

Relevance of Sant Kabir Das's Syncretism in the 21st Century

Prabira Sethy

Abstract

The article begins with an attempt to reconstruct Kabir's biography by analysing where Kabir was born, who were his parents and when he was born which has been shrouded in the mists of mystery. Then, the article goes on to exhibit Kabir's philosophy about syncretism by bridging the gap in between rich and poor, higher and lower castes, and the Hindus and the Muslims people by his message to maintain equality, love affection and cooperation to one and another in place of enmity, jealousy, egotism, disparity and has shown the way to the human beings to love for one another.

*Harsh words is worst of all
Burns its target to ash
Sweet word is like Heaven's nectar
It pleases cools, does not harass.*

Introduction

Kabir is widely regarded as one of the most outstanding religious figures of medieval India. He was a reformer and a versatile preacher of religious truth. He was a good observer and pointed out every disorder in the society as he was determined to change it. He was always seized with several problems of the

society and found some solutions to them. He wanted to bring the people out from their mundane life by showing them the right path. He counselled like a friend, enlightened like a teacher and showed the right path like a preacher. He talked of several social evils just as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Gandhi and Ambedkar did several centuries later. He is considered a people's poet, a *Vaishnava* reformer, one of the founders of the deistic movement in India, a radical social critic, a messenger of inter-faith harmony, an anti-caste evangelist and a benign humanist in several ways.

Kabir strongly denounced asceticism, fasting, bathing in rivers and becoming *Sanyasins* without a sense of personal devotion to God. He also laid emphasis on a sternly ethical code of life both for the *Guru* and the householder. His criticism of laying emphasis on the external of religion was not confined to the *Brahmanas*, but extended equally to the Muslim *Shaikhs* and *Mullahs* for their empty insistence on *roza*, *namaz*, etc.

Kabir was strongly opposed to reliance on religious authority and revealed scriptures. For him, the only true path was reliance on constantly repeating the name of the one God whom he identified as Rama, Hari, Govind, Allah, Khuda, Sahib, etc. Tara Chand says that Kabir's mission was to “preach a religion of love which could unite all castes and creeds” (+++). Kabir certainly believed that God is one and different religions were different paths to Him. His own path of love and devotion to God was one which could be followed by all, irrespective of their religions.

An even more important aspect of Kabir's teaching was his emphasis on human equality. He denounced inequality based on caste, station, race or wealth, and criticised the wealthy and the powerful for their pattern of life. This strain is largely missing in the writings of the Sufi Hindu saints for whom God was the creator of everything. According to them, God designated the rulers and the slaves, and the rich and the poor. This was not for Kabir. He voiced the sentiments of the poor and the oppressed. He wanted a change in their lives but suggested no way to do so. Perhaps he hoped for a change in attitudes through the message of love and fortitude.

Life Sketch

Sant Kabir Das has been acclaimed as one of the most outstanding of the saint-poets of *Bhakti* cult (devotion) and mysticism of medieval India. The period in

which he lived is also not yet confirmed by the historians. Some people believed that he was born in 1398 A.D. and some others in 1440 A.D. There are different opinions among the scholars about his birth place. Some scholars opine that he was born in Benaras while for others he was born at Maghar 200 kms away from Banaras. There are different versions about his birth story. According to some, he was found on a lotus leaf in a tank in Benares, while others say that he was the son of a Hindu *Brahmin* widow who left him immediately after his birth to hide her shame. He was brought up by Muslim weavers who christened him Kabir, which means 'The Great' in Arabic and it is the 37th name of God in Islam. Since Kabir had received no schooling, formal or informal, it is said that he was a born saint-poet. Kabir adopted the profession of his Godfather but being a man of sober and serious temperament, he spent most of his time in solitude and meditation. This child grew up to be the celebrated Saint Kabir who gained support because of his immensely popular *Dohas* (couplets) and *Bhajan*s (devotional songs) of great spiritual fervour and poetic quality. Mysticism appears to have been an inborn element in his nature.

