Chapter 3

The Unseen and the Unsaid in Tagore and Kabir

“For the protection of the virtuous, for the extirpation of the evil-doers, and for the establishment of Dharma (righteousness) on a firm footing, I am born from age to age.”

_Bhagawat Gita_

This chapter endeavours to throw light on the mystical expressions of the two poets under review. The study focuses on a review of the poems of these two great poet philosophers placing them in the paradigm of mysticism. Both these poets occupy a distinctive position in the Indian literary firmament. This chapter will concentrate on the two poets individually as well as together, in the archetypal study of mysticism. They were both instrumental in bringing about a great change in the social, cultural and religious awareness of their times. Perhaps it is a daunting task in the present age, to gauge the depth and measure the intensity of the impact that these two visionary poets effected to their respective eras. Both Kabir and Tagore sang out or recorded their ideologies and principles and thus passed on a legacy that calls our attention in spite of a wide span of years and their vision seems to hold good to today’s strife-ridden world. This chapter will provide an exploration into the mystical views of Kabir and Tagore, highlighting the non-sectarian perception of religion as seen in these two poets because it is the non-sectarian conception of religion that leads to unconditional love or the concept of Divine love.

Every Age has its own achievements, developments, revolutions, expansions and accomplishments that are certainly accompanied by strifes, struggles, confusions, chaos and disturbances. The most important lesson that history teaches one is that the
wheel of life keeps spinning and the side that goes down will inevitably come up in time. History of India also proves this hypothesis right. The varnashrama division of ancient India took on colossal proportions during the middle ages and was misinterpreted and misused by the so called ‘higher castes’ for their own private benefits, disregarding the basic self-respect that is the birth right of any human being. The caste system became the ‘Jurassic park’ that man himself created and that grew beyond his control. The subjugation of certain castes by certain others enlarged to such unmanageable dimensions that it was inevitable to boomerang. As Lord Krishna promised in the Gita,

“Yada yada hi dharmasya glanirbhawati Bharatham, abhuthanaam adharmasya, thadaathmaanam srijamyaham”

“For the protection of the good and also for the destruction of the wicked, for the establishment of Dharma, am I born from age to age.” (Bhagawat Gita, Ch 4)

Thus every age witnessed the arrival of an avatar or a super human who was instrumental in bringing a renaissance in the society. Kabir and Tagore were two such souls who endeavoured to uplift the society of their particular times.

Kabir is a poet of paramount importance in the lineage of Bhakti poets of India. His poetry is simultaneously realistic and mystical. He gave voice to deep philosophies and high spiritual notes with an unbelievable blend of rhyme and rhythm in the local dialect of the common man of his times. His poetry was thus composed as to reach the unlettered common man of the 15th Century Awadh. Although Kabir sang for the people of his times, his songs surpass the boundaries of time and space and carry the same import and significance even to the present day world as they did to the 15th Century Awadh. Kabir’s strong hold on both literary as well as religious
thoughts do not confine to India alone. There is a perennial body of Kabir followers (Kabirpanthis), who indisputably assert allegiance to his principles, and respect him for his nonsectarian mysticism and the nonchalant power of his poetry. Through the strength of his poetry and its universal appeal and import, Kabir has become a significantly familiar name even in the modern world. Kabir’s poetry is presently a topic of study and research far and wide – just as much in the western universities as in the eastern. Scholars like Linda Hess have gone to the extent of learning the local language in order to comprehend Kabir in a realistic and holistic manner. She has also introduced the western world to the crude songs in their original form by encouraging bands of Kabirpanthis from his native land to perform at different programmes organised in the western world with the aid of various western universities.

Kabir led an extremely simple and spiritual life and it is surprising to note that his rejection of organised, institutionalised religion does not stand in the path of him being acclaimed as a spokesman of both Hindus as well as Muslims. Both the sects find pride in singing his songs and quoting extensively from his dohas. Just as the English academia quotes from Shakespeare or Wordsworth, just as the Tamil speaking population in south India quotes at length from Thiruvalluvar, it is with the same fervor that the Hindi speaking populace quotes from Kabir during discourses on any topic, ranging from day-to-day mundane affairs to the highest philosophical truth. Besides the Hindu and Muslim populace, Kabir is equally acclaimed by the Sikhs and the fact that the holy Guru Granth Sahib holds Kabir’s songs as an integral part stands testimony for the all-inclusive, non-sectarian nature of Kabir’s poetry.

Kabir was a weaver basically and was not allowed the luxury of formal education during his childhood. His poetry exposes his professional life by an abundance of imagery with the jargon of weaving. Most of his poems are based on the
typical rustic life of Benaras. He employs subtle images and riddles from the weaver’s profession or the art of weaving, and through these images he conveys the highest philosophy of life the sublime truth of the Divine. There is, however, a lot of disagreement among scholars with regard to the fact whether Kabir pursued his profession to earn his livelihood after stepping into the spiritual odyssey. In her introduction to Tagore’s translation of one hundred poems by Kabir, Evelyn Underhill proclaims, “Like Paul the tentmaker, [German mystic Jacob] Boehme the cobbler, [English preacher John] Bunyan the tinker, [and German religious writer] Gerhard Tersteegen, he knew how to combine vision and industry; the work of his hands helped rather than hindered the impassioned meditation of his heart” (x, One Hundred Poems of Kabir). Critics in Hindi have referred to lines from Kabir where a mention is made of his wife or mother. In the form of arguments with them, he expresses the impediments on the path of a seeker who is also a family man. Thus Kabir also became a beacon light for both the spiritual seeker, as well as the common man leading a family life (grihastha). He may no doubt be referred to as one among the few spiritual seekers with commonplace material and social moorings. In the words of R.P.Tiwari,

It can be safely said that Kabir was brought up in a society which was not looked upon with favour by the Hindus nor was fully accepted by the Muslims. No wonder he was free from all kinds of inhibitions and could proclaim his faith with full vigour and self-confidence. Kabir was unlettered and of low origin and it can very easily be surmised that he had no deep acquaintance with the Hindu Sastras but whatever he has said has the stamp of his personality and his simplicity born out of self-realisation. (89-90)
An impeccable feature of Kabir’s poetry is the ecstatic expression of association with the Divine, and the elimination of institutionalised religion (both Hinduism and Islam – the two chief religions of the time) in favour of a direct affiliation with the Divine. “I have had my Seat on the Self-Poised one,” Kabir said.

