Chapter 4

Kabir: The Saint-Poet and Preacher

Kabir exits as one of the most influential personalities in the world, in literary as well as the religious domains. For the past six or seven decades, his poems have been circulating in several languages across the globe. Born in the 15th century India, numerous legends discuss the birth, life and the death of Kabir. According to the generally accepted view, Kabir was, as a child, found resting on a lotus leaf by a Muslim weaver who bought him home and adopted him (Keay, 1996). In spite of this widely accepted view, scholars have different views with regard to his parenting, family, birth and death. There is, however, a consensus on the fact that Kabir belonged to the time when Sikander Lodi ruled and also that he was a disciple of Swami Ramananda. Similarly, as far as his place of birth is concerned, Viswanath
Tiwari writes that “two places, namely Kashi and Maghar are mentioned as his birth-place but a majority of scholars are of the view that Kabir was born in Kashi” (2005, p. 3). It is believed that Kabir was born in Kashi and towards the later stage of his life, he went to Maghar, especially, to challenge the view that to die in Kashi would merit entry to heaven and to die in Maghar would lead to hell (Sharma, 2008). As far as the married life of Kabir is concerned, he is believed to have married Loi and their son was named Kamal (Sharma, 2008). However, this argument remains to be substantiated, but the inference drawn is that he lived a normal and an ordinary family life. A weaver by profession, Kabir was an epitome of chastity and simplicity.

The 15th century in India was a period of political instability and turmoil. The Delhi Sultanate was declining and the rulers who took over were partial in approach to religions (Bahadur, 1997). It was during this medieval age that Bhakti flourished across India and Kabir remains, even today, the most significant Bhakti poet in the Indian tradition. Kabir wasn’t literate, but he was a wise, insightful and an experienced man who revolutionized the society through his poetry. Through his poetry, he emerged as a saint, a mystic, a revolutionary, a rebel, a reformer, a preacher and above all a great thinker. He spoke to and for the people and in a language that they understood—the vernacular. His poems, therefore, remain the all time compositions for the upliftment and harmony of the world at large. His poetic utterances are packed with multiple themes ranging from social to religious. Being an illiterate, Kabir’s utterances are more visionary rather than scholarly compositions and a representative of his personal and experimental foresight. His experience with the divine stays at the centre of his verses. The poems of Kabir are divided into two poetic forms, short rhymed lyrics called the padas and ramainis and the other couplets known as dohas or sakhis (Bahadur, 1997).
Kabir belonged to the Bhakti cult of India as mentioned earlier also. Bhakti as a movement took its birth from the South India and then, it spread gradually to the rest of the country. The North India proved to be a fertile ground for Bhakti and many saint poets emerged on the scene giving voice to their feelings. “Bhakti favoured the informal over the formal, the spontaneous over the prescribed, and the vernacular over Sanskrit” (Mehrotra, 2011, xxiv). A K Ramanujan opines that with Bhakti, “a new kind of person or persona (came) into fashion” (quoted in Mehrotra, 2011, p. xxiv). This new persona could have been anyone ranging from a king to a weaver or a cobbler. The devotee looked upon God with great love and Kabir emerged as one of the most outspoken lovers of God. For Kabir, all religions were the same and all religions were actually after one true God who was beyond the forms of faith. He says:

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.

(Tagore, 2007, p.112)

He believed in the oneness of God and, according to him, the Supreme manifested itself in everything. It did not matter to him whether He was called Allah, Ram or God. However, as a Bhakta, Kabir had devoted himself to Rama. Rama was his personal God or rather, Rama was the name given by him to the Supreme Self. According to him, in order to reach the Supreme Self, the most important requirement was love in one’s heart for one’s Lord and a complete devotion to Him. It was this
spirit of devotion and unconditional love that granted Kabir the strength to take on to the path of Bhakti and live a life devoid of material attractions (Singh, 1934). The path led him to the larger understanding of humanity and envisioned him with the Reality. He immersed himself completely in the love of God and absolved himself off the conventions. Kabir was against all the ritualistic practices and religious rites. He advocated a search for the Self based on true love.

Kabir belonged to the Ramananda tradition of mystics and was in line with many other mystic poets like Tulsidas, Raidas, Mira, Pipa and others (Singh, 1934). Nearly all Bhaktas except Mira belonged to the lower sections of society. Kabir also was a part of the weaver community, but Bhakti was a domain that had made salvation accessible to all. Therefore, everybody in the society, irrespective of the colour, caste and creed, could approach God. Kabir, too, had immersed himself in the love of Rama and he believed that Rama existed in all. He says:

\[
\text{maim taim taim dvai namhim}\\
\text{apai akala sakla ghata mamhim}\\
\text{atamalina akhandita ramam}\\
\text{kahai kabira hari mamhi samamam}
\]

There remained no difference between you and me
The soul mingled with the world Soul
Thus, the atman became one with the infinite Rama

(Bahadur, 1997, p. 7)