Kabir was remarkable for his spiritual earnestness and this was apparent at the very outset. His discipleship was the first step to it. Ramanand, the great saint of the Order of Ramanuja, accepted only Brahmins as his disciples. All entreaties to relax the rule proving futile. Kabir, one day hid himself under the steps of the *ghat* at Banaras, where Ramanand used to go very early in the morning for a bath. Unknowingly as he passed, his foot fell on Kabir, to the great joy of the latter. The Master, in sheer agony of having crushed one of God's own creatures, cried out, 'Rama', 'Rama'. Kabir took it as his initiation *mantra*. Since then he called himself the disciple of Ramanand, and began to recite 'Rama'. When Ramanand saw the earnestness of Kabir, he accepted him as a disciple, and his association with his *Guru* was a long one. It was with him that he learned the worship and practice of the impersonal aspect (*Nirguna*) of the Lord (Behari, 1991, pp. 222-223). Under Ramanand's influence, Kabir adopted a number of Hindu notions, though much of his own doctrine and some of the language were borrowed from the Nestorian Christianity of South India.

According to historians, he married twice, and his wives were ever obedient to him and ministered to his special mandates to feed every mendicant who came to his door. Among the contemporaries with whom Kabir was said to have matched his wits or engaged in friendly controversy were Gorakhnath (who in

fact, lived long before him), Nanak, the emperor Sikander Lodi (who later persecuted him) and Sheikh Taqqi. Popular with the masses but persecuted by the ruling classes, Kabir was exiled from Banaras, and his subsequent wanderings took him from Bukhara to Kalighat. He visited Persia, Afghanistan and other places in the Middle East before settling down to end his days in Maghar in Northern India. It was commonly believed that those who died in Banaras received salvation, while those who died in Maghar went to hell. Kabir deliberately chose to die in Maghar to show his contempt for such puerile superstitions. It has also been said that when he died, his body was covered with a sheet. His Hindu disciples wanted to take it for cremation, while his Muslims disciples wished to bury it. They argued and quarrelled. But when they lifted up the sheet they found the body for which they were quarrelling had disappeared and in its place were a bunch of fresh flowers. The Hindus burned half the flowers at Banaras, and the Muslims buried the remaining half at Maghar (Walker, 1983, pp. 506-507).

Kabir's simple couplet compositions, *Doha* (two liners) and *Chowtai* (four liners) are very popular. His writings - *Bijak*, *Sakhi*, *Granth*, *Kabir Granthawali* and *Anurag Sagar* – proves his universal view of spirituality. He transcended the bounds of religion, rose to greatest heights in his spiritual thoughts and broke into spontaneous lyrics and *bhajans*. Kabir expressed his poems orally in vernacular Hindi language. He used native language with local idiom and popular expressions. He used the simple and crisp language of everyday usage and revealed astonishing truths with accuracy and persuasiveness. His works are read with a lot of reverence by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. He is universally recognized as a unique person. After his death, the followers of Kabir, both Hindus and Muslims, became known as *Kabirpanthis*. The devotees as well as the priesthood of the *Kabirpanth* retain their distinct identity up till this day. His followers number about half a million and are mostly found in Uttar Pradesh.

An analytical examination of the views and mode of preaching adopted by Kabir suggests that he had borrowed from many sources. Kabir is taken to be a saint of the *Nirguna Pantha*. That he was indebted to the Hindus for his views on *Brahma* and *Maya* is amply proved by the utterances attributed to him. But he brought in elements of the *hathyog* of *Vajrayanis* and *Gorakhpantis*. In imitation of the *yogis* and *siddhas* of these two sects he too has indulged in boastful assertions about his knowledge of the ultimate reality. This was a

cover for his utter ignorance of the scriptures. He tried to establish his superiority over the *pundits* and the *mullahs* by hurling abuses and passing unilateral strictures on them. He was indebted to the *Sufis* also from whom he learnt much of mysticism. From the teachings of his Guru Ramanand, he incorporated the elements of nonviolence, morality, *bhakti* and *prapatti*. Thus he held on to certain spiritual concepts on the basis of meditation over what he had heard from others and what he acquired by his own *sadhana* and personal experiences. This formed the crux of his teachings. His utterances have been grouped together as *Ramainis*, *Sakhis* and *Sabads* and they are collectively called the *Bijak* (Pandey, 1990, pp. 334-335).