He further expresses his tryst with the Supreme lucidly and sings,

I have drunk of the Cup of the Ineffable.
I have found the Key of the Mystery.
I have reached the Root of Union.
Traveling by no track, I have come to the Sorrowless Land: very easily has the mercy of the great Lord come upon me….
There the whole sky is filled with sound, and there that music is made without fingers and without strings;
There the game of pleasure and pain does not cease.
In Kabir’s words, ‘If you merge your life in the Ocean of Life, you will find your life in the Supreme Land of Bliss.’ (13-14)

Perhaps his own era was not as favourable to Kabir as is the present day. During the fifteenth century Kabir is believed to have angered the so-called rulers of religion and was also pursued for his ostensibly heretic notions. Kabir himself had progressed so much on the spiritual odyssey that he no longer found mere religious rituals to be of any avail and sometimes he even mocked at exponential religious stalwarts of those days. In one of his songs Kabir assumes the sound of the Supreme and asks thus: “O servant, where dost thou seek Me?,“ and in the same song, he gives the answer:
Lo! I am beside thee.
I am neither in temple nor in mosque;
I am neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash:
Neither am I in rites and ceremonies, nor in Yoga and renunciation.
If thou art a true seeker, thou shalt at once see me; thou shalt meet me in a moment of time. (1)

In the light of his personal experience, Kabir confirmed that the Divine was omnipresent, and need not be found only in the places of worship. This notion of Kabir’s seemed to be questioning the contemporary orthodox culture. It was indeed blasphemy to pronounce that God was “neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash”. His philosophy suggested modernism which in fact enraged both the orthodox Pundits as well as the Maulawis of his times. Kabir outrightly discarded the baseless ritualistic practices of both the contemporary religious sects simultaneously:

The images are all lifeless; they cannot speak:
I know, for I have cried aloud to them.
The Purana and the Koran are mere words:
lifting up the curtain, I have seen. (31)

Some historical records mention that Kabir was charged of religious betrayal by the then presiding Emperor Sikandar Lodi and was exiled from Benares. During his period of exile, he roamed around different places in north India, singing aloud his songs through the villages of those distant lands. Kabir thus became famous all over northern India and became a name that is revered even centuries after his death. He was of such a balanced mind that he would definitely not have basked in the vain glory of his fame and he chose to lead a completely simple life. Among the various
legends about Kabir’s life, an awe-inspiring one is regarding his burial. The votaries of both the religious sects (Hindus and Muslims) are said to have fought over his mortal remains. Both the groups wanted possession of his body in order to cremate it according to their specific custom. In the midst of the argument, a voice from above seems to have asked them to pull back the shroud that covered his body. On doing so, all those present there were astonished to see a heap of flowers under the pall, instead of the mortal remains of Kabir. The two disputing groups divided the flowers with reverence and the Hindus burnt their half while the Muslims buried theirs. Thus, even in his death, Kabir made his non-sectarian nature felt and became immortal. It is ironical to note that he sang against religious intolerance and proclaimed the importance of a higher spiritual thinking as against the narrow idea of segregation, but his own ‘followers’ quarreled over his mortal remains. As if Kabir had predicted such an event, he has sung during his lifetime:

Hindu kahen hum hi le jaaron, Turk kahen mor pir
Dou aaye dinan main main jhagdein, dekhein hans Kabir

“The Hindu wants to burn my body but the Muslim resists: ‘How can you do this to my pir?’

The followers of both religions quarrel as Kabir the swan looks on.”

(pada 90, Bijak)

The poetry of Kabir is replete with high philosophy and mysticism. Like all great mystics who have had the Divine experience, Kabir too realised that the journey towards Godhead was an internal odyssey through the recesses of one’s own soul – which emanates from the Supreme Soul. Whatever Kabir learnt through his personal mystical experience, he wanted to share with the common seeker and thus he proclaimed the relevance of the internal odyssey and the significance of the internal
mental vision as the basis for union with the Divine. This notion is expressed in Tagore’s translation of Kabir’s poem that sings:

Do not go to the garden of flowers!

O Friend! go not there;

In your body is the garden of flowers.

Take your seat on the thousand petals of the lotus, and there gaze on the Infinite Beauty. (3)

These lines are pregnant with the message that God is ‘within’ and not ‘without’.

Kabir’s metaphysical moorings can be discerned in the following lines:

Between the poles of the conscious and the unconscious, there has the mind made a swing:

Thereon hang all beings and all worlds, and that swing never ceases its sway…. All swing!

The sky and the earth and the air and the water; and the Lord himself taking form:

And the sight of this has made Kabir a servant. (10)

The poet extolled the pursuit of truth and the realisation of non-duality. He spoke against the meaningless rites and rituals that various sects and sub-sects of diverse religions propagated. He reiterated the concept of the sanctum sanctorum of the soul being the seat of God when he sang, “Your Lord is near: yet you are climbing the palm-tree to seek Him” (18)

In another poem he articulates the hypocrisy and false pride of the pseudo monks who are enamoured by the external paraphernalia and do not comprehend the
true knowledge. In order to convey this message, Kabir rhetorically exclaims thus, “Why put on the robe of the monk, and live aloof from the world in lonely pride?” He makes us realise that “He [God] dwells at the heart of all things, so why take refuge in empty desolation?” (53) The great poet-seer tries to explain the worth of real knowledge and tells us “Where knowledge is, can ignorance endure?” (28) He further sings and explains how man is fighting against all evils and negative emotions within his soul. Kabir firmly believes that God-realisation leads to the ultimate redemption.

