

Chapter-XIV

The Man and His Message

Kabirdas

Kabirdas (1398-1518) was the saint of northern India during the 15th century. A rebel against all that was unspiritual in religion, Kabir-rightly called the Luther of India-helped to reform both Hinduism and Islam. He spoke of God with authority. He taught the common people in their own mother tongue, Hindi. He spoke of the `living God` like Sri Aurobindo spoke of divine presence in every human being. As a result, a powerful religio-social awakening soon followed.

The period from 5th to 18th century A.D.in India reveals the development of a special religious atmosphere. During the 6th century some grotesque aberrations of *tantra* entered into the *Vedic* religion. For example, during Raja Bhoja's time, a philosophy called `Neelapari Darshan` advocating `triratna` of wine, woman and meat was widely preached. However, the common man in the north was more drawn to the simple religion of *pancharatra vaishnavism* and of *panchadevata* worship. The religion preached by several saints of the 8th-9th century, had many things in common, such as opposition to rituals and external observances, insistence on purity of mind, and necessity of self-realization. Kabir is said to be the *Adi-sant*.

It is interesting to note that the *nirguna* worship in the north developed as a product of the *alwar vaishnavism* of the south, and the *yoga* and *jnana* cult of the *nathyogis* of the north. A *nath yogi*, Gorakhnath, was the first to accept Ratan Haji, a muslim, as his disciple. This movement advanced under Swami Ramananda, disciple of Swami Raghavananda. The latter belonged to the fourth generation of successors to Ramanuja. Ramananda was a religious revolutionary of the time, for he accepted even women and those of lower classes as his disciples. He reconverted some muslims and for this he suffered excommunication by his own *guru*. It was left to Kabir to promote this movement for Hindu-Islam harmony further and this he did with eminent success. The *Vedantic* teaching of the one *atman* pervading all creation means that all men are equal spiritually. Kabir took this up and, compounding it with the *Islamic* ideals of monotheism and the brotherhood of man, evolved a *panth* or sect which broke all barriers of caste, sex and religion, and propagated the unity of man and the harmony of Hinduism and Islam.

Not much historical data is available about the time or place of Kabir's birth or about his parents. So we rely on the strong traditions of the Kabirpanthis. According to *Ramaananda Digvijaya*, Kabir was born of a celestial being who abandoned the

child on a lotus leaf in a lake at Lahartara near Kashi (present Varanasi). According to another tradition, Kabir's father was a Sannyasin named Swami Ashtananda and his mother was a celestial being named Pratichi. Prahlada, the famous devotee of Narayana, was himself born to them as Kabir. A third tradition says that Swami Ramananda blessed a Brahmin virgin, unawares, saying, *putravati bhava*, Be you the mother of a son` (a usual blessing, of course). When the virgin gave birth to the child, she left him for obvious reasons, near the *Lahartara* lake as mentioned earlier.

Niru and Neema were a pious couple belonging to the Julaha caste and living in Kashi. They found the child Kabir at Lahartara lake and took him home. Naturally there was some commotion in the community. Some women taunted Neema saying, `How did you get this baby?` Neema silenced them by her firm but disarmingly honest reply, `I got him without giving birth to him!`

The Julaha caste had its origin from *nath yogis* and from the *jogi* caste, both connected with Islamic traditions. Hence the parents called in a muslim kazi (judge) for naming the child. He opened the Koran at random, with the intention of giving the child the first name that would come up. And lo! It was `Kabir`, which

meant `great` and which referred to Allah! How could this name be given to this insignificant Julaha boy? The kazi once again opened the Koran, to find this time `Akbar`, a synonym of Kabir! The more he opened the book the more he got the other synonyms: Kubra, Kibriya, Zinda, Khijwar, Pir, Aqua, and so on. At this point, the baby Kabir opened his lisping lips to utter an oracle, a `Shabda`.

“I was not born of a woman but manifested as a boy. My dwelling place was near Kashi. A weaver found me there. I am wisdom personified. I have come in a spiritual form and my name is of great significance. These are the words of Kabir, the Indestructible.”¹

The *kazi* was stunned and unhesitatingly named the child Kabir.

Kabir was a precocious boy even at that tender age, he was seen to have an intense love for the name of God, both of Islam and of Hinduism. He called Him sometimes Allah, sometimes Rama. He would wear a sacred thread. If his Brahmin friends objected, he would retort, `I am a weaver, dealing in threads. If I wear a thread, what is that to you?`

With all the love for his foster child, Niru could not send him to any school because of his poverty. A Julaha boy was welcome neither in the *muslim madrasa* nor in the Hindu

pathsala. Kabir learnt the hereditary craft, weaving. Kabir was very austere in his food and dress. He spent much of his time in prayer and contemplation. Feeding and serving holy men was one of his favourite pastimes. His mother sometimes felt anxious about Kabir's future. He would smilingly tell her: 'Ammi Jan (Mother dear) would God, who protects all his other creatures, forget only us?' Thus *japa*, prayer and contemplation became the whole and sole education of Kabir about which he said later:

Laying studies aside,

"Into a stream the books Kabir threw.

