KABIR: A PIONEER IN SOCIAL REFORMATION, LIBERATION AND HARMONY

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The special presence of the Creator in the human society has always been proved by the emergence of saints and sages, especially from among the common folk. Their life and message have contributed greatly to the ongoing reformation of the human society towards social harmony. One of the most significant of such great men was Kabir, who is known for pioneering the unique 'saint tradition'. He was not merely a traditional icon of holiness but was a living legend of spiritual achievement and social renaissance – two in one. The perennial contribution to the re-construction of social life of Kabir was so immense that it makes him a great stalwart of social harmony.

Kabir, a product of the 15th century, belonged to the *julaha* community who supported himself and his family by hard work, and hence wasn't a traditional monk living at the mercy of others. Though he lived in Kashi, he had gone to Meghar towards the end of his life, in order to challenge the traditional belief that 'to die in Kashi would merit entry to heaven and to die in Meghar, would lead to hell'.ⁱⁱ

Kabir was not scientifically educated but had wise insights and was a revolutionary. His thinking was practical as well as radical. He was saint, a poet, a mystic, a great thinker, a social reformer, and the like – all in one. He was genuine with his experiences and bold with his expressions as well. He was a man of the people and spoke the dialect of the common man, moved with them, taught them and lived like them. Weaving was his profession and weaving the human society into a 'well-knit human network' in all its facets was his life mission.

A saint should be devout, wise, truthful, gentle, pure, noble, generous and serviceable as well as having faith, good conduct and the like. "True holiness is simply the presence of God reflecting itself in the goodness of a person's character and action." Kabir had all the qualities of a great saint and his composition for upliftment and harmony is important part of our history, culture and civilization.

A Popular Saint Poet

Saints of the medieval period are known as popular saints. Kabir has been the most significant of all of them. Like others, he belonged to the people, in a special sense. He hailed from the so-called lower strata of the caste-ridden society of his time. Belonging

to the discriminated lot of the general public, he voiced the cries and sentiments of the 'voiceless', represented the taste, needs and aspirations of the masses, shared the problems, struggles and life-situations of the ordinary people and was liked by the common folk for his genuineness and admired for relentless search for the divine. He presented a simple form of bhakti and spirituality which was appealing to the people.

Kabir spoke in the dialect of the general public His utterances were spontaneous, poetical and musical, simple straight forward and colloquial. To attempt the popular dialect for communication, when Sanskrit monopolized all knowledge and media of official communication, was the revolution that Kabir pioneered. Through such an approach he whispered volumes of spiritual messages to the hearts of the general public; his lines are often found ready at the tips of tongues of people.

The poetic character of Kabir emerged from his inner experience. It had an appeal of spontaneity. The categories Kabir used were taken from the day to day life. The images were taken from the nature. The idioms and examples were fully in line with the ordinary experiences of human life. Kabir did not struggle in any way to make poetry. Poetry was a natural medium for him in the process of his thought and expression. Poetry became an effective tool for Kabir in communicating the mystical experience. Thus Kabir became a living icon of spiritual poetry and poetical spirituality at the same time. The poetical dimension has added quality to the saintly character of Kabir and to his spiritual experience.

Kabir was deeply involved in Indian Society – its traditions, values, struggles, problems, needs, ambitions and aspirations. His heart and mind were fully alive to the spiritual, cultural, ideological and behavioral patterns of Indian Life. He was deeply committed to the diverse dimensions of the genius of Indian world-view, such as spiritual outlook, individual freedom, plurality, integration, philosophical concept, experiential approach, aesthetic attitude and poetic expression.

This Indian character had a universal appeal. While being firmly rooted in the Indian soil, his life and message had ample implications for the whole humanity. Even though his poetical lines were mostly addressed to himself, they communicated many values for the welfare of the entire human family. Their perennial value travels across the boundaries of caste, creed, profession, community and nationality.