Sant Kabir Das and his ideas about Syncretism

The Dictionary meaning of syncretism defines it as an attempt to unify or reconcile differing schools of thought. Here it can definitely be said that the synthesis of different and contradictory ideologies are the base of syncretism. From this point of view Kabir tried his best to bridge the gap in between the king and the subject, the rich and the poor, the higher and lower castes and the Hindus and the Muslims in medieval India. Kabir spread his message to maintain equality, love, affection and cooperation to one and another in place of enmity, jealousy, egotism, disparity and has shown the way to the human beings to live for and with one another. Kabir's apparently simple '*Dohe*' contains the essence of the great philosophical ideas of syncretism which have immense significance in contemporary times.

Criticized the Caste System

In his crusade against everything that was meaningless and unreal, Kabir naturally uttered strong denunciatory words against the caste system. It has been acknowledged unanimously that the strongest indication of Islamic influence on Indian thought is the rejection of caste system by some Indian mystics, such as Namdev, Ramananda, Nanak, Appar, Basava, and Kabir. But unlike some *bhaktas*, Kabir rejected the caste system for social reasons. It is in this sense that Kabir is regarded as the crusader of revolutionary ideas in medieval Indian society. Kabir simply could not tolerate the division and distinction between man and man. He urges us to forget our sense of distinctions between man and man and become humble like an ant. He says:

*Jaati na pucho saadhu ki puch lijiye sab gyan,
Mol karo talwar ka padi rehan do myan*

It means we should not enquire about the caste of the saints but seek their

wisdom instead. Sharpness of a sword counts more than the metal with which it is made of.

Thus this reformer and saint fearlessly preached the gospel of social equality, imparting with force and preaching by practice the gospel of his Guru, Ramanand.

*Jati pati puchai na koi
Hari ko bhaje so Hari ka hoi*

It means none shall inquire into thy caste. He who shall recite the name of the Lord will be claimed by Him.

There are verses which Kabir directed against the *Brahmans* themselves who consider impurity and caste *defilement* in almost everything. The *Brahmans* censured Kabir for not paying due attention to caste rules. There are many stories told about Kabir's confrontations with the *Brahmans* on the question of the caste. One of these stories is told with regard to Kamali, Kabir's daughter. It is stated that when she was 20 years of age, while drawing water from a well, a *Brahman* named Har Deva, asked for a drink, but was afterwards horrified to know that he had taken water from a weaver's daughter. The matter was referred to Kabir. The *Brahman* complained that the girl had *defiled* his caste. On that Kabir said the *Brahman* to have fallen at the feet of Him and to beg his forgiveness and to be received by him as his disciple. Kabir accepted him, and Kamali was given to him in marriage.

Raised Voice against Sati and Child Marriage

Kabir concerned himself not only with the matters of religion, but also with those social evils which the Hindus used to practise in the name of religion. One such superstition which obtained wide currency in the Hindu society of those days was the practice of *Sati*, i.e. burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Kabir rejected the idea of salvation by *sati*, and condemned the practice. Thus, Kabir raised his voice against the custom of *Sati* and child marriage, the two evils which were purely social in character.

Concept of Universal Humanism/One Humanity

Equality of All Men

Following on his view of one God, Kabir preached the principle of equality of all men. Egalitarianism is the second great principle of Islam which Kabir accepted under the influence of Sufism. When the low-caste weaver Kabir

began preaching the same to men of high caste, he was reproached for his daring.