According to the poet:

In the field of this body a great war goes forward,
Against passion, anger, pride, and greed:
It is in the kingdom of truth, contentment and
Purity, that this battle is raging; and the
Sword that rings forth most loudly is the
Sword of His Name. (28)

In a true seeker’s quest for the Divine, Kabir exalts that the path is demonstrated by ‘Satsang, sadhu, sanyasi and Guru’ “The true guru teaches that He has neither limit Nor infinitude” (33)

Kabir conveys the difficulty of communicating mystical ecstasy through linguistic syntax. He believes that a true seeker will receive the grace and guidance of the almighty, who alone can lead the seeker in the spiritual quest. In a poem that has been translated by Tagore, he is quoted to have remarked, “Brahma suits His language to the Understanding of His hearer” (33)

In Kabir’s opinion, the only way of communion with the Supreme is to shed ego and to surrender completely. Kabir realised this secret and he pities the spiritual
aspirant who does not realise that the supreme Soul that he is seeking is within him. In one of his poems he explains this:

The flower blooms for the fruit: when the fruit
Comes, the flower withers.
The musk is in the deer, but it seeks it not within
Itself: it wanders in quest of grass (4)

The poet wishes the seeker to realise the ultimate truth and to cry out to the omnipotent with an unquenchable eagerness and earnestness. He gives the clarion call, “My heart must cleave to my Lover; / I must with-draw my veil, and meet Him with all my Body” (7) Kabir calls out to the seeker asking him to shed all that is dividing him and the Divine, to wake up from the slumber of lifetimes, undergo purgation of the soul through tears and like a true lover craving for his beloved, to realise God through love.

Inspite of differences of opinion among scholars and researchers regarding Kabir’s life and works, it is universally believed that Kabir was influential in the amalgamation of Islamic and Hindu ideologies and thus he is given his due credit in the words of Hedayathulla, who addresses the saint as the ‘harbinger of Hindu-Muslim unity’. A thorough reading of Kabir brings us to the conclusion that his intention was not merely to bring the two disputing communities together, perhaps he hoped for a society free of any such distinctions. He influenced both the Bhakti cult of Hinduism and also the Sufi system of the Islamic mystical tradition. Researchers are even trying to read elements of Christian mysticism in Kabir’s songs, notwithstanding his obvious connections with Sikhism and Buddhism. These facts are a true testimony to the non-sectarian nature of the great poet. After Tagore’s translation of Kabir’s
poems in English, many other translations also came up. Kabir enriched the Hindi language with his simple but lofty expressions and peculiar phraseology.

Like the renowned contemporary Persian mystics, Jalalludin Rumi, Attar, Hafiz, and Sadi, who influenced the believers of Islam and introduced them to the concept of a non-sectarian Supreme, Kabir influenced the ideologies of the multifarious Hindu sects prevalent in the North during his times. His dream of bringing together, the two sects of Islam and Hinduism, in a proper spiritual understanding can be clearly seen in many of his songs and dohas. True to the ideals of his guru Ramananda, who introduced to the North, the religious revolution that Ramanuja introduced in the South, Kabir also voiced the thought that God was not the private property of the elite or the priestly sect or the learned Sanskrit-educated society of his times. Through his songs and dohas, which were set to the common vernacular, he made the society realise that God would listen to a simple call of an earnest seeker with the same fervour that he would, the high sounding mantras of a learned priest.

In Kabir, we see an inner conviction and an undying quest for the rendezvous with the Divine and he chose to sing aloud his understanding of the Supreme Soul for the benefit of the masses. He posed a challenge against the superstitious rituals and traditions and also questioned the orthodox texts until he himself validated the truth. He was not a skeptic or an atheist who negated all doctrines, teachings and practices outright, without acknowledging them. Conversely, a thorough research into the poems of Kabir throws light on the fact that he knew a wide variety of traditions and has explicitly recognised any path that gave the truth. Perhaps, this is the reason behind the difficulty of casting Kabir into any particular faith or tradition.
True to the nature of a guru, Kabir never lacked the courage to stand up to face the truth and speak out boldly even to men of consequence and power. His songs and dohas stand testimony to his criticism of hypocrisy that was prevalent among the religious leaders of his time. It is not clear whether he disapproved of sincere devotees who practiced the rites and rituals. His path was one of a spiritual nature – focused on the inner sanctity rather than mere external exhibition. To him, Guru was equal to God and he often used these two terms interchangeably in order to signify the Supreme Soul. In summation of Kabir’s life and teachings, it can be rightly said that he believed in simplicity, honesty and conviction in the quest of truth, which was possible to achieve only through a desire for detachment from the material world of desires.

Kabir articulated a healthy disregard for conservative dogmas of society and the concept of institutionalised religion. His inherent quest was deep-rooted in spirituality and not bound by the narrow walls of sectarian religion. He was an ardent social and religious reformer with sublime thoughts that worked in the direction of bringing to harmony, the otherwise disputing religious sects. In his endeavour to bring about the religious harmony, Kabir had to brave the rough winds of orthodox religious system.

There is a difference of opinion among scholars whether Kabir was basically a poet who conveyed spiritual ideas through his poetry, or whether he was a spiritual saint who employed poetry as a potent vehicle to convey his ideas on spirituality. Kabir was also a social reformer who effected a positive change in the rigid orthodox social environment. Thus his contribution to literature, social life and religion, cannot be undermined. His poetry is an authentication of his spiritual message and mystical moorings. Thus Kabir is more a philosopher and a seer than a poet. After this in-depth
study of the life and the poetry of Kabir in the framework of mysticism, the scholar now wishes to shift focus to the second author under review, Rabindranath Tagore.