Kabir gas a powerful message for the humanity, which was firmly grounded in his mystic experience. He never relied on others' utterances or on pieces of hearsay; he counted on his own personal experience. Kabir could not close his eyes against the rampart forms of enslavement the human society of his time was afflicted with. There were bondages of understanding, like ritualism, fundamentalism, fanaticism,

communalism, etc. Attitudinal form of slavery like prejudice, hatred, and ill feeling were strongly prevailing. Discrimination based on caste, class, sect, office, social status, profession, language, region, etc., was the most commonly found social malady. Kabir attempted a campaign of reformation with a view to freeing the humans from the clutches of diverse bondages. Only the one who is liberated can facilitate another to get liberated. Personal life of Kabir had a considerable in-built spiritual capacity for awakening reformation in societal life as well as spiritual transformation in personal lives. His message of liberation was processed in his own social context, and it was in the light of the personal experience of the divine he was brimming forth.

On Social Harmony

Religion is a doubled-sided phenomenon. On the one hand, it is a system of faith, which takes care of the spiritual factor in life. It is supposed to be an agent of all pervasive liberation. But, on the other hand, the followers get enslaved to a certain perspective, an interpretation, a code and a ritual expression. It is a certain type of conditioning. It is intended to unite human beings. But nothing else has divided the human society so appallingly as religion. The worst of the wars and tensions in the world have taken place in the name religion. No doubt, it has facilitated the humans in the search of the Divine. But the institutionalized and sophisticated details of the religious systems have made the spiritual journey of the followers not only bothersome but also next to impossible, in many respects. There are large numbers of self-styled leaders, who claim to have been 'anointed to rule over the people'. They have no scruple in manipulating the religious fabric in order to suit their private interest. Pseudo-orthodoxy and discriminatory attitudes based on caste, class, language, ideology, profession, sect, etc. gain undue power. No wonder, the general public feels pushed aside. It is obvious that the religious system failed to maintain the social equilibrium.

This is more or less the story of religion Kabir found himself encircled by. He had his roots in the discriminated section of the society, but emerged as an extra ordinary sage. He had deep personal experience of the Divine and was capable of a spiritual leadership intended to awaken social outcome.

Simplicity of Religion

Kabir understood religion in a very simple manner. His spiritual insights were natural. They were appealing to the downtrodden and alienated ones. The texture of religion of religion suggested by him included such simple treads like remembering the Higher Power, entertaining sentiments of faith in that power, singing *bhjan* or praises to the power, engaging in *satsang* (good company) or in acquaintances which are conducive

to a divine atmosphere, rendering service to the other, etc. These attempts at self realization were coupled with values of social behaviour too. The practice of religion was made simple for the common folk. Spiritual experience was brought within the easy reach of the general public. This form of religion, which was lived and highlighted by Kabir, goes beyond the barriers of caste, creed, traditions, community ideology and sect. This is an approach of religion that incorporates all faith positions and perspectives of life, in some fashion or other. It is like a world of religion for the humanity, which could easily be accepted. This understanding of religion, which is universal as well as simple, was capable of liberating the human from the clutches of the prevailing system of religion complicated as well as degenerated. The message of Kabir was for the re-construction of spiritual experience for social harmony. iii

Personal Experience

Experience is personal by its very nature. 'Personal' pertains to the core of one's being. When processed by one's own personal involvement, experience becomes genuine and reliable. That is precisely what Kabir means when he says anbhai saancha, i.e. experience is true, and true experience is personal. He does not rely on lekhaa lekhee, i.e. what is written or narrated by others, but on annkhin dekhee, (Too kehtaa kaagad kee dekhee, mein kehtaa aankhin kee dekhee) iv what has been with his own eyes. He exhorts, 'you think for yourself (i.e. experience); then you will become wise' (Aap bichaarei so gyanee hoi)^v. According to him, seeing, hearing and touching the reality oneself, thinking and feeling it oneself experiencing and knowing it oneself gives one a joy, that is special. vi He continues, 'the story of love is indescribable; hardly anything can be said about it, it is like a dup person who has taken jaggery and is not able to express what he or she feels about it, but just smiles', vii that would amount to experience defies expression. God is a matter of personal experience, as love is; one has to know Him for one self. Kabir proceeds to a mystical experience and tells the Lord: 'pondering you again I became you; now there is nothing left in me'. viii His experience of Divine reaches an exquisite culmination when he says 'I am so full of Your presence; wherever I look You are seen'. ix

The deeper the experience the richer it is. Pearls are not found at the shore but at deep sea. The personal experience of the mystic saints like Kabir goes to the point of ecstatic communion and is often expressed in shrinking analogy between 'drop and sea', 'wife and husband', 'fish and water', bird and air', peacock and mountain', chakor and moon beams', 'waves and sea', etc. This characteristic of personal experience highlighted by him could be compared to Meerabai, Ravidas and Raman Maharshi, Ibn Arabi and Mansur al-Hallaj and Rumi, and Jesus, Thomas and Paul in the Bhakti, Sufi and Christian traditions respectively. Without personal experience of

the ultimate reality religious practices wouldn't produce the intended result for the societal life.

