

**RELIGION, CASTE AND BHAKTI: A CRITICAL  
STUDY OF KABIR'S NOTION OF MODERNITY**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru  
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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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### DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled "**RELIGION, CASTE AND BHAKTI: A CRITICAL STUDY OF KABIR'S NOTION OF MODERNITY**" submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of **Master of Philosophy** is my original work. It has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

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### CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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*Dedicated to my Mother and Grand Parents*

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## Glossary

*Atma/atman*: Refers to the soul in Kabir's corpus

*Avatar*: Incarnation of Hindu God.

*Bhakti*: A form of devotion which establishes a personal relationship with God. This form of devotion culminated in the Bhakti movement.

*Chamar*: Low caste associated with the work of Leather

*Chut*: Touch

*Guru*: Spiritual guide

*Julaha*: A weaver's caste

*Mana*: Mind

*Maya*: Referred to as Illusion

*Narsimha*: An incarnation of Vishnu who was brought to life with the purpose of killing Hiranyakashapu who was a devil.

*Nath Panthi*: A sect of ascetics and yogis who discarded institutionalized religion. Goraknath was the founder of this sect.

*Nirgun*: God without attributes

*Phakkar*: Rebellious attitude

*Ramaini*: Compositions of Kabir are called Ramaini, Sakhi and Sabda.

*Sagun*: God with attributes

*Sahaj*: simple

*Sabd*: word

*Ulatbamsi*: Upside Down language

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## **Introduction**

### **Why Kabir?**

The background that forms the basis of this research is both personal and political. The research focuses upon the medieval century poet Kabir in India. With his profound knowledge Kabir synthesized in his poetry the essence of everyday existence and the realm of spiritual. He has been compared to Gautam Buddha and is also the third guru of B. R. Ambedkar. His songs are being sung with great fervor across the subcontinent. Not only the scholars from the subcontinent but western Scholars too have been attracted to this indigenous genius. A pertinent question thus, can be raised is why Kabir especially in the realm of politics. The broader concern I had in mind while forming the idea for my research on Kabir was that how and why has been Kabir appropriated by different scholars coming from different intellectual backgrounds? The present scholarly studies have made Kabir stand at the crossroads of being a Hindu and a Muslim, of being a Dalit, of being a Sufi, of being a Vaishnav and of being a Nath Panthi. He has also been referred to as a socio-religious reformer and the marker of composite culture. With so much being ascribed to a single person, it becomes important to understand and possibly seek the probable answers for contemporary issues.<sup>1</sup> It also becomes important to explore and understand somebody like Kabir to counter the possibilities of miss-appropriation especially in the realm of politics where identity alliances play an important role. All these curiosities to understand Kabir led to the formulation of my thesis.

Kabir was a fifteenth century unconventional poet who belonged to the julaha caste of weavers. All his compositions were oral since he was untutored. The imagery therefore that comes to forth is that of a weaver, weaving cloth and simultaneously reciting his own compositions. Weaving is an important metaphor as it seeks to carefully contrive the design of poetry and the activities of everyday existence. Kabir's poetry

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars like Vinay Dharwadekar and John Stratton Hawley have argued for the possibility of there being many Kabir, since Kabir's corpus is an oral composition which began to be documented in the seventeenth century.

weaves together the actions and experiences (social, religious and political) of an individual. The centrality of experience in his poetry, for instance, when he criticizes caste he talks about the experience of untouchability or when he talks about 'Bhakti' he talks about the experiences of separation and longing, plays an important role in his popularity. Through this appeal of experience, he establishes a direct contact with the masses, giving them the voice to express themselves.

Kabir has a very strategic position in the history of the subcontinent. The time when Kabir lived that is between the fifteenth and the sixteenth century was marked by the coexistence of plurality of cultures. There was the simultaneous existence of orthodox cultures of Brahmanism as well as heterodox cultures of ascetics and yogis and there was the existence of Perso-Arabic cultures since thirteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Therefore there was an existence of plural ideas originating from different sects, which gives us an insight into the political and social needs of the time. Where on the one hand we find traditional Islamic thought implementing Sharia (Islamic Law), on the other hand for instance in Abul Fazl's work we see the operationalization of secular thought and with this one can argue for the existence of liberal Islamic thought. Apart from the Dharamshastras whose foundation was the principle of 'Dharma', there was also the existence of secular, political and economic texts like Arthashastra.<sup>3</sup> There was also the simultaneous existence of ideas inspired by Sufism and Bhakti which cannot be homogenized as there were different strands within them. Thus, an interaction was taking place between different cultures and ideas within a particular geographical area. One thing that needs careful attention is that the political perceptions and political thought of the medieval period was dominated by the textual formulations of the upper class thereby ignoring the people on the margins.<sup>4</sup> Since Kabir belonged to the lower caste which constituted the margins of Indian society, it becomes important to understand his ideas which was and till date has been giving the voice to the deprived sections. In order therefore to understand the nature of political power and to have a nuanced understanding of political

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<sup>2</sup> Nandita Prasad Sahai, "Revisiting Middle Period Political Thought: Texts, Practices, Material Culture", in *Political Science, Vol 3, Indian Political Thought*, ed. Achin Vanaik et.al, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.90.

<sup>3</sup> Sahai, "Revisiting Middle Period Political Thought: Texts, Practices, Material Culture" pp.91-94.

<sup>4</sup> Sahai, "Revisiting Middle Period Political Thought: Texts, Practices, Material Culture" pp. 114-116.



arrangements, one needs to take into consideration the popular literature, oral compositions and folklores of the medieval century.

## **Objectives of the Research**

- The ideas one can discern from the corpus of Kabir and which is also one of the objective of this research are particularly modern. Through his rejection of the dominant hegemonic traditions we not only see a form of dissent but also the critical engagement with the authorities. Kabir's out righteously criticized Caste and the Varna system. He therefore sought to reject the hierarchical structures which eventually led to the inequality in the society.
- Secondly the objective of the research is to critically analyze the categories of indigenous modernity and Dalit modernity being imposed on Kabir, by scholars like Purshottam Aggarwal and Dr. Dharamvir. The study also attempts to analyze if Kabir can be placed within the frame of alternative modernity.
- Thirdly the objective of the research is to understand the notion of equality emerging from Kabir's rejection of the Caste and the Varna system. It simultaneously tries to look at the contemporary political and sectarian appropriation of Kabir not only by the Dalits but also by the political parties.

## **Approaches to the Study of Kabir**

In order to understand Kabir therefore, it is important to analyze the context he was born in and where he spent his life. Many modern scholars have associated Kabir with secularism and tolerance<sup>5</sup> but whether he was actually proposing these ideas or not is to be understood by placing him in his own context rather than approaching him with the expectations and problems of our age<sup>6</sup>. Often the preconceptions of the reader

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<sup>5</sup> Dharamvir, *Kabir Ke Alochak*, (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2015), pp.16-24.

<sup>6</sup> I am using a Skinnerian approach. For further details see Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and theory*, Vol.8, Issue. no. 1, 1969, pp. 3-53.

interfere with the text leading to 'historical absurdities' which often end up in creating 'mythologies rather than histories'. Therefore the context in which the utterances were made becomes important to understand the intended meaning of the text (the utterances of Kabir were recorded by his disciples) and how the meaning has been taken by the scholars. There is no objective reading (on the line of Skinner) that I would claim in our method of interpretation, rather our framework broadly approaches the thinkers with an intention to enrich its own as there is an attempt to shorten the distance between the fore-understanding of Kabir that one has and then read between the lines (on the lines of religion) to see him as representing various facets of religions from pluralism and syncretism to conversion.

It is important to understand how a philosopher can answer the questions which emerge in the present day society. The answer lies in the authority of the philosopher and the corpus of her/his texts. For instance not only Kabir's verses but his own identity plays an important role when scholars from different backgrounds have appropriated him to answer the questions of the contemporary times. From Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi, from the post-colonial scholars (especially Purshottam Aggarwal) to the scholars of the west (David Lorenzen, John Stratton Hawley) and from the elite to the subaltern scholars, Kabir has been appropriated by different intellectuals having different set of ideologies. They have then sought to mold Kabir according to the intellectual, political and social needs. For instance John Stratton Hawley argues that an author's name at the end of (say for example) the Pads (short rhymed poem having the authors name at the end denoting the signature) implies more than his/her authorship. Rather it emphasizes strongly on the authority of the composer and further allows us to have deeper insights into the art and life.<sup>7</sup> It is also important to remember that the themes one finds in Kabir's corpus for instance that on Caste continues to dominate the social, political and economic scenario of India. Not only caste but other themes of dissent and reason too, play an important role in the contemporary times. In this regard it also becomes important to see the prejudices one has in mind when one approaches the philosopher to address the issues of the present. Therefore having said this, the method here specifically seeks

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<sup>7</sup> John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Times and Ours*, (India: OUP, 2012) p.22.

directions from the aspects pointed out by Skinner-like his contention that writing is an action of an authorization.<sup>8</sup>

Hans-Georg Gadamer becomes very important for such a project as he does not distinguish the method to understand as distinguished from the way of being—prejudices constitute the reality of both. As he puts it: “That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being”.<sup>9</sup> We should then begin to understand Gadamer by dropping the pejorative sense of ‘prejudices’ they are, according to Gadamer necessary “fore-structures” of understanding. There is always a “fore-projection” in the mind of the interpreter when reading a text and this explains precisely why Kabir has been appropriated by different intellectual streams. The particular approach followed has also to do with the hagiographical sources we rely on reading Kabir.

### **Framework of the study**

The scholarship on Kabir has looked at him as a Nath Yogi, a Sufi and a monotheist and has even argued that Kabir was influenced by St. John’s doctrine of ‘word’. It is clearly evident that different religions have made an attempt to claim Kabir. However Kabir himself never proclaimed adherence to any particular religion. Kabir transcended the identities of caste and religion imposed by the society. He argued for an attribute less God. In the backdrop of all these appropriations it becomes imperative to understand the context of Kabir.

The first chapter therefore seeks to contextualize the debates around Kabir. Apart from discussing the sectarian appropriation of Kabir the chapter also seeks to analyze the debate around his language which has been referred to as ‘vulgar’ by Charlotte Vaudeville. Linda Hess argues that underlying Kabir’s poetry is a ‘rough rhetoric’ which seeks to surround individual with the experience of their very existence both socially and spiritually. This chapter will also look at the hagiographical sources which according to David Lorenzen are essential because they are reflective of the socio religious ideologies.

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<sup>8</sup> Quentin Skinner, “Hobbes and the Purely Artificial Person of the State”, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 7, Issue No. 1 (1999), pp. 1-29.

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method*, (London:Sheed,1975), p.278.

The objective of the second chapter is to understand how and why Kabir emerges as a modern individual. Therefore the second chapter will first understand the concept of western modernity and its context. Through an analysis of the ‘acultural theories’ of modernity and the concept of ‘alternative modernities’ the chapter will criticize the universalization of a particular notion of modernity as arising from the west. The chapter will then further investigate into the claim of Hindi Scholar Purshottam Aggarwal who argues that Kabir was an ‘indigenous modern’ and the Dalit scholar Dr. Dharamvir who emerging Dalit modernity in Kabir. In the further course of discussion the chapter will argue that Kabir cannot be straitjacketed into any particular notion of modernity despite the fact that one finds origin of modern ideas in Kabir.

The third chapter will discuss Kabir’s rejection of hierarchies based on the Caste and Varna. The chapter will then try to develop the idea of equality in Kabir, through his rejection of untouchability. The premises upon which the idea of equality can be seen as emerging in Kabir is his insistence upon equal moral worth of an individual. We will also look at Gandhi’s and Ambedkar’s notion of equality and also reflect upon the differences with Kabir. The reason for choosing Gandhi and Ambedkar is that while the former tried to look at Kabir within the vaishnava tradition and for the latter Kabir was his third guru. The chapter will further critically analyze the growth of Kabir Panth who have casted Kabir as an avatar and have developed elaborate rituals of worship. This chapter will thus argue that the sectarian appropriation of Kabir is primarily a failure to understand Kabir’s ideas which henceforth require critical engagement with them. In the end the chapter very briefly discusses how Kabir has been claimed by different party politics to suit their political needs.

## **Literature Review**

The reason that Kabir has been appropriated by various scholars reflects the contemporary relevance of Kabir. It is important to understand that the lowest of the low utters his name with great fervor. It is clearly evident in the documentaries of Shabnam Virmani that Kabir is a name not unknown to the lowest of low class. A lot of scholarly work has been done on Kabir, the most important, being that of Hazari Prasad Dwivedi’s book ‘Kabir’. It was Dwivedi who catapulted Kabir to the centre of Hindi Poetry who

was earlier disregarded by Ramchandra Shukla because of his motive to establish Tulsidas and Surdas as the national poet. One also needs to understand the motive of Dwivedi in establishing the eminence of Kabir in the Hindi poetry. Dwivedi appropriated Kabir for the larger project of Hindu nationalism as against the Islamic and colonial forces. Through Kabir he sought to bridge the gap between the subalterns and the elites which was necessary for the project of dedifferentiated Hinduism. However Dwivedi's insistence upon Kabir belonging to the sect of Nath Yogi and even his insistence upon establishing Kabir as a Hindu is problematic because of the sectarian nature especially when Kabir himself never accepted any religion.

The confinement of Kabir within different sects has been attempted by other scholars like Purshottam Aggarwal who established Kabir as a Vaishnav and argued that Kabir was the harbinger of indigenous modernity. Similarly, Dalit scholars like Dr. Dharamvir have attempted to impose Dalit identity on Kabir and made a case for Dalit modernity. Though one cannot deny that Kabir belonged to the low caste, we need to understand that Kabir refused to accept any socially and religiously constructed identity. Muhammad Hedayatullah in his work 'Kabir: The Apostle of Hindu Muslim Unity' have tried to establish Kabir as the disciple of Sheikh Taqi and then later tries to establish him as the harbinger of Hindu-Muslim unity. Every scholar thus can be seen to enforce a particular identity on Kabir in their endeavor of a much larger project of Nationalism, modernity, Dalit God and unity between two major religions of the subcontinent. This is the major problem that I encountered while reading these texts.

Therefore as David Lorenzen has argued it is important to understand Kabir and the Kabir Panth through the logic of dissent inherent in them. The social protest that Kabir launched against the dominant traditions of Hinduism and Islam through his criticism of rituals and customs plays an important role in understanding Kabir as a critical individual. However Lorenzen too makes an attempt to place Kabir in the Ramanandi's tradition by drawing upon Ananta Das's Parchai and also fails to question the historicity of Ananta Das.<sup>10</sup> For Lorenzen Hagiographies plays a crucial role in deciphering the socio-religious ideas prevalent in the society at the time of their composition. It however is also important as has been argued by John Stratton Hawley to

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<sup>10</sup>Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Times and Ours*, p.328

understand the 'intention of the author' and to critically reflect upon them. Therefore this research has tried to analyze the hagiographies related to Kabir which are an important source to study his ideas.

Based on these literatures the study tries to unfold the uniqueness of Kabir and that it is important to trace his modern ideas though not necessarily positing him within any framework of modernity. An attempt to look at the contemporary significance of Kabir is therefore unfolded in the following study.

### **Methodology**

The following research is theory based; therefore it seeks to employ the qualitative method. In the process I have relied on books, journals and online documentaries concerned with my topic. The study is an attempt to understand the modern ideas of Kabir.

## Chapter-1

### Kabir: Text and Context

#### Introduction

Kabir is one of the most important figures in the religious and political history of India. To many he comes across as a social reformer, while others consider him to be the champion of Hindu-Muslim unity. Yet for many others Kabir was an ‘indigenous modern’ who laid the foundation of modernity in India<sup>11</sup>. He was a Muslim pir for some and Hindu sant<sup>12</sup> for others. He was a Sufi and he was a yogi; he was claimed by all yet he belonged to no one. Kabir was always shrouded in the mystery of mysticism. Kabir has been interpreted as someone who is putting across the idea of a critical and moral individual who seeks communion with God not through the socially constructed and organized religion but someone who shares a personal and direct connection with the one who created them. This allows an individual to rationally analyze the doctrines in understanding the ‘Supreme Being’ rather than being dictated by the principles of organized rituals. The aim is to realize that the Supreme Being might be Allah or Ram for some and Devi for others but there is no difference between God and human being as God is existent in all human beings.

There exists difference of opinion amongst the scholars regarding Kabir’s birth, death and place of birth. Dr. Dharamvir claims that the dates ascribed to Kabir by most of the Hindi scholars are not scientific and hence argues that the birth of Kabir should be decided by deciding the date of death. The date of death therefore ascribed is in 1505 because if one finds the mention of Kabir in Ain-e-Akbari which was written in 1596 one needs to rethink the dates of death in 1549, 1569 and 1575.<sup>13</sup> Even David Lorenzen uses the same methodology but arrives at different conclusion of giving Kabir the time span of

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<sup>11</sup>Scholars like Purshottam Aggarwal and Vinay Dharwadker have argued that Kabir was the initiator of indigenous modern. The idea of Kabir as an indigenous modern has its roots in the writings of Hazariprasad Dwivedi, latter developed by Purshottam Aggarwal. For further understanding see Purshottam Aggarwal, *Akath Kahani Prem ki Kabir ki Kavita aur Unka Samay*, (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Vaudeville, *A weaver named Kabir: selected verses with a detailed biographical and historical Introduction*, Vol. 6, (USA: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.11.

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Dharamvir, *Kabir Ke Alochak*, (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2015), pp. 16-24.

1398 to 1518 relying heavily on Anantadas's Parchai. He simultaneously rejects the time span associated to Kabir by Parshuram Chaturvedi and Charlotte Vaudeville again keeping the dates ascribed in Anantadas's Parchai.

The following chapter seeks to contextualize and critically analyze the debates on Kabir's identity and language and his criticism of institutional religion. Through this analysis one can conclude that Kabir's corpus was giving rise to a critical individual. For this purpose therefore, I wish to begin the chapter, first by discussing the Hagiographies which forms an essential source in understanding the socio-religious context of Kabir and gives us insight into the prevalent ideologies of that time.

## **Hagiography, History and Politics**

What one knows about Kabir's life is through the stories that are written in his hagiographies or as one calls them the 'sacred biographies'. Often the criticism that comes to mind while reading hagiographies is that they are written from a theological perspective and hence tends to venerate the protagonist as 'sacred', thereby giving hagiographies the place of a religious text. However scholars like Christian Lee Novetzke urge one to think that one can identify historical aspects, as the sacred figures exists alongside the empires and state, in the hagiographies like in other secular texts – chronicles and court documents. Therefore "if one can accept these two operations at work within hagiography – the historiographic and the theographic – it suggests, in essence, that hagiography contains the same complex arrangements of textures that we find throughout other South Asian textual sources. This reveals to us how sacred biography is a multifaceted narrative about the past that has served multiple purposes and innumerable publics over centuries in South Asia".<sup>14</sup> It is important to keep in mind though that these narratives are retrospective, they began appearing from the beginning of the seventeenth century. Moreover, they have not come to us directly, but mediated by an oral and manuscript tradition. The hagiographies show not only how the author and his community imagined the saint but also how they imagined themselves. In the process of

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<sup>14</sup>Christian Lee Novetzke, "The Theographic and the Historiographic in an Indian Sacred Life Story", *Sikh Formations*", Routledge, Vol.3, Issue No.2, (December, 2007): pp. 169-184.



narration, for example we find that Kabir engages with the temporal authorities and the religious authorities (for instance Sultan Lodi who was the sultan of Delhi), which is not to show his superiority but to show how religious figures were engaging with the state and the masses. This account of hagiography cannot only be seen as sacred and historical but political in nature, where the engagement with the ruling authorities is giving rise to the political values of deliberation, accountability and dissent. When Kabir was brought to Sultan Lodi, he had refused to bow down in front of the sultan. This angered the sultan and in return he ordered to kill him by various means. However Kabir surpassed all the dangers and was yet safe<sup>15</sup>. Hence one can see the seeds of dissent in the mentioned story. This story is also reflective of the power structure that operates between the ruler and the ruled; hence this can be seen as an example of not only dissent but a kind of rationality that allows one to question the authority in the power. Therefore the different dimensions, apart from only being sacred, that are present in the hagiographies, makes them an important part of the study. Hagiographies of Kabir therefore form an important part in understanding his socio-religious, historical and political context.