Out of alphabets fifty-two,

He memorized Ra, Ma --- only two!"

He proudly proclaimed: 'I did not touch ink or paper: nor did I ever hold a pen in hand!'"²

Kabir had two wives-Ramjaniya and Loi. After the former died, Kabir married the latter. Like Kabir, Loi was an orphan child, abandoned on the banks of the Ganga and found and nurtured by a holy man. One day the holy man suddenly died. The girl somehow grew up to be a practical, intelligent young woman. One day Kabir, with some more holy men, chanced to visit her home.

She entertained them all with a cup of milk each. All but Kabir drank the milk. When asked Kabir replied, I drink the divine name.' Impressed by Kabir's lofty life and spiritual powers Loi came to his home as his bride.

As Kabir's preoccupation with prayer and contemplation deepened, his bread-earning work suffered. The family often faced starvation. He prayed only to his Rama: 'O Lord, empty stomach is no good for devotion; how can I approach anyone but you for help? Please grant me the barest minimum of food, shelter and raiment.'

On two different occasions Kabir had called back to life a dead boy and a dead girl. They were the greatest miracles of Kabir. Both the boy and the girl came to live with him as his children and were named kamal and Kamali respectively. When Kamali came of age, Kabir found a bridegroom for her in a strange way. A pundit came to Kamali at the village well and asked for drinking water. The young woman gave it to him from her pitcher. After quenching his thirst, the man started accusing her, a Muslim, of 'defiling' his high caste! At this point, Kabir appeared on the scene and thundered:

"What is defilement, can you say? Fishes and tortoises are defiling daily the water you drink. The earth of the

vessels you use contains crores of dead bodies. The cloth you wear is woven by a low caste weaver. Can you prevent these defilements? Dispel such illusions take the name of Rama.”³

The pundit was moved by the power behind those words of the saint; he repented and took the hands of Kamali in marriage.

The spiritual power of Kabir was manifesting thus, always enlightening the ignorant and saving the sinner. At the present spot of Kabir Choura in Kashi once stood Kabir's home, surrounded by a number of houses of prostitutes. Though Kabir did not mind their presence in the least, the ill-famed women wanted him to go away from there so that his night-long singing of prayers did not affect their unholy trade. Seeing Kabir unwilling to oblige, the women set fire to his hut and stood calmly watching it burn, all the while singing the name of Rama. Suddenly a spark from the flames darted off to set on fire all the neighbouring huts of the prostitutes. The terrified women ran out, and finding all their paramours disappearing without lending any help, they took refuge at Kabir's feet. He had pity on them and miraculously saved their huts from total destruction. By his loving teaching, they were changed away from their sinful ways.

As Kabir intensified his spiritual practices he felt more and more the need to have a formal *guru*. He had a great fascination to have Swami Ramananda of Kashi as his *guru*. His Muslim background, he thought, might dissuade Ramananda from initiating him. So one early morning before sunrise he laid himself on the steps of a *ghat* on the Ganga where Swami Ramananda came for his daily bath. Unconsciously stepping upon the head of Kabir in the darkness, Ramananda uttered aloud the name of God as 'Rama' up rose Kabir, repeating the same name as his *mantra*. Ramananda was overwhelmed when he saw the great yearning and devotion of this disciple. Kabir later said about this historic incident: 'When he got Ramananda as his *guru*, his sorrows were destroyed, and his doubts disappeared. Such is the power and grace of the *guru*.'

Kabir taught *nirguna bhakti* which included the concept of *Shankara's Advaita*--the oneness of *jiva* with the supreme self. He stressed on God's grace as most essential for spiritual illumination.

"He emphasized the importance of cleaning the mind of its desires and living a life of truthfulness, simplicity, and self-control. Kabir called his God '*nirguna*', in the sense that He was free from the three *gunas* and

their derivatives- ego, mind, senses. Though a *jnani* by temperament, Kabir preached to the common man the love of God as the means for highest spiritual enlightenment.”⁴

Kabir did not accept either the *avatars* of Hinduism or the ‘last and best messiah-hood of Mohammed.’ He preached against all exclusiveness, privileges and priestcraft in Hinduism as well as in Islam. He preached against the habits of meat-eating and consuming intoxicants, and spoke strongly against the evils of adultery. He laid greatest stress on faith in the *guru* and serving him in every way. Listening to and serving holy men, he said, was powerful force for spiritual upliftment.

For some inexplicable reason, Kabir left Kasi in 1518 for a nearby town, Maghar, at the ripe old age of 120. Here came his end. At the time of death he sang in joy about God:

“A sweet song of blessing,

Sing, O bride handsome!

Rama, my Beloved, has come to my home.”

Kabir had a message for the world. Kabir’s teachings were given through inspired poetry. Besides *sakhi*, he also employed other metres like *doha*, *chaupai*, *rameini* and *sabda*.