Unity of Human Beings

Kabir took great pains to try to articulate his view about the unity of human beings. According to him, while religious differences are only fortuitous, the essential humanity is always the same. And when Kabir says that “all have come from the same country”, that is, it was all one human, thus one nation, “but the evil influences of this world have divided us into innumerable sects”, his conception of the oneness of human beings is in uniformity with that of the Qur'an. Hence he says:

*O' Saints! I have seen the ways of both. In their
Pride the Hindu and the Turk don't recognize me....
The way of the Hindu and Muslim is the same.
The Satguru (God) has revealed it to me.
Here what Kabir says:
Rama and Khuda are one and the same.*

(Bijak, Sabda-10)

One Human Race

In accordance with his concept of one human race, Kabir forcefully and with reasoned arguments denounced the Hindu Caste system. In his efforts to convince the Hindus about the reality of humanity, Kabir traced the beginning of the human race to Adam and says:

*Adam who was first did not know
whence Mother Eve came.
Then there was no Turk (Muslim) nor Hindu ...
Then there was no race, no caste,
If thou think the Maker distinguished castes:
Birth is according to these Penalties for deeds.
Born a Sudra, you die a Sudra;
It is only in this world of illusion that you assume the sacred thread...
If you milk black and yellow cows together,
Will you be able to distinguish their milk.*

(Bijak, Ramaini - 62)

Monotheism

Emphasized the Unity of God

According to Kabir, the supreme reality is one although it has been called by different names such as Sahab, Allah, Khuda, Rama, Rahim or Brahma. Wisdom consists in getting at the basic unity underlying the multiplicity of names. After his spiritual awakening, one of the fundamental ideas which Kabir expressed in clear terms is his concept of God. It is generally held that under the influence of Sufism, Kabir denounced idolatry, image worship and polytheism, and adopted the strong monotheism of Islam. As a result, he at first taught and emphasized the unity of God. Hence Kabir says:

He is one: there is no second

(Bijak Sabda - 43)

Rama, Khuda, Sakti, Siva, are one: tell me,

Pray, how will you distinguish them?

(Bijak Sabda - 48)

The one Name, like the tree of life, Seventh mankind,

They who are regenerated by God shall never alter,

Saint Kabir, I have recognized God's name.

(Adi-Granth, Gauri - 37)

Believed in Oneness of God

Kabir believed in the oneness of God, irrespective of the names by which human beings addressed Him. Having given a simple description of the oneness of God, Kabir tells us that the different appellations of God are only experiences of one and the same truth. According to him, it matters little by what name we call Him. Thus he says:

Brother! From where have the two masters of the universe come? Tell me, who has invented the names of Allah, Rama, Keshab, Hari and Hazrat? All ornaments of gold are made of a unique substance. It is to show the world that two different signs are made, one is called Namaz, while the other is termed Puja. Mahadev and Muhammad are one and the same; Brahma and Adam are one and the same, what is a Hindu? What is a Turk? Both inhabit the same earth. One reads the Veda and the other the Qur'an and Khutbah: One is a Mawlana (Mawlawi/Mullah) and the other a Pandit. Earthen vessels have different names, although they are made from the same earth, Kabir says: both are misled, none has found God.

(Bijak Sabda -30)

In another *Doha* he says:

Hindu says Rama is dear to him

Muslim says Rahim

Both Quarrel, fight and kill each other

Not knowing the root of things.

It means the Hindu proclaims that Rama is the God dear to him while the Turak (Muslim) declares Rahim as his God, but not knowing that fundamentally both are one and the same, instead they quarrel over this, fight each other and court death. God of the universe is only one and the different names given to Him in different faiths cannot create more than one God. Both Hindus and Turaks should realise this and refrain from hostilities over inessential matters.

Hindus and Muslims are the Children of One God

The entry of Kabir into the fold of the *Bhakti* movement proved most fruitful in bringing about reconciliation between the Hindus and the Muslims. Kabir addressed mixed gatherings, consisting of Hindus and Muslims and made disciples from both. Kabir's idea of one God and one-humanity is truly Islamic. As a matter of fact, this is the key conception of Kabir according to which he refused to find any distinction between Hindus and Muslims and on the basis of this unity in principle and substance he tried to find a *modus vivendi* between the two communities. By using terms employed by both systems, Kabir tells us that it is only the difference in names. Finally, in the *Upanisadic* style, Kabir tells us that the Hindus and the Muslims are only different manifestations of the same substance. Therefore, they are the children of one God.