Tagore hails from a diagonally opposite social, economic and cultural environment to that of Kabir’s. His lineage boasts of three generations of exceptional men. He is an heir of an aristocratic legacy of his grandfather Prince Dwarkanath; his father, Maharshi Debendranath was among the pioneers of the Brahmo Samaj which was initiated in the form of a revolution against orthodoxy; his elder brother Satyendranath was the first Indian who cleared the Indian Civil Services Examination. This unique combination of aristocracy, defiance of orthodoxy, and profound intellect which was passed on genetically to Rabindranath Tagore, finds its expression in his writings and speeches.

Tagore penned poetry at a very young age, composing his first poem at the age of eight. He did not choose to be pinned down by conservative formal education and decided to free his spirit from the shackles of the four walls of the school. Thus he left school at the age of fourteen. He then exposed himself to the open world of books and learning. Tagore had the opportunity to be exposed to both - the Indian classical writers as well as the Western Romantic poets simultaneously. He is said to have admired the stalwarts of Sanskrit poetry, like Kalidasa, and other Bhakti lyricists from Bengal on the one hand and on the other, the Romantic poets of English literature, like Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth, whose reverent approach to nature and their gentle love for the Divine can be seen reflected in Tagore’s works.

It was after 1890 when Tagore shifted to Shelidah (modern Bangladesh) to take care of his family estates there that he came into direct contact with the rustic beauty of nature and he began to admire the rustic beauty and the ethnicity of the
villages of Bengal. Life at Shelidah introduced Tagore to Bauls - the mendicant singers – who wandered around the villages, singing in praise of the Divine. Their songs brought forth the notion of the Divine dwelling within the portals of one’s own heart and not in the outward institutions. They proposed the rejection of external manifestation in the form of conventional modes of worship. They believed in an inward journey in search of the Divine and even expressed detest for the orthodox institutional religions that denied freedom of expression. Through their simple country songs, the Bauls introduce the listeners to the mysterious omnipresent. The Bauls’ concept of “religion of man” (manusher dharma) impacted an indelible imprint in Tagore’s mind and opened new vistas of spiritual knowledge for him. Tagore became an ambassador of Baul music and spirituality and made the outer world realise the greatness of these simple rustic folk.

A perfect blend of God, Humanity and Nature (Sathyam, Shivam, Sundaram) formed the basis of Tagore’s conception of religion. He held a spiritual vision that rejected the rigidity and superficiality of orthodox institutionalised religions and based his vision on a unification of Purusha (God) and Prakriti (Nature – including Mankind). In his spiritual notion, he even deviates from the modern monistic concept of religion put forth by the Brahmo Samaj. Tagore had a unique vision about all kinds of art and artists. According to him, there was a single Creator who is manifested in the numerous splendors of nature, and the artist (painter, musician, or any other art) reveals that same diversity with an inimitable divine unity.

Tagore has left behind a literary fortune as legacy for Bengal as well as the whole of India to boast about. Although best known as a poet who composed different kinds of poetry, he also wrote short stories, plays, novels, essays, political articles, songs, and even composed music and was also a great painter. Tagore’s literary
output is thus astounding. His early compositions were primarily in Bangla and later, he himself translated them into English. His first translated work was *Gitanjali*, and it earned him and his country, the much coveted Nobel Prize for Literature, the first one for India in the field. Tagore had the rare opportunity of being overtly praised by W. B. Yeats. Yeats consented to write an introduction to this work, wherein he comments about the great piece as lyrics “expressing in thought a world I have dreamt of all my life.” (xiii) This masterpiece brought international acclaim to the poet and in the process, introduced Bengali literature to the world.

Tagore was earnestly engaged in national politics and took active part in the *Swadeshi* Movement. He is better known as a poet philosopher and a social reformer, than a political activist. Aesthetic idealisation seems to have sidetracked his role in politics. He played a fairly significant role in the freedom struggle until 1907. A series of unprecedented deaths in his family made way for his disillusionment and brought about a sudden and drastic change in the psyche of Tagore. He began to introspect more and became a spiritual seeker, aspiring for the ultimate truth. The advent of spirituality brought with it an increasing dissent for violence of any sort (even for the freedom that he so genuinely craved for). Thus Tagore retreated from the nationalist movement to the deeper realm of art and spirituality. This philosophical disillusionment and his poignant withdrawal into the inner sphere of spirituality are lucidly expressed in *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*, 1919). True to his temperament at that time, the novel depicts an ambivalent state – divided between home and the outside world – at the level of conscience, between the inner sphere of spirituality and the outer world of action. Attesting the author’s spiritual maturity, the novel depicts the failure of the violent revolt for freedom.
In spite of his retreat from active politics, Tagore was still invited at various forums and he inevitably spoke about diverse social and political issues of his times. In 1917, after the horrendous First World War, Tagore went on a tour to Japan and the United States where he delivered lectures highlighting the negative implication of nationalism and the need for a more comprehensive and universal outlook. By now Tagore, the nationalist had developed a deeper understanding and a higher notion of ‘Universalism’ as against the narrow concept of ‘Nationalism’; the Vedic idea of ‘VasudevaKutumbakam’. Tagore now saw nationalism as an evil dehumanising power that was fast spreading throughout the world and was stripping human beings of their humanity and leading to a lot of bloodshed.