Purity of Heart

Purity of heart makes one eligible for attempting the experience of God. Since the Divine is pure, only a pure state of mind can assure an encounter with him. Purity of heart would mean simplicity and to absence of duplicity. That is why Kabir says 'One is capable of meeting the Ultimate Reality only when the mind clears it crookedness off', Kabir stressed on transparency which is synonymous with purity of heart. Purity of heart is holiness and is the starting point of spirituality. This aspect of the inner religion certainly facilitates a social behaviour, which is acceptable to one another in the day-to-day life. The concept is akin to the concept of 'safa' in Sufism which means purity of heart, mind and body.

Indwelling of God

The presence of the Creator in the creation is a fact too obvious to be negotiated. This common belief underlines the constant awareness of his abiding presence in all the beings. Kabir highlights the intimate and close union with the Divine by way of declaring the human heart as the special abode of the Divine. He even considers the whole universe as the home of God. He used many categorical saying to establish the fact: 'as the whole subsists in the part', 'i 'as musk resides in the deer', 'ii 'so dwells God in every being'; mind (man) is *Mathura*, heart (*dil*) is Dwaarika and body (*kaayaa*) is Kaashee'. 'iii The indwelling of God is materialized in an experience of self realization form of the universal presence of God. It makes the existence of the Divine real and meaningful. It permeates into the diverse dimensions of life, making it effective to the details. Kabir advocated the basic principle of equality in life by arguments like 'the image o God is in all' xiv and 'the Divine power is present in all'. The spiritual consciousness of Kabir that the human heart is the temple of the Divine has far reaching implications for a harmonious social life.

Kabir found himself amidst staring contradictions of social life as well. Social behaviour was in stark incompatibility with the prevailing theories and policies. The general public was being crushed by the clutches of the hierarchical structure of caste and class. The ways of discrimination and exploitation were beyond any logic. Brahmins and high classes monopolized the religious, social and educational arenas. The low placed people in the realms of caste and class found themselves dominated over. They were deprived of their rights, which were assured even by basic justice. The spiritual insight of Kabir was the product of his own social situation. It enabled him to recognize the seriousness of his awakward social predicament and its tragic implications. He was charged with a great sense of social consciousness. He felt a pang

of being challenged by the social evils. He experienced a passionate urge to respond to it positively and creatively. No matter how unjust and trying his situation was, he decided to prove his spiritual mettle. Like lotus, which remains in dirty conditions but produces immaculate flowers, Kabir, rose to such spiritual height in life that his very life became a living symbol of social resurrection.

Kabir campaigned against evil forces like selfishness, hypocrisy, discrimination, exploitation, manipulation, suppression and fatalism. He was genuinely committed to reforming the society. He emphasized personal values like genuineness, honesty, sincerity, love, service and respect. His saintly way was 'living this alternative value system oneself', which he himself proposed. He propagated his message in a subtle poetic language. The values were applied to the respective life setting of the people he addressed. He placed a clarion call to the practice of social values as the religion in practice. He was avowed to making the society a better place to live in. This reformative character of his message is like an ever-flowing fountain, which contributes immensely to better quality of life in the society.

Co-ordination between Theory and Practice

The most reliable test of one's social fitness is the co-ordination between theory and practice. It is the proof of one's genuineness in life. It reveals the level of maturity a person has achieved. The individual fruitfulness and social relevance of one's life is hidden in this hard reality. The life of Kabir, like other saints, has always stood the test of the theory he upheld. His behavioral integrity was not only beyond doubt but also highly inspiring for others.