Kabir, in his poems, used different names for God or the Supreme power that he bowed before. As mentioned earlier also, he would say that he worshipped Ram, Rahim, Hari, Allah, Karim, Keshav etc. What one can infer from this is that for him,
the ‘whole’ mattered and by what name the whole was referred to was of least value to him. In Kabir’s poems, one finds the nirguna (formless god) Bhakti more than the saguna (god with form) Bhakti type but many of his shabdas or poems are packed with the praises for God in its saguna avatar (god with form) also. These poems describe the personality of God as having special characteristics. However, even if the poems praise the deities and glorify their personal characteristics, yet they end with lines that reinforce faith in the formless ultimately. Some of his poems refer solely to the nirguna form of god. He says, ‘[D]evote yourself to the Absolute Being, no one knows the impenetrable Lord’ (Pandit, 2001, Retrieved). He further says, ‘People think that god is in the temple and go to temple to bow in front of that god but actually god dwells in the heart, so you be attached with that’ (Sharma, 2008). One more aspect in Kabir’s poems with regard to the devotion was that of Nirgunatva which related to the One with no beginning and an endless entity and it, in turn, gave birth to the Nam (Pandit, 2013). Nam has both aspects of the saguna as well as the nirguna. As a devotee gets closer to the deity, he realizes that Nam is without any form with infinite powers and encompasses the trinity—the worshipped, the worshipper and the worship itself. So, Kabir’s poetry is packed with this Nam form of entity that transcends all particularities and achieves a universalisation.

Bhakti lays down various steps for approaching the Divine, one step being chanting the name of God. Kabir advocated and followed this practice and it finds mention in many of his poems. According to him, this practice grants the devotees not only nearness to God, but also facilitates the union with Him. However, it is not hollow chanting of the name that can help one attain the supreme wisdom but chanting the names with devotion, piety and faith. Kabir strongly believed that all the evil thoughts and practices could be destroyed if one’s mind paves way for the
thought of God to enter. There are various forms of Bhakti or the ways in which one relates to the personal deity. The most important bhava or emotion in Bhakti is the madhurya bhava, wherein, the devotee relates to the deity or the god as a lover and the relationship is that of a lover-beloved. There is the pain of separation and the joy of union. Like Meera who was also a lover of Krishna, Kabir also pines in separation and at times, rejoices upon union. He says:

\[\text{suni sakhi supanaim ki gati aisi, hari aye hama pasa}\]
\[\text{sovat he ja jagaiya, jagat bhae udasa}\]
\[\text{calu sakhi bilambha na kijye, jab lkaga sasa sarira}\]
\[\text{mili rahiye jagannathasum, yum kahe dasa kabira}\]

Listen O friend! Hari came to me when I was asleep and when he touched me I woke up

I was disappointed (because I lost him). O friend, let us not delay, says Kabir

Hurry, for there is life in this body, one should try to unite oneself with jagannath

(Bahadur, 1997, p. 9)

The attainment of bliss by the disciple and the quest towards the Supreme followed by the Union was called Sahaja by Kabir (Bahadur, 1997). Attaining the ultimate destiny was, however, a toilsome process and demanded a lot of efforts on the part of the devotee. In many religious books, this path is described as ‘hard to tread’ much like walking on a razor’s edge. It requires abandonment of worldly pleasures and keeping the five senses under control. One should be prepared to make sacrifices even of laying down one’s life for the sake of the Supreme. Kabir says in this regard:
"kabira yaju ghara prem ka
khalam ka ghara nahim
sisa utarai hathai kari
so paise ghara mahim"

O Kabir, this house is house of love
Meant only for the mature
Only he enters it who can cut off his head from his body
and make an offering of it.

(Bahadur, 1997, p. 12)

Therefore, the search that the self takes on to is not at all easy. As a devotee, Kabir’s devotion can be compared to Meera who gave up all the worldly comforts for her beloved Lord. The only difference being that she had rested her love in an idol as her beloved while for Kabir, Rama was the infinite Brahmaan. He says:

"bahari khojat janama gammaya
unamanim dhyana ghata bhitara paya"

All my life I searched for him outside
But when I controlled my senses and meditated
I discovered that he was inside me

(Bahadur, 1997, p. 13)

In order to attain this state, a complete freedom from kama (desire), krodha (anger), lobha (greed) and moha (attachment) is required (Bahadur, 1997).

The world was an illusion for Kabir, bound to vanish. According to him, the way world of dreams appeared as real while being asleep, in the same way, this world, too, was like a dream, bound to disappear upon real awakening. Kabir dwelled upon
these intricacies in his poems. He focused upon the dynamics of illusion and reality. For him, it was completely futile to look for any worldly comforts and to dwell in the material possessions. To him, the body was nothing but the abode of dust. He says:

\[
\text{kabira dhuli sakelikari, puri jaa bamdgi eha}
\]

\[
\text{divasa cari ka pekhana, anti kheha ki kheha}
\]

This packet (the body) encloses dust

It is a four days wonder

And will in the end return from dust to dust.

(Bahadur, 1997, p. 21)

Kabir also believed that this life was actually a journey destined to end somewhere else. He believed that man was just a pilgrim on this earth and life, at large, was a temporary sojourn between arrival and departure.