Thirteenth century saw the emergence of the independent Muslim ruler Qutub - din – Aibak, who ruled the Delhi Sultanate<sup>16</sup>. With the advent of Muslim rulers one sees the emergence of Muslim Sufis and missionaries who gradually were able to make their presence stronger among the various Indian communities. The presence was stronger amongst the lower castes especially Julahas which had converted to Islam in the between twelfth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>17</sup> According to H.H. Risley's work 'The People of India' one finds the categorization of Indian Muslims into Sayyeds, Pathans and Julahas. Kabir was born in a julaha caste of weavers. Though to view him as a Hindu, many scholars have claimed that he was born to a Brahmin mother who had abandoned him and later was adopted by a Muslim couple belonging to julaha community. For instance, it is evident from the texts of Brahmalinamuni's 'Sadgurushrikaviracharitam' and Gangasharan Shastri's 'Kabir Jivanacharitra' which tries to interpret the legends

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<sup>15</sup>David N Lorenzen, *Kabir legends and Ananta-das's Kabir Parachai*, (New Delhi: SUNY Press, 1992), pp.32-35.

<sup>16</sup> Irfan Habib, *Medieval India: the study of civilization*, (India: National Book Trust, 2008), pp.175-178.

<sup>17</sup> Vaudeville, *A weaver named Kabir: selected verses with a detailed biographical and historical Introduction*, pp. 67-78.

associated with Kabir within a pro-Brahman and anti-Muslim identity<sup>18</sup>. The Julaha community who were the converts from Hinduism to Islam, constituted the lower strata or the Shudra caste of the Hindu caste order. At that point of time in the northern, western and eastern regions of India, the influence of Buddhism and Jainism had ignited the spirit of being treated equally amongst the lower castes. This was further strengthened by the advent of Islam in India. However it is important to understand that the conversions did not lead to the upward mobility of the low castes. So why were people converting from Hinduism and adopting Islam or Buddhism is an important question. One possible explanation which is offered by Charlotte Vaudeville is that these conversions can be seen as a form of rebellion and protest against the dominant Hindu caste system. The seed of dissent was sown after seeing the practices in Buddhism and Islam where the hierarchies based on caste and caste system were not present<sup>19</sup>. However one must be careful while talking about conversion because conversion to Islam meant temporary liberation from the caste system of Hinduism and that vertical mobility was difficult to achieve in Islam too where converts were made to work as domestic servants, artisan and as labourers.<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to see that the free converts were infused along with the immigrants and slaves in the Islam, however this process of conversion by a large group is still obscure because the customs and rituals of the caste system would have continued until the imposition of Sharia which would have diluted the earlier constraints of caste system and Kabir belonged to such group of weavers in transition.<sup>21</sup> The period between twelfth and the fifteenth century also saw an amalgamation of Nath Yogis and Sufi culture. P.D. Barthwal argues that the mixing of Sufis and Sants had brought about a syncretic culture earning respects from both the Hindus and Muslims.

The anti-caste and monotheistic forms of worships found resonance with the other sects such as the Nath Yogis and Muslims which has led many literary scholars like Hazari Prasad Dwivedi to claim that Kabir was a Muslim and was influenced by the

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<sup>18</sup> Lorenzen, *Kabir legends and Ananta-das's Kabir Parachai*. pp. 20-22.

<sup>19</sup> Vaudeville, *A weaver named Kabir: selected verses with a detailed biographical and historical Introduction*, pp. 67-78.

<sup>20</sup> Irfan Habib, "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting", *Social Scientist*, Vol 21, Issue No 3/4, (1993): p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Habib, "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting", p. 82.

tradition of Nath Yogis. However this needs serious investigation because Kabir's own utterances show that he was against any form of organized sects:

“The Jogi cries: Gorakh, Gorakh! The Hindu invokes the Name of Ram, The Mussalman cries: Khuda is One! But the lord of Kabir pervades all”<sup>22</sup>

One might argue therefore that Kabir's idea of Bhakti was centered on an individual who is not blinded by the rituals and ceremonies of institutionalized religions or various other sects. It is then possible to argue that he was proposing a case for a critical individual who seeks communion with the Supreme Being on his/her personal terms. Scholars like Vaudeville have argued that Kabir was arguing a case for an interior religion<sup>23</sup>. But whether Kabir was talking about religion at all is an important question. Another question is whether he was making a distinction between religiosity and spirituality? Kabir does talk about grounding knowledge of truth and the Supreme Being within an individual so that God is to be found within. However his question “whether Rama is greater or the mind that knows him?” makes one go beyond the interiority of the divine.<sup>24</sup> This is because he is arguing against the Ram which is the creation of human beings and the one which is consciously created by the institutionalized religions.

Thus calling it an ‘interior religion’ is problematic because firstly it is derived from the Christian spirituality and secondly would be falling into the same trap as modern day Kabir panthi's have , that is of forming themselves into an organized sect and establishing principles of avatars and various other doctrines to venerate Kabir as their master. Though, one may agree with Vaudeville's conception of ‘interiority’ which focused on establishing a relation with the cosmos and god from within. Rather than interiority, for Kabir it is the internalization of an ethical divine force which requires human beings to act morally and reasonably. For Kabir this internalization is not achieved by chanting the mantras along with the telling of beads but through ‘sumiran’ that is remembering God in each and every breath one takes. The interiority of divine

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<sup>22</sup> Vaudeville, *A weaver named Kabir: selected verses with a detailed biographical and historical Introduction*, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> By interior religion Vaudeville means, that Kabir emphasized on the importance of the ‘interior experience’, rather than delving in any kind of exterior forms of religion. Therefore she argues that this shows the amalgamated influence of the ‘Bhakti’, nath yogis and Sufi thought on Kabir.

<sup>24</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Seeking begumpura*, (New Delhi: Navyana Pub., 2008), p.98.

invokes only the man's relation with the cosmos but through the internalization (for which Kabir argues) one can see invoking of moral self which is incompatible with the materiality and divisiveness of the outside world.

While describing the biography of Kabir it becomes important to make a distinction between the actual historical facts and the hagiographies such as those by the Kabir panth. As rightly pointed out by David Lorenzen, the legends reflect the 'socio-religious', 'psychological', 'political and 'economic' needs of the society. This enables us to critically analyze the legends of saints or any famous personality. One therefore needs to look at not only what has been mentioned but what has 'not' been mentioned. There is an observable trend one can notice in these hagiographies. This trend is that of the reversal of the prevalent power structure, the desire of overthrowing the powerful by the powerless and envisioning an alternative society which is premised on the visions of the poor and powerless. However these legends play a crucial role in understanding the values and shared past of various communities and in this case that of the Kabir panth. The literature that is available to us from the Kabir panthi's<sup>25</sup> has venerated Kabir as the knower of ultimate truth and an avatar of the spiritual being. Kabir here is celebrated nothing less than God, Allah or Ram. These legends about Kabir are a part of the religious faith, identity and ideology for the followers of Kabir<sup>26</sup>.

The biographical account of Kabir becomes important for us to understand the fact that Kabir has been appropriated by not only Hindus and Muslims but also by Christians and Sikhs. That is why the charge of interiority should be linked to this point, as Vaudeville is making it from a western point of view. Kabir's verses show a remarkable influence of the 'nath yogis' and 'Sufi's' too. According to religious scholar Grierson "Kabir's doctrine of word (sabda) is a remarkable copy of the opening verses of the St. John's Gospel"<sup>27</sup>. This has also been agreed to by G.H. Westcott. However this

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<sup>25</sup>Anurag sagar is one the text composed by the Kabir panthi's in which Kabir is described as avatar of the Supreme Being. Kabir through his spiritual knowledge is able to liberate the masses from the clutches of 'kaal' or 'niranjan'. This book also lays the foundation of seven principles which the followers of Kabir should adhere to.

<sup>26</sup> Lorenzen, *Kabir legends and Ananta-das's Kabir Parachai*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>27</sup> Vaudeville, *A weaver named Kabir: selected verses with a detailed biographical and historical Introduction*, pp. 24-25.

seems quite disturbing that Grierson uses the words ‘remarkable copy’ rather than ‘remarkable similarity’ because there are no records of Kabir encountering a Christian missionary in his life. Though other scholars like Nicol Macnicol have argued that the influence of Christianity on Kabir and Kabir panth is not a matter upon which they can dogmatize based on the similarities one finds in both the traditions.<sup>28</sup> There are texts like *Ain-i-Akbari* that talks about Kabir being a Muwahhid-the one who believes in unity of God and thus refuses to accept Kabir as ‘musalman’ because of the fact that Kabir was against the orthodoxies of Islam as well<sup>29</sup>. One can think on the lines that this appropriation of Kabir’s corpus is nothing but the ‘subjugation of the knowledge’<sup>30</sup> that Kabir was trying to impart. The various accounts, as already mentioned above, that associate Kabir with the dominant discourses is basically trying to fit him within that frame rather than understanding him in his own context. For instance certain works like ‘*Khazinat-ul-Asafiya*’ mentions that Kabir is a Sufi and the disciple of Shaykh Taqqi<sup>31</sup>. However we find in *Bijak* a verse that rejects the religion of Taqqi:

"Through Manikpur, Kabir had passed, There he heard of the fame of Shayk Taqqi. At the places which they call Jaunpur And at Jhusi he heard the names of pirs: There are written the names of the twenty-one pirs, People read the khatma and sing the prophet’s praise. Hearing that talk, I could not restrain myself, Seeing those graves, I was bewildered: The works prescribed by that friend of god and that prophet, And all their commands is – all that is unlawful! O Shaykh Aqardi, O Shaykh Saqardi, Listen to my words: With open eyes, consider The beginning and the end And the succession of ages”<sup>32</sup>

Therefore appropriation has rather become subjugation (of his preaching’s) in a sense that in order to prove the dominant discourse’s doctrines his ideas have been subdued under the frame of either Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Sufism, yogic traditions and Buddhism.

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<sup>28</sup>Vaudeville, *A weaver named Kabir: selected verses with a detailed biographical and historical Introduction*, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup>Vaudeville, *A weaver named Kabir: selected verses with a detailed biographical and historical Introduction*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Space, Knowledge and Power’, in Paul Rabinow ed., *The Foucault Reader*, (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp 239-245.

<sup>31</sup>Vaudeville, *A weaver named Kabir: selected verses with a detailed biographical and historical Introduction*, pp. 78-87.

<sup>32</sup>Vaudeville, *A weaver named Kabir: selected verses with a detailed biographical and historical Introduction*, pp. 78-87.

## Kabir's Critique of Rituals and Ceremony

It is interesting to see here that the Kabir was not adopting any particular religion or even being influenced by it. One might say that the doctrines or principles he thought to be rational were used by him to focus upon an individual who critically establishes the relationship with the Supreme Being and does not fall into the trap of rituals and ceremonies created by the organized religions. One often forgets that in this era of institutionalized religions where rituals are also institutionalized, distinctions are created among the individuals on the basis of it. For rituals are the manifestations of power of a certain class, caste, race and sex over the other. Various rituals often create a distinction among the individual bodies such as being identified as a Hindu with a janeyu or a Muslim with a circumcision. Different rituals relating to diet, dressing, sexuality and devotion are a representation of a highly stratified society and simultaneously are a site for contestation of cultural power<sup>33</sup>. Kabir vehemently criticized institutionalized religion<sup>34</sup>. What religion offers us today are the prescriptions in the form of rituals in order to access the Supreme Being. 'It' is inaccessible as long as one keeps themselves entangled in these rituals. For the only way one can access 'It' is through love for the fellow beings. In Kabir's poems one often finds examples of how a ritual often constructs the 'body' which is distinguishable from the other in a sense that it gives different appearance to the humans which technically are of the same origins, for instance:

*"I'd say this through a megaphone If I had one: Look at these men. Shaven heads, Great big earrings, Ash-smear'd bodies, But inside they are empty As a house that's been cleaned out by thieves. And look at these others in the best part of town, Who forget that when death slips its noose round their necks To drag them through the streets it won't be pretty. I live in Fearlessburg, Kabir the weaver says. It's builder? Rama"<sup>35</sup>.*

Kabir in this poem is arguing that God cannot be achieved through a particular style of dressing up of the body. With shaven heads and big earrings one can only decorate the

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Fuller, "Religion and Body", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, March 2015, ssaccessd on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2017: pp.4-7.

doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.18.

<sup>34</sup> Religion, which is based on a book and prescribes certain set of rules and conduct.

<sup>35</sup> Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (trans), *Essential Kabir Special Bilingual Edition*, (India: Hachette Book Publishing, 2011), p. 25.

body which is empty from inside. Therefore Kabir's religion focuses on the internalization of belief and faith rather than the faith facilitated by exterior and material environment. God is to be found within and not outside. The fear of death lingers around those who does not dwell 'Rama' within. Echoing the same contention is Kabir's another poem mentioned below, where he argues that salvation cannot be achieved through shaving off heads, roaming naked and by castration.

Kabir in the following poem launches a strong criticism of practice of asceticism. Asceticism is the disciplining of body through performance of yoga, modification in the dietary habits and practicing hours and hours of meditation. But Kabir argues that by performing such disciplines and not controlling the covetousness of the mind one will never be able to unite with Rama. Salvation can be achieved only by remembering God.

“If going naked Brought liberation, The deer of the forest would attain it first. If a shaven head was a sign of piety, Ewes would be pious too. If holding back the semen Brought you closer to heaven, A steer would lead the way. There is no salvation Without Rama, says Kabir, Not to know it is really dumb.”<sup>36</sup>

The above two poems clearly shows, that rituals and faith have been entwined in such a manner that the performance of rituals serve as a medium to establish connection with the divine. The faith therefore which is to be placed in the Divine is placed upon the Rituals. They are artificially created tools of religion that are being used as a coping mechanism (from grief), beginning of a new life/work, basically an important aspect of one's everyday lives. Though these rituals maybe important to remind us of super natural's existence, however over a period of time it has created binaries between the individual bodies. Rituals enable us to identify individuals as a Hindu, Muslim, Christian and a Sikh body, where a *janeyu* (sacred thread around the bodies of Brahmins), circumcision and turban etc marks the difference. Religion uses ritual as a disciplining tool to produce religious subjects. The sacredness of the religion derives itself from the practice of these rituals because the performance and non performance of rituals creates the fear of auspicious and inauspicious events to take place. The pundits for instance often encourage people to perform yagnas for the peace and prosperity of the household. The

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<sup>36</sup> Mehrotra, *Essential Kabir Special Bilingual Edition*, p. 27.

performance of these intricate rituals to invite cosmic authority to bless the individual seems confusing. The functions of the rituals spans from salvation of soul to enabling an individual to live a happy life both of which seems contradictory. If the purpose of the rituals is liberation of the soul then why finding means to keep it on earth separating it from the super natural. Therefore it is important to denounce these external observances and simultaneously focus on the interior prospects of human-self, which frees one from the clutches of irrationality of rituals and religion.

“Hindus keep fast on ekadasi, they eat only singhara and milk. They abstain from grain, but do not control the mind’s desire. Next day they eat the flesh of beasts. Turks keep fast and hours of prayer; they cry aloud in the name of god. How will they find paradise? When evening comes they slaughter fowls. Devotion, sacrifice and rosary, piety, pilgrimage, fasting and alms. Nine bhaktis, Vedas, the Book (the Quran), All these are the cloaks of falsehood. O mind you make your gods and goddesses... If by circumcision one becomes turk, What then will be said of your woman? ‘Half the body’, so the wife is styled; Then you will remain hindu! By putting on the sared thread, Does one become a Brahman? What hast thou given to women to wear? She from birth is but a sudra! Why dost thou eat that food she brings, o Pundit?”<sup>37</sup>

Another important aspect associated with rituals is the concept of purity and impurity. According to Mary Douglas body is not merely a physical entity but represents the entire social structure. The body is representative of complex societal structures for example a Dalit body which apart from symbolizing its caste also represents a different culture altogether. Religion and rituals produces this social structure that comes to be symbolized in the body of an individual. The very notion of getting polluted by the touch or sight of a low caste or Muslim signifies how rituals shape body. A body of a Brahmin is different from the body of a Dalit and a body of a Hindu is different from a Muslim body. The very practice of Wudhu in Muslims is a bathing ritual which provides for the purity of the body. The body becomes impure if one has a physical contact with other,

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<sup>37</sup>Baidyanath Saraswati, “Notes on Kabir: A Non-Literate Intellectual” , in *Dissent, Protest, and Reform in Indian Civilization*, ed. Subhash Chandra Mali, (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), p. 170.



bleeding of a body part, defecation or urination etc. Brahmins maintain the purity of the body by not seeing or touching low castes, taking bath in Ganga River and wearing janeyu. All these rituals associated with maintaining purity is nothing but shaping a pure body as distinct from impure one. It is here that Kabir argues:

“Tell me, O Pundit, what place is pure- Where I can sit and eat my meal? Mother was impure, father was impure- The fruits they bore were also impure. They arrived impure, they left impure- Unlucky folks, they died impure. My tongue’s impure, my words are impure, My ears, my eyes, they are all impure- You Brahmins, you’ve stolen the fire, But you can’t burn off the impurity of senses! The fire, too is impure, the water’s impure- So even the kitchen’s nothing but impure. The ladle’s impure that serves a meal, And they are impure who sit and eat their fill. Cowdung’s impure, the bathing square’s impure- It’s very curbs are nothing but impure. Kabir says, only they are pure Who’ve cleansed their thinking”<sup>38</sup>

The poem criticizes the exterior notion of Hindu ritual of purity and argues that purity should be interior. The cleaning of the thought rather than the body makes one pure. Purity is not achieved through water and soap but by cleansing the self of the vicious desires and passions.

Kabir out rightly rejected the artificial binaries created by the caste system by saying:

“I and you are of one blood, And one life animates us both. From one mother is the world born. What knowledge is this which makes us separate? All have come from the same country And have at one ghat; But the evil influence of this world Has divided us into innumerable sects”<sup>39</sup>

Through the rejection of these notions of purity and impurity which creates inequality in the society Kabir puts forth the idea of social equality: This idea of equality in Kabir will be expounded in the latter chapters.