The poetical utterances of Kabir shed light on the details of the problem of disagreement between theory and practice that prevailed in his society. Kabir asks 'what is the use of that speech which does not correspond to action'?xvi According to him, 'theory is empty, practice is the essence of life'xvii To give advice to others is easy, but to translate the same into action is very difficult. 'Many are those who say things but few are those who do accordingly'. xviii He appropriates a satirical approach to those who preach without practicing; 'you haven't got water with you; but you pretend to distribute milk to others. Your own mind is not at peace; and you seem to be enthusiastic in consoling others'.xix This argument has another dimension when one is not pure oneself, how could one give advice to others. The basic predicament of spiritual attainment is that 'doing is difficult and saying is easy'. Without living the life oneself, the Divine cannot be attained. This is the double-sided play of the reality of speech and action. Kabir analyses the phenomenon further: 'The speech is sweet like jaggery, action is like poison; but if you leave speech and do action, then you will attain nectar, in the place of poison'.xx He observes the sad plight of the learned and categorically suggests an effective treatment to the problem of disharmony between

theory and practice; 'the world has (generations have) gone by perusing large volumes and no one has ever become learned. The one who learns the single word to love only will really become learned. To him the verbal expression becomes futile if it does not correspond to what it implies. The ideal word is one that is accompanied by the corresponding behaviour. Only this merits the divine approval. One who does not translate the word into practice is like a foolish man who builds his house on shaky ground. Faith without action is dead. What is the use of seeing one's face in the mirror if one does want improve his look. Theory is like a treasure that needs to be invested in practice. One's relation to the Divine is a theoretical experience, which is not worthwhile without the practical experience of good relations with the human beings and the nature. Loving God is theory and loving one-another is practice. Spirituality has both individual and social dimensions. The social side of one's spirituality can in nom way be underrated.

Kabir advances his argument by his perception that disagreement between theory and practice would mean having a divided heart. One has to be single mind. Co-ordination between word and deed as well as thought and action is the sign of an undivided mind; and that is human integrity. That is why Kabir condemned oral knowledge and appreciated behavioral knowledge. His utterances are as if he was addressing himself. He used to speak out only that which was experimented by him in his personal life. That which has come to one's own experience only is worthy of any importance. As the words interpret the action, so the action bears witness to the words. The conflict between theory and practice proves one's state of being disorganized in life, which is to be regretted. Besides, word and deed are complementary to each other. Kabir's highlight of co-ordination between theory and practice is a radical social message, relevant to the social order of world today.

Equality

The message adopted by Kabir to re-organize the society, which was scattered by discriminatory behaviours, was the ideal of equality. Different standards were being applied to individuals and communities. Superior-inferior attitudes were maintained in the society too. The approach of Kabir to this mentality of inequality and discrimination was basically spiritual. Contemplating the whole Reality would help one rise beyond the fragmented mind. The internal sphere of the mind is to be concentrated upon rather than the external characteristics of the body. The former unites whereas the later divides. The quality of the spirit is to be imbibed in order to see the basic one. A non-dualistic experience I the basic requirement for equality. It is the divided mind, which discriminates on the basis of caste, colour, profession, language, class, creed, faith, conviction, ideology, nationality, and the like. The foundation for human equality is 'faith in the Divinity'. The characteristic of 'rainbow presents seven colours-each different from the other. The diverse colours expressed in

the rainbow are all hidden in the sunlight. It is the same sun3and the same sunlight at the root of all these colours. So it is the Divine Spirit – basically one in experience and different in expressions. The different colours are different expressions and they are not to b compared with and discriminated against each other. Each has its own singular quality. Together they radiate a beauty. This aesthetic outlook of life is the spiritual motivation for equality. This has been the subtle experience of Kabir.