Kabir’s poetry has a literary as well as a philosophical significance owing to the strong mystical poetic elements in it. One finds, in the poems of Kabir, truths which he felt could not be communicated adequately. Certain concepts are difficult to explain when it comes to language. A mystic also is keenly aware of the difficulties he faces while talking about his personal experiences. Roland Stahl opines that “[t]he mystic does not try to "mystify," but he is keenly aware of the difficulties in describing the content of his intensely personal experiences, so unlike the ordinary experiences of mankind” (1954, p. 143). Radhakrishnan also says in this regard, “While intuitional experience carries with it the highest degree of certitude, it has only a low degree of conceptual clearness ... Men of vedya, or vision, say what language and logic were not invented to say” (1937, p. 514). Kabir, too, talked about this saying, “[W]hat you see is not and for that which is, you have no words” (Tagore,
According to him, these truths could be comprehensible to those only who passed through similar experiences. Kabir shared the view that when desire and passion do not interfere and when one has abandoned all the emotional involvement with the world, then the intuition of one’s being reveals that the same being is in some sense the universal being. Kabir had a practical motive in life. He wanted men to know what actual liberation was. He wanted everyone to do away with the superstitions and ignorance. According to Kabir, the true knowledge was the *paravidya* through which God was known as nirguna Brahmaan without qualities. Brahmaan was the absolute being and a determinate whole who was composed of countless differentiations.

Kabir’s devotion was an amalgam of multiple schools of thought. He was highly averse to the formalistic and ritualistic worship that was propagated by various religions. His poetry includes elements from Bhakti, yoga and from the Sufi tradition as well (Stahl, 1954). What Kabir focused on constantly was to look into the inner recesses and to draw attention away from the exterior into the interior. The meeting between the Lord and the soul was the epitomic experience for Kabir. This was a mysterious experience and Kabir called it *paricaya*. The union was the ultimate destination for Kabir. He was the lover who had merged himself completely in the river of love. He endeavoured to discover Him in the depths of his soul and bind “[h]is heart to his own with gentle bonds” (Dharwadker, 2003, p. 66). Kabir’s was an ardent quest for union with the Supreme. Bhakti was not an easy path for Kabir but the path which demanded risking life. The path to God was filled with suffering and tears and the suffering had its source in the separation of the soul from its beloved. It was the union only which could bring peace and completion. This suffering, however, that came in the way was loved by true Bhaktas.
At the Hindu front, Kabir was a product of the Bhakti movement, as has been stated earlier also. He reacted against the rigid and orthodox conventions propagated by the prevailing religious schools. Bhakti has been described as the “great many sided shift…in Hindu culture and sensibility” (Ramanujan, 1981, p. 103). An important feature of it was the love for a personal deity in opposition to the orthodox religious set up and the social hierarchical upheavals. There were various oppositions also raised for it, whether at the public level or at the personal front, but for a true Bhakta, all these oppositions didn’t matter at all. Bhaktas like Meera and Janabai threw all the customs to winds and gave up everything for their beloved deities. For Kabir also, religion was a completely inner experience. Everything, according to him, was a unified whole.

The theme of Divine immanence is very dominant in Kabir’s poems. For him, God existed within the self of the individual and in all that was manifested outside also but there was no need to look for Him outside one’s domain. He believed that the Lord revealed Himself to his servants who sought Him with pure love and devotion. He says:

\begin{verbatim}
nirguna rama nirguna ramna japahu re bhai
abigat ki gati lakhni na jai
cari beda jakai sumrta purana
nau byakarana marama na jana
sesa naga jakai garada samana carana kamala kamvala nahim jana
kahai kabira jaki bhedai nahim nija jana baithe hari ki chahim
O brother worship the formless Rama
No one has seen his shape or form
Neither the smritis nor the puranas
\end{verbatim}
Can know him; nor the nine branches of grammar
Shesha and gaura wait on him and even shree who presses his lotus feet
Can’t relate his infinite glory
For he is beyond compare
Only he who truly loves him, says kabir,
Can obtain his grace

(Bahadur, 1997, p. 152)

In fact, Kabir, at times, compares this dwelling of God to a garden of flowers and says that actually one’s own body is the garden of flowers. He asks the devotee to rest himself on a flower and, thereby, gaze on the infinite beauty. Many times, he expresses his helplessness and despair at the fact that in spite of having the beloved so near, he is not able to see or locate Him, but then, he finds that what actually is required is the removal of ‘I’ and ‘Mine’ He says:

The moon shines in my body, but my blind eyes cannot see it:
The moon is within me, and so is the sun.
The unstruck drum of Eternity is sounded within me; but my deaf hears cannot hear it
When all love of the ‘I’ and the ‘Mine’ is dead, the work of Lord is done
For work has no other aim than getting of knowledge:
When that comes, then work is put away.
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.

(Tagore, 2007, p. 4)

God, the infinite Brahmaan existed beyond bounds to him. He was manifested in everything. The way, a seed was found in a plant and shade under a tree, in the same way existed, the Brahmaan. Kabir talks about the void in the sky and the infinite
forms that exist in the sky. It was “from beyond the Infinite that the infinite came and from the infinite that the finite extends” (Tagore, 2007, p. 5). Kabir expresses this belief as:

- When He Himself reveals, Himself, Brahma brings manifestation
- That which can never be seen
- As the seed is in the plant, as the shade is in the tree, as the void is in the sky, as infinite
- Forms are in the void
- The creature is in Brahma, and Brahma is in the creature: they are everdistinct, yet ever united
- He Himself is the tree, the seed and the germ.
- He Himself is the flower, the fruit and the shade.
- He Himself is Brahma, creature and Maya.
- The Supreme Soul is seen within the soul
- The Point is seen within the Supreme Soul
- And within the Point, the reflection is seen again
- Kabir is blest because he has this supreme vision.