“O saintly men, Don’t ask the man Devoted to the god without qualities What his caste is. The brahmin’s good, The warrior’s good, The trader’s caste is good. The thirty six clans, they are all good- It’s your question then that is crooked, The barber’s good, The washerman’s good, The carpenter’s caste is good. Raidas, the saint, was good, Supach,

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<sup>38</sup> Vinay Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, (India: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, p. 22.

the seer, was good- Though they were scavengers. Both hindus and turks Have demeaned themselves- They can fathom nothing”<sup>40</sup>.

Caste here is being looked at as an overarching structure and Kabir is arguing that since caste system is good then all its parts (all the castes) are equivalently good. The poem is unusual in a sense that it is embracing the logic of caste system just to defeat its internal logic<sup>41</sup>. Further Vinay Dharwadker argues that “the negative implication is that, if Hindus and Muslims establish internally differentiated societies, but fail to apply their principles of differentiation consistently, their principles as well as their social orders must be debased, in which case their systems of inequality must be fundamentally wrong”. In another poem Kabir rejects the binaries created on the basis of religion, caste and gender and argues that they are manmade creations. The body of an individual is being constructed socially and ideologically on the basis of religion and caste. He further adds that there is no distinction between male or female body and Brahmin or a shudra body. The problem is that we tend to look at body as a cause to further some end. Kabir argues that body is an effect and not cause. Moreover the origin of human beings comes from a common source so the binaries are artificial. A striking feature of Kabir’s poetry is that it tries to show us the power religion exerts over individuals. Through the prescriptions in the form of rituals it tries to shape the body.

Kabir through his preaching’s also tries to bring out the ‘unresolvable dilemma in the Hindu and Muslim theology and ritual practice’<sup>42</sup>. In the following poem Kabir asks which is greater, an effect or a cause, a knowing subject or an object of knowledge<sup>43</sup>.

“If you love your followers, rama, Settle this quarrel, once and for all. Is brahma greater, or where he came from? Is the veda greater or its origin? Is the mind greater or what it believes in is rama greater, or the one who knows him? Kabir says, I’ m in despair. Which is greater? The pilgrim station, or Hari’s devoted slave?”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, p. 196.

<sup>41</sup>These types of poems are called ‘ulatbamsi’ and this style was peculiar to Kabir’s utterances, for instance ‘son of a barren woman’. This style is paradoxical in nature.

<sup>42</sup>Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, pp. 222-223

<sup>43</sup>Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, pp. 222-223.

<sup>44</sup>Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, p. 144.

This forces us to think that whether religion is greater or the knowledge it produces. Over a period of time knowledge produced by religion has acquired a greater significance. The knowledge of one religion is considered to be superior to the other. It is important to ask a question here that what knowledge is this that separates human beings. Is the doer separate from his/her actions? Kabir argues:

“O saints, The doer is different from his deeds. He doesn’t come and go, he doesn’t die, He isn’t born- think this over with a cool mind... creator and creation stand apart. Just as a cause is held back From its consequence, So is my lord and lover from me. Kabir says, The doer isn’t the one Who has gone and sold himself As a slave to his deeds.”<sup>45</sup>

Kabir here is arguing that a doer is different from his/her actions and the cause is detached from the consequences. This is where his idea of ‘true self’<sup>46</sup> comes in. He argues that one needs to make a distinction between what a person does and what he actually is. However this is contradictory to the karma theory which identifies the agent and his deeds identical. This is often the justification given for purity, impurity and the untouchability in Hindu philosophy. Through his rejection of the Karma theory, one can again see Kabir attacking these exterior notions and rituals of purity and impurity and instead encouraging one to look at the ‘true self’, the interior of the being. The exterior is shaped by the religion and its rituals, but what is an innate need to be seen and recognized. The ‘true self’ according to Kabir is a ‘simple state’ or ‘sahaj sthiti’. One therefore needs to go beyond this bodily existence (religion, rituals, caste) yet recognizing the power they have in shaping us (the body) and then rejecting them.

“The ineffable tale Of that final simple state: It’s utterly different. It can’t be weighed on a scale, Can’t be whittled down. It doesn’t feel heavy And doesn’t feel light. It has no rain, no sea, No sun, no shade. It doesn’t contain creation or destruction. No life, no death exists in it, No grief, no joy. Both solitude and blissful union Are absent from it. It has no up or down, no high or low. It doesn’t contain either night or day. There is no water, no air, No fire that flares again and again. The true master permeates everything there. The eternal one remains unmoving, imperceptible, unknowable. You can attain him with the

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<sup>45</sup> Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>46</sup> I have still not able to comprehend the idea of ‘true self’. But what one can think is that true self according to Kabir is the manifestation of god himself. Therefore for him god dwells in every human being.

guru's grace. Kabir says, sacrifice yourself to the guru, And remain ensconced in the true community."<sup>47</sup>

## **Bhakti, Supreme Being and the Rise of the Critical Individual**

Through all of this one can see that Kabir, by rejecting organized religions and caste distinctions, was trying to present an idea of an individual whose rationality triumphs over the socially constructed doctrines<sup>48</sup>. However the irony is that whatever Kabir was trying to argue or whatever he stood for was either misunderstood or appropriated to give legitimacy to individual doctrines. Years after his death one can see the emergence of an organized sect called the Kabir Panth (though Kabir vociferously attacked any kind of institutionalized sects or organizations) that now operates on the doctrines of 'avatars' which believe that Kabir was an incarnation of the Supreme Being. This irony is also reflected in the legend about his death where the Hindus wanted to cremate the body while the Muslim followers wanted to bury it. The very ceremonial rites he was against, he himself was caught up in that. Therefore, as rightly pointed out by Purshottam Aggarwal, calling Kabir an apostle of Hindu and Muslim unity would be extremely problematic because the unity calls for the uncritical acceptance of both the religions<sup>49</sup>. This calls for a critical analysis of the ideas of secularism and tolerance present in Kabir. He can be looked at as someone who was trying to establish a personal relationship with the Supreme Being based on love and equality. His idea of Bhakti was hinting at the outright rejection of the caste hierarchies and religious binaries. Kabir's idea of Bhakti was that of participation and of relating to the cosmic authority through the social experience<sup>50</sup>. Rather than arguing for the unity of Hindu and Muslims he was arguing for oneness of Supreme Being. This oneness was to be achieved only by equality.

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<sup>47</sup> Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, pp. 101.

<sup>48</sup> By 'socially constructed doctrines' here I mean is the organized religion and its rituals, along with the order that creates distinctions among individuals on the basis of caste .

<sup>49</sup> Purushottam Aggarwal, "But for Kabir in this Kaliyuga..", *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 37, Issue.No. 2, (Autumn, 2010): pp. 36-45.

<sup>50</sup> Aggarwal, "But for Kabir in this Kaliyuga..", pp. 36-45.

Apart from religion Kabir was also initiating a tradition of critical inquiry and interrogation<sup>51</sup>. This clearly shows the beginning of indigenous modernity or as Purshottam Aggarwal calls it 'deshaj adhunikta' which was witnessing the rise of critical individual and questioning the authority of organized religious structures. This, forces one to think how Kabir was different and ahead of his times?

Kabir through his poetry, unlike Tulsidas and Surdas, outrightly rejected the structure of varnashram or the caste system. Tulsidas, on the other hand had accepted the varnashram but on the basis of one's 'innate qualities', which favored the upper caste's perception.<sup>52</sup> One of the features that marks the distinctiveness or uniqueness of Kabir was his staunch opposition to accepting the prevalent structures of caste system and institutionalized religion, which simultaneously places him ahead of his times. The conflict between the temporal and spiritual and the conflict with the authorities on religion, which is highlighted in Kabir, reflects the idea of dissent against the blind acceptance of both the authority of state and the authority of religion. Another feature that makes him distinct is his language. Most of Kabir's corpus has been orally transmitted which was later on written down by his disciples. One of his autobiographical verses clearly mentions that he was an illiterate- "Ink or paper, I never touched, nor did I take a pen in hand, the greatness of the four ages, I have described by the word of mouth"<sup>53</sup>. Kabir preferred to spread his knowledge orally and which is in sync with his preaching's, where he rejects the authorities of religions based on the written words. The most important terms devised by Kabir were the sabda (the word), rama (ram) and nama (the name)<sup>54</sup>, on which his entire experience with the social and spiritual was embedded. There are many verses that have been attributed to Kabir but, the authenticity of which is still in question. Therefore in order to understand Kabir it becomes important to analyze the way his utterances were composed and presented before the audience and why they gained so much popularity. His works mainly comprised of the sabda, dohas(a unit of strophic lines) and ramainis(short rhymed poems). These verses have been preserved in

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<sup>51</sup> Aggarwal, "But for Kabir in this Kaliyuga..", pp-36-45.

<sup>52</sup> Savitri Chandra Shobha, *Medieval India and Hindi bhakti poetry: A socio-cultural study*, (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publication, 1996), pp 180-194.

<sup>53</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. and ed. Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, (New York: OUP, 2002), pp-3-5.

<sup>54</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pp-3 to 5.

the regions of North India, Punjab and Rajasthan and UP and Bihar. The Adi Granth which is the sacred book of Sikhs, Kabir Granthavali and the Bijak respectively are the three major texts which contain the verses of Kabir<sup>55</sup>. However Lorenzen has claimed that Anantadas's Kabir Parchai written in the seventeenth century is a systematic compilation of Kabir's legends.

As told by Hess that this oral tradition still flourishes amongst various sects of sadhus, villagers and across the subcontinent along with some 'dialectical alterations'. The uniqueness in the way these verses were composed that they are still flourishing today needs a careful analysis of their structure and nature. The point is that Kabir was a non-conformist and this is reflected through his language which was a 'language of bazaar'<sup>56</sup>. Kabir's verses have been very provocative firstly because of their dialogic nature and that they establish a direct contact with the masses.

Milind Wakankar puts forth the question as to what makes Kabir important and unique till date. The very gift of his rough rhetoric and ability to reflect intellectual abilities is being tapped by the people living in the margins of the society. Therefore, is it the gift of memory or intellectual, political or social insights which makes Kabir easily malleable yet retaining its uniqueness which is being countersigned by many other individuals<sup>57</sup>. Uniqueness lies in the fact how the readers are able to associate with Kabir, instead of the addressees in his verses. The picture he creates starts throwing questions, stirring one's consciousness and allowing one to relate the verses with their everyday lives. For instance when he talks about 'circumcision' or 'rosary beads', one can immediately draw a reference between a Hindu and a Muslim. This is how he creates a world understandable and inclusive of all.

Kabir is known for his scathing attacks on the institutionalized religions and its rituals and caste system. However one can see different Kabir's in the above mentioned three texts. Wherein the Guru Granth, one finds an 'emotional Kabir' who longs for the

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<sup>55</sup>Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pp5 to 7.

<sup>56</sup> Vaudeville in her book '*A Weaver Named Kabir*' argues that Kabir's language was that of non-conformity and that it was the language of bazaar, a language which was understandable by all and basically comprised of hindui.

<sup>57</sup> Milind Wakankar, "The Anomaly of Kabir" in, *Muslims, Dalits, and the fabrications of history*. Vol. 12, ed. Shail Mayaram, et al (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), pp. 102-107.

union with the God and adopts the role of a beggar or a servant and even a lover burning in the agony of separation. In the *Bijak* one can see Kabir taking the role of a teacher, challenging and invoking the consciousness of the disciples.<sup>58</sup> Kabir in all of his sayings appears as somebody who is questioning the embedded values of a society in an individual, thereby directly engaging with the consciousness of the beings and forcing them to step outside their securities (by ‘securities’, I mean the world where we are ready to gain anything but not to lose. A world full of delusions where one plays in the hands of profit and loss, greed of the materialist world stuck between the moral and immoral acts) and critically engage with them. Kabir’s language has often been described as vulgar yet allusive and eloquent<sup>59</sup>, a language associated with nath yogis<sup>60</sup> and other nirguni sects. Most of these verses were straight forward composed in ‘sadhukhdi bhasha’, while some were composed in *ulatbamsi bhasha* (language) which contains paradoxes that are ironical and amusing yet deeply insightful. The use of this *ulatbamsi bhasha* and *sadhukhdi bhasha* in the verses is to challenge a particular mode of thinking which is structured in a particular way. The dominance of Sanskrit in ancient and medieval India had created a world which was structured in a way accessible only to the few, learned (the Brahmins) sections of the society, while others (low castes) were denied the right to learning. The very fact that Kabir started composing in language which was accessible to all was a way of challenging this world of Sanskrit language which was exclusionary and unequal in its very nature. As argued by Linda Hess “Unceremoniously, he (Kabir) shows us actual human feeling, surrounds us with experience of delusion, makes vivid the fragmented nature of ordinary life. What unity there may be comes forth in flashes or in leaps from the disordered surface of the world to a momentary recognition: it is here, in every-body (ghat ghat me); something simple (sahaja); a single word (sabda)”. The world created by Sanskrit language that is of unity was rejected by Kabir’s unstructured style of verses. It can be argued that the basis of this unity, which Sanskrit language created, was the caste system and Sanskrit language mediated the relations of hierarchies, in a sense that the language of learned was Sanskrit who dictated the everyday organization of the

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<sup>58</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Charlotte Vaudeville refers to Kabir’s language as vulgar yet elusive. For this see Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir*.

<sup>60</sup> Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, *Kabir*, (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2008), pp. 36-45.

society. By establishing a direct contact with the masses Kabir differed from Tulsidas, Surdas and Mirabai in whose preaching's there was a conversation with the god. This ability of directly engaging with the audience and invoking their consciousness has the element of rhetoric in Kabir's verses which has also been argued by Linda Hess<sup>61</sup>. Apart from this, one can think that Kabir was actually trying to engage with the reason and criticality of the minds of audiences. The verses are addressed in such a manner that immediately grasps the attention of the reader making him/her an active participant in the conversation forcing them to think, stirring in them confusion, dilemma, aggression, amusement, etc and then act. The verses/poems are therefore either in the form of provocative questions, riddles, dialogues and monologues.<sup>62</sup> Hess argues that one can still discern a pattern in Kabir's corpus where the beginning of the poem is either a negation of something, a riddle, or a provocative question, which grasps the attention of the audience immediately and latter leaving them with the space for contemplation.

“His social-satirical poems, his psychological probes, his poems about death, his crazy and paradoxical and mystical poems, do not inhabit separate categories. They are unified by a principle of radical honesty that sweeps through marketplace, temple, body and mind, that will no more allow you to delude yourself than to cheat others, to hack up the truth than to sever the head of an animal”<sup>63</sup>

One may argue that this unique style of poetry coming from the medieval era not only enables us to see existing notions of rationality but enlightenment and modernity too. By leaving the space for contemplations, they actually allowed deeper insights into the existing societal problems of inequality, institutionalized religions and caste system. The corpus attributed to Kabir focuses on the individualistic rather than the collective entities, for instance when he vociferously rejects the credibility of religious texts and instead asks the individuals to have a direct link with God thereby destroying the roles of fake mediators (in this case maulvis and padits). However the pattern of poetry of Kabir is very different from the way works composed in Sanskrit. One of Kabir's style include Ulat bamsi or the upside-down poems, the enunciation of whom are designed to break the

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<sup>61</sup>Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pp. 5 -34.

<sup>62</sup>Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pp. 15 to 20.

<sup>63</sup>Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 21.



binaries and tamper with the normalcy of thinking. The paradoxes reflected in his 'Ulatbamsi' are puzzling and at the same time have an important hidden message. For instance 'an elephant is tied to the ant's feet' reflects that ant is the 'mana' that always runs after the pleasure whereas elephant is the atma which craves for God but is bounded by the mana<sup>64</sup>. Scholars like Hazariprasad Dwivedi have argued that these ulatbamsi poems can be called 'Sandhabhasha' which is associated with the Nath yogis and tantric practices.<sup>65</sup> Scholars like Parshuram Chaturvedi have shown the link with the religious literature like Rigveda, Atharveda and Svetasvatara.<sup>66</sup> These poems are paradoxical in nature which puzzles the mind of a reader that at times they appear stupid but at the same time forces the reader to challenge the existing norms. For instance "lion and tiger are yoked to a plow, sowing rice in barren field" or "it's not a wild beast, brother, not a wild beast, but everyone eats the meat". The function of ulatbamsi therefore is not only amusement but also challenging the ludicrousness of mind that has attuned itself to the way society wants. Hess has argued that these ulatbamsi's cannot have one meaning and therefore depends on how one reads them. She further adds that these poems have something very simple and that relates to the experience of an individual. Therefore one can argue that the hidden message of these ulatbamsi poems is to challenge the set modes of thinking which has created rigid boundaries and that there should be fluidity in one's thought process. As rightly pointed out, by Eliade "The semantic polyvalence of words finally substitutes ambiguity for the usual system of references inherent in ordinary language. And this destruction of language contributes, in its way too, towards "breaking" the profane universe and replacing it by universe of convertible and integrable planes".<sup>67</sup> Therefore Kabir through his poetry was trying to envisage a new world where older forms of thinking and way of living was being challenged and this he was trying to achieve through the style of his poetry which encapsulated ontological questions and vociferous rejections of the set standards of the society, regulating our everyday lives thereby carving out an individual space for a being.

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<sup>64</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 21.

<sup>65</sup> Dwivedi, *Kabir*, pp. 36-45.

<sup>66</sup> Linda Hess, "The cow is sucking at the calf's teat: Kabir's upside-down language", *History of Religions*, Vol. 22, Issue No. 4, (1983): pp- 313-337.

<sup>67</sup>Hess, "The cow is sucking at the calf's teat: Kabir's upside-down language", p.337.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I began by arguing a case for critical individual that one finds in Kabir's corpus by examining the available hagiographical accounts. Kabir's vehement criticism and rejection of the organized traditions and existing binaries of the society reflects the birth of the critical individual. The individual which was not only supposed to engage with the external structures critically, but also the structures within, that of the 'mana' and 'atma'. Here we can see Kabir making a difference in the way society perceived individual as formed by the multiple layers of caste, religion, gender and class, in opposition to the critical one which was not submissive to the hierarchies but challenged and tried to reform them.

## CHAPTER-2

### Kabir and Modernities

#### Introduction

As has been argued in the previous chapter that Kabir strongly advocated the idea of a critical and a moral individual. Implicit in this was the idea to reason with the prevalent structures of the caste, class, religion and knowledge. The very current of criticality envisaged by Kabir in the medieval era marks a significant departure from the stagnant society based on the hierarchies of the caste system. It is not only unique in Kabir to have initiated this current of questioning and dissent in his time but the uniqueness also lies in his poetry and the way it has come to be incorporated in the day to day lives of the individuals in the contemporary period as well.

The first part of this chapter deals with the origin of modernity in the west. Reason was the central tenet of western modernity. In its process of expansion the western modernity sought to impose the universal values upon the non-west. This idea of western modernity has faced severe criticism from the post colonial scholars such as Javed Alam's work *India Living with Modernity* (1999). A rich spectrum of works brought to light the complex and complicated history of what constituted modernity and particularly its rather provincial underpinnings in the hitherto works on modernity that emanated in the West. The second part of the chapter then deals with the idea of alternative modernity(ies), particularly the counter-ideas of indigenous modernity and Dalit modernity.