God is Omnipresent

Sant Kabir elaborates the theme of God's omnipresence and condemns the narrow-mindedness of the two communities i.e. the Hindus and the Muslims - who try to keep God confined to their respective places, whereas Kabir asserts that God is universal and is present everywhere especially in the human heart. Thus he says:

*'If God dwelt only in the Mosque, to whom
belonged the rest of the country?*

*They who are called Hindus say that God dwelt in an idol: I see not the truth is
sect. O' God,
whether Allah or Rama, I live by Thy name, O' Lord show kindness unto me.*

*Hari dwelt in the South, Allah has his place in the west.
Search in thy heart, search in thy heart of hearts; there is His place and adobe.'*
(Adi-Granth, Prabhati -2)

In other words, it means if God is in the mosque only, then to whom does the rest of the country belong? If God be inside the mosque and Rama within the image, then what lies outside? If Hari is in the South and Allah is in the West and look within your heart, for there you will find both Karim (the merciful Allah) and Rama.

Transcended Religious Differences

There is no reason to doubt that he transcended religious differences as he never showed any preference for either of the two religions. But his use of different names for God, mostly Hindu names, and his mention of the some Hindu deities and narrations of stories connected with them simply indicate his acquaintance with both the religions. Having transcended religious differences, and in his intense desire to see all religions united, Kabir did not make any distinction between the two faiths, and thus accepted all Gurus and Pirs. For the syncretic nature of his teachings, Kabir has won an undisputed recognition as the best representative of the trend engendered by the interaction of Hindu-Muslim ideas. In doing so, he kept himself completely free from sectarian outlook and dogmatic mentality.

Bhakti or Devotion should be Emotional and Unalloyed

According to Kabir, the ultimate reality is formless and yet the master of this universe. His consort *Maya* has distracted everybody. A loving devotion to Him will bring deliverance from *Maya* by His grace. Thus by the fusion of the formless with the form, a basis for *bhakti* has been devised. The *bhakti* or devotion should be emotional and unalloyed. The repetition of His name need not be done with the help of an objective rosary but it should be an internal and intermittent affair. The search for the Divine should be conducted not outside but inside one's own self. Consequently, worshipping a stone idol or shouting in the mosque is meaningless. Ritualism, pilgrimage to holy places, and *Haj* are all useless. What is needed is the purity of emotion, fear of the Lord, moral conduct, and an attitude of fraternal affection for all and not violence and bloodshed in the name of religion. In the search for the Divine within oneself,

he has recognized the value of exercises prescribed by *hathyoga*. He rejects the spiritual significance of dance and music as practiced by the Sufis and recommends instead listening to the *nad* or music within. Nor does he attach any merit to scriptural learning.

Asked Hindus to Give-up Centuries Old Practices

Turning to the Hindus, Kabir asked them to give up what Hinduism had been practising for centuries, such as ceremonies, sacrifice, lust for magical powers, idol and temple worship, repetitions of mantras, pilgrimages, fasts, innumerable Gods and Goddesses, bathing in the holy waters, religious monopoly of the Brahmans, prejudices concerning untouchability and food, penances and yoga and sectarianism. He unequivocally condemned the doctrine of incarnation (Avatarabad). In Kabir's view it is neither rewarding to offer worship to the stone idols in the temple (instead of the God within) as do the Hindus nor to take shelter of no God for attaining salvation (as do the Muslims). He holds that God who dwells in the heart of every being is the one whose shelter has to be sought by complete self-surrender to Him. Though his vocabulary is replete with Hindu spiritual concepts, he strongly opposed dogmas prevalent in all religions. In his old age, Kabir decided to go to Maghar and die, just to break the blind belief that when people die in Maghar, they go to hell.