(Tagore, 2007, p. 5)

God was always approachable according to Kabir. However, the greatest obstacle to it was sin. He believed that only after giving up the path of evil and sin could one attain God’s grace. Keay (1996, p.78) writes in this regard:

Kabir believed that…only when sin is subdued can man arrive at a knowledge of God. But until this knowledge of God is acquired men cannot rightly understand the things around them…God is all-pervading, and must not be regarded as dwelling in any confined locality…Kabir taught men to look within their hearts to find God, but this can only be when the heart is purified from sin.
For God, everyone was alike irrespective of the caste or any other category that one belonged to. The end was ultimately same for all. What mattered was the spirit that backed the quest. In this relation Kabir says, “[I]t is the Spirit of the quest which helps/ I am the slave of this Spirit of the quest” (Tagore, 2007, p. 2). For Kabir, the underlying feelings and the true devotion were important. He believed that God made His presence everywhere saying:

Lamps burn in every house, O blind One! And you cannot see them

(Tagore, 2007, p. 18)

Kabir’s poetry bears witness to varied streams of thought, but he stayed immune from the influence of any ‘ism’. He preferred to be called a lover, a true devotee of God. He had absolved himself of the limited perceptions that otherwise bound the ordinary mortals. The transcendent and the Invisible, therefore, found an ever pervasive space in his poetry (Das, 2011).

Kabir was primarily a lover and in his poems, we find a yearning for the beloved. Through his poems, he sang joyously of the union and separation, of the smiles, and tears. Sehdev Kumar (1983, p. 208) writes in this regard:

The truth of Kabir is that he is a lover, and his whole life is like an epic love poem. Always yearning for or in embrace of his beloved, Kabir sings joyously of love and longing, of rapture and separation, of laughter and tears. Kabir’s beloved, however, isn’t merely another person. It is the Primal Element that permeates everywhere, ‘the Being of our being’, ‘the Soul of our soul’. But his experience of this Beloved, expressed so rhapsodically in his songs is as intense and as palpable as any known on the human plane.

Kabir’s poetry is packed with the sentiments of love. In many of his poems, he resorts to the status of a lover proclaiming his God as his beloved. There is a pain that arises out of the separation and a longing for union with the beloved. Kabir’s poems reflect
the passion and the intensity with which he adored his Lord. Seeing in Him his ultimate refuge, Kabir took to the path of love in search for the Ultimate. He says:

The whole world does its works and commits its errors but few are the lovers who know the beloved
The devout seeker is he who minglest in his heart the double currents of love and detachment,
Like the mingling of the streams of the Ganges and the Jamuna

(Tagore, 2007, p. 12)

His poems are representative of the pangs and pains caused by the distance that exists between a lover and his beloved. He expresses the uncertainty that a person faces when immersed in the ocean of love and unsure of the achievements, despairs as is conveyed by the lines like:

To what shore would you cross, O my heart? There is no traveler before you, there is no road:
Where is the movement, where is the rest, on that shore?
There is no water; no boat, no boatman, is there.
There is not so much as a rope to tow the boat, nor a man to draw it
No earth, no sky, no time, no thing, is there: no shore, no ford!
Where is the place that shall still the thirst of the soul? You shall find naught in that emptiness.

(Tagore, 2007, p.17)

He further says:

O brother, my heart yearns for that Guru
Who fills the cup of true love, and drinks of it himself
The heart of a Bhakta constantly yearns for the union and love is the primary refuge in the world that one can take to. For Kabir also, love was the primary motive of living. He wanted nothing more than God’s grace and a shelter in His domain. He says, “[M]ore than all else do I cherish at heart that love which makes me a limitless life in this world” (Tagore, 2007, p. 20). The path to Him, of course, was full of difficulties but being a lover, Kabir was always eager to make sacrifices for the Lord’s service. He says, in this regard:

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jaisaim man alai rama sanam
kapata bhagati kijai kauna gunam
jyaum mrga nadosim bedhuau ai
pyanda parai vakau dhyana na jai
prana tajai bisarai nahim bani
bhringi kita rahai lyau lai
hvai lai lina hbringa hvai jai
rama nama nija amrta sara
kahai kabira dasani kau dasa
aba nahim charaum carana nivasa
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Love Rama with sincere love

Mere pretence is of no use

As a deer stands rooted to the ground

On hearing a sound

Even though it loses its life
As the fish doesn’t part with the water

Even though it gets caught on the hook

So should your love for Rama be

I am a humble slave of Rama, says Kabir,

And I will ever worship his holy feet

(Bahadur, 1997, p. 198)

An important feature in the Bhakti domain was that God was considered to be the only male in the universe and all others were females in relation to Him. Though for the female Bhaktas, this was more of an advantage for they didn’t have to take on to a different status. They already enjoyed a privileged position in this regard. However, men would often refer to their beloved as male or husband and themselves as wives or women. Kabir, too, resorted to this status and called His Lord as his husband and referred to himself as a yogini or a virhani (Hawley, 2005). In this regard, Keay (1996, p. 84) writes:

In connection with Bhakti, we find Kabir using as an illustration the idea of husband and wife, God being the husband to whom the devotee owes loving trust and obedience, and with whom he is connected by the closest of ties. He also frequently speaks of ‘drinking the elixir of Rama’ which is another way of expressing the deep satisfaction that is obtained by ecstatic union with God.