In dealing with these alternatives, the chapter seeks to put forth a discussion that interrogates whether these counter-categories of alternative modernity can be imposed on Kabir and would do justice to his ideas. Why was Kabir more modern than his contemporaries? How can we understand Kabir from the lens of modernity? The idea of "alternative modernities" holds that modernity always unfolds within specific cultures or

civilizations and that different starting points of the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes. But whereas "alternative" was conceived earlier in systemic terms, in its most recent version since the 1980s cultural difference has become its most important marker. Adding the adjective "alternative" to modernity has important counter-hegemonic cultural implications, calling for a new understanding of modernity. It however suffers from a limitation. It ends up obscuring, in its fetishization of difference the entrapment of most of the "alternatives" claimed, products of the reconfigurations of global power--within the hegemonic spatial, temporal and developmentalist limits of the modernity they aspire to transcend. Culturally conceived notions of alternatives ignore the common structural context of a globalized capitalism which generates but also sets limits to difference.

In light of these discussions straitjacketing Kabir becomes an impossible task. Kabir has been seen as the Indigenous Modern by Purshottam Aggarwal. He argues that Kabir's rationality was rooted in his capability of making independent choices. Further he argues that the colonial episteme is a hindrance in approaching Kabir as the indigenous modern. On the other hand, Dalit scholars like Dr. Dharamvir have sought Dalit modernity, thereby questioning the tendencies of authors like Ram Kumar Shukla and Hazariprasad Dwivedi who tried to 'brahmanise' Kabir. The problem with ascribing Kabir with such identities is that it imposes an identity on Kabir which he himself deconstructs. This chapter thus tries to negotiate through these debates complicating the relation between Kabir and Modernity.

## **Reason, Enlightenment and Modernity in Europe**

Before digging into these questions it is important to understand the very concept of modernity and the notion of self it brought into the question in the west. The roots of modernity lie in the Europe which saw the transformation from the traditional societies to the modern societies characterized by rationality and scientific knowledge. This idea of modernity seeks to destroy any or all impediments to its process of actualization. Inherent in this idea of modernity is therefore the idea of the 'other' which it seeks to destroy through universal imposition of its values. The basis of modernity is laid in the

Enlightenment period of the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. This period also known as the 'Age of Reason' was majorly influenced by Descartes notion of duality ("cogito ergo sum" translated as "I think, therefore I am") which was the birth of rational individual and scientific knowledge based on empirical evidences thereby marking a distinction between facts and value. Modernity therefore marked a significant departure from the pre-modern societies and traditional beliefs. The pre modern society of Europe which was guided by the authority of the church interpreted the world as constitutive of God's expression or God's law that pervaded every sphere of individual's life. The church was the link between the beings relation with the cosmos. This idea of being in the pre modern societies was guided by Platonian notion of subject who was liberated once it comes in touch with the cosmic order that is the order established by God, thereby acknowledging God as the highest form of truth<sup>68</sup>. Therefore reason came to be dictated by the order of cosmos which was given by the law of God.

Modernity marked its distinction from these beliefs and practices ushering into the era of reason where the self was not to be dictated by the external structures of cosmic order but by the internal orders of reasons. This made a distinction between the subject and the object which was very much absent in the pre modern society. This separation of the subject and the object had its roots in the Renaissance and Reformation which was majorly influenced by Lutheran idea of faith, which sought to free the individuals from the dictates of church thereby focusing only on the faith<sup>69</sup>. This also marked the beginning of separation of church from the state, repudiating the authority of the former in the temporal affairs of the individual. These secular ideals and notion of freedom emerging during the renaissance provided a base for the enlightenment during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As already stated above, this period of enlightenment was marked by the reason, questioning the universe governed by the law of God rather than by the scientific principles. These modern scientific principles heralded a new era touching upon the

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<sup>68</sup>Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, (UK: Cambridge University Press,1977), pp. 5-6.

<sup>69</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: The Renaissance*,(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) see chapter 1.

notion of self<sup>70</sup> which becomes important for this research. The idea of the modern self has been initiated by Descartes and Hobbes who were contemporaries. Descartes famous phrase ‘Cogito ergo sum’ or ‘I think, therefore I am’ lays the foundation of his dualism between mind and body<sup>71</sup>. This is embedded in his idea of doubt, wherein he argues that everything that exists outside the human body is doubtful; however one cannot doubt the thinking ability of the being<sup>72</sup>. Therefore this dichotomy between mind and body and ‘I’ as the thinking thing leads to the subjectivity and consciousness of the being<sup>73</sup>. Through this the reliance on the self is made necessary and everything that exists outside the self is doubted even the existence of the God. This meant situating moral source and consciousness within us rather than placing the source outside as was the case with the pre moderns<sup>74</sup>. For Descartes therefore the idea of the world needs to be derived from the ideas within. The reality is to be conceived and known through the mind and cognition of the individual, replicating the structures of the mind on the external world, leading to the construction of the reality by an individual. Descartes was dismissive of the theory that ideas are inherently present in the world and this led to the creation of subject endowed with the power of reason and freedom. This also means that, through this new invented subjectivity within beings, the outside world was being objectified, thus inventing the correlativity between objectivity and subjectivity<sup>75</sup>. As Taylor rightly points out :-“Of course, Descartes holds that his procedure will result in substantively true beliefs about the world. But this is something which has to be established. Indeed, to establish it is one of the most important goals of Descartes's philosophy. We make the link between procedure and truth with the proof that we are the creatures of a veracious God. The procedure is not simply *defined* as the one which leads to substantive truth. It could have been leading us entirely astray, if we had been victims of a malicious demon. Rationality is now an internal property of subjective thinking, rather than consisting in its vision of reality. In making this shift, Descartes is articulating what has become the standard

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<sup>70</sup>Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>71</sup> Harvie Fergusson, *Modernity and subjectivity: Body, soul, spirit*, (London: University of Virginia Press, 2000), pp. 4-8.

<sup>72</sup> Kim Atkins, ed., *Self and subjectivity*, (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 7-9.

<sup>73</sup> Atkins ed., *Self and Subjectivity*, pp.5-9.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*, (USA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 140-143.

<sup>75</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 9-11.

modern view. In spite of the wide disagreements over the nature of the procedure, and despite all the scorn which has been heaped on him from the dominant empiricist trend in modern scientific culture, the conception of reason remains procedural.”<sup>76</sup> This shows that Cartesian ideas avoided the sense experiences and the knowledge produced by them, pointing at the self- mastery of the reason which means that our lives is being shaped by the orders of our reasoning capacity. Therefore this led to the instrumental use of reason controlling the desires and feelings of the body and simultaneously becoming a source of knowledge.

The empiricists contended the Cartesian idea of reason as the sole source of knowledge. For instance Locke argued that reason needs primary material to start its operation and that it alone cannot be a source of knowledge and this primary material is provided by sense experience. Therefore, Locke rejected the claim that ideas exist within<sup>77</sup>. Deeply influenced by the scientific thinking, like Descartes, Locke was against following the dictates of external order but at the same time laid the emphasis on the understanding that the conceptions of the world an individual receives are a synthesis of the ideas received through sensation and reflection<sup>78</sup>. This synthesis leads to the disengagement and remaking of the self respectively which Taylor calls as the ‘radical reflexivity’ which ‘touches the entire mental activity’<sup>79</sup>.

Through this period of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the basic premises of modernity rested on the new found notions of reason rendering the past as invalid. Reason was the order to be followed that led to the indubitable truth. It was through reason that nature was to be understood hence rendering the latter to instrumental use by reason. Not only was scientific knowledge considered to be the only valid form of knowledge. Apart from all of this the ideas of freedom, equality and human progress became important.

## **Dissent: The Romantics**

In the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the conceptions of modernity enunciated by the age of enlightenment were challenged by the Romantics who protested against the

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<sup>76</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*, p. 156.

<sup>77</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*, chapter-9.

<sup>78</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*, chapter-9.

<sup>79</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*, chapter-9.

dissociation of the self from its feelings and the nature surrounding it<sup>80</sup>. Hence the thrust of their thought was very much anti-dualistic and sought ‘communion with the nature and the other men’<sup>81</sup>. Rousseau in his book “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” criticizes the notion of detached self as embarked by the enlightenment and therefore argues that self-interested subjects will lead to the corrupting of the society. In his state of nature, he highlights the two inherent capacities of individual: ‘capacity for freedom’ and the ‘faculty of improvement’ which seeks to remedy the inequalities in the society, stemming from the distorted idea of freedom where one is made subservient to another<sup>82</sup>. The romantics heralded the new theme of expressivism leading to the self-awareness of the individuals and freedom lies in expressing one’s emotions. For this self expression Taylor argues that there was a need for a proper language and art because man can express themselves highly in the respective two. However they denied the modern premises of objectification of the nature and considered man as the essential part of the nature thereby leaning towards the Aristotelian conception of ‘final causes’ and ‘holistic concepts’<sup>83</sup>. But the very idea of ‘subject’s self-realization’ in the romantics links them to the modern conception of the subjectivity, where the former is achieved through the unfolding from within and not the ‘ideal order beyond’<sup>84</sup>.

## **The German Idealists**

German idealism inspired by the romantics and propagated through the works of Kant and Hegel reformulated the notion of self and freedom enunciated by the European modernity. Kant’s assertion in prioritizing reason over passions and inclination, thereby giving it a universal nature links Kantian notion of the reason with that of the Cartesian notion of reason. Kant’s ‘transcendental argument’ of the self is something which yields a unique position to him, where he argues that one must look into the ‘nature of the subject’ prior to experiencing, or in other ‘what goes into the making of the nature as to

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<sup>80</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 20-24.

<sup>81</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, p.24.

<sup>82</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, (New York: Dover Publications, 2004).

<sup>83</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>84</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 17-18.



have experienced certain phenomena'<sup>85</sup>. According to Kant the notion of the self is realized through the use of reason by establishing a control over emotions and inclinations. Kant's reason therefore is something which is a priori i.e. existing prior to the experience<sup>86</sup>. Therefore Kant argues that morality is following the moral laws which one gives to oneself through the use of one's reason, thereby separating morality from any inclination and keeping it within the bounds of duty to be followed for its own sake. He calls these moral laws as the 'categorical imperatives' which are universal in nature<sup>87</sup>. Following from this is his notion of 'autonomy' which means that 'I am free in a radical sense, self-determining not as a natural being, but as a pure, moral will'<sup>88</sup>. Absent in Kantian notion of the self is the idea of 'other' which Hegel posits as the 'not-self' which the self always seeks to overcome<sup>89</sup>. Hegel also rejects Kantian notion of morality which is defined by the reason detaching it from any inclination and thereby cautions that this might lead to the subjugation of man by the reason. Hegel is confronted with the discordance between man and nature, subject and object which it seeks to remedy through his idea of the 'Geist' or cosmic spirit which seeks self-awareness in the conscious beings or the 'finite spirit', thus establishing a unity between the two<sup>90</sup>. It is also important to note that 'Geist' cannot be reduced to man since it is the ultimate spiritual reality, whose purpose and ends are being served by the finite spirits<sup>91</sup>. In this unique synthesis between cosmic and the infinite spirit Hegel argues that reason which needs separation from the subjectivity should be the basis for it<sup>92</sup>. For Hegel ethical life is one's moral obligation towards community of which it is a part, thus bridging the gap between self and the other and building his idea of ethical totality<sup>93</sup>.

It is evident from the above that the notion of 'other' became entrenched in the western modernity and it sought to eliminate this 'other'. The very universal nature of this modernity has led us astray from the alternative conceptions of the modernity that

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<sup>85</sup>Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 30.

<sup>86</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and tr. Allen Wood, (London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp 25-32.

<sup>87</sup>Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 25-32.

<sup>88</sup>Taylor, *Hegel*, p.3.

<sup>89</sup>Taylor, *Hegel*, p.40.

<sup>90</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, pp.44-45.

<sup>91</sup>Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 45.

<sup>92</sup>Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 48-50.

<sup>93</sup>Taylor, *Hegel*, pp. 365-375.

could be prevalent within west and outside it (non-west)<sup>94</sup>. In the backdrop of this it is important to see if some non-west ideas of modernity can be formulated without replicating its trajectory and looking at the spirit of modernity which is the growth of reason, disengagement with the religious beliefs and rituals and the growth of dissenting voices demanding equality from the hierarchies of the class and caste. Modernity in the contemporary scenario is dominantly looked at as a break from the traditions and growth of scientific knowledge which lays the foundations for more and more reliance on technology and development. One can say that the 'instrumental use of reason' has engulfed the ideas inherent in the modernity which had sought to liberate the individuals not only materially but spiritually. Therefore as rightly pointed out by Rajeev Bhargava that "there is a pressing need of our times to conceive and, more importantly, to realize an alternative to the dehumanizing excesses of western modernity or non-western traditions"<sup>95</sup>. These alternatives to modernity are necessary because the inherent universalizing tendencies ignore the cultural differentiations and the prospect of a culture taking a different trajectory and reaching different ends. Not only this it also suppresses the birth of new ideas that are context specific and serve better ends to the respective culture. Charles Taylor makes a distinction between two theories of 'acultural modernity' which sees the change in terms of development as the demise of the traditional society and the rise of modern society and 'cultural theories' which sees the difference in cultures.<sup>96</sup> Taylor argues that for acultural theories the 'culture serves as an input', therefore the transformations in any culture are defined in 'culture-neutral' making transformations homogenous across culture be it in terms of social or intellectual terms.<sup>97</sup> Taylor further argues that the acultural theory of modernity is the dominant one and the problem with this theory is that it associates everything modern with the 'package of enlightenment', leading to the misunderstanding of the embodied meanings and 'social imaginaire' of our predecessors and looking at them through our own beliefs. Therefore he places importance on cultural theory of modernity which rejects the atomistic

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<sup>94</sup> Rajeev Bhargava, "Are there alternative modernities" in *Culture, Democracy and Development in South Asia*, ed., N.N. Vohra (New Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2000), pp. 9-26.

<sup>95</sup> Bhargava, "Are there alternative modernities", pp. 9-26

<sup>96</sup> Charles Taylor, "Two theories of modernity" *Hastings Center Report*, Vol 25, Issue No. 2, (Mar-April, 1995): p.24.

<sup>97</sup> Taylor, "Two theories of modernity", p. 24.

understanding of the self and instead argues for moving from one 'background understanding and imaginary' to another (rather than tracing everything to one constellation of enlightenment), henceforth establishing a relation with the 'other and good'.<sup>98</sup>

It is important that one does not exhaust oneself with the particular notion of modernity because as argued by Javeed Alam one needs to 'un tap the surplus' based on which an 'emancipatory notion of modernity' can be drawn<sup>99</sup>. Some sort of resonances with the universal values of modernity can be seen in Kabir who vehemently argued against the institutionalized religion and caste rooted in the tradition of India. With his constant engagement with the temporal and religious authorities' one sees notions of criticality and dissent. Therefore in understanding Kabir the context becomes important as already explicated in the first chapter.

### **Faith: Sagun and Nirgun**

It is very important to understand how faith becomes integral to the lives of individuals in all the ages and this is what even the makers of our Nation were aware of. For instance Ambedkar who ripped apart the Hindu religion could himself not go beyond the ambit of religion, when he argued for a case of conversion to another religion i.e. Buddhism for the untouchables in the Hindu Varna system. One can therefore see how faith gets implicated into the religion and it therefore is important to make a distinction between the two, precisely what Kabir was doing. God is central to both religion and faith yet religion institutionalizes God in the rituals and ceremonies of everyday existence but faith renders God transcendental yet immanent. That is why for Kabir, faith takes a higher pedestal than the religion. However faith becomes a corollary of the religion and gets institutionalized as a Hindu faith or Muslim faith etc thereby making people blindly follow the dictates of religion. It is here that one needs to understand how Kabir's faith was different from this institutionalized faith and how over a period of time his preaching's have been misinterpreted by various sects. No doubt God was central to his faith too, but the mode of accepting and following this faith rested on the critical

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<sup>98</sup>Taylor, "Two theories of modernity", p. 33.

<sup>99</sup> Javeed Alam, "Beyond Enlightenment: Democratizing Modernity", *Social Scientist*, Vol 37, Issue No. 9/10 (Sep-Oct, 2009): pp. 16-31.

engagement with the established orthodoxies and raising the voice of dissent against what seemed unreasonable and illogical. Religion for Kabir is nothing but a mere hypocrisy of arriving at the truth of existence and reaching this truth, becomes the goal of individual before their coming into this existence. It is structured into the lives of individual in such a way that they seek to identify the other on the basis of already existing societal distinctions of religion. Humans are therefore not looked upon as other fellow beings but rather through the religious identity ascribed to them. This is what Kabir was arguing against and instead of forwarding the idea of a Saguna God (God with attributes), he made reverence to the Nirguna god (God without attributes). Kabir plays the trick very well when he argues that the God is ineffable<sup>100</sup> that is indescribable or unknowable because describing God is yet another way of institutionalizing it. In this state of unknowing (of God), yet acknowledging its existence, Kabir therefore urges individuals to look within oneself and to correct oneself rather than simply negating others on the basis of their external appearances and identities inherited and imposed on them by the society.

*“If khuda inhabits the mosque, then whose play field is the rest of the world? If Rama lives in the idol at the pilgrim station, then who controls the chaos outside? The east is Hari’s domicile, they say, the west is Allah’s dwelling place. Look into your heart, your very heart: that’s where Karim and Rama reside. All the women and men are nothing but your embodied forms: Kabir’s a child of Allah and Rama. They are his Guru and Pir”<sup>101</sup>*

Kabir refers to his God as ‘Nirguna Ram’. In this naming i.e. ‘Nirguna Ram’ one can see negative dialectics being operationalised where prefixing ‘Nirguna’ to the Ram who is an incarnation of Vishnu, Ram becomes his own ‘unimaginable opposite’.<sup>102</sup> This ideal abstraction of Nirguna God that Kabir brings into play seems necessary to avoid distinctions among the human species on the basis of religion and for their harmonious existence. This nirguna god has to be found through the consciousness of the atman

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<sup>100</sup>Vinay Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, (India: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 78.

<sup>101</sup>Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, p. 65.

<sup>102</sup>Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, p. 79.

(soul) by controlling our passions and desires created by Maya (temptations) and constantly looking for truth within. For instance Kabir when in his verses refers to the audience as ‘sants’, he is actually referring to everyone as the seeker of truth<sup>103</sup>, so in this play of seeking truth about God how can one dictate its truth to others based on the scriptures and books. It is here that one needs to question the truth imposed by the society and others and instead look for it inside. Everything for Kabir therefore was internal and the external was Maya or illusion. However these externalities had to be controlled by practicing self-control of the desires and passions which led human beings astray and becoming frail. However this inward- looking should not be interpreted as self-centeredness or selfishness but as seeking meaning in existence of everybody that is, respecting the moral worth of every individual.

Though scholars like P.D. Barthwal, Ramchandra Shukla and Hazari Prasad Dwivedi have sought to make the Saguna/Nirguna distinction fluid, thereby bringing Kabir within the Saguna fold of Vaishnavism<sup>104</sup>. This is nothing but the fallacy of ‘historical absurdity’, where Kabir is seen out of his context and his verses being grossly misinterpreted and misrepresented. The problem with incorporating Kabir within any fold, be it the ‘Advait Vedanta’ or ‘the Vaishnavism’ or even the ‘Kabir’ panth is actually imprisoning him in the identities which he sought to deconstruct be it the religion based or caste based identities. Also Irfan Habib has argued that the Sankracharya’s version of Vedanta was not in occupation before the seventeenth century and therefore questions his influence over the monotheism of fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries.<sup>105</sup> This runs counter to the beliefs of Hazari Prasad Dwivedi that Kabir was influenced by Sankracharya’s version of Vedanta. Similar is the case with those scholars who have argued that whether Kabir draws his anti-caste nature and egalitarian virtues from Islam are questionable. For instance Minhaj Siraj showed the importance of pure lineage of the class of Turks for the ruling class.<sup>106</sup> In fact Habib argues that the entire Islamic literature of the medieval period doesn’t criticize the untouchability, pollution and caste theory of

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<sup>103</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. and ed. Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, (New York: OUP, 2002), p. 12.