Laid Stress on Religious Toleration

Kabir was one of the most outstanding *Bhakti* reformers who did his best to bring the Hindus and Muslims close to each other in all walks of life. Kabir laid stress on religious toleration and taught a lesson of brotherhood to the Hindus and Muslims. He suggested that people should speak in a palatable manner avoiding any kind of friction and disharmony:

*Aisee vani boliye, mun ka aapa khoye
Apna tan sheetal kare, auran ko such hoye*

It means speak such words which will keep mind and body composed and give the listener joy.

Kabir's poetry solely aims at bringing an attitudinal change in the individual and thus reforming the society. In one of his couplets, Kabir says that the individual should not blame others and indulge in mud-slinging act but should clean one's own self:

*Bura jo dekhana main chala, bura naa milya koye
Jo munn khoja apnaa, to mujhse bura naa koyee*

It means I went on the search for the bad guy, but guy I couldn't find. When I searched my mind, then no one is as bad as me (Krishna, 2016, pp. 108-110).

Earning Livelihood by the Sweat of Brow

Kabir was not in favour of renouncing the world and going to forests or hills in search of true knowledge or salvation instead he advised his followers to earn their livelihood by the sweat of their brow and perform all the duties as householders while leading as honest, noble and dedicated life. Kabir's idea was to educate the individual and wean him away from illusion, ego, and thirst for wealth. Kabir also does not believe in earning more money than required. Through his *doha*, he exhorts:

*Sai itna dijiye, ja mei kutumb samaye
Main bhi bhukha na rahu, sadhu bhukha na jaye*

It means God, give me this much wealth, just enough to take care of my family, I don't remain hungry and the saints coming to me should not go hungry. Likewise Kabir advises us not to daydream and chase mirages. In his *Doha* he says:

*Chaah miti, chinta miti, manwa beparwaah
Jisko kuch nahi chahiye, woh*

Shahenshah

It means if your wishes end, then your anxiety and trouble will also end, and your mind will be fearless. One who doesn't need anything is a real king.

Believed in Service to the Mankind

Sant Kabir believed in the purity of the soul and service to the mankind. He says in a *doha*:

*Bada hua to kya hua, jaise ped kahjoor
Panthi ko chaya nahin, phal laage atidoor*

What use is a date palm which grows tall? It gives no shade and its fruit are quite far-off and inaccessible.

Kabir asks what good is our so-called eminence, if it is neither compassionate

nor helpful to others. He emphasises that we should shed our greed, selfishness and insecure tendencies and establish ourselves in such a way that we should be willing to give and share. Only then we will be blessed and become a blessing to others. Kabir compares such a vainglorious person with a date palm which though very tall is of no avail to anybody.

Similarly with regard to charity he says in a *doha* that:

*Amassed wealth should be taken in hand
And given away in charity
There is no market ahead for spending it
On purpose better than bounty.*

It means amassed wealth is best spent on charity to the poor and needy. There is no use hoarding wealth with the hope of spending it later. After death one will have no chance to lay his hands on it.

Concerning the institution of Marriage

Marriage is a sacred institution. Kabir has criticised the Muslims for having their marriage relationships within the family and among the near and dear relatives.

Opposed to Economic Inequalities

The disparity of economic distribution was fully reflected in the utterings of the Mahatma, Kabir. The state's exploitation, the tendency of luxurious life, undue taxes, natural calamities, foreign plunderers, distinction of Varna-Dharma, lack of equal opportunities, slave system etc. can be counted as causes of economic disparity. Kabir saw these situations minutely. His aim was to reform society which was not possible without prevention of disparity. Kabir himself was poverty stricken, who listened to the pains and the sufferings of the suffering Dalits and the exploited people and was prepared to solve it by his own utterings. Kabir points out that the humble and small man should not be disparaged because of his humble and low position; he should be given due respect, and honour as any other man. In his couplets, Kabir cautions not to oppress the weak as his sigh of sorrow is capable of causing ample harm to the oppressor elsewhere.