In many of the poems, the pain of separation has been conveyed by Kabir in terms of a typical male-female relationship. He says:

 hari mohre pih

 mai hari ki bahurya

 ram bade main tanik luharya
dhani pihu ake sangh basera
sejh aek pai Milan duhra
dhannin suhagni jo pi bhave
kah kabir phiri janami na aawe

My husband is called Hari
And I am his young wife.
My husband is called Rama
He’s an inch taller than me
We live under the same roof,
Sleep in the same bed
But seldom meet
Fortunate the bride, says Kabir,
Whose husband loves her.

(Mehrotra, 2011, p. 63)

He further says:

haan vaari mukh pheri piyaari
karvat de mohin
kah kon mare tek
tumhi sau kant naari ham soi
ham tum beech bhayo nahi koi

Lying beside you
I’m waiting to be kissed
But your face is turned
And you’re fast asleep
I have one husband: you

You have one wife: me

Who’s there to come between us?

(Mehrotra, 2011, p. 65)

After achieving the union with the beloved, the fulfillment that descended on was the panacea for all pains tolerated that far. After the union, there was no scope at all left for separation. Kabir shared such a strong bond with his Lord that it was impossible for anyone to sever the ties (Hawley, 2005). Through his poems, he would openly challenge the world and talk about the strong dynamics of love that existed between him and God. In the following lines, he compares the strength of their relationship to a diamond. The way in which it is difficult to pierce a diamond, in the same way it is difficult for anyone to break their relationship. He compares his relation with that of a lotus and the water. The way in which a lotus has no existence without water in the same way Kabir believed to have no existence without his Lord (Das, 2011). He compares his Lord to gold and sea and himself to borax and a river that adds to the two respectively. He says:

*mohin tohin laagi kaise chute

jaise heera phore na phoote

mohin tohin aadi ante bani aayi

ab kaise durat duraij

jaise kanwal part jal basa

aese tum sahin ham daasa

mohin tohin keet bhring ki nai

jaise salita sindhu samayee*
kahe kabir mann laga
jaise sone mile suhaga
Separate us?
Pierce a diamond first
We’re lotus
And water
Servant and Master
My love for you is no secret
I am the grub to your ichneumon fly
The river to your sea
The borax to your gold
Heightening its effect

(Mehrotra, 2011, p. 67)

Kabir’s was a multidimensional personality. He was a true Bhakta of God, but in addition to Bhakti, his poetry encompassed various other aspects also. For the ones who were socially troubled, Kabir existed as a revolutionary who brought the tyranny to limelight and sang against it. For the spiritual seekers, Kabir was a great yogi, a sat purush (a pious man) and for intellectuals, Kabir, even today, exists as a poet par excellence. Kabir was an enlightened man whose vision wasn’t marred by orthodoxy and dogma. Kabir has been popularly known as Sant Kabir for he addressed the common people mainly and preached simple message of love in the vernacular language. The songs, therefore, remain as part of the folklore in India. Sehdev Kumar (1983, p. 207) writes in this regard:
Kabir has been called a monist, an advaitist, a pantheist, a transcendentalist, a Sufi, a Nirguni, a Nath-Panthi, a Vaisnav, a Tantric, and so on and on. There is not a stream of spiritual thought that has not somehow found a sympathetic chord in Kabir. Indeed he encompasses them all, like the ocean that receives water from all rivers; but his vision is not circumscribed by any one of them.

Kabir was a powerful saint poet and lover who through his poetry laid bare his heart. Through his poems, he attempted to change a lot of then existing norms, whether at the social level or at the religious level. The medieval India was a victim of many malpractices and a rigid social system. A tradition of discrimination on the basis of caste, colour and creed was in vogue (Singh, 1934). Nearly all religions upheld an orthodox doctrine, but Hinduism governed lives in general and one’s deeds, one’s caste were important factors that determined the life course of an individual and as mentioned earlier also, it was in reaction to these practices and schools of thought that Bhakti emerged as a liberating movement and granted everybody an access to the Divine. Kabir used his sainthood expressed through his poetry to change the social dynamics and bring in a new era of liberation and salvation.

Kabir’s poetry contained a strong satire on the orthodoxy and the superstitions of Hinduism. He rejected all the ceremonies and rituals that were held high by the society at that time. He rejected all the popular ways in which devotion was manifested- purifactory baths, rituals, fasts etc. (Vaudeville & Partin, 1964). He attacked the Muslim faith and rituals too. The Mullah’s and Qazi’s were no less targets of attack to him. Vaudeville & Partin (1964, p. 192) write in this regard:

The work of Kabir contains a resounding satire on Brahmanical orthodoxy and the superstitions of popular Hinduism. Not only does he condemn with finality worship of idols, these “lifeless stones”, but he also rejects with contempt all the proceedings and ceremonies by which popular Hindu devotion manifests itself…if the Brahman and the Pandit are his favourite
targets, he feels scarcely more respect for the official representatives of the Islamic religion, the Mullah and the Qazi, who are less venial but no less proud and pedantic…

Most of Kabir’s poems attack very bluntly the religious institutions and their representatives. Hinduism and Islam were equally critiqued by him. The practices, norms, and set conventions received a biting attack from him. Keay (1996, pp. 74-75) mentions this as follows:

His condemnation extended to pilgrimages, ceremonial purifications, fasting, sacred threads, circumcision, use of the rosary and many other practices. Kabir held very strongly the doctrine of ahimsa or the sin of taking life in any form…he rose above the divisions that separated men, and , believing as he did in one God, sought to make men realize they were all one family in Him.