<sup>104</sup> Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, *Kabir*. (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2008), pp. 94-105.

<sup>105</sup> Irfan Habib, "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting", *Social Scientist*, Vol. 21, Issue. No. 3/4, (Mar-Apr, 1993): pp. 78-88.

<sup>106</sup> Habib, "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting", pp. 78-88.

Hinduism and also the justification of slavery in Islam is antithetical to the core of equality. Kabir's distance from the established religions and simultaneously their explicit rejection not only lends him a radical modern outlook but a universal image too, as compared to his fellow beings within the tradition of Bhakti. Kabir within the Bhakti movement can be seen as actually producing a tradition of intellectualism against the dominant and oppressive Brahmanical intellectualism. For instance the rejection of scriptural authorities of the Vedas and Quran in his poetry addressed both for the masses as well as the temporal and religious authorities. The entry of the saints belonging to the low caste for example Kabir and Raidas, in the North India, into the socio-religious and politico-economic realms saw the emergence of self-confidence among the low castes<sup>107</sup>. However they failed to bring about a complete transformation of the society because of the entry of the high caste saints into the Bhakti movement and the simultaneous development of the Saguna Bhakti sought to further entrench the values of Vedas rather than rejecting the inherent inequalities. For instance Tulsidas who though claimed '*Absolute Brahman*' to be Nirguna but the path of worship was Saguna Bhakti and his advocacy of Varna system further entrenched the '*Varnashram Dharma*'.<sup>108</sup> This is why the distinctions between the social ideologies of saguna and nirguna needs to be taken into account where the former can be seen as brahmanical, elite and hegemonic and the latter could be seen as the lower caste and subaltern.<sup>109</sup>

### **Kabir in the Bhaktikal**

The period in which Kabir lived and composed his verses is referred to as 'Bhakti Kal' by Ramchandra Shukla which according to him was divided into the 'Nirguni sect' (i.e. those who believed in God without attributes) and the 'Saguni sect' (i.e. those who believed in the God with attributes).<sup>110</sup> These were not merely the theological distinctions

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<sup>107</sup>Habib, "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting", pp. 78-88.

<sup>108</sup>Habib, "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting", pp. 78-88.

<sup>109</sup>David N. Lorenzen, ed. *Bhakti religion in north India: Community identity and political action*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 12-22.

<sup>110</sup>Acharya Ram Chandra Shukla, *Hindi sahitya ka itihās*, (New Delhi, Rajkamal Prakashan Pvt Ltd, 2009), pp. 58-72.

but the social<sup>111</sup> and philosophical distinctions too. One can trace these distinctions from ‘Bharatendu Yug’ in the development of Hindi Literature. Harishchandra Bhartendu brought not only Kabir within the Saguna fold of Vaishnavism but also argued that all the other heretic religions belong to the same. This is how they had tried to establish Vaishnavism as the natural religion of India.<sup>112</sup> This intellectual thread was further strengthened by the ‘Dwivedi Yug’ in which Ramchandra Shukla established the bhakti of Ram of Tulsidas as central and simultaneously rejected the western influence on it. The Saguna Ram Bhakti was therefore established as the Hindu religion as against the western forces.<sup>113</sup> P. D. Barthwal later linked the epistemology of Bhakti with that of the Upanishadas and argued that the Sufis were influenced by the Vedanta.<sup>114</sup> This is how Kabir and the other ‘sant mat’ was brought within the fold of Vaishnavism and Bhakti was considered to be a ‘movement’ against the British colonial authorities. However the entire Bhakti literature met with a paradigm shift when Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, though saw Bhakti as a homogenous movement, argued that Bhakti was influenced by non-brahmanical religions too and saw the Bhakti movement as the national movement. Kabir was also seen within this Saguna Vaishnav tradition which will be contested later in the chapter.

In order to understand Kabir, therefore it becomes all the more important to see the ‘values’ enshrined in the Bhakti movement and for this purpose it becomes important to understand the ‘Bhakti Kavya’(the literature and poetry) of the ‘Age of Bhakti’. The entire Bhakti movement can be seen as part of cultural changes<sup>115</sup> that were taking place during the medieval era. It is therefore referred to as the ‘cultural movement’ by Manager

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<sup>111</sup>Rameshwar Prasad Bahuguna, "Conflict and Assimilation in Medieval North Indian Bhakti: An Alternative Approach", *SAP-History Monograph*, 6, (Mar, 2009): p.2.

<sup>112</sup>Martand Praglab, “Santo Dhokha Kasu Kahiyo”, *tirchhisPELLing wordpres*, Jun, 2012, accessed on 2-05-2018, <https://tirchhisPELLing.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>113</sup>Martand Praglab, “Santo Dhokha Kasu Kahiyo”, *tirchhisPELLing wordpres*, 20-06-2012, accessed on May 5,2018, <https://tirchhisPELLing.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>114</sup> See P.D Barthwal, “The Times and Their Needs”, in *Religious Movements in South Asia 600-1800: Debates in Indian History*, ed. David N. Lorenzen, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 253-268.

<sup>115</sup> Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh, “Madhyayugin Bhakti Andolan Ka Ek Pehlu”, *Aalochana*, Nov, 2013, accessed on April 7, 2018. <http://www.debateonline.in/131112/>.

Pandey<sup>116</sup> within which one could see the growth of 'folk culture' or 'mass culture' as opposed to the 'elite culture'. The contents of the Bhakti poetry were inspired from the everyday experiences of the masses and entailed an expressivist approach. The poetry and the literature of the Bhakti movement tried to build a gap between the literariness of the elite and the experiences of the masses trying to expose the hypocrisy and undemocratic nature of the former. Why does this 'Bhakti Kal' becomes important is because in its socio-cultural context was embedded the seeds of dissent against the elite and feudal structures of the society. The voices of the marginalized were heard for the first time through the Bhakti poetry which was being recited in the 'local languages' of the masses apart from the Sanskrit, Pali, Apbramhsa and Prakrit which were the languages of the elite.<sup>117</sup> The Bhakti literature influenced the 'Chayyavad' which was the romantic stream of Hindi poetry and 'Pragatisheel Andolan' which represented the progressive ideas in the Hindi literature<sup>118</sup>. With Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi developed the tradition of literary criticism which finally was culminated in the works of Ramchandra Shukla<sup>119</sup> who argued that the socio-cultural context of Bhakti embarked upon the anti-feudal and humanitarian approach. For the modern scholars of Hindi therefore the Bhakti literature provided the basis for literary criticism. With the growth of various ethnic nationalities in between 11<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the feudal forces started receding because of the simultaneous growth of mercantile capitalism and also leading to growth of ethnic literature and art forms.<sup>120</sup> With the changes in the socio economic conditions of the society the farmers, craftsmen and trading sections came to occupy the central position due to which the consciousness of the marginalized masses developed and got reflected in the literary compositions of the Bhakti saints. This shows that the changes in the socio-economic conditions are accompanied by a change in the worldview of the changing society and simultaneously leading to the change in the discourse of the literature and ideas<sup>121</sup>. Therefore in the backdrop of all these socio economic changes, the Bhakti movement got the impetus to develop as a form of democratic and egalitarian force in the

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<sup>116</sup> Maneger Pandey, *Bhakti Andolan Aur Surdas ka Kavya*, (New Delhi, Vani Prakashan, 1993), pp. 2-3.

<sup>117</sup> Pandey, *Bhakti Andolan Aur Surdas ka Kavya*, pp. 2-3

<sup>118</sup> Pandey, *Bhakti Andolan Aur Surdas ka Kavya*, p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> Pandey, *Bhakti Andolan Aur Surdas ka Kavya*, p. 9.

<sup>120</sup> Pandey, *Bhakti Andolan Aur Surdas ka Kavya*, p. 9.

<sup>121</sup> Pandey, *Bhakti Andolan Aur Surdas ka Kavya*, p. 13.



society and unveil the 'false consciousness' created by the elite culture.<sup>122</sup> Reflecting upon the old forms of structurations of the society, the Bhakti saints through their compositions were either seeking the abolition of the authorities of the Vedas, religious rituals and feudal authorities (i.e. the Nirguna sect) or were seeking to reform the society keeping the authorities of Vedas intact (i.e. the Saguna sect). It was later that the Bhakti was seen as divided between the saguna and nirguna especially for the Dalit scholars who saw Kabir as the Dalit god and wanted to free him from the Hindu entanglements of Vaishnava tradition. The major distinction between the Nirguna Bhakti compositions and Saguna Bhakti compositions can be seen through the figures they venerate as their heroes. Where for the former the forerunner of change comes from the marginalized sections, the latter construes either 'Ram' or 'Krishna' (the avatars of Hindu god Vishnu) as the destroyer of evil forces prevalent in the society.

In such a scenario the reason that Kabir could draw so much attention that even in the contemporary times he holds relevance is because his verses and sayings are much more humanitarian and enshrines democratic values in their approach and therefore align to the contemporary values of our times. The Nirguna Bhakti preached by Kabir was 'syncretic' and 'universal' in its approach bringing within its ambit not only the Hindus but Muslims as well. Kabir actually questioned the feudal structures prevalent at that time amassing wealth from the poor peasants, low castes, artisans etc. "From a little money a man goes crazy. He doesn't hear news of the King of Death. When the terror comes his face shrivels. Cheated, he learns his nectar was poison".<sup>123</sup> These feudal and socio-religious structures imposed on the illiterate masses hampered their political consciousness thereby making them the slaves of the religious orthodoxy who had a nexus with the ruling elites. Kabir tried to expose this power nexus and countered it through his dissenting voice. All this, indicates the modern values were present throughout Kabir's poetry central to which was the reason, expression and dissent.

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<sup>122</sup>Pandey, *Bhakti Andolan Aur Surdas ka Kavya* , pp. 9-13.

<sup>123</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 31.

## **Kabir's Modernity: Contested Versions of Purshottam Aggarwal and Dr. Daramvir**

Purshottam Aggarwal in his book '*Akath kahani Prem Ki*' argues that Kabir was the pioneer of indigenous modernity, the roots of which goes back to his belonging to the Ramanandi tradition. Not only does Aggarwal establish that Kabir was a Vaishnav but argues that Kabir's modernity was a result of his embeddedness in the Vaishnava tradition through his initiation by Ramananda into it. The idea of Ram which was central to the Bhakti also became central to the Vaishnava tradition and this is how the author establishes Kabir as a Vaishnava. Aggarwal further argues that the seeds of the indigenous modernity can be found in the 'Narad Bhakti Sutra' of Ramanand (who according to some hagiographies was the guru of Kabir). This concept of indigenous modernity is therefore traced back to the fifteenth century with the emergence of mercantile capitalism, the centrality of which relied upon the ethics of 'fair play'.<sup>124</sup> The new ethics, where the old feudal orders began to be questioned, saw its reflection in the indigenous modernity that was already present in the consciousness of Ramananda and was reflected in their poetry. And also during that period, Aggarwal has argued that the Bhakti movement was successful in creating a public sphere or 'Lokvrit' where the issues of public interest were beginning to be discussed and Kabir was the voice of this sphere. This creation of Public sphere was a modern phenomenon according to Aggarwal but what the author overlooks are the internal contradictions that were present within this sphere in the form of Nirguna and Saguna distinctions. He further adds that the coming of colonial forces in India severed the consciousness of the masses, leading to the imposition of western ideals on the Indian masses thereby further leading to the development of Dalit consciousness and Marxist tendencies which has acted as a hindrance in the growth of Indigenous modernity. For this concept of indigenous modernity Aggarwal relied on the mercantile capitalism and the ethics of 'fair play' criticizing the Marxist consciousness throughout his work. This reliance on mercantile capitalism proves the point that Aggarwal was himself influenced by the development of capitalism in the west and hence through this tried to establish Kabir as an indigenous

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<sup>124</sup> Purushottam Aggarwal, *Akath Kahani Prem ki Kabir ki Kavita aur Unka Samay*, (New Delhi Rajkamal Prakashan, 2009)

modern. The problem with this kind of argumentation is that reliance on the rejection of feudal authorities by the already available intellectual stream of Saguna Bhakti, overlooks the actual intellectual resistance by the Nirguna sects.<sup>125</sup>

However this has been challenged by some Marxist scholars<sup>126</sup>, who have argued that in order to understand the modernity in Kabir one needs to look at Gramsci who was a Marxist and therefore these scholars have tried to see Kabir in the Marxist tradition itself. One might argue that when Kabir was composing his verses in the common language of the masses as opposed to the language of the elite (Sanskrit), he was actually arguing for the accessibility of knowledge and philosophy for everyone. Similar to Gramsci's idea that philosophy is not the intellectual activity of a specific group but that "all men are philosophers" and philosophy is contained in the 'language', 'common sense' (set of incoherent assumptions and beliefs common to the any society) and 'good sense' and the 'popular religion' which comprises the folklore of the masses.<sup>127</sup> The Marxist scholars have therefore tried to look at the modernity emerging from the consciousness of the oppressed/subaltern section of the masses in medieval India where Kabir was trying to challenge the uncritically inherited and absorbed consciousness of the Vedas and scriptures. Rather through his act of resistance towards the religious authorities he was trying to bring forth the consciousness that associated every individual through the medium of their respective work moving forward to change the world through their labor.<sup>128</sup> Therefore Kabir was introducing an individual consciousness free from the consciousness imposed by the religious authorities and through his identity as a *julaha* he concentrated on the importance of labor and sustenance. Therefore in order to understand the indigenous modernity one has to look at the development of cities in the medieval India which not only led to the cultural interactions but also a growth of individual consciousness.<sup>129</sup> One might argue that this is a very materialistic understanding because Kabir at the same time was arguing for a moral consciousness

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<sup>125</sup>Praglab, "Santo Dhokha Kasu Kahiyo".

<sup>126</sup>Praglab, "Santo Dhokha Kasu Kahiyo".

<sup>127</sup>Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks*, Vol. 294, ed. and trans. Qutin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pg 323.

<sup>128</sup> The two different types of consciousness thus have been taken from Gramsci, where the contradictory consciousness of the labour is suppressed by the consciousness inherited from the past. Refer to prison notebooks pg 333.

<sup>129</sup>Praglab, "Santo Dhokha Kasu Kahiyo".

seeking to realize the equal moral worth of an individual for instance his rejection of any human authority (religion and caste based) over the others.

Dalit scholars have tried to venerate Kabir as the harbinger of Dalit modernity by regarding him as the creator of new religion for the low castes. Since Kabir is considered to be the voice of the low castes and the fact that he himself belonged to the same, enables many Dalit scholars to appropriate him. Not only they argue for a case of Dalit consciousness which can be seen emerging in Kabir but also compare him to Ambedkar.<sup>130</sup> Scholars like Dr. Dharamvir have tried to locate Kabir within Dalit modernity. Basically he criticizes the authors who have tried to encapsulate Kabir within the fold of Hinduism in his book 'Kabir ke alochak' and 'Soot Na Kapas'. According to Dr. Dharamvir the Hindu authors have tried to Hinduise Kabir trying to suppress the originality of Kabir's ideas which could have actually shook the roots of the Vedic philosophy<sup>131</sup>. He considers this as the project by the Hindu upper caste to suppress any new religion of the Dalits. The project on Kabir that was taken by the 'Kashi Nagri Pracharini Sabha' and which had published 'Kabir Vachnavali' by Ayodhya Singh Upadhyaya, 'Kabir Granthavali' by Dr. Shyam Sundar Das and 'Jayasi Granthavali' by Acharya Ramchandra Shukla was actually a part of book series for the purpose of entertainment i.e. 'manoranjan series'.<sup>132</sup> Therefore one can see how the attempts to conduct a serious research on Kabir were scuttled by the Sabha rendering it a status merely for entertainment. This is what Dr. Dharmvir tried to uncover by criticizing the Brahmin scholars writings on Kabir. For instance he argues that Ayodhya Singh associated Kabir with the Vaishnava Dharam and also called the Kabir Panthis as the Hindus. He further argues that this is a misreading of Kabir because 'Kabir Vachnavali' is presenting Kabir as a Hindu, of the same religion which considered him an untouchable. This arises out of the failure to define what a Hindu is, by the high castes because if Hinduism is associated with the Brahmins then the low caste would leave the fold of Hinduism, which reflects the inherent anxiety of the high castes<sup>133</sup>. Establishing that Kabir was the guru of Ambedkar, Dr. Dharamvir argues for the contemporary

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<sup>130</sup> Dr. Dharamvir, *Kabir Ke Alochak*, (New Delhi, Vani Prakashan, 2015), pp. 30-31.

<sup>131</sup> Dharamvir, *Kabir Ke Alochak*, p.11-24.

<sup>132</sup> Dharamvir, *Kabir Ke Alochak*, p. 25.

<sup>133</sup> Dharamvir, *Kabir Ke Alochak*, pp. 26-30.

importance of Kabir and therefore puts forth the view that by venerating Kabir as a Dalit God, the need for conversion to another religion will eventually subside when the Dalits can have a religion of their own<sup>134</sup>. Echoing in the similar contention Dharamvir criticizes Shyam Sundar Shastri for not only turning blind towards the inherent problems within Hinduism but holding the advent of Muslim rulers in the country responsible for the miseries of Hindus. Also by making Ramananda the guru of Kabir these authors have again labeled Kabir as Hindu<sup>135</sup>. Lorenzen claims that none of the oldest collections of Kabir i.e. Adi Granth, Rajasthani Kabir Granthavali and Kabir Bijak of the Kabir Panth, refer to Ramananda as Kabir's guru. The guru of Kabir is not a human guru but the divine guru<sup>136</sup>. In fact most of the texts of Dharamdasi sect<sup>137</sup> containings legends associated with Kabir shares a great similarity with Brahmalinamuni's 'Sadguru-shrikavira-charitam', which fabricates the legends of Kabir to prove his Hindu identity.<sup>138</sup> Not only this Ramchandra Shukla denied Kabir the status of a poet and established the fact that Kabir was greatly influenced by western philosophy<sup>139</sup>.

One can see all this as a strategy for furthering the entrenchment of the brahmanical thought, however on the other hand one can also argue that venerating Kabir either within Hinduism or the Islam, or venerating him as the Dalit God or as a founder of any sect (example the Kabir panth) is actually imposing a particular identity (caste/religion) on him, of which he was not only critical but staunchly opposed it. According to Irfan Habib " the important truth that historical complexities goes far beyond any possible simple unilinear schemes; and that history of class struggles, carried on consciously or unconsciously, loses its richness and lessons for us when it is forced into the artificial mould of a blind and automatic process. Religion has played a role not only in the suppression of popular revolts, but also, on the other side, in rallying the rebels".<sup>140</sup> This 'blind and automatic process' in the constructing the history of Kabir are

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<sup>134</sup>Dharamvir, *Kabir Ke Alochak*, p.41.