Property not an Individual's Right

In Mahatma Kabir's perspective it is injustice to link property with individual's

rights. He also very categorically said that it is ignorant to keep the feeling of mine and thine with property. It is an evil to feel proud on the basis of property. It is your due (right) to possess property as required for your maintenance and safety. From Kabir's point of view, the tendency of gathering more and more property creates obstacle in making an individual honest. According to him, wealth is the main reason for all the evils. Kabir implies that man should not hanker after wealth in excess of the minimum need. He said that one should not feel sad and happy having seen the property. He wanted to give equality and respect to the poor and the rich respectively. He also wanted to bring an end to egoism which is linked with the possession of property and post and power. According to him, the material wealth and prosperity cannot make a man happy and contented. So Kabir says in doha:

*Save only that wealth
That later may be useful
And if you carry it on head in a bundle
To others will not be visible.*

It means spiritual wealth, being invisible to the eye, is not subject to theft or burglary. Kabir indicates that man should collect and save that wealth and not the worldly riches. The former will bring him emancipation while the latter only worries and miseries.

An Appraisal

On his death, Hindu influences found their way back into Kabir's sect. The use of the rosary was introduced, though he had been against it. He opposed idolatry, yet his image and his book are both worshipped. He rejected the doctrine of divine incarnation yet he himself is now regarded as an incarnation of the Supreme. The views of Kabir are not very systematic or well-reasoned for he was no learned philosopher. On the contrary, there are even contradictory statements. But his attacks are sharp and telling. Although his diction is not urbane or polished, the turns of phrases coined by him are saved from drabness by his high genius. Some of them are indeed marvellous and truly mystical. Some of his statements are couched in paradoxes whose correct meaning is difficult to unravel.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion suggests that Kabir is one of the greatest mystics of

India. He spent much of his time in the company of ascetics, saints and Muslim Sufis. With filial attachment to both religious communities, Kabir was free from religious prejudice against either. He rubbed shoulders with *Bhakti* reformers as well as the *Sufi* saints. Though intensely religious in outlook, he was not a slave of either Hinduism or Islam. He was a man of absolutely independent thoughts and boldly criticised the evils of both the religions. He denounced the *Brahmins* and the *Mullas* alike to be the sole custodians of their religious orders and took them to task for their orthodox and exploitative attitude. He refused to accept the sanctity of the *Vedas* as well as the *Quran* to be 'the revealed scriptures'.

Kabir raised his voice against the custom of sati and child marriage and these two evils which were purely social in character. Kabir strongly opposed the idol-worship, caste system and untouchability as practised by the Hindus and simultaneously condemned the orthodoxy and the meaningless rituals of the Muslims. He exposed the futility of offering five daily prayers in the Mosque without the purity of the heart and sincere dedication to God. Kabir had full faith in the Hindu doctrines of *rebirth* and *karma* and stood for purity of life, complete self-surrender to God and His devotional worship for the attainment of *mukti*. Kabir's teachings has more relevance even today in India when dissenting views are often exiled and forced out of the public sphere by state interference and by religious and social groups within the civil society. By claiming offence, these groups make threats to the public order, pressurising courts and authorities to invoke colonial-era restrictions on free speech. Books and documentary films are frequently banned. Publishers are intimidated into censoring their authors. It is suffice to say that Kabir's teachings were in perfect harmony with the social and religious needs of the times and he identified himself completely with the concept of an integrated Indian society and won the hearts of millions. Thus, Kabir's concept of syncretism has contemporary relevance to the modern society which is torn to pieces in the name of sectarianism, racism, caste system and gender discrimination.

According to Kabir, God is formless, *nirguna*. It is necessary to have a preceptor to realise Him. He is to be found neither in the temple nor in the mosque; neither in Banaras nor in Mecca, but only in the heart of his devotees. So in *one of his dohas* he says:

*I am neither in temple nor in mosque,
I am neither in Kaaba nor in Kailas;*

*Neither am I in rites and ceremonies
Nor Yog and renunciation
Lamp burns in every house, O Blind One
And you cannot see them....
Your Lord is near, yet you are climbing the Palm tree to see Him
Yoga and the telling of beads
.... these are naught to me.*

(Chopra, Puri & Das, 1974, pp. 89-90)

Kabir emphasised on the unity of God and preached the path of love, devotion and *bhakti*. He permitted the adoration of Vishnu, Rama, Hari (a form of Vishnu), Govinda (Krishna), and Allah, which he said were merely names for the One Supreme Deity. He accepted karma and transmigration, but like Ramanuja found a way out of the remorseless bonds of karma by preaching that the love of God can bring salvation. He upheld a high moral code, stressing truthfulness, mercy and self-control. Thus he has tried to bring out the fundamental unity of Islam and Hinduism.