Kabir termed distinctions on religious basis completely illogical and non-sense because according to him, God existed in every one. Therefore, the actual religion was humanism. To see every other being with love and respect was actual worship (Keay, 1996). Different names and different identities had no importance in reality because the essence was same everywhere. He says:

The river and its waves are one surf

Where is the difference between the river and its waves

When the wave rises, it is the water; and when it falls, it is the same water again

Tell me Sir, where is the distinction? Because it has been named as wave

Shall it no longer be considered as water?

(Tagore, 2007, p. 9)
As mentioned earlier also, casteism was a deep rooted evil in the society and it was not at all a democratic system (Agarwal, 2008). It didn’t offer any individual dignity to anyone. It was this identity which was claimed by people through Bhakti. All the Bhaktas took on to the idea of equality in all matters and practices and all this was possible owing to the sphere of Bhakti. William Crooke recognized the role of Vaishnava Bhaktas belonging to the lower castes so as “to establish the more intellectual and more sacred forms of public worship and to actively oppose the ideas and practices of the Brahmin hegemony” (quoted in 1975, p. clxix). Kabir was the most powerful among all the attackers on casteism and through his poetry, he left no scope for any justification to come on others part. Nearly all social and religious systems were critiqued by him. He proclaimed:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{chalhu bichari rahu sambhari kehti hun je pukari} \\
&\text{ram naam antargati nahin tou janam juva jyon hari} \\
&\text{moond mundayi phholi ka baiithe kaanini pahiri manjusa} \\
&\text{bahir dehkhe laptaani bhitri tou ghar moosa} \\
&\text{I’d say this through a megaphone if I had one:} \\
&\text{Look at these men, shaven heads, great big earrings} \\
&\text{Ash smeared bodies} \\
&\text{But inside they are empty} \\
&\text{As a house that had been cleaned out by thieves.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Mehrotra, 2011, p. 25)

He constantly reinforced the idea of oneness saying:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{jo pai karta baran bichare} \\
&\text{tou janten tini jhadi kin sare} \\
\end{align*}
\]
Casteism was reinforced by religions. The religious authorities in the form of Qazis, Mullahs, Pandits, Gurus, on the one hand, preached goodness and quality but, one the other hand, they never practised or executed what they taught. So, Kabir made them the direct targets for his attack. People who appeared to be pious and forthright were actually corrupt and ill at heart. They would merely engage themselves in rituals and ostentatious practices and for Kabir, all that was a waste of time and effort.

Appearances and outward piety didn’t count for him and he says in this regard:

\[
\text{nange phire jog jo hoi} \\
\text{ban ka miran mukti gaya koi}
\]

If going naked bought liberation

The deer of the forest would attain it first

(Mehrotra, 2011, p.27)

He further says:

\[
\text{kya japu} \\
\text{kya tapu} \\
\text{kya brat puja} \\
\text{jo ke ride bhav hai duja}
\]

Try though you may

Neither punditry nor penance

(Mehrotra, 2011, p.35)
Nor telling beads will bring you
To the four armed god

(Mehrotra, 2011, p. 33)

According to Kabir, merely chanting the name, however, meant nothing. He argued that saying meant nothing and if it counted, then, the mere saying of the word sugar would sweeten the mouth and that of water would quench the thirst and fire would burn the feet. Everything had its roots laid in the purity of heart. Keay (1996, pp.78-79) discusses this as:

Kabir had nothing but condemnation for those who performed ceremonial ablutions and cleansings and went to elaborate ritual to find God, but paid no attention to the purification of the heart. What is the use of all this ceremonial and ritual when men harbor deceit within and practise fraud under the guise of holiness? The Hindu pundits are proud of their learning and ceremonial and despise those who are of lower caste than themselves. The Muhammadan mullahs are equally puffed up with their vain knowledge of the Quran and traditions and are punctilious about details but unless these get rid of the pride from their hearts, they cannot find God.

Kabir was a fearless teacher who spoke candidly and bluntly to all. What he constantly tried to do was to bring people closer to the actual reality. That is why, his verses came up as confrontational and challenging, but Kabir was always least bothered about the public opinion. Isaac Ezekiel (quoted in Das, 2005, p. 17) opines:

Kabir’s songs seek nobody’s approbation. They seek no sanction, ask for no approval, search for no popularity, invite no commendation, crave no compliment. They stand independent of these considerations, and they constitute the most uninhibited literature, the freest of free writing ever produced by a saint . . . Banter, ridicule, sarcasm, wit and humour—these are the weapons he wields! Nor does he hesitate to hit straight-from-the-shoulder, hitting hard, ceaselessly and without stop, till the face of false piety and hypocrisy is battered out of shape and exposed to the view of the general public for general laughter.
Apart from the religious, rebellious and the love ethos, Kabir’s poems dwelled upon various other themes also, like those of death, Maya (illusion) and Humanism.