Tagore gave voice to the quintessence of Eastern spirituality through his poetry. He is one of the most influential mystic poets and teachers of his time. Through extremely sensitive and spiritual versification, Tagore reaches out to people from all backgrounds and gives them a taste of spirituality through selfless service and love. To Tagore, in a like manner as to any other seer-poet, love is the highest emotion. Through his poems Tagore advocated his vision and philosophy of life and through the use of various symbols and images he exposes the spiritual path for a true seeker. The path that is mapped out in his poetry includes – listening to the names of the Lord; singing hymns and songs in praise of God; remembering His magnificent attributes; serving God; worshiping God; offering one’s self to God; and thinking of God as one’s soul mate. Tagore portrays God as mother, friend, beloved, a traveller, and calls out to the seeker to shed the veil of ego and move towards the Godhead with devotion and love.
The Gardener and Gitanjali are two of the most important works of Tagore that reflect his philosophical and spiritual vision. The former is a collection of poems that express youth and earthly love, whereas the latter is an anthology exposing the concept of divine love. The Gitanjali is the collection of poems that is simple yet overwhelmingly mystical. It throws light on Tagore’s concept of spirituality and his quest for eternal happiness. It forms a bridge between the occidental and the oriental concept of spirituality, thus making him the spiritual ambassador of India to the West; and it is this endeavour that won him and India, the much coveted Nobel Prize in literature.

Tagore believed in the “unity of all things in God” (One Hundred, xix) Through the huge repertoire of his writings, Tagore conveys the idea of the universe as a single unit that manifests God and shows the path towards God through the humanitarian way. Tagore’s poetry talks about divine love, its significance and the path towards achieving the same. As mentioned in his introduction to Gitanjali, “We had not known that we loved God, hardly it may be that we believed in Him…” (xix) Yeats describes Tagore’s vision of the omnipresent God in his introduction to the Gitanjali where he [Yeats] mentions:

These verses … as the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon the rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth… The traveller in the red-brown clothes that he wears that dust may not show upon him, the girl searching in her bed for the petals fallen from the wreath of her royal lover, the servant or the bride awaiting the master's home-coming in the empty
house, are images of the heart turning to God. Flowers and rivers, the blowing
of conch shells, the heavy rain of the Indian July, or the moods of that heart in
union or in separation; and a man sitting in a boat upon a river playing lute,
like one of those figures full of mysterious meaning in a Chinese picture, is
God Himself… (11)

In the 21st century strife-ridden world, torn by religious violence and
terrorism, the influence of Tagore is inimitable not only to his homeland, but
throughout the country, and even globally. Tagore is an internationally acclaimed
cultural icon, who has the rare credit of having composed the national anthems for
two different countries (India and Bangladesh) and like Shakespeare, is one of the
most widely published authors to this day, whose books find place in the curriculum
of many acclaimed universities around the world. His observations against the narrow
domestic walls of nationalism are undoubtedly relevant to the present times where
religious violence has taken up a monstrous proportion and is spreading its intensively
destructive clutches. It is in fact highly ironical that a land that honours Tagore as the
‘Kaviraj’ and ‘Maharishi’ and sings a song composed by him as its national anthem,
should fail to recognise his world view of tolerance and remain torn by the same
nationalistic and religious barricades that he detested.

All of Tagore’s works – however simple they appeared, possess an underlying
shade of philosophical element. His concept of spirituality – a strong belief in the
existence of the Super Soul or a Supreme Natural Spirit that pervades the entire
universe and acts behind all humans, is the core of all his works. His movement from
personal to social to national and further to international and universal betterment is a
process of development in the inner conscience of Tagore in search of Divine unity.
He acknowledged the divine presence in all his writings and it finally culminated in the appearance of song offerings (*Gitanjali*), which was his tribute to the Divine.

Besides being an artist, social reformer, philosopher, spiritual master and a political figure, Tagore’s role in the field of educational pedagogy cannot be ignored. He can be termed as a pioneer in the colonial era who envisioned a drastic change in our system of education to be carried forward to the post colonial India. Disappointed by the stifling system of colonial education in the Indian schools, where children were tied down with choking ties, shoes and pressing rows of benches and desks, and were not allowed the freedom of thought, Tagore aspired for an alternative methodology. He turned towards the replica of our ancient *gurukulas* or the *tapovanams* and founded the *Shantiniketan* (the abode of peace). This was a unique endeavour in the field of education as it set forth an unconventional method of teaching and learning. The classes were held outdoors, in the gardens in direct company of nature, thus encouraging creative thinking. All kinds of arts were given paramount importance.

After this brief exposition of the two poets in the light of spirituality, mysticism, their vision, and mission, the scholar would like to present a small cross-section of comparison between the two poet philosophers in their revelation of the non-sectarian concept of religion since this is the notion that leads to the development of Divine love in a true seeker. This concept is articulated vociferously by Kabir thus:

*moko kahân dhûnro bande*

O SERVANT, where dost thou seek Me?

Lo! I am beside thee. I am neither in temple nor in mosque: I am neither in Kaaba nor in Kailash: Neither am I in rites and ceremonies, nor in Yoga and
renunciation. If thou art a true seeker, thou shalt at once see Me: thou shalt meet Me in a moment of time.

Kabîr says, “O Sadhu! God is the breath of all breath” (*One Hundred*, 1)

Tagore resonates the same idea in his *Gitanjali* by highlighting the futility of chanting and telling the beads as a mere ritual. He appeals to the seeker to understand that God is not shut in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, “Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!” (22)

In the modern age of scientific and technological development, when man has scaled great heights and has reached the pinnacle of success in almost every sphere of human involvement, there are perhaps a few complex questions that have remained unanswered and have left mankind baffled at its own inscrutable nature. Man has, from the days of yore, been fighting for several causes like land, love, life, power, fame and glory and when he was assured of these, he started believing that he was all-powerful and so neither God nor religion mattered. However, surprisingly, the modern age - which has conquered Nature to a great extent - has become an age of undeniable doubt, strife, and struggle; a strange battle for all the above reasons and, ironically, even for faith and religion, persists. The whole of mankind is battered by the doubts regarding the right and the wrong, the good and the evil, and in this quest it has stumbled upon different paths and faiths that lead to the realisation of the Ultimate Truth. If we define religion to be a path that leads one towards the realisation of the Supreme, which religion can show us the path towards the Supreme? Perhaps, we can find answers to these questions in Kabir and Rabindranath Tagore.
Given the fact that Tagore was of high and noble birth and lived a thoroughly worldly life and Kabir was of humble birth and led a saintly life, they display a set of curious similarities. Even though both the poets lived in different times - separated by five centuries - and lived in an entirely different social milieu, the fact that they held very similar ideologies and philosophies is remarkable indeed. It is evidently seen that they were perturbed by the inequalities and the pettiness of human mind. Both of them have clearly voiced their views on (i) the futility of rites, rituals and similar practices, (ii) the folly of searching for the Divine outside one’s own self in external forces (iii) the pining for the Divine Union (iv) the concept of Oneness, etc.