<sup>135</sup>Dharamvir, *Kabir Ke Alochak*, p. 55.

<sup>136</sup> David N Lorenzen, *Kabir legends and Ananta-das's Kabir Parachai*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), p.12.

<sup>137</sup> It is one of the branches of Kabir Panth.

<sup>138</sup> Lorenzen, *Kabir legends and Ananta-das's Kabir Parachai*, p.22.

<sup>139</sup>Lorenzen, *Kabir legends and Ananta-das's Kabir Parachai*, p.70.

<sup>140</sup> Irfan Habib. "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting", *Social Scientist*, Vol. 21, Issue. No. 3/4, (Mar-Apr, 1993): pp. 78-88.

the sects that have developed around him for instance the Kabir Panth. Therefore it is important to look at the 'history of any religion' or for that matter any sect through the 'universal criteria of scientific enquiry'<sup>141</sup>. The origins of Kabir panth are obscure and there is no evidence of its formation till the end of the seventeenth century, apart from the fact that the name of Kabir appears in Dabistan-i-Mazahib attributing to him a large number of following<sup>142</sup>. The Panth gets its recognition in the Bhaktamal of Raghodas which was written in the eighteenth century.<sup>143</sup> This clearly shows that the unilinear development of the history of the Kabir Panth directly from the saint cannot be taken seriously, especially when it has different branches and one observes a difference in their preaching's setup in different geographical zones of eastern U.P, western Bihar and North-eastern Madhya Pradesh.<sup>144</sup> This clearly shows the loss of Kabir's teachings when the literature of these sects starts to consider him as incarnation of the 'Parampurush' and Niranjana as the evil progenitor of 'maya' and the ruler of this cosmos who enslaves the soul of the individuals and distorts the path of truth.<sup>145</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century and with the coming of colonial knowledge these panths have either been marginalized or have been brought within the Hindu folds, though their major following comes from the low caste.<sup>146</sup> However the organization of these panths and their rituals resembles nothing less than the institutionalized religion which Kabir radically sought to overthrow.

Therefore this calls for a reinterpretation of Kabir's understanding of religion, bhakti and understanding of his modern values. Since many Hindi scholars and Dalit scholars have tried to fit him within either the Vaishnav or Nath Yogic traditions<sup>147</sup> or as

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<sup>141</sup>Habib. "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting", pp. 78-88.

<sup>142</sup> Bahuguna, "Conflict and Assimilation in Medieval North Indian Bhakti: An Alternative Approach", pg 30

<sup>143</sup>Bahuguna, "Conflict and Assimilation in Medieval North Indian Bhakti: An Alternative Approach", p. 30.

<sup>144</sup>Bahuguna, "Conflict and Assimilation in Medieval North Indian Bhakti: An Alternative Approach", pp 30-34.

<sup>145</sup>This understanding is arrived at from the text 'The Ocean of Love: Anurag Sagar' composed by Sant Ajaib Singh and published by Sant Bani Ashram, New Hampshire. The text is composed in the dialogical manner where the conversation takes place between Dharamdas and Kabir and in their conversation Kabir reveals to him the truth of the world and how it was created.

<sup>146</sup> Rameshwar Prasad Bahugna, "Conflict and Assimilation in Medieval North Indian Bhakti: An Alternative Approach", p. 46.

<sup>147</sup> Dwivedi, *Kabir*, pp. 36-45.

a Dalit God<sup>148</sup> or as a Sufi<sup>149</sup>, therefore there arises the need to distinguish between terms and words used by Kabir which have been borrowed from various traditions and his ideas.<sup>150</sup> For instance, he refuses to accept both 'Kaba' and temple just as he refuses to accept the 'sheikhs' and 'pundits'. Kabir's criticism of the scriptural authorities of the religion and their respective rituals lends him a modern and secular image and as argued by Vaudeville the religion of Kabir is 'interior'.

But this secularism needs serious investigation and we need to ask whether we can call Kabir secular or not. Secularism is a project associated with modernity<sup>151</sup> which seeks to maintain distinction between the public institutions and the religious institutions. It is important to understand that Kabir was critical of both the religions, Hinduism and Islam. Muhammad Hedayatullah has argued that Kabir was an ambassador of Hindu Muslim unity who was against the formalism of both and gave rise to a new spirituality that sought to blur the boundaries between the two religions<sup>152</sup>; however this falls flat because Kabir ridiculed the perverseness and corrupt rituals of both. Though the Hindu-Muslim unity can be seen at the site of Kabir's death where the Hindu temple in Kabir's name has been built alongside the mausoleum, but this principle of reconciliation is nowhere mentioned in the poetry of Kabir.<sup>153</sup> Kshiti Mohan Sen, P. D. Barthwal, Tara Chand and even Jawaharlal Nehru have argued that one could see the growth of composite culture in Kabir. Not only this even Amartya Sen claims that one could see the elements of 'interreligious tolerance' in the poetry of Kabir, Dadu, Ravidas, Sena and others.<sup>154</sup> However one needs to understand that Kabir rejected the need for religion at all and that the above authors tried to fit him within their frameworks of 'interreligious tolerance' and 'unity' to fulfill the needs of their time. Lorenzen therefore argues that one might think it is plausible that the above mentioned authors were looking within Kabir for

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<sup>148</sup> Dharamvir, *Kabir ke Alochak*, pp. 1-24.

<sup>149</sup> Muhammad Hedayatullah, *Kabir: the apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity*, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), pp.5-10.

<sup>150</sup> Habib, "Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting", p. 85.

<sup>151</sup> See Introduction in Talal Asad, *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp.1-17.

<sup>152</sup> Hedayatullah, *Kabir: the apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity*, pp12 – 15.

<sup>153</sup> J. S. Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer (trans.), *Songs of the Saints of India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 41.

<sup>154</sup> David N Lorenzen, "Kabir and the Secular State", [ceaa.colmex.mx/profesores/paginalorenzen/imagespaglorenzen/KabirSecPia2.pdf](http://ceaa.colmex.mx/profesores/paginalorenzen/imagespaglorenzen/KabirSecPia2.pdf): p. 12.

a new tolerant religious vision; however he criticizes the above scholars of having failed to recognize the acute hostility in Kabir's poetry against the religious doctrines of both Hindus and Muslims.<sup>155</sup> Lorenzen further argues that one might look at the mystical experience<sup>156</sup> of Kabir where the need for religion is dissipated with having established a direct and individual contact with God. This clearly shows that the excavation of secular remains in Kabir is problematic, however what Kabir offers is a rational Faith, which is arrived at through the resistance and expressing dissent. For instance Priyadas's hagiographical account of Kabir mentions the story where the Brahmins were jealous of the crowd Kabir attracted because of his rejection of the Vedas, causing a lot of disruptions in his life. His refusal to bow down in front of the emperor also shows the resistance to not only institutional authority of the king but also the religious ones. The very fact that for Kabir God doesn't exist in the symbols but lies within us is the essence of his Nirguna Bhakti and inherent in this worship is the faith which is reasonable because it emerges not from the dictates of externalities but from the engagement between self and God. This further justifies the God without attributes whose worship is not bound by ritual sacrifices or institutions but by knowing oneself. Therefore for Kabir, God is the pure expression of one's emotions. One doesn't have any filter when expressing in front of god.

## **Conclusion**

Therefore from the above one can argue that his rejection of the symbolic rituals and the religious authorities, though not encompassed within the secular fold, indicates the presence of modern faith which is very personal and is not guided by the orthodox religious institutions. In the mystical language of Kabir which is the expression of underlying consciousness of the popular culture as opposed to the elite culture of the Brahmins, one often finds the trials of everyday experiences and an evolving notion of dissent, resistance and criticality. The verses of Kabir 'expose the unreason of oppressive social and religious hierarchy'.<sup>157</sup> Kabir's faith which arises from the complex social

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<sup>155</sup>Lorenzen, "Kabir and the Secular State", p. 13.

<sup>156</sup>Lorenzen, "Kabir and the Secular State", p. 10.

<sup>157</sup> Malini Bhattacharya, "The Rural Artist and Secular Culture in the Era of Globalization", in *The making of history: essays presented to Irfan Habib*, ed. K N Panikkar et.al, (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), pp 525-526.



relations is an alternative to the 'blind faith'. Hence these values of resistance, criticality, dissent and faith represent an alternative to the western modern values of say secularism for instance. One can see the growth of modernity in India therefore simultaneously with that of the European modernity in the form of emerging resistance and criticality in Kabir. However it would be wrong to suggest, as has been argued by Purshottam Aggarwal, that the speed with which modernity came to Europe was similar to that in India, because scholars like Tapan Raychaudhuri have argued that though there was remarkable export of manufactured goods yet technologically India was very backward in comparison with European and Chinese civilization.<sup>158</sup> Lorenzen has argued that it is plausible to think of some similarities that Purshottam Aggarwal draws in his *Akath Kahani Prem Ki*, between Ramanand, Kabir and Dadu, who were according to him were early modern intellectuals, and the western philosophers like Spinoza, Hobbes and Montaigne. But it is also important to look at the differences to understand why early modernity failed in India.<sup>159</sup> Lorenzen argues that this was because of the Indian counterparts especially Kabir spoke against religious institution rather than the religion itself which was found in the works of Spinoza and Diderot. Also the fact that the development of Universities in Europe had admitted secular- humanist professors and they were free from the patronages from the monarchs and Church. This fostered an independent public sphere, however Lorenzen suggests that in India the educated elites were working in the royal courts and were dependant on the patronages from Kings. Though Kabir and Nirguni saints were not dependent on the patronages and were free thinkers, they were dependent on the support from common masses. Their ideas were based on socio- religious problems and were not well learned in mathematics and science.<sup>160</sup> One might agree with the differences that Lorenzen brings to the light, but one needs to understand that the knowledge available to us about these saints is very much obscure and rather not a complete knowledge about them. The early modernity found in Kabir through resisting the established authorities very well proves the fact that he was

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<sup>158</sup>David N Lorenzen, "Dissent in Kabir and the Kabir Panth", in *Devotion and Dissent in Indian History*, ed. Vijaya Ramaswamy, (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2014), pp.183-185.

<sup>159</sup> Lorenzen, "Dissent in Kabir and the Kabir Panth", pp.183-185.

<sup>160</sup> Lorenzen, "Dissent in Kabir and the Kabir Panth", pp.183-185.

not only conscious of his surroundings but was trying to invoke the same among the masses.

Kabir stood at the cusp of modernity in India and therefore there has been appropriation by scholars like Dwivedi, Aggarwal and Dharamvir seeking the origin of modernity in Kabir. Dwivedi's project of Hinduism as an attempt in seeking to build an idea of national unity by placing Kabir within the longstanding Hindu tradition as a modernist reformer becomes problematic since it fails to understand the dissenting voice of Kabir against the caste system which lies at the foundations of Hinduism. In a similar fashion Dharamvir appropriates the low caste identity of Kabir to establish him as a Dalit modern and through it seeks historical origins of Dalits, which can be seen as a radical departure from the dominant Brahmanical history. While the radical anti-caste impulse in Kabir is explored, to see Kabir as only a dalit thinker-philosopher becomes problematic because one finds in Kabir's utterances the constant deconstruction of identities imposed by the society, including the identity of a dalit. Purshottam Aggarwal argues that Kabir as an independent rational thinker capable of making choices individually points to the birth of indigenous modernity. However his assumptions that the growing mercantilism amongst the julaha caste was the reason for this emerging indigenous modernity becomes problematic because it seeks same trajectory as that of western modernity marking transition from the feudal to the modern society because of the trade and industrialization. Aggarwal further pushes Kabir into the Ramanandi tradition which again brings into the sectarian fold which he disregarded and dismissed.

Therefore, though Kabir's corpus opens up itself to appropriations by different modern political projects of modernity like nationalism, anti-caste politics and secularism, he cannot be confined to a single and homogenous idea of modernity. True to his sayings, Kabir remains tentatively poised at the cusp of modernity, complicating any straitjacketed characterizations. A further interrogation of Kabir's ideas also opens up to the myriad ways in which modernity and its early origins in the south asian context can be mapped in alternative ways.

## CHAPTER-3

### The Problem of Caste: Bhakti and Equality in Kabir

#### Introduction

According to Hazari Prasad Dwivedi Kabir's poetry has a unique quality of embracing the rationale of say caste only to turn against it and therefore rejecting it. This is evident in the following song attributed to Kabir.

“O saintly men, don't ask again the man devoted to the God without qualities what his caste is. The brahmin's good, the warrior's good, the trader's caste is good. The thirty-six clans, they're all good- it's your question then, that's crooked. The barber's good, the washer man's good, the carpenter's caste is good. Raidas, the saint, was good, Supac, the seer, was good- though they were scavengers. Both Hindus and Turks have demeaned themselves- they can fathom nothing.”<sup>161</sup>

The inherent logic of this poem questions the organization of caste system firstly by embracing different castes when it says that all the castes are good and tries to break the binaries of hierarchical structure of caste by bringing them at par with each other. As pointed out by Vinay Dharwadker “this poem is grounded in the historical fact that, over time, many of the famous bhakta have come from the low castes and from untouchable groups”. This category of bhakta is very important as it is devoid of any ‘societal power structures’ operating on it. Through this category of bhakta one can see Kabir's vehement rejection of inequalities prevalent in the society based on the caste and religion. Therefore through the poems attributed to Kabir one can discern the idea of equality present in them. Arguing against the critics of Bhakti movement that it seeks to establish equality only in the realm of spiritual and is unable to do so in the social sphere, Kabir's idea of equality as can be understood through his poems and verses seeks to establish the equal moral worth of an individual irrespective of caste and religion. This can be seen through

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<sup>161</sup>Vinay Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, (India: Penguin Books, 2003),

his direct engagement with the spiritual and temporal authorities and with the society which represents a kind of power structure which was oppressive in its very nature. His out righteous rejection of the above confers him a unique position in Bhakti.

The following chapter will thus seek to understand the notion of equality emergent in Kabir's poem and how it can be materialized in the context of India. The second important question that this chapter will address is the contemporary significance of Kabir in his vehement opposition to the hierarchies of the caste system. The chapter will further investigate into the question of influence of Kabir over Ambedkar as recent studies by scholars like Kanwal Bharti have shown. He argues that there was a profound influence of Kabir on Ambedkar and the reason for this was that both were the victims of same socio-religious background.<sup>162</sup> For Kabir the epitome of the power structures were the Maulvies and Pundits who were not only the religious heads of their respective religions but also responsible for entrenching the rituals of piety and Varna system. Therefore one sees a vehement attack throughout his poetry on the perpetrators of the power structure of caste that is the Brahmins. Kabir directly engaged with the spiritual authorities of his time and this is evident from his poems when he refers to them as, 'hey pundit', 'listen maulvi'. 'Mr Qazi', 'think pandit', 'Pandit you have got it wrong' etc. This also shows the challenge to the caste structures operationalized by the religious authorities, through Kabir's dissenting voice and disrespect for their intellectual authority and knowledge system of the Brahmins, which was very much exclusive in nature. Kanwal Bharti argues that similarly to Kabir, these religious authorities were also a problem for Ambedkar.

## **Caste in India**

The caste system has not only led to the social but economic and political inequalities. The castes which were docile and submissive have become more assertive and militant recently. The theories of organization of caste defined purely by hierarchy and purity are no longer sustainable because of the assertiveness of the low caste identity

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<sup>162</sup> Kanwal Bharti, "Kabir's 'Nirgunvad' influenced Ambedkar", July 1, 2017, accessed on May 12, 2018, <https://www.forwardpress.in/2017/07/kabirs-nirgunvad-influenced-ambedkar/>

in the contemporary times.<sup>163</sup> According to the sociologist Louis Dumont the caste system in India was defined in terms of ‘Pure hierarchy’ in which the Brahmins occupied the top most position and the rest of the castes fell in line behind the Brahmins, completely agreeing with the ideology of hierarchy. This is why he called the Indian society as ‘Homo Hierarchicus’.<sup>164</sup> This two extreme ends of this hierarchy are the pious Brahmins and the impure Untouchables, thereby making ‘purity and pollution’ the bedrock of the hierarchy of caste system. Politics and wealth have only interstitial role in this hierarchy. However, Dipankar Gupta argues that this theory of pure hierarchy is failing on the grounds that each caste had ideological underpinnings from which they drew their ‘symbolic energy’ for political and economic mobilizations and hence were able to value themselves deeply.<sup>165</sup> For instance the Julaha caste can be seen as representing their origins and history differently and simultaneously glorifying their own lineage. This is precisely what Dwivedi argues when he says that the weaving castes never liked to be represented as inferior to Brahmins. In fact they called themselves Brahmins at times.<sup>166</sup> He further argues that Dumont was aware of the parcellization of pure hierarchy into competing blocks, but he failed to provide a reason for the same.

Another attack that comes to Dumont’s theory is from Andre Beteille who argues that the caste system in India is leading to ‘dispersed inequalities’. Highlighting the problems of ‘comparative sociology’ Beteille argues that the hierarchical society like India (where hierarchy permeates every sphere of life) is placed in opposition to the ‘homo equalis’ (societies which are zealously attached to the principle of equality). This comparison between the ‘Homo Hierarchicus’ and ‘Homo Equalis’ comes from the lack of understanding of the context of the former and prejudice towards the latter.<sup>167</sup> The western societies are the exemplar of the ‘Homo Equalis’ and the sociologists of the West accepts the diverse views in the West thereby making it more egalitarian in nature.

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<sup>163</sup> See introduction in Dipankar Gupta ed. *Caste in Question: Identity Or Hierarchy?*, Vol. 12, (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), p.x.

<sup>164</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, trans. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont and Basia Gulati, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 60-75.

<sup>165</sup> Gupta ed. *Caste in Question: Identity Or Hierarchy?* pp. x-xi.

<sup>166</sup> Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, *Kabir*, (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2008), p.19.

<sup>167</sup> Andre Beteille, "Homo hierarchicus, homo equalis", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.13, Issue no. 4, (1979): p. 529.

However, when it comes to the hierarchical societies the western scholars are satisfied with the less differentiated view of the latter.<sup>168</sup> This allows the western scholars to judge the hierarchical societies not on the basis of their experience of the modern struggles against discrimination but their image of the past. For instance, India's modern struggles against the inequalities of caste and untouchability have been pushed into the background, just to bring the hierarchical Varna and Caste system upfront.<sup>169</sup> This possibly arises from the anxiety of the West to show itself in the light of equality by using the non-West in the background which reflects the built-in structures of inequalities. Therefore, Beteille suggests that the specifications of the society are to be understood in the light of both equality and inequality merging together to form a particular design.<sup>170</sup> He simultaneously rejects Dumont's assertion that traditional India knew nothing about the values of equality and liberty. What Beteille brings to fore is the point that before these categorizations of 'Homo Hierarchicus' and 'Homo Equalis', one needs to study the context and traditions of the so called hierarchical societies because according to him no society can lack in the conceptions of equality and justice. Every society therefore has some basic conception of equality.