As far as the theme of death in Kabir’s poems is considered, a large number of his poems deal with and dwell upon this (Bahadur, 1997). Death generally is a universal and an undeniable phenomenon. Everything that exists is bound to perish. However, the phenomenon of death has varied dimensions and aspects associated with it. The definitions of death vary from discipline to discipline. If we speak clinically, then death means the death of the body; all its organs, tissues and cell stop functioning and we declare someone dead. However, among the religious schools or the philosophical systems, death carries different connotations. In the Christian school of thought, death is the outcome of sin. In the Indian philosophical system, death is viewed as nirvana which literally means blowing out (Radhakrishnan, 2009). This blowing out can infer extinction of fire upon the exhaustion of fuel or it can also refer to the act of cooling down something. Nirvana is the achievement of liberation and a freedom from the cycle of birth and death. In Hinduism, death relates to the separation of the soul from the body. Various religious schools have, therefore, various beliefs related to death. The concepts of rebirth, heaven, hell, therefore, depend upon the religious beliefs and orientations of a person.

In the spiritual school of thought, death is usually seen as self-transcendence which characterizes the journey beyond and a merging with the Supreme. This is also known as spiritual death and, according to Kabir, this was the real death. Once this is attained, one is freed from the cycles of rebirth and death again. The first step in the path to spiritual death is conquering the fear of death. One sees people dying, but to imagine one’s own death is always harder. He says, “The one who is crying at the death of others, He also has to die some day” (Bahadur, 1997, p. 22). According to
Kabir, accepting physical death as a universal phenomenon gradually takes one to the path of overcoming the fear of one’s own death and this gradually followed by other practises leads to the spiritual death. In this regard, Keay (1996, p. 82) mentions:

The transitoriness of the world and the certainty of death for all, is a constant theme of Kabir’s... men often bestow much thought on the body, but one day it will perish. No one can escape from death, which he (Kabir) often personifies as Yama. All the Yogis, and those who prided themselves on their sanctity have come under the power of Yama. But for those whose minds have been filled with divine knowledge and have realized their union with god, death is not to be dreaded; for it is the gate which leads to happiness. Kabir, himself, therefore, has no fear of death.

For Kabir, physical death related to the death of mere body that either is burnt or cremated. He says that the body disappears, but the death of the body is not the real death. It is the mere disappearance from the perceptible world (Bahadur, 1997). The body, according to him, is made up of five elements and these five elements return to their original state and the soul returns taking rebirth till its scores aren’t settled in this world (Bahadur, 1997). He says:

\[\begin{align*}
kauna marai kahu pandita jana \\
so samajhai kahau hama sana \\
mati mati rahi samai pavanai pavana liye sangi lai \\
kahai kabira suni pandita guni rupa bhava sab dekhai duni
\end{align*}\]

O wise men ponder carefully
What is it that dies and then tell me
Dust unto dust this body is
And with the wind the soul flies
O pundits, all the world knows this
Says Kabir that only the body dies

(Bahadur, 1997, pp. 151-152)

He further says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kauna desa kamha aiya} \\
\text{janai koi namhi} \\
\text{ohu maraga pavai nahim} \\
\text{bhuli pare ehi mamhi}
\end{align*}
\]

Leaving its heavenly home
The embodied soul roams
The world deceived into thinking
My real home is this earth
It forgets the subtle path by which it came
So that it cannot return to Brahma again

(Bahadur, 1997, p. 244)

The real death, according to him, was the merging of one’s being with that of the Supreme. The union of self with the Self whether the body is living or not was the ultimate nirvana and a person reached this state by practicing and experiencing true love and devotion. In other words, when a person transcends his state from 'Manmukh' (self-centred man) to 'Gurumukh' (God centred man), he becomes a jivan-mukta (Pandit, 2012). In order to reach this realization, one of the primary requirements is doing away with the Maya.

Maya, in many Vedas, has been referred to as the mysterious power that acts upon individuals and draws them to sin. It is also known to be the illusion or delusion that individuals fall to as it draws the attention and focus to the material and the
phenomenal world (Bahadur, 1997). At times, Maya is viewed as being beyond understanding. According to the religious philosopher, Shankaracharya:

The universe is maya because it has only a phenomenal existence…the subject and object are as opposed to each other as darkness and light, i.e., the non-I and the I are diametrically opposite but due to false knowledge which is in born in humans they are paired together. Hence, arises the idea of I and mine in them which ceases only when this false notion is removed by the realization of the Brahmaan. Maya has the power of hiding the truth and of misrepresenting it.

(Quoted in Bahadur, 1997, p. 26)

This misrepresentation takes one far away from the actual Reality and results in the fall. Kabir also dwells on this aspect and states that greed, lust, and all materialistic desires draw a man to wrongs. Keay (1996, pp. 76-77) discusses this as:

Kabir held fast to the doctrines of Karma…deeply woven in the Hindu thought. A man (he believed) is bound by his actions, and every act is productive of future good or ill. Evil deeds destine a man to punishment by his being born in a lower state of life in his next birth…it is because men are deluded by Maya that they are not released from the toils of Karma.

Kabir has compared Maya to a tree saying that “it is a huge tress yielding three kinds of fruit. Its branches are sorrow and distress. The tree of Maya is shade less and the fruit it yields is tasteless and creates a burning sensation in the body” (Bahadur, 1997, p. 29). He further calls it a “creeper plant” which no matter how much one cuts, grows again. Maya, according to him, was the cause of all misery, sorrows and distress. It was a chameleon that lured people in different forms. Therefore, what Kabir constantly preached was to abstain from all the worldly desires and seek refuge in God for He alone was the saviour and source of liberation and salvation.