Kabir imbibed the tenets of both the religions, Hinduism and Islam, stood for Hindu-Muslim unity and declared that 'Allah and Rama' were the names of the same God. The people of both the religions should not fight and kill to each other. The essence of both religions is the same. Kabir's *Doha* says:

*The Hindu says Ram is dear
The Muslim says Rahiman
They quarrel, fight and kill each other
Never knowing the essence.*

A number of people felt strongly drawn towards him so that many Hindus and Muslims became his followers.

Kabir pours ridicule on idolatry, polytheism, priest craft (*Qazis* and *Brahmins* both deserve hell), world renunciation, and religious ceremonial in a number of apothegms called *Sakhi* which are still current and popular as are also his doctrinal poems known as the *Ramaini*. A collection of these called the *Bijak* (treasure) forms the scriptures of the Kabir *Panth*. He questioned the validity of the Vedas and Puranas, and was critical of parts of the Koran. According to him, the Vedas are empty words. He dubs the Brahmins and the Mullahas as ignorant, credulous, vain, and misguided and exhorts them to accept the Truth.

References

1. Behari, B. (1991). *Sufis, Mystics and Yogis of India*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
2. Bhargava, M. (Ed.). (2010). *Exploring Medieval India: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries, Culture, Gender, Regional Patterns*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited.
3. Chandra, S. (1996). *Medieval India: Historiography, Religion and State in Medieval India*. Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.
4. Chopra, P.N., Puri, B.N., & Das, M.N. (1974). *A Social, Cultural & Economic History of India* (Vols. II, Medieval India). Delhi: MacMillan India Ltd.
5. Das, G. (Ed.). (1991). *Couplets from Kabir*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
6. Johnson, W.J. (2009). *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.
7. Khilnani, S. (2016). *Incarnation: India in 50 Lives*, UK: Penguin Random House.
8. Kumar, A. (2015). *Madhyakaleen Bhakti Aandolan*, Lucknow: Bharat Prakashan.
9. Krishna, N. A. (2016). Interweaving Divinity Through Altruistic Vision: A Study of Kabir's Poetry. In M. & Rajagopalachary, & M. R. Rao (Eds.), *Bhakti Movement and Literature: Reforming a Tradition*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications Pvt. Ltd.
10. Mehta, J.L. (1990). *Advanced Study in the History of Medieval India: Medieval Indian Society and Culture*, Vol. III, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
11. Pandey, A. (1990). *Early Medieval india*. Allhabad: Central Book Depot.
12. Rajagopalachary M. and Rao, K. Damodar. (Eds.). (2016). *Bhakti Movement and Literature: Reforming a Tradition*, New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
13. Singh, V. (2009). *Interpreting Medieval India: Early Medieval, Delhi Sultanate and Regions (circa 750-1550)*, Vol. 1, Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Ltd.
14. Shekhar, G. N. (2016). Sant Kabir and Yogi Vemana: A Comparative Study of Their Philosophy. In M. R. Rao (Ed.), *Bhakti Movement and Literature: Reforming a Tradition*. New Delhi.
15. Tyagi, R. (2014). (Ed.) *Prachinavam Madhyakalin Bharat ka Rajnitika Chintan: Pramukha Paramparaavam Chintak*, Delhi: Delhi Viswavidyalaya, Hindi Madhyam Karjayanoya Nirdeshyalaya.
16. Walker, B. (1983). *Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism* (1st Indian Edition Vol.1, A- L). New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.