Therefore, in the background of this it becomes important to study Kabir as a modern figure who was not only fighting against the oppressive caste system but the religion that sanctioned it. Kabir serves as an example that the idea of equality was not entirely absent in India. Besides Kabir, there were other poets of the medieval century that were arguing for a casteless society and this is evident from the utopian society of Begumpura which Ravidas had propounded.<sup>171</sup> According to the hagiographies Ravidas is considered to be the contemporary of Kabir and one often finds stories of their debate on the Sagun and Nirgun Bhakti.<sup>172</sup> Both Kabir and Ravidas belonged to the low castes where the former was a julaha and the latter was a 'chamar' or a leather worker and it is in their subalternity that one can see the anti caste agenda. The city of Begumpura

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<sup>168</sup> Beteille, "Homo hierarchicus, homo equalis" p. 530.

<sup>169</sup> Beteille, "Homo hierarchicus, homo equalis", p. 530.

<sup>170</sup> Beteille, "Homo hierarchicus, homo equalis", pp. 531-532.

<sup>171</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Seeking begumpura*, (New Delhi: Navyana Pub., 2008), p.18.

<sup>172</sup> David N Lorenzen, *Praises to a Formless God: Nirguni Texts from North India*, (New Delhi: SUNY Press, 1996).pp168-190.

encapsulates the vision of a prosperous and equal society where irrespective of caste and status everyone walks together and freely.<sup>173</sup> In a similar way Kabir's city of 'Premnagar' (the city of love) and 'Amarlok' (the city of immortality) too is a utopian vision where love pervades every sphere thereby bringing down the walls of hatred and discrimination.<sup>174</sup> As rightly pointed out by Gail Omvedt, reason and ecstasy form the bedrock of these utopian visions of the subalterns, where without the access to any knowledge and privileges they were trying to subvert the hegemonic Brahmanical traditions. Being aware of their positions in the society the low caste saints were trying to bring a radical transformation of the Indian society. The utopias of the subaltern saints could be seen as posing an alternative society which was based on the understanding of history and the way to achieve it was through reasonable actions.<sup>175</sup> Whereas Brahmanism had no such vision of a just society but in fact they placed emphasis only on the deeply hierarchical society to be regulated by the Varna system. It is also important therefore to understand that the Varna system that sought to maintain stability and coherence in the society was itself responsible for the rising inequalities. This is because, as Beteille would argue, the very criteria of evaluation that an organization sets for an individual is responsible for inequalities.<sup>176</sup> For instance, the criteria for evaluation, on the basis of birth for the admission into the caste system points towards the inherent tendency to be unequal. Therefore, this idea of evaluation is a 'social or cultural process' because this standard of evaluation is applied not only to the material things but to the human beings, thereby making them part of the collective representations (for example caste).<sup>177</sup> This places the individual in a ranking order based on, for example their birth in an Indian Caste system.

The envisioning of the utopia thus can also be seen in the form of dissent and social protest against the divisive forces prevalent during the medieval centuries. However, in the case of Kabir it is important to remember that not only was he simultaneously envisioning an ideal simple state that is 'sahaj sthiti' which means true

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<sup>173</sup> Omvedt, *Seeking begumpura*, pp.106-107.

<sup>174</sup> Omvedt, *Seeking begumpura*, p. 18.

<sup>175</sup> Omvedt, *Seeking begumpura*, p.14-15.

<sup>176</sup> Andre Beteille, *Inequality among men* (UK: Blackwell,1977), pp. 4-6.

<sup>177</sup> Beteille, *Inequality among men* pp 8-9.

liberation, but he was directly engaging with the dominant forces and was not somebody who denied his material existence. In fact, he sought to acknowledge them and then tried to bring about a radical transformation. Therefore, when Gail Omvedt argues that the low caste saints utopia of casteless society was to be accomplished through the reason guided actions because this utopia represented a combination of reason and ecstasy. Kabir actually is doing both, the envisioning of an ideal city of ‘Premnagar’ and ‘Amarlok’ and at the same time questioning the orthodox brahmanical authorities. For instance, in his following verse he is seen to be questioning the very logic of caste based inequalities. “It's all one skin and bone, one piss and shit, one blood, one meat. From one drop, a universe. Who's Brahmin? Who's Shudra?”<sup>178</sup>

### **The Paradox between Hindu Kabir and the Dalit Kabir**

In order to see how Kabir understands caste, it is important, to see how Hindu authors and Dalit authors have tried to understand and then appropriate Kabir. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi compares Kabir with the Narsimha avatar of Vishnu because both stood at the intersection of impossible and contradictory situations. While the latter was a creation to kill Hiranyakashapu who had asked for his killer to be neither a man nor an animal, that he should not be killed by a weapon neither made of metal nor stone and many other eccentric conditions required to kill him. This points to an impossible yet an extraordinary task. Kabir too stands in a similar way at the intersection of contradictory conditions, of being a Hindu and a Musalman, of being learned and untutored and of being the preacher of nirguna and a seeker of saguna.<sup>179</sup> Therefore for Dwivedi Kabir stands at the crossroads of mutually contradictory doctrines similar to that of ‘Narsimha’ avatar of God Vishnu and this is where he paints Kabir as the savior of Hinduism.<sup>180</sup> Kabir becomes for Dwivedi the ‘romantic rebel’ who seeks to save Hinduism from the Islam. Referring to Kabir as ‘*Phakkar*’ which means rebellious, Dwivedi argues that Kabir criticized all the customs and traditions and inaugurated a Nirguna Bhakti. He calls

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<sup>178</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. and ed. Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, (New York: OUP, 2002), p.19

<sup>179</sup> Dwivedi, *Kabir*, pp 143-145.

<sup>180</sup> Milind Wakankar, *Subalternity and Religion: The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), p.81. Hereafter I will be using the analysis made by Wakankar in the same book.



Kabir as a 'dharamguru' and throws light upon the unique personality which becomes essential for the historical project of Hindi. It was Dwivedi who brought Kabir and his mysticism in the center of the debate, where he was seen to represent new ethics of individualism in the discourse of nationalism, after a continuous attack from Ramchandra Shukla who was trying to establish Tulsidas and Surdas as the most influential saints of North India and in whom the dominant idea of community and nationalism was being construed.<sup>181</sup> The enumeration of an 'unique individual' and marginal status in the caste system represented by Kabir becomes essential for Dwivedi for opposing the Islamic creed by bringing Kabir within the fold of Hinduism resting upon his shoulders the task of radically changing the social norms of the traditional Indian society. Why a marginal figure of Kabir becomes important for Dwivedi is because a homogenous and consolidated national tradition could emerge only with the accord between the low castes and the elites. Therefore for Dwivedi, Kabir is neither a Dalit nor a Muslim, but a unique modern Hindu.<sup>182</sup> This tendency of assimilating Kabir within the Hindu tradition is criticized by the Dalit scholars like Dr. Dharamvir.<sup>183</sup>

Kabir according to the Dalit scholars is the Dalit God instituting a religion of its own. This veneration of Kabir as a Dalit God was essential for Dharamvir in order to construct the history of the subalterns which was denied by the hegemonic brahmanical traditions. Therefore, to dissociate themselves with the Hinduism is very much radical for the Dalit movement initiated by B. R. Ambedkar. Whereas Kabir is a rebel who seeks to go beyond Caste for Dwivedi, for Dalit scholars he becomes a victim of caste always pointing at the inherent inequality of the caste system. But in this, as has been pointed out by Wakankar both Dwivedi and Dharamvir keeps Brahmanism at the centre where the former seeks to move towards it and the latter seeks to depart from it. This often ignores in the process what is 'intransigence for the low castes in their struggle for recognition and autonomy'.<sup>184</sup> The difference between Dwivedi's Kabir and Dharamvir's Kabir can also be looked at how they understand his notion of Nirguna God. While Dwivedi argues

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<sup>181</sup> Wakankar, *Subalternity and Religion: The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia* pp.117-118.

<sup>182</sup> Wakankar, *Subalternity and Religion: The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia*, p. 74.

<sup>183</sup> Dr. Dharamvir, *Kabir Ke Alochak*, (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2015).

<sup>184</sup> Wakankar, *Subalternity and Religion: The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia*, p.77.

that Kabir's nirguna Bhakti was a way to achieve the Saguna God, for Dharamvir Kabir himself was a Dalit God.

In the light of the above discussion it is important to see that while Dwivedi was trying to do away with the caste, Dharamvir was bringing it to the fore. For both therefore caste remains central, where the former is trying to ignore the inherent inequalities of it for the larger project of a homogenous tradition, the latter unveils the inherent inequalities. However, the problem with the Dalit appropriation of Kabir as Dalit God confines him within the institution of organized religion. Another point that needs to be taken into consideration is that when Kabir refers to his identity as a Julaha or of his low caste status, the purpose is to reject the institution of caste and then the institution of any religion. One might argue that possibly for Kabir the hierarchies within the institutions eventually led to the inequalities and therefore it was crucial to reject not only those institutions (specifically caste and religion) but the very ideology of those institutions. But this is not the case with the Dalit scholars as they very well are skeptical of leaving behind their identities which are being used as a bargain for the sake of their representation and equal rights.

In order to understand the concept of equality in Kabir it is therefore important to critically analyze the appropriation of Kabir either by the Hindu scholars or by the Dalit scholars.

### **Kabir's Idea of Equality**

The Hindu religious authorities were exclusionary by their very nature because they granted the access to knowledge and privileges only to the upper caste. This phenomena of binaries based on the caste is not something new but has been entrenched in the minds of those who favor it and those who want to destroy it. In such a case Ambedkar argued for the 'annihilation of the caste' in the early twentieth century and similar to this Kabir too was fighting against this in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. One might argue that both launched a strong attack against the Brahmanical ideology and the prevalent power structures that sought to repress one section of the society while favoring the ideology of those who ruled. However, both differed in their ways of doing so, whereas Ambedkar suggested leaving the fold of Hindu religion and joining

Buddhism<sup>185</sup>, for Kabir the entire practice of following institutionalized religion and any external authority that sought to dictate the lives of individual needed to be rejected. Therefore, for Kabir these binaries had to be rejected and the practice of ‘interiorizing faith’<sup>186</sup> needed to be inculcated. One can argue that in rejecting these binaries there was an idea of non-discrimination and equality present in Kabir and he sought to materialize it through the ‘principle of sameness’. This principle can be seen in the following sabda where Kabir argues that every individual is made from the same bone; same flesh and has the same blood running through their veins.

“Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge. Tell me where untouchability came from, since you believe in it. Mix red juice, white juice and air— a body bakes in a body. As soon as the eight lotuses are ready, it comes into the world. Then what's untouchable? Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels decay into dust, while the potter keeps slapping clay on the wheel, and with a touch cuts each one off. We eat by touching, we wash by touching, from a touch the world was born. So who's untouched? asks Kabir. Only she who's free from delusion”<sup>187</sup>

The metaphor ‘clay’ denotes the substance with which the body comes into existence and which according to Kabir is same for every individual. In the above poem one can see how Kabir like Socrates has a ‘hammerlock’ over the argument, while the ‘interlocutor’ in this case ‘Pandit’ becomes the subject.<sup>188</sup> The passion with which Kabir is arguing reflects his anguish towards discrimination based on caste, purity and impurity and most importantly ‘touch’. The question that Kabir raises, that ‘from where did untouchability come?’ is very pertinent to the idea of equality and hierarchy that one can draw from Kabir. Hierarchy for Kabir was composed of the oppressed and the oppressors, in his case the low castes and the upper castes respectively. This hierarchy was based on the access to the knowledge of the Vedas, birth, pure-impure, power and wealth. It was this

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<sup>185</sup>Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, *Annihilation of caste: An undelivered speech*. (New Delhi:Arnold Publishers, 1990), pp. 40-42.

<sup>186</sup> With regard to this, as has already been pointed out in the chapter 1, Charlotte Vaudeville uses the term ‘interior religion’.

<sup>187</sup>Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.17.

<sup>188</sup>Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 27. Special emphasis on the footnotes.

hierarchy that Kabir sought to eliminate and thereby establish equality not only on the ontological but also moral basis. The idea of equality was not that of demanding political rights but that of equal moral status in the society by not only drawing upon the natural basis of equality (that of flesh, bone and blood) but also by rejecting the acquired inequalities based on hierarchies of caste and varna system. Coming back to the above mentioned sabda, Kabir attacks the notion of untouchability by embracing the idea of 'touch'. Kabir argues that without the action of 'touching', one can neither perform their everyday functions nor can they come into existence. No human body remains untouched in this world. Therefore Kabir is questioning the very premises on which the untouchability is based, if touch which is the essence of everyday activity of every individual being. Hess calls this the questioning of 'illusoriness of touch'. Since every body is made of the 'same essential substance' and that each body is produced from another body, at what point the defilement takes place?<sup>189</sup> This question raised by Kabir challenges the notion of purity and impurity which were developed by the Brahmanical authorities on the basis of touch and sight. The world which is seen as the creation by touch<sup>190</sup> in the above verse highlights its importance thereby negating the very essence of untouchability. This is in a way very procedural because the things that go into the making of an individual are same and the procedure of reproduction are too the same. So the basis for inequality or ascription of lower status to the shudras by the Brahmins on the basis of birth becomes redundant.

It is important to analyze the resistance against the Brahmanical orthodoxy that one sees in Kabir. This resistance stems from him being conscious of his caste and his surroundings. The very fact that some scholars have argued that Kabir belonged to the community of converts and Kabir himself referring to as either 'julaha' or 'kori' is indicative of his awareness towards his caste. Kabir asks individuals to reject the organization of caste and Varna. The following 'Ramaini' and this reflects that he was aware of the inherent inequalities in the organization of caste. "Drop family, drop status, seek the nonexistent space, destroy the shoot, destroy the seed, reach the unembodied

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<sup>189</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pg 17.

<sup>190</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pg 18.

place.”<sup>191</sup> This can be seen in yet another sakhi coming from the Rajasthani Granthavali – “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.”<sup>192</sup>

It is important to see that he was not just challenging the hierarchy of upper and the lower caste but the different power structures leading to inequalities. This is how his idea of equality becomes universal because he was not just challenging the status and power of the dominant sections but also the sources from where they were drawing upon them such prestige, for instance, the knowledge of the Vedas, scriptures, birth, wealth and language etc. The aim was therefore to destroy the roots or the source of inequality. It is important here to cite one of the famous hagiographical account concerning the ritual of birth and death in the Hindu tradition. According to this ritual dying in Magahar lead to the re-birth as a donkey whereas dying in Kashi meant liberation. Magahar was a town where the low caste or the ones who performed unclean jobs resided. This clearly shows that Kabir’s conscious decision to die in Magahar meant his complete rejection of the rituals associated with the rituals associated with death and afterlife.<sup>193</sup> This shows that Kabir as, a critical individual, was trying to bring forth the problems of external rituals, social differentiations and sectarianism. Hence according to Baidyanath Saraswati one can see a tradition of non-conformism in Kabir.<sup>194</sup> For Kabir the inherent qualities of an individual had nothing to do with the caste<sup>195</sup> and this is evident in the following lines of Ramaini. “The maker himself became a potter, the potter shaped all kinds of pots. He set them in one place, the creator— carefully he made those pots! He baked them in the belly’s fire, guarding them the whole while. Then carefully he brought them out and “Shiva,” “Shakti,” named them all. If the son of the house is stupid, clever ones don’t follow him. I’m telling you my own truth, madmen follow others’ dreams. Hidden and visible—all one milk. Who’s the Brahmin? Who’s the Shudra? Don’t get lost in false

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<sup>191</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pg 86.

<sup>192</sup> Linda Hess. "The cow is sucking at the calf's teaKabir's upside-down language." *History of Religions* Vol 22, Issue no. 4 (1983): pp. 313-337.

<sup>193</sup>Baidyanath Saraswati, “Notes on Kabir: A Non-Literate Intellectual” in, *Dissent, Protest, and Reform in Indian Civilization*. Vol. 24, Malik, Subhash Chandra ed., (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), pg 172-173.

<sup>194</sup>Saraswati, “Notes on Kabir: A Non-Literate Intellectual”, p. 173.

<sup>195</sup>Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, see footnote to ramaini 26.4.

pride. False is the Hindu, false the Turk.”<sup>196</sup> This clearly stands in opposition to the division of castes on the basis of inherent qualities as for Kabir one can bring about a change in the existing social conditions through one’s labor and this is clearly evident from his life account as a *julaha* weaving the cloth for the subsistence of the family.

The falsity of rituals, religious identities and caste identities and anything which is hypocritical are often associated with ‘Maya’ in Kabir’s verses. According to Linda Hess, Maya represents the ‘phenomenal universe’, ‘the ephemera of transient forms’.<sup>197</sup> Since these forms are evanescent and their existence is temporary, Maya therefore constitutes ‘illusion’ which often leads us astray from the true path to salvation. Therefore for Kabir all the religions, caste and rituals are forms of Maya. Often it is representative of lowly passions and desires which clouds the criticality of individual pushing them to pursue the temporary pleasures of the phenomenal universe. Sometimes Maya is also personified as a female seductress leading people into the bewilderment and distractions. This concept of Maya found in Kabir is understood by Kumkum Sangari through three types of femaleness on which Kabir draws upon – the ‘fallen’ femaleness of *strisvabhav*, the noble precepts of *stridharma* and the ‘higher’ femaleness emerging in *bhakti* compositions.<sup>198</sup> The *stridharma* often found in the marriage along with the ‘higher’ femaleness enables the individual to free themselves from the clutches of lower passions and desires of *strisvabhav*. Maya is the basis of distinctions between different kinds of woman on the basis of above categories but also simultaneously defines a woman’s essential nature.<sup>199</sup> The first category that of ‘*strisvabhav*’ views women as an impediment in the path of *Bhakti*, hence it is associated with the characteristics of deceit, sensual pleasures, greed and lies. For instance, in the following *sabda* one can see Kabir referring to Maya as a trickster swaying people away from the path of salvation.

“Maya's the super swindler. Trailing the noose of three qualities, she wanders, whispering honeyed words. For Vishnu she's Lakshmi, for Shiva she's Shakti, for priests an idol, for pilgrims a river. To a monk she's a nun,

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<sup>196</sup>Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 83.

<sup>197</sup>Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir* pg 197.

<sup>198</sup>Kumkum Sangari, “Mirabai And The Spiritual Economy of *Bhakti*”, *Occasional Papers on History and Society*, XXVIII, (1990), p. 78.

<sup>199</sup>Sangari, “Mirabai And The Spiritual Economy of *Bhakti*”, p. 78.

to a king she's a queen, in one house a jewel, in one a shell. For devotees she's a pious lady, for Brahma, Mrs. Brahma. Kabir says, seekers, listen well: this is a story no one can tell.'<sup>200</sup>

Thus, Maya is present within oneself and Kabir argues that Maya and Mind become one thereby creating a delusional world. In this sense the *strisvabhav* therefore becomes a 'principle of male self-division' where there is a constant struggle between the male striving for higher truth and Maya creating distortions.<sup>201</sup> The *strisvabhav* runs contrary to the *stridharm* which refers to the 'pativrata' women surrendering her life for the betterment of her husband and children. Kabir is often seen as immersing himself in the Bhakti of God in the pursuit of *stridharm* where the latter represents perfect male protecting their respective wives. This reflects upon the undivided self which when separated from the god becomes unworthy but becomes complete on uniting with the God.<sup>202</sup> The *strisvabhav* and *stridharm* therefore reflects the contradictory virtues - 'femaleness of male frailty' desirous of lowly pleasures preventing both men and women from attaining salvation on the one hand and 'femaleness of higher male desires' respectively. This is therefore legitimizing the *stridharm* as a married woman who chastise the lowly desires created by *strisvabhav*. However the problem in such kind of division where on the one hand woman is a mere trickster and on the other helps in chastisement reflects upon the dual nature of women either being bad or good. This representation is very much patriarchal in nature where again women have been not only been reduced to as being evil and good but have been placed in subordination to the men. The powerful femaleness of '*strisvabhav*' which can be rather interpreted as an independent force is rendered as evil. This therefore reflects the persistence of patriarchal values in Kabir's verses. The problem in such a claim might arise from the fact that Kabir's poems have been orally transmitted and from the western to eastern texts there have been additions. So whether these values were actually present in the original compositions or have been latter additions remains an enigma, hence the idea of equality

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<sup>200</sup> Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 41.

