one to try to see any 'celebration' of these in Kabir. He was the poet-teacher of concentration on the 'word', the ultimate and permanent spiritual truth above and beyond all worldly-temporary realities of status and possession in the material-transient world. He always warned his listeners to be on guard against 'the great swindler' (*maya mahathagini*) who was always on the prowl, seeking to snatch away this concentration.

For our present purpose of focusing on the ingredients of the indigenous Indian modernity, the legal amendments regarding the caste-based differential punishments for the same sort of offences and crimes are most relevant, as they confirm the crumbling of the societal structure under the strong weight of the changing economic relations which got manifestation in the various tensions and adjustments in the day-to-day life of the people. Kabir's anguish at being reminded of his caste with pejorative repetition by the Hindu and Muslim religious orthodoxies is reflective of such tensions of the time. One legend famously says that the joint petition of these orthodoxies against him (incidentally 'signed' by his mother also) to the then emperor Sikandar Lodhi referred to him as an 'abusive weaver'. There is evidence that during the medieval age the *varnashram*-based textual norms came under severe strain as reflected in the revisions carried out keeping in view the rising socio-economic powerat the bottom of the societal structure. Purushottam Chandra Jain, in his *Socio-Economic Explorations of Medieval India* writes that a chronicle of the time *Yashtilak* mentions a *teli* minister, a barber chief military commander, a *mahamantri* of mixed parentage, and a low-caste instructor of royal princes. King Vallalsen of Bengal appointed a sailor as one of his provincial governors (*mahamandlik*) and his successor made a weaver named Dhoyi the official poet (r*ajkavi*) of his kingdom. These were not rare exceptions but notable examples of the inescapable changes springing out of the interface between the *dharmashastric* textual norms emphasising birth and the actual socio-political praxis giving primacy to individual merit. By way of the legal recognition to such praxis, commentators like Hardatta and Chandeshwar made drastic changes in the *Manu Smriti*-prescribed criminal procedure code which prohibited punishment to Brahmin offenders just on the basis of their being born as Brahmins.

The Public Sphere of *Bhakti*

Besides disrupting the birth-based social hierarchy, the proliferation of trade, together with the development and spread of the multi-hued artisan class, created an indigenous discursive space in which an individualistic

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interpretation of religious traditions and man's relationship with God became prominent. To call this space 'public sphere' may raise some eyebrows because secularity has been accepted as an integral part of this concept which is European in its origin, particularly for Anglophone writers and readers. But, being largely oral, those rationality-based discussions and debates around the themes of humanity, spirituality, true nature of the godhead, all with progressive implications for the day-to-day worldly life, were listened to attentively by the cognoscenti as well as the common people of the time. It was an arena for the clash of the diverse and rich Indian thought systems, and so a part of the indigenous Indian modernity which was evolving over the medieval age. This public sphere was essentially Indian as religious-spiritual problems were at the center of its debates. What was most remarkable about it was that there was no psittacism; cardinal concepts like *dharma, jnana*, *veda*, *kaliyuga*, etc., were analysed and explained with revolutionary insight. The religious orthodoxy was also a participant with its own vocality. An illustrative example of the vibrancy of that public sphere is the diametrically opposite interpretations of these concepts implicit in Pipa and the Hindu orthodoxy. While eulogising Kabir as the savior who saved *bhakti* from the triple enemies of the folk-accepted social evils, the hegemonic knowledge tradition, and the orthodox tendency toward birth-based discrimination and sectarian hatred (*lok, veda aru kaliyug*), he uses the words *ved* and *kaliyuga* in senses quite new and fresh at the time. The orthodox religious establishment disliked and dismissed this novelty and freshness, but the spirit of Indian modernity, which was a potent product of the dynamic socio-economic forces in creative dialogues with the deep roots of their spiritual-philosophical traditions, welcomed and celebrated the progressive poetically expressed spiritual truths. These roots, perhaps, went deep, to the Upanishadic reversal of 'the order of greatness' regarding the four *varnas*.

In the account of the origin of the four *varnas*, as we find in the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad*, the *shudra varna* is the greatest because it comes last in the *successive* process of creation of the four *varnas*. This process, as underlined by a perceptive commentator, 'reflects the progressive evolution of superior or better forms' (Sharma 2017, p. 153). Here, this *varna* is mentioned as better qualified than other *varnas* to make the Creator (Brahma) achieve His *shreyorupa*, 'excellent form' as translated by S. Radhakrishnan or 'superior form' in the words of Robert Ernest Hume. In the context of the socio-spiritual churning of Kabir's time it could be given a legitimate extrapolated interpretation that owing to the possession of the virtue of humility, it was easier for the neglected and the humiliated to approach god.

In light of what we saw above, we can say that Kabir was the articulator of the total existential condition of the social-spiritual being whom A.K. Ramanujan in his essay 'Men, Women and Saints' calls 'a new kind of

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person' with ancient roots. This new person was in search of alternative interpretations of what was happening within and around him. The socio-religious orthodoxies thwarted this search through their insistence on the sanctity of the 'traditions'; but the saint-poets like Kabir, whose wise songs flowed out from what Ramanujan enumerates as their hallmarks – 'the spirit of quest, the sensitivity to experience, the impatience with speculation and ritual.., an eye that sees death and decay, an ear that hears the 'still sad music of humanity' (Ramanujan 1999, p. 281), answered it with appealing fullness.

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