Kabir had centered his belief on the fact that God resided within man. Therefore, he believed true love to be a source of liberation. Love was the chief
quality of humans and Kabir’s works are emblematic of this fact. Evelyn Underhill opines:

Again and again he (Kabir) extols the life of home, the value and reality of diurnal existence, with its opportunities for love and renunciation; pouring contempt—upon the professional sanctity of the Yogi, who "has a great beard and matted locks, and looks like a goat," and on all who think it necessary to flee a world by love, joy, and beauty—the proper theatre of man's quest—in order to find that One Reality Who has spread His form of love throughout all the world.

(quoted in Tagore, 2007, p. 4)

Therefore, an important doctrine that he upheld was Humanism and he constantly advocated that men should love men. It was only love that could bring one peace and harmony. This was a recurrent theme in his poems. He says:

Speak in words so sweet that fill the heart with joy
Like a cool breeze in summer for others and self to enjoy

(2013, Retrieved)

Kabir also advocated humility in his poems. Most of the turmoil is caused by ego clashes. So, he stressed on the curbing down of the ego. F E Keay (1996, p. 81) writes in this regard:

Kabir was himself a humble man. Unless he had been so, he could not so unflinchingly have denounced pride in others. He often confesses his own sin and failure but he was undoubtedly a man of high moral ideas and attainment, and constantly appears as a preacher of righteousness.

He believed whatever had taken a form had to pass away and therefore, ultimately all, irrespective of the worldly stature were powerless and servants in the service of God. In this regard, he says:

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. Millions of beings are there:
The sun and the moon in their courses are there: Millions of ages pass,
And the swing goes on. 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.

(Quoted in Stahl, 1954, p. 155)

Kabir’s God belonged to this very world and that’s why he exemplified how an
ordinary man could attain truth despite the social and family responsibilities
(Bahadur, 1997). Love was a source of redemption and it was the enlightening lamp.
He says:

Mine eyes must perform the ceremony of the lamps of love.
Kabir says: "Listen to me, friend: he understands who loves
If you feel not love's longing for your Beloved One
It is vain to adorn your body, vain to put unguent on your eyelids

(Tagore, 2007, p. 33)

The ones who are devoid of love see the life as banal and purposeless while those who
love find peace in everything. He says:

In the ocean of manifestation, which is the light of love
Day and night are felt to be one. Joy for ever, no sorrow,—no struggle!
There have I seen joy filled to the brim, perfection of joy;
No place for error is there.

(Tagore, 2007, p. 46)
In spite of being a saint (having affinity with God), Kabir never condemned life and this world. He did preach restraining one’s desires and channelizing them, but he never complained of the problems. He lived an ordinary life of a weaver, but imbued it with love and devotion (Mehrotra, 2011). Accepting the pains, agonies and miseries was what he practised and asked others to practise also. To him, God could be found in the maze of social life and it wasn’t at all necessary to self-impose isolation. He says:

The home is the abiding place; in the home is reality;
The home helps to attain Him Who is real.
So stay where you are, and all things shall come to you in time.

(Tagore, 2007, p. 72)

Kabir was a combination of godliness and worldliness based on realities. He holds a high place in the history of Indian literature, and the world literature at large. He transgressed through his poetry all the national and international boundaries. He didn’t compose any long treatises, but expressed his thoughts in his short, crisp and vigorously spoken verses. His poetry conveys innumerable themes ranging from mystic to humanist, social to personal with illustrations from the ordinary life to represent and convey the larger truths. His poems contain similes, metaphors and comparisons that one can easily relate to. According to Underhill:

…Kabir never loses touch with the diurnal existence, never forgets the common life. His feet are firmly planted upon earth; his lofty and passionate apprehensions are perpetually controlled by the activity of a sane and vigorous intellect, by alert common sense so often found in persons of real mystical genius. The constant insistence on simplicity and directness, the hatred of all abstractions and philosophizing, the ruthless criticism of external religion; these are amongst his most marked characteristics… there will be found examples which illustrate …all the fluctuations of the mystics emotion;
the ecstasy, the despair, the still beatitude, the eager self devotion, the flashes of wide illumination, the moments of intimate love.

(Quoted in Tagore, 2007, xxvii)

He was a practical religious teacher and poet who dwelled on the subject of human life and expounded its intricacies in his poems—death, Maya, society, sin, casteism, transmigration, God, he talked about everything. He was at once many things—a philosopher, a poet, a saint, a Bhakta, a fearless speaker and critic. His words possessed the natural sweetness of poetry and centuries after his departure, his poems are being reinterpreted everywhere. They carry the contemporary relevance and shine with a radiance that illuminates the minds and societies in the 21st century also.

Dharwadker (2003, p. 95) puts it rightly as:

When the weaver departed from his house, he left his unfinished weaving on his loom with fables, allegories, sermons, satires, aphorisms, riddles and songs stretched out as a warp ‘in progress’. In the centuries since his departure, his collaborators have made the journey to his workshop and sat at his frame, shedding and picking, beating in the weft thread by thread, finishing the great design that he began.

Kabir is loved and adored as a poet even today for the humanness that brightens up every line of his verse. He left no human emotion out and brought it in his poetic domain. Through his poetry, he portrayed actual and true feelings along with the fragmented nature of everyday life. He stays germane today also for his poetry transcends all forms of sectarianism and dogma.