Kabir presents an awareness of the common roots, which elicits a sense of common belonging. By going deeper into the experience of the Divine, one comes to the realization that all beings essentially belong to the same Divine. The supreme truth is that all human beings are the children of the same God. All are members of the same family of God and humanity. Differences are just superficial and often superimposed. The places of worship of the diverse religious traditions represent the same Higher Power that knows neither temple nor musjid. The 'high and low feelings' are based on merely external differences. The quality of the human person is more important. The inner quality is the invisible basis of the attitude of equality. To be carried away by the visible world would mean to lead a life on the level of the body, which is not life proper. All being share the same Creator and the same creation. All share the same water, the same light and the same air. It is indeed foolish for one to make difference between one another. Sorrows and joys, hopes and disappointments, suffering and struggles, successes and failures, dreams and achievements are a common experience for all. In fact, there is nom reasonable ground for discrimination and unsociability. The basic reality of life is just equal for all. The so-called religious and secular leaders of the society erected a system of classification of human beings, where they can satisfy their selfish interest. A Divine sanction is attributed to this system, which has no logical basis. This is the sublime realization of Kabir.

Kabir highlights the religion of good social conduct as *dharma*. Good behaviour towards one another is that which makes a real human society. Kabir challenges the proponents of the caste system, who undervalue others and thus fall short of a social conduct which is humanly dignifying. He asks in an ironical tone, 'you *Brahmin*, why haven't taken another way to be born'? What he meant by this is that 'if both *Brahmin* and *Sudra* have taken the same way to be born into the world, then there is no difference between them. Both have blood of the same colour; both have hunger and thirst as well as needs and problems. One has to learn from nature, the lessons of equality and good behaviour. The system of caste-discrimination is a hindrance to a meaningful social life. What is important is a spirit of equality in the garden of life, which is created and maintained by the same Creator. That is why Kabir categorically affirms the 'oneness of religion that is good in conduct'.

Kabir suggests a morality of good behaviour, which is grounded on the perfect equality among the humans for the establishment of harmony in social life. Unity of the human

society is dependent on the behavioural equality in life. Equality takes care of the right approach to life. This attitude does full justice to the human dignity. It rules out all narrowness of thinking. It also proves one's genuineness, and nobility. Such open, transparent and realistic disposition assures the right orientation to life. It liberates the humans from all that is unworthy of the human spirit and promises a healthy tuning to one-other. The welfare of the whole humanity 'sarvoday' is inherent in this elevated state of mind. This is in fact the foundation of social harmony.

Integration of Values

Integration is combing different parts to form a single whole. It is like bricks, stone and other requisites brought together to erect a wall. It is like 'different parts fixed together' or 'letters to form a word in the block' or 'words to make a piece of poem', or harmony of various notes to make music'. It is like a 'body that functions as one unit while having many parts'. The many parts exist as one. There is no contradiction or discrimination among them. There is equal importance and dignity shared among the parts. There is mutual understanding and agreement. Integration, thus, is an existence in togetherness and precursor to a holistic vision of life and can rightly be described in the terminology of Indian culture: unity in diversity and diversity and unity'. Integration is the positive outcome of the dynamics of human values, which makes social life possible. A well-knit social life is dependent on the interplay between the values of human life.

Kabir not only underlined the need of integrating the values of social life but his own life was a lofty example for the same. He was a person of great integrity. He was honest and upright in character. He was simple and straightforward in heart. He was fully committed to the society with the sole mission in his life was 'all-out attempt at making the human society a better place to live in'. He started this campaign with himself. Kabir suggests a highly imperative single-doze medicine for the disorganized and disintegrated human society: 'the oneness of the human existence'. For him following a particular religious tradition or ideology, belonging to a particular social caste, class or community, holding a particular profession or position, etc. is not important. Becoming a good human being is the most meritorious achievement in life.

Kabir also raises a major objection about the religious traditions. The human society has accumulated a lot of junk in the name of tradition. Much of it is a burden – a futile heavyweight, for the human being. There is a dire as well as a continuous need to examine, discern and discard what is outdated and irrelevant, Kabir gives a categorical exhortation: 'accept the substantial and reject the insubstantial.' The primary things are to be attended first in comparison to the secondary things. The inner element has to get priority in relation to the outer. Quality should gain the first importance. That only can help life, which is the greatest human motto possible. The motivation for being

perfect and the best model of perfection is the 'Higher Power' itself, which never discriminates between the good and the evil. The quench for perfection is life's greatest adventure. This divine characteristic of perfection can be imbibed only by an honest commitment to quality in life.