<sup>201</sup> Sangri, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti", p. 85.

<sup>202</sup> Sangri, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti", pp 85-90.

in Kabir remains incomplete. This makes the contextual reading of Kabir all the more important.

### **Kabir, Gandhi and Ambedkar on Inequality, Caste and Toleration**

It would not be wrong to suggest that one can identify a common thread between Kabir, Gandhi and Ambedkar. Where Gandhi often recited Kabir's verses and the recent Dalit scholars have argued that there was a consistency in the thought of Kabir and Ambedkar. Also the influence of Kabir is seen on Ambedkar because his parents were Kabir Panthi's.<sup>203</sup> Three of them raised the important questions of untouchability and inequality of the caste system; however their respective ways of approaching the problems were different. Kabir, as has already been pointed above rejected the external rituals of caste and religion in totality. Not only that, he argued for the elimination of the two which were leading to the inequalities in the society. He sought to achieve equality by arguing a case for biological sameness.<sup>204</sup> Kabir not only rejected the distinctions of caste and varnas but also rejected the scriptures in which they were rooted. Kabir rejected the existence of different God's for different people and in fact placed importance on the unity of God which was immanent.

However, for Gandhi religion was an important aspect of one's life and he is often seen claiming in 'Hind Swaraj' that Indians are becoming irreligious. Gandhi explains that Indians are 'turning away from God' and this because of the dawn of modern civilization, in front of which the religious superstitions seems harmless. This however does not mean that he was supporting the superstitions but instead argued that one cannot do away with them by disregarding religion.<sup>205</sup> One can therefore see the underlying difference between Kabir and Gandhi in the way they approached religion wherein the former sought to dissipate the existence of religion, the later sought to conserve it. This 'conserving of religion' by Gandhi steers the way to his principle of toleration which relied on the acceptance of the faults of every religion thereby leading to the fact that all

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<sup>203</sup> Bharti, "Kabir's 'Nirgunvad' influenced Ambedkar".

<sup>204</sup> This sameness is based on the flesh, bones and blood which is common to all the human beings. the faculty that separates human beings from the animals is that of reason and criticality, the two of which are the essence of Kabir's verses.

<sup>205</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, (India: Navjivan Publishing House, 2014), pp.38-39.



religions are imperfect. It is in the acceptance of these imperfections that the principle of tolerance develops. However later Gandhi had transformed the meaning of tolerance to 'goodwill' as he thought former to be judgmental and condescending.<sup>206</sup> For Gandhi therefore "Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling?"<sup>207</sup> Therefore for Gandhi religion was a "resource, a body of insights to be extracted, combined and interpreted in the way he thought proper".<sup>208</sup> Whereas for Kabir different religions were the delusions of Maya that led people astray from the path of salvation. Therefore in the light of this Saral Jhingran, the argument that both Mahatma and Kabir emphasized on the importance of unity of all religions is rendered redundant.<sup>209</sup> Though, both were facing the communal discord during their times, yet their approach for settlement of the conflict varied. For Kabir tolerance of religion was by no means an option when he rejects the basis of external differentiations of human beings based on the same.

Coming to the question of caste and varna, Gandhi had rejected the caste system prevalent in India, yet had accepted the Varna system. He argued that Caste has no relation with religion and Varna but also said that Varna defined our duties based on the occupation and is good for the welfare of the society.<sup>210</sup> Varnashram dharma according to Gandhi was a 'unique contribution of Hinduism' to the entire world. Varna which was based on the division by birth was inherent in human nature and to disregard it was to flout the 'law of Heredity'.<sup>211</sup> Therefore the four fold varna distinction remained important for Gandhi while the classifications into various castes was 'unwarranted'. In fact when there was a discussion regarding the granting of communal award to the lower castes, Gandhi came out in strong opposition to it because according to him their status as

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<sup>206</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, 'Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction', (United States: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.118.

<sup>207</sup> Gandhi, *Hind swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, p. 49.

<sup>208</sup> Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 47.

<sup>209</sup> Saral Jhingran, "Kabir and Gandhi as Apostles of Human Unity, Transcending Religion and Caste-based Discrimination", *Gandhi Marg*, Vol. 32, No.3, (Oct-Dec 2010), accessed on June 5, 2018, <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/kabir-gandhi-apostles-of-human-unity-trascending-religion.html>

<sup>210</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of caste*, pg 42.

<sup>211</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *The essence of Hinduism*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1987), pp 30-33

untouchables would be further perpetuated without actually reforming Hinduism.<sup>212</sup> Though he condemned the practice of untouchability of the caste system, but also demanded the Hindus for bringing the reform. It is important to understand that Varna system is based on the birth but on the worth of an individual and the caste system is based on the birth of an individual. Both in their practice become solidified with clear cut distinctions and this perpetrates inequality. That is why it is important here to reiterate Kabir's idea of equality which basically emphasized on the equal moral worth of an individual. This basic equality whose remnants are to be found in Kabir is essential for any democratic society. That is why Kabir rejected completely the caste and the Varna system and also the rejected their source of knowledge that is Vedas and Puranas.

Echoing in the same contention Ambedkar in his 'Annihilation of Caste' argues that Hindu society is not a community but an amalgamation of different castes and it is important to do away with the caste and Varna system. The reform of Hinduism was impossible therefore he suggested to leave the fold of Hinduism and converted to Buddhism. Caste according to him was a state of mind and thereupon reform of the caste meant notional change. The deeply held religious beliefs further perpetrated the caste distinction making all the Hindus slave to the caste system and this could be changed only by leaving the fold of Hindu religion.<sup>213</sup>

Religion for both Gandhi and Ambedkar was important wherein the former sought to reform Hinduism the later sought to reject it by conversion to Buddhism. Though for Gandhi the cosmic spirit (God) was the truth which human beings strive for and which was formless that is without qualities, but he was also aware of the disorientation experienced by the human mind (especially Hindus for whom rituals around dieties is a way of life) when asked to think of God in a 'non-qualitative' terms.<sup>214</sup> Therefore for Gandhi religion becomes central to the reform of the hindu society. In fact Ambedkar never rejected the religion per se and this is evident from conversion to another religion. However, Kabir completely takes a different course altogether and a much more radical one that is of rejecting all the organized religions. Kabir's rejection of religious distinctions and the caste distinctions are based on his idea that every human

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<sup>212</sup> Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 23.

<sup>213</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, pp 31-40.

<sup>214</sup> Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*, pg 36.

being is equal and the only hierarchy that exists is that between God and the Bhakta. The Bhakta doesn't know any caste, gender or religion. What is important to note here is that Kabir is not rejecting the possibility of God's existence but the religions which are hindrance to the path of salvation. The essence of life<sup>215</sup> is not to be found in any religion but within oneself and one's labor. By placing the essence of life within the individual Kabir seeks to create a unity of all the human beings.

## **Kabir and The Kabir Panth**

Westcott in 1907 had written that the Hindu followers of Kabir were divided into two sects being referred to as 'Mai' and 'Bap'. Where the former had its headquarters in Chhattisgarh, it was a branch which followed Dharam Das who was one of Kabir's disciples. The latter had its headquarters at Kabir Chaura in Benares.<sup>216</sup> In Magahar where Kabir had died are two 'math' surrounding the place where Kabir awaited his death. One of the 'maths' belongs to the Muslims while the other belongs to the Hindus.<sup>217</sup> In the recent times one of the most famous voices of Kabir is Prahalad Tipanya who combines the teachings of Kabir with the folk music of the Malwa region. Tipanya has also over a period of time attracted a lot of people from the low caste and in his sessions he encourages everyone to rise above hypocrisy, sectarianism and divisiveness and to adopt the religion of love.<sup>218</sup> Apart from the fact that different sects have started forming around Kabir one needs to see their compositions and question the elaborate rituals they have evolved over a period of time. Lorenzen points to the presence of two texts both of sanskritic origins at the library of Kabir Chaura. One is 'Saracandrika' which is the collection of verses from Puranas and other Sanskrit texts and the other text is 'Vajrasuci Upanishad' whose author is often identified as

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<sup>215</sup> By essence of life I am being referring to the meaning of our existence which we derive from religion. For instance the various rituals performed to please the deities to bring good fortunes.

<sup>216</sup> George Herbert Westcott, 'Kabir and the Kabir Panth'. (Cawnpore: Christ Church Mission Press, 1907), p. 98.

<sup>217</sup> Westcott, *Kabir and the Kabir Panth*, pg 99.

<sup>218</sup> For more information on Prahalad Tipanya see Shabnam Virmani's, 'The Kabir Project' which in her three documentaries titled 'Had Anhad', 'Chalo Humare Des' and 'Koi Sunta Nahi' features Tipanya's life and his preachings of kabir. Also look at the website of Prahalad Tipanaya.

‘Sankracharya’.<sup>219</sup> Both the texts defy the ontological basis of caste division, therefore according to Lorenzen one can see the dissent in the Kabir Panth through these literature.<sup>220</sup> It is important here to see that no doubt there is an existence of dissent in the Panth and its followers, majority of which is comprised of lower castes, but one also needs to see how Sanskrit texts against whose sanctity Kabir had argued have slowly made their way into Kabir’s corpus.

One also needs to understand that Kabir was always against the sectarianism and institutionalized religions, so the Panths that have been formed around him are very much contrary to his teachings. One might argue that these Panths over a period of time have played an important role in keeping Kabir alive in the memory of India, but then what about the elaborate rituals of worship which they have developed around Kabir. The receiving of Prasad after prayers, organizing of Melas by the Muslim sect accompanied by sacred feasts prepared with elaborate rituals and chanting of prayers afterwards is nothing less the ‘Havanas’ and ‘Yagnas’ performed by the upper castes.<sup>221</sup> The evidence found in Westcott of the pilgrimages to the shrine which the devotees are expected to make and the existence of pictures of Kabir with Surat gopal and Dharam Das kneeling in front of Him<sup>222</sup> among the Panths actually looks like the replication of Hindu religious practices. The evening prayers that are being offered to the Guru who is regarded as ‘the Supreme Kabir’ in the Shrines of Benares in the Sanskrit is yet another example of adoption of Brahmanical religion by the followers who primarily come from the lower sections.<sup>223</sup> Scholars like John Stratton Hawley and Marks Juergensmeyer have called this the ‘routinization of charisma’ a term which is coined by Max Webber in his book ‘On Charisma and institution building, which basically refers to the process where the magnetic charisma of a figure is transformed into the institutional authority.’<sup>224</sup>

The Panths have still managed to retain their egalitarian nature and kept Kabir alive. However it becomes all the more important now to read Kabir as an independent

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<sup>219</sup>David N Lorenzen, "Dissent in Kabir and the Kabir Panth" in *Devotion and Dissent in Indian History*, ed. Vijaya Ramaswamy, (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2014), pp 171-173.

<sup>220</sup>Lorenzen, "Dissent in Kabir and the Kabir Panth", pp. 171-176.

<sup>221</sup> Westcott, ‘*Kabir and The Kabir Panth*’, p. 100.

<sup>222</sup> Westcott ‘*Kabir and The Kabir Panth*’, pp. 101-103.

<sup>223</sup> J.S. Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer (trans), ‘*Songs of the Saints of India*’, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 47-48.

<sup>224</sup> Hawley and Juergensmeyer, ‘*Songs of the Saints of India*’, p. 48.

thinker and philosopher in order to understand the ideas of medieval India and also to understand his socio-religious ideas which hold relevance till date. Kabir is being politically appropriated not only by the Dalits but also by the Hindu right wing. On the occasion of Kabir jayanti on 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2018, Prime Minister Modi along with other BJP members addressed the rally of the followers of Kabir in Magahar. Not only was this a strategy to appropriate Kabir but also to use the followers as the vote bank for the elections of 2019. Relegating Kabir with the title of Mahatma and calling Magahar a 'Tirath Sthal' was a step towards the appeasement of the low caste followers thereby implicitly trying to bring them within the fold of Hinduism. Narendra Modi in his speech placed Kabir at the top of the hierarchy followed by Raidas, Phule, Gandhi and Ambedkar all of whom had played an important role in arousing the consciousness against the practice of untouchability and inherent inequalities of the caste system. The paradox that comes to light is that while on the one hand the Dalits are being lynched and Muslims being killed by the supporters of RSS and BJP and on the other hand the appropriation of Kabir by Modi is a tactical political move for appropriating low caste vote bank.

Hence in the light of this it becomes imperative to interpret Kabir as an independent thinker and philosopher to critically engage with the fundamental forces appropriating him and the State.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have tried to analyze the concept of equality found in Kabir's corpus. I began by understanding the concept of caste and how it can be understood through Kabir's verses. Kabir is then seen as rejecting the very idea of the caste and untouchability. Secondly I have tried to analyze how Dwivedi and Dharamvir understand Kabir where the former tries to bring Kabir within the fold of Hinduism; the latter ascribes Dalit identity to him. Thirdly the chapter tries to analyze the differences between Gandhi's, Ambedkar's and Kabir's ideas of equality. While Gandhi and Ambedkar both never rejected the institutionalized religion, Kabir rejected it. Therefore one can argue that Kabir not only challenged the authority of the institutional structures of Caste and

religion but attacked the very ideology upon which they are founded. He criticizes Caste and also attacks the notion of untouchability stemming from the notions of purity and impurity. While arguing that 'touch' is the essence of our existence, he argues that the Brahmin, Shudra, Muslim, Hindu, etc everybody is born through the touch. Therefore one can say that Kabir was arguing for an equal moral worth of an individual and through this he sought to unite the humanity.

Finally from the above discussion it can be concluded that Kabir's idea of equality was very much political and social in nature. Not only was he arguing a case for basic equality but simultaneously envisioned the city of love where everyone was equal. The ideal of selfless love and devotion towards God actually burnt the walls of discrimination because it sought to bring every individual on the same plane.

## Conclusion

The inability to read the entire literature constitutes one of the limitations of this research. The study though has tried to look at the key texts on Kabir, comprising Hazari Prasad Dwivedi's '*Kabir*', Purshottam Aggarwal's '*Akath Kahani Prem ki*', Dr.Dharamvir's '*Kabir Ke Alochak*', Charlotte Vaudeville's '*A weaver named Kabir*' and Muhammad Hedayatullah's '*Kabir the Apostle of Hindu Muslim Unity*'. The focus has also been placed upon David Lorenzen's '*Kabir Legends and Ananta-das's Kabir Parchai*' which gives us a Hagiographical account of Kabir's life. It becomes important to understand why a particular theme was selected by the author in order to understand the text and the larger project it seeks to fulfill. Secondly there is a tendency to read too less and too much between the lines and therefore one is unable to draw the boundaries. Thirdly the Kabir's corpus is a compilation of oral translations and therefore the authenticity of the texts can be questioned. Henceforth the contextual reading of Kabir becomes important. Fourthly when talking about Equality in the fourth chapter, I have not been able to give Justice to the aspect of gender which remains contentious in Kabir's corpus. While on the one hand the category of Bhakta has no identity except that of a devotee and on the other hand one finds in Kabir's corpus that 'Maya' is personified as a woman enchantress who creates delusion.

The broader objective of the research was to understand the ideas of Kabir and seek their contemporary relevance. In this process the study analyzed the debates around Kabir and through these debates I have concluded that we can see the seeds of criticality and dissent in Kabir. Kabir was a critical individual who refused to accept the temporal and spiritual authorities. Through his rejection of the caste based and religion based binaries Kabir uprooted their respective ideologies. He questioned the very basis of birth and purity and impurity in deciding the status in the society. The rituals and customs associated with the organized religion too were questioned and critically engaged with. For instance, Kabir argues that the elaborate rituals of wearing the sacred thread by the Hindus and the circumcision of the Muslims are societal constructions because in the womb everyone is the same. Kabir's criticism of the caste hierarchies and untouchability

is reflective of the non-conformism to the organized social structures which were inherently unequal in nature. This non-conformism is indicative of Kabir's critical nature.

Based on the emerging rationality and the criticism of caste and Varna system in Kabir, scholars tend to see the emergence of modernity through Kabir. The concept of modernity emerged in the West and had an entirely different road to modernization as compared to the Non- West. This led to the tendency amongst the scholars of the Non-West to question the imposition of the western modernity across the globe and therefore they suggested cultural theories of modernity thereby seeking an alternative paradigm. A similar such attempt is made by Purshottam Aggarwal to see Kabir as an indigenous modern. For Aggarwal Kabir is an independent thinker and was capable of making individual choices. Through Kabir he envisions an early modern India which did not conform to the 'colonial episteme' of religion and caste. This is made possible only after bringing within the fold of Ramanandi sect in which Aggarwal traces the early seeds of modernity. Dalit scholars like Dr Dharamvir appropriates the Dalit identity of Kabir to seek in him the history of Dalits which was denied by the hegemonic Brahmanical traditions. This search for modernity has often led the scholars to appropriate him for their sectarian interests. Therefore it is argued in the second chapter that Kabir cannot be straitjacketed into a particular framework of modernity. It is henceforth suggested that since Kabir himself rejected to be associated with any sectarian affiliations, he opens up myriad ways in which one can map the origins of modernity in the context of South Asia.

In the third chapter after making an analysis of Kabir's idea of equality I have then attempted to compare it with the ideas of Gandhi and Ambedkar. Through this comparison we can see that for both Gandhi and Ambedkar, religion was important and both never wanted to leave the ambit of religion. However Kabir rejected the institutions of religions and sought unity among the human beings by realizing equal moral worth of every individual. The utopian society imagined by Kabir and other anti caste intellectuals reflects an alternative to the prevalent inequalities in the society. This utopia as argued by Gail Omvedt is an amalgamation of reason and ecstasy. This leads us to think that the very creative impulse of imagining an alternative to the existing society arises from their ability to rationalize the prevailing problems and then look for an alternative.



In the contemporary times Kabir has been used by different political parties. For instance Acharya Vivek Das who was earlier a Naxalite has been appropriating Kabir and is a part of the Kabir Panth. This is reflective of the dissent inherent in the Kabir Panth against the institutionalized structures of the society. However the Kabir Panth over a period of time has come to replicate the elaborate rituals of Hindus, when Kabir strongly rejected them. The RSS/BJP has appropriated Kabir to lure the votes of low caste. Kabir's verses and songs are being performed for the public. Prahlad Tipanya, a well-known artist from Madhya Pradesh performs Kabir's songs for the wider public. Therefore one can see that Kabir spreads through the domain of spirituality and poetry to the domain of social, political and performativity. It can be concluded by saying that Kabir was a champion of Humanity who dismantled everything that was a tried to harm the very essence of it. Thus Kabir provides us with abundant ideas which become important for tracing the origins of modernity especially in the context of India.

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