Both Kabir and Tagore were against the futility of meaningless ritualistic worship of God and they appeal to mankind to go beyond such rituals and look inside one’s own self to realise the Supreme. The same idea is echoed in several Indian writers starting from the Vedic Age to the 20th century poets like Sri Aurobindo and Tagore. All great seers and philosophers point at this unison in their discourses and despite the repetition of the same thought in different ways mankind is yet to wake up to the truth conveyed by the Supreme Being. The philosophy professed by Kabir and Tagore may be briefly summarised in the following manner:

**Futility of religious rites and rituals**

This aspect is brought out well in several songs of Kabir as well as in Tagore’s works. The first song in Tagore’s translation of *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, highlights the futility of searching for the Divine in temples or mosques.

A great revealer of Reality, one of the pioneers of a non-sectarian concept of Religion, a detester of religious exclusivism, a believer in the ideology of all men being the children of God, Kabir tried to shed the veil of orthodox ritualism which,
according to him, was a barrier in the path of attaining unity with the Eternal. His songs and *dohas*, written in a local dialect of Hindi, are the natural articulation of his vision of universal love. The futility of searching for God in places of religious worship is well brought out in Tagore’s opening stanza of *Gitanjali* also, where he entreats upon mankind to leave chanting and singing and telling of the beads and asks to open one’s inward eye to see God within, thus impressing upon the true seeker the futility of searching for the Divine without.

Like Kabir, Tagore is also against the futility of meaningless ritualistic worship of God and asks man to go beyond such rituals and look inside his own self to realise the transcendental. The reflection of the same idea is undeniably seen and the folly of looking for the Divine in monotonous rituals is a simple, plain ironical attack on the social practices of not only their times but even the present day. The mockery or perhaps, even the mere mention of ‘the mindless following of the people’ shows the poets as social reformers. In another poem in the *Gitanjali*, Tagore says,

The traveler has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end.

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said ‘Here art thou!’ (23)

In the *Stray Birds*, Tagore speaks thus: “How far are you from me, O Fruit?/ ‘I am hidden in your heart, O Flower.” (Tagore, *Great Works* 595)

The comprehension of and the unison with the Divine Reality which Kabir extolled, was far away from mindless austerities, rites and rituals. According to him,
the Supreme was not in the religious temples or mosques, but within the portals of the individual’s own heart. There was no need to seek Him far and wide; the Lord was ready to show Himself to the ardent seeker.

_stärath men to sab pànî hai_

THERE is nothing but water at the holy bathing places; and I know that they are useless, for I have bathed in them. The images are all lifeless, they cannot speak; I know, for I have cried aloud to them. The Purana and the Koran are mere words; lifting up the curtain, I have seen. Kabir gives utterance to the words of experience; and he knows very well that all other things are untrue. (31)

These lines undoubtedly authenticate Kabir’s belief in a non-sectarian concept of the Supreme. They also reinforce his dislike for meaningless images and the conventional ‘sacred words’ devoid of the essence of the Supreme. The song also prophesies the futility of orthodox ritualistic worship that is meaningless.

**Love and God Realisation**

Most of Kabir’s _dohas_ and songs contributed to the portrayal of the Omniscient to all true seekers who develop an earnest love for the Divine, irrespective of their religion or clan or sect, or sub-sect, or any other possible human demarcations. Kabir introduces his followers to the necessity and the urgency to realise the Supreme and also refers to the place to find the Divine. Through the simple analogy of the mortal and the immortal as the lover and the Beloved, Kabir pronounces thus:

[paramatam guru nikat virajain]

O my heart! The Supreme Spirit, the
Great Master, is near you: wake,
Oh wake!
Run to the feet of your Beloved: for
Your Lord stands near to your
Head.
You have slept for unnumbered ages;
This morning will you not wake?” (17)

In another of his songs, the poet talks about nirguna and saguna bhakti. He proclaims ‘love’ to be the highest form of worship and communion with the Lord as the ultimate truth and infinite bliss.

He says:

Onkar siwae koi sirjai
All things are created by the Om;
The love-form is His body.
He is without form, without quality, without decay:
Seek thou union with Him!
But that formless God takes a thousand forms in the eyes of His creatures:
He is pure and indestructible,
His form is infinite and fathomless,
He dances in rapture, and waves of form arise from His dance:
The body and the mind cannot contain themselves, when they are touched by His great joy.
He is immersed in all consciousness, all joys, and all sorrows;
He has no beginning and no end;
He holds all within His bliss.” (21)

To reach the common audience of his times, Kabir makes use of very ordinary and simple metaphors. In the following lines, he suggests that we must think of God as our beloved and like a couple in love, eagerly yearning for their marriage and pining for each other’s permanent company, we must think of the Almighty with the utmost intense craving.

*sain bin dard kareje hoy*

When I am parted from my Beloved, my heart is full of misery: I have no Comfort in the day, I have no sleep in the night. To whom shall I tell my sorrow?

The night is dark; the hours slip by. Because my Lord is absent, I start up and tremble with fear.