Integration of values is to be searched for in the quality of concord one maintains with the Divine and with the other human beings. The unseen is reflected in the seen. Creatures are the images of the one same Creator. The Divine is to be encountered in the human and in the natural. Commitment to the Creator is to be expressed towards commitment to the creatures. The latter is the measure of the former too. There is no religion like doing good to the other and there is no irreligion like doing harm to the other. Doing good to the other is the right worship of the Divine. Whatever is done to the other human being is done to the Divine being itself. To love one's neighbour is to love God. To live in harmony with one's co-creatures, especially the humans, is to achieve harmony with the Creator. This is the 'Truth of God' and the 'God of Truth' as well as the truth of life experienced and communicated by Kabir. Kabir inter-twines the visible and the invisible dimensions of the Higher Reality in an unparallel way. Thus he proposes the establishment of social harmony in the human society. This form of integration summarizes all values in life. The consciousness of harmony with the Divine expresses itself in gestures of harmony with one another in the diverse dimensions of societal life.

More than being a holy person, wise and enlightened, a saint is one who is oneself in perfect harmony – spiritually and socially – with the Divine as well as with human and natural dimensions of life. Kabir was one such great mystic and social reformer who enriched the human society, by his struggle against various forms of disharmony in the society, i. e. discrimination, slavery, corruption, castism and other abnormalities. He not only expounded the real spirit of religion but also lived it. He was endowed with a special gift of being human as well as spiritual. His life encompassed the diverse dimensions of spiritual and social renaissance and harmony. He highlighted a universal spiritual foundation for human integration, and facilitated a revolution for renewal in view of promoting integrity and quality in social behaviour.

Notes

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Dr Rajdev Singh, *Shabd Ur Arth Sant Sahity Ke Sandarbh Mein*, Nand Kishor and brothers, Varanasi, 1968, pp.51-53

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Kabir Gratnavalee, Dr Shyam Sunder Das (Ed), Nagree Prachaarinee Sabhaa, Varanasi, VS2045, Saakhee5.4, p.10

- 'Too kthtaa kaagad kee dekhee, mein kehtaa aankhin kee dekhee', Kabir
- 'Aap bichaarei so gyanee hoi', *Kabir Granthaavalee, Padaawalee,* 52, p. 79
- 'i 'Aap hee aap vichaariya, tab kaisaa hoi anand re', Kabir
- 'Akath kehanee prem kee kachu kehee na jai, goonge keree sarkaraa, baithe muskaai', Kabir
- 'Too too kartaa too bhayaa mujhmein rehee na hoon', Kabir
- 'Jit dekhoom tit toom', Kabir
- ^x 'Jab man cchod kutilaayee, tab aayee milei raam rayee', Kabir
- 'Khaalik Khalak Khalak mein Khaalik', *Kabir Granthaavalee*, ibid, Padaavalee 1B, p. 29
- 'Man mathura dil dwaarikaa, Kayaa kaasee jaanee', Kabir, *Kabir Granthaavalee*, ibid, Sakhee, 23, 10, p. 35
- 'Jyoon bimbahi pratibimb samaanaa', Kabir
- 'Ghati ghati rahyo samaayee', Kabir, *Kabir Granthaavalee*, ibid, Padaavalee, 51, p.111
- 'Kethnee kethnee tou kya bhayaa, je kernee na thahray', Kabir, *Kabir Granthaavalee*, ibid, Sakhee, 18,1,p.29
- 'Kethnee thothee jagat mein, kernee uttam saar', Kabir
- 'Kethnee to bahut milaa, garta milaa na koi', Kabir, Sant Sudhaa Saar
- 'Paanee mile na aapko, auran baksat ccheer; aapan man nichal nahin, auran banthawat dheer', *Kabir Sant Kavy*, Parasuram Chatruvedi (Ed), p. 241
- Kehnee meetha khaand see, kernee vish kee loy; kethnee taj kernee karei, to vish se amrut hoi', *Kabir Sant Banee Sangrah*, PartI, p. 47
- 'Pothee padi padi jag muvaa, pandit bhayaa na koi; ekei ashir prem ka pade so pandit hoi', *Kabir Granthaavalee*, ibid, Sakhee, 19,4, p. 30
- 'Je too banbhan-bandhanee jaayaa, to aan baat hvei kehee na aayaa?' *Kabir Granthaavalee*, ibid, p. 79
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- A French Ouote

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