Experts have named Kabir's language as *santa-bhasa*. Unlike common Hindi, this language contains many words from other Indian languages and is happily free from grammatical stringency. The power and simplicity of Kabir's language, it is said, swept grammar off its feet! The rules of grammar had to yield to cater for the profundity and power of Kabir's ideas.

Though there are quite a few compilations of Kabir's teachings—like *Sukha-nidan* and *Amarul*. Those recorded in the books *Bijak* and in the *Adi Granth* of the Sikhs are considered the most authentic. Following are a few of his selected teachings:

On God: "O God, I am your child and you are my Mother. Won't you pardon me my errors? The child may commit numberless blunders; would the Mother ever mind them? If the baby pulls the Mother's braids, wouldn't the Mother remain unruffled? Kabir is convinced that the child's sorrow is also the mother's, nay, the mother's is still more!"⁵

On External observances:

"Why do you bathe and wash,

Without feeling the God indwelling?

You wash the vessel outside,

While within it's foul-smelling.

Wash you may a hundred times will;

Without the Name, you can't avoid the hell!"

On Guru: 'Kabir says that those who think lightly of their *guru* are blind, indeed. When God frowns upon us, the *guru* is our refuge; but when the *guru* frowns, we have no refuge anywhere!.

"If body is a venomous creeper

Guru is a tank full-o-nectar.

Should you give for Guru your head?

Still the price is far less paid."

On Remembrance of God:

"Merged in the joy of God-remembrance,

Remain with your mouth closed in silence.

Shut out the senses from the world outside,

Open the mind and see Him inside.

Ages passed telling your beads,

Yet the mind's crookedness mending needs;

Leave aside then telling beads by hand.

Tell, instead, your beads by mind."

On Duty: Kabir says that this body is sure to go away; before it dies, apply it to some good purpose. He asks us to serve holy men and sing the glory of God.

On Egotism:

"He who says always 'my' and 'I'

His ego does everything destroy.

It binds the feet tight as a chain,

It acts like a noose of death and pain."

On Death: 'Whoever is born must depart some day, be he a king or a slave or a saint. The only difference is that the king departs after sitting on throne, while the servant has to go after suffering much pain.'

"In this body-cage with ten doors open

Is lodged the bird of Life;

It's wonder if it stays even for second's time,

Nothing to wonder if it leaves anytime!"

On Maya: 'Very few are aware that both *maya* and a shadow behave alike. Run away from them and they chase us; face them boldly and see them both run away from us!

On Practice: 'There are many to preach; alas, so few to practise. It is better that empty precepts are dumped in streams, for preaching without practice is nothing but senseless screams.'

On Adultery:

"The neighbour's wife is a deadly knife.

Bring her never into your life.

Ravana, though ten-headed, lost his life,

Because of his desire for Ram's wife."

On Truthfulness:

"Dressed in love's attire

Kabir would dance in mirth,

And would sacrifice his all

On one who spoke only truth."

On Holy Men:

“To become a holy man esteemed by all
Is like climbing a palm tree tall;
Succeed, you enjoy the delicious juice;
Fall, you're a heap of broken bones!
He who's above the greed for gold
And who's free from woman's hold,
On such a holy man's feet
I'll lie like dust, says Kabir.”

Real Heroism: 'He is no hero who fights with bow and arrow. True heroism consists in overcoming *maya* and attaining divine love for God.'

In many of the above teachings, one cannot miss the lofty message of Sri Ramakrishna expressed in almost the same language more than four centuries later. In fact, the similarities between Kabir and Sri Ramakrishna are astonishing. Both were near-illiterates. Both attained supreme illumination through yearning alone. Both taught in their own native tongue; not from scriptural learning but from the depth of their own realization.

Both preached the harmony of religions. Both practiced Hinduism and Islam. Both preached essentials of religion rather than its externals. Both saw in man the manifestation of the divine and hence preached equality of man and man, and man and woman. Both had followers from more than one religion, and both were originators of a powerful spiritual-social awakening. Both preached that *advaitic* experience could be attained through pure and intense love of God. Both had great concern for the upliftment of the masses and the women, not only spiritually but also socially and economically. Both were hailed and worshipped as the highest manifestation of God as *guru* by their followers.

Similarities between Kabir and Swami Vivekananda are also significant. Both of them wanted a 'root and branch' reform in the Indian society but on the basis of spirituality. Both preached morality as the foundation for all spiritual life and progress. Both used a very strong language against oppressors and charlatans. Both upheld the need for a new approach and application of religion under the changed conditions of Indian society. Both preached *yoga* to the masses along with *jnana* and *bhakti*. In fact, Swamiji spoke of Kabir as his ideal of 'reformation through spiritual upliftment.

Notes

1. "*Saints and Mystics*", Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore-Chennai, p.113.
2. *Ibid*, p.115.
3. *Ibid*,p.117.
4. *Ibid*, p.119.
5. *Ibid*, p.123.