Kabir says: ‘Listen, my friend! there is no other satisfaction, save in The encounter with the Beloved.’ (36)

Both Kabir and Tagore are of the view that love is the ultimate emotion and it is the intense love for the Supreme that leads man to the final communion with the Divine. In his *Gitanjali*, Tagore says,

Through birth and death, in this world or in others, wherever thou leadest me it is thou, the same, the one companion of my endless life who ever linkest my heart with bonds of joy to the unfamiliar.

When one knows thee, then alien there is none, then no door is shut. Oh, grant me my prayer that I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the one in the play of the many. (58)
To reinforce this same concept, Tagore writes in another song in *Gitanjali*:

“That I want thee, only thee – let my heart repeat / without end. All desires that distract me, day and /night, are false and empty to the core.” (37) Tagore righteously believed in the emotion of love and was of the opinion that God also loved ‘love’. To quote from his *Fireflies*, “God seeks comrades and claims love, / the Devil seeks slaves and claims obedience.” (S.K. Das ed. 442). Another line from the same collection of poems says, “While God waits for His temple to be built of love, / men bring stones.” (444)

This clearly purports the poet’s concern over man’s ignorance of his purpose and mission on earth, that of ‘love’. Overtones of social reform aimed at developing love for all humanity can be read in Tagore throughout his writings. For instance, the idea of love is promulgated in very simple terms in these lines from his *Stray Birds*: “He who wants to do good knocks at the gate; / he who loves/ finds the gate open.”

(S K Das ed. 88)

**Seeking the Divine**

Kabir, throughout his life, has urged his followers to realise the necessity and urgency to seek the Divine and reach the Supreme and has also guided the seeker in the journey. All great seers and philosophers point at this unison in their discourses. Like Kabir who has made use of the simple analogy of the passionate lover and the beloved to drive home the concept of Divine love, Tagore also makes use of similar metaphor in his poems. In the following lines from his *Gitanjali*, Tagore voices the importance of shedding away the materialistic nature of one’s self if one aims at the sublime communion:
My song has put off her adornments. She has no pride of dress and decoration. Ornaments would mar our union; they would come between thee and me; their jingling would drown thy whispers. (20)

Great poets like Kabir and Tagore are of the opinion that the Almighty is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient, who can be realised only through pure, intense and extensive love and craving. This love may often lead the seeker to look in different directions and assume different relationships with the Divine. One may perceive Him to be a Master, while the other may look at Him as a parent, as a child, as a beloved, as a friend, and so on. The journey, however, ends up in the consummation of the Self and the Supreme. Tagore, true to this tradition, says, in his *Gitanjali*,

The traveler has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end.

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said ‘Here art thou!’(23)

We find that Tagore’s perception changes and develops into a friendship with the Lord in another song from *Gitanjali*: “Drunk with the joy of singing I forgot myself and / call thee friend who are my lord.” (18) The last part of the poem, *Fireflies*, reflects Tagore’s craving for Divine union through a complete sense of surrender in love with the Divine.

ALL THE delights that I have left in life’s fruits and flowers
let me offer to thee at the end of the feast,
in a perfect union of love. (S.K. Das ed. 469)

This reminds us of the Upanishadic concept of self realisation that is contained in the Chhandogya Upanishad (6.8.7) of Sama Veda. According to this philosophy, the highest realisation is that the soul and the Super Soul are the same. This summation of the Upanishads and essence of Sankaracharya’s Advaita Philosophy “Tat tvam asi” (“Thou art this”) is finely brought out in the line from Tagore’s *Fireflies*: “WHEN the voice of the Silent touches my words I know him and therefore I know myself.” (765)

**The concept of Oneness**

In any spiritual quest, a seeker reaches the Ultimate Truth by realising the ubiquitous charisma of the Divine in the entire universe. The awareness of His presence in all things great and small makes a seeker reach his destination and attain the re-union with the Supreme. A *sadhak* reaches this stage after a long period of introspection and *tapas*. We see the same idea reflected in both Kabir and Tagore. To quote Kabir, as translated by Tagore:

*Nirgun age sargun nacai*

BEFORE the Unconditioned, the Conditioned dances:

‘Thou and I are one!’ this trumpet proclaims.

The Guru comes, and bows down before the disciple:

This is the greatest of wonders. (22)

The same idea is echoed in Tagore’s *Stray Birds*, where he says, ‘How far are you from me, O Fruit?’/ ‘I am hidden in your heart, O Flower.’ (S.K. Das ed. 595)
The element of Oneness found in flower and fruit as seen in these lines appear in Gitanjanli too: “The same stream of life that runs through my veins / night and day runs through the world and dances in / rhythmic measure.” (62) In the present world of materialism and social inequalities where there is no assurance of peace and prosperity, the understanding of the Divine in human nature promotes the well-being of all on earth.

_Jo khoda masjid vasat hai…_

IF GOD be within the mosque, then to whom does this world belong?
If Ram be within the image which you find upon your pilgrimage,
Then who is there to know what happens without?
Hari is in the East: Allah is in the West. Look within your heart, for
There you will find both Karim and Ram:
All the men and women of the world are His living forms.
Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram: He is my Guru, He is my Pir. (46)

The concept of a monistic religion, as seen in Kabir, is very prominently seen in Tagore also. In his collection of poems, _Fireflies_, Tagore sings, “Bigotry tries to keep truth safe in its hand/with a grip that kills it.” The same thought is expressed again in the following lines from the same collection:

_The spirit of death is one,_
_the spirit of life is many,_
_when God is dead religion becomes one. (S.K. Das ed. 442)_

**Mission, Vision, and Relevance to Modern times**

Even though Kabir preceded Tagore by several centuries, it cannot be concluded that Tagore borrowed ideas from the former for the simple reason that
Tagore was exposed to an eclectic reading and his travels abroad had widened his world of knowledge. Notwithstanding this, Tagore’s *Gitanjali* and his other poems with philosophical moorings were dated earlier than his translation of Kabir. W. B. Yeats, who has written an introduction to *Gitanjali*, marvels at the greatness of the work and writes “… these prose translations from Rabindranath Tagore have stirred my blood as nothing has for years…” (5) Another note of appreciation is written by Atkinson while mentioning about Tagore’s Philosophy: “…what seems to characterize Tagore’s philosophy and spiritual outlook was his tendency to pick what he liked best in each religious tradition and to unify those beliefs into his own world view.” (33) Tagore has been admired by a long list of critics even upto the present time not only in Bengal or the entire India, but also across the world as he holds the position of a cultural icon and his works are studied the world over.

In the modern world of cut-throat competition, where everyone is busy securing one’s future, one seems to have forgotten the umbilical cord connecting him to the Supreme and has become disjointed from the source. This in turn leads to the present global unrest and anarchy. The only way to overcome this great distress is to understand the Upanishadic concept of realising the Supreme, as has been very aptly highlighted in simple terms by Kabir:

*Kabir so dhan sanchiye, jo aage koon hoy,*

*Sees chadhaye potli, le jaath dekhya na koy.*

Says Kabir,

Save only that wealth
That later may be useful
And if you carry it on head in a bundle
To others will not be visible. (G N Das 108)
Das adds his own commentary to the couplet wherein he mentions that man should collect and save spiritual wealth as it is invisible to the eye and hence is not subject to theft or burglary. The hoarding of spiritual wealth will lead to man’s emancipation, whereas hoarding worldly riches brings only worries and miseries.

(108)

Kabir believes that humans have forgotten their mission on earth due to deceptive thinking and due to the effect of *maya* (illusion). In a song, he asks his fellow-beings to open the gate to the mansion of God with the key of love. This is very much reflective of Tagore’s own idea of universal love. The study has brought forth a few important and fascinating facts and similarities. Since the Upanishadic concept of a non-sectarian *Brahman* is the need of the hour the importance of the concepts upheld by both Kabir and Tagore are relevant even after centuries. The songs of both these poets took up as their tool, simple examples, images, symbols, situations and references from daily life experiences, thus making it easy for the reader to grasp the meaning without the help of a mediator, dictionary or a reference manual. Both the poets had the power to touch the readers’ heart and soul, compelling them into introspection and the realisation of the supreme Spirit within each human spirit. This was perhaps the positive fortification that the poets intended to bring about in the societies of their times.

Since Kabir and Tagore belong to two widely different centuries, a clear contrast can be gauged in their lives, social and religious milieu, yet there is a marked similarity in their philosophical outlook. Both of them not only influenced their own social and religious environments greatly, but also exercise their imprint to the present day. Their works act as beacon lights to the seekers of all ages and all strata of the society. Tagore’s poems are, borrowing the phrases from Wordsworth, a
‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and ‘emotions recollected in tranquility’.

On the other hand, Kabir’s preaching is the immediate outcome of his direct mystical experience with the Divine. Kabir’s experience was not the result of contemplated effort and hence his songs are not a reproduction of memory – they are a spontaneous overflow of Divinity from the inner core of his being. He employed very ordinary and simple language in his poetry. He had a natural endowment for rhyme and rhythm that endeavoured to call upon the common man to be focused on God Realisation.

The Quest of Truth in the Songs and Poems of Kabir and Tagore

Kabir was an enlightened soul who had direct experience of the Divine and Tagore was a person who realised the futility of the affairs of the world through personal pain and became a seeker of the ultimate truth. Hence the songs and poems under introspection here – *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* and *Gitanjali* – have the pursuit of truth as the crux. The pursuit of truth leads the seeker invariably from the path of Duality (*Dvaita bhava*) towards inner confluence of the *Jeevatma* (human soul) and the *Paramathma* (Supreme Soul) which results in Non-Dualism (*Advaita bhava*). It is this notion of non-dualism that culminates in the movement of the *Jeevatma* from the state of transient joy to a state of transcendental bliss (*paramananda*). As Reenu Kumar says in her article “Some Philosophical Elements in the Poems of Kabir and Rabindra Nath Tagore”,

Pursuing Truth means confrontation with Duality and realization of Non-Dualism. Dualism recognises the differences between *Jiva* (Subordinate soul) and *Ishvara* (Supreme God) and perceives the Truth to be different and distant from oneself. Non-Dualism philosophy looks at everything as *Brahman* (The
Supreme God, considered the only truth - The singular reality) which has three fundamental attributes *sat-cit-ananda* (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss). (220)

This state of realisation takes the human spirit to the higher realm of Divine consciousness where the subordinate spirit and the supreme spirit unite in blissful Divine communion (*Aham Brahmasmi/ Tat twamasi*). Both Kabir and Tagore convey that the Divine Soul resides within the individual soul. “Non-Dualism insists that the experiential personal realization of unity of everything must be achieved until a person achieves such realization.” (Kumar 220)

The important lesson that the poems of these two great visionaries teaches us is the realisation of the ultimate truth of one Supreme Soul pervading the entire universe. Any true seeker who is earnest in efforts can realise the ultimate truth that the omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent Spirit is the spirit of the universe. The realisation of this truth does not require one to be well-read or exposed to scriptures (as exemplified by the life of Kabir) nor is this awareness a hindrance on the path of a true seeker (life of Tagore stands testimony to the fact).

This in-depth analysis of the philosophy, vision, mission, and the poetics of these two poets very vividly brings to light the similarities and differences between them. In the following tabulation the researcher consolidates some of the differences between the two poets as observed during the course of this study:
### Kabir vs Tagore

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As an extension of this research work, the scholar has consolidated a schematic representation of the various themes that have been dealt with in the poems of these two great poet philosophers, thus making it easy for future researchers in their attempt to study these poets. The results have been recorded as appendage to this report. Divine love is the underlying idea in both these poets and the scholar’s search reaches culmination in this theme. The next chapter will deal extensively with the concept of Divine love as seen in these two visionaries.