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3.1 life-sketch of Kabir in Brief

Scholars differ about Kabir’s parentage, his family, the place of his birth, the time and place of his death etc. Instead of concentrating on various beliefs about Kabir’s life, the scholar deems it appropriate to side with the beliefs that are widely accepted. Scholars agree with the fact that Kabir belonged to the time of Sikandar Lodi and was a disciple of Swami Ramanand. (Tiwari 18) Apropos this fact, most scholars believe that Kabir was born in 1455 and died in 1575 (18). If we accept the above-mentioned years of his birth and death, it invariably means accepting that Sikandar Lodi, Swami Ramanand and Guru Nanak were his contemporaries. Similarly, there are a lot of beliefs about Kabir’s birthplace. However, Dr Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari in his book “Kabir” observes:

Two places namely Kashi and Maghar are mentioned as his birthplaces but a majority of scholars are of the view that Kabir was born in Kashi. (3)

Though Kabir lived in Kashi, he left for Magahar to challenge the popular myth of those days that death at Kashi ensures redemption while at Magahar re-birth as a donkey. (19) Kabir said in this regard:

Listen O saints,
Says Kabir,

Let none have qualms;

Barren Magahar Is as Kashi,

if heart is full of Rama. (Mahajan  67)

According to a hearsay, Kabir was married to a woman named Loi and their son’s name was Kamal. There are, though, no proofs to systematize these arguments. However, this leads us to believe that Kabir lived as an ordinary person among people and lead a family life instead of escaping from it and be a becoming a hermit. And it is this very quality of being among people that seems to make his sainthood a peculiar type in itself. He himself appeared to be a paragon of simplicity and spontaneity and led a life devoid of any hypocrisy, which led many of his disciples to believe him to be an incarnation of God. (Tiwari, 24) Besides, there are a good number of fables and tales surrounding his life, many of which, however, cannot pass the crucible of logic.

Kabir’s parentage is not certain but on the basis of images he used in his poems, one can assume that he was brought up in a weaver family.

I’m smitten by love,
Now who will weave, O mother?

I am drunk on Rama-wine,

Now who will weave, O mother? (Mahajan 99)

It is an interesting question to ponder whether Kabir was Hindu or Muslim? A close study of his literature confirms the belief that he was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim, but just a good “human being”. (4) There is a meaningful myth relating to his death. After his death, his Hindu and Muslim disciples have a contention over his dead body because his Hindu disciples wanted to cremate the body and Muslim disciples wanted to bury it. The myth has it that the corpse transformed into flowers, which his disciples divided among themselves. (5)

According to Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, the story suggests Kabir’s lineage from Nath-sect yogis who lived as ordinary householders having a family life and later converted to Islam. (Dwivedi 21) They had the tradition of first cremating a corpse and then burying the ashes. The flowers in the above-mentioned myth can symbolically mean ashes. Furthermore, Kabir’s aggressive style i.e. his scathing criticism of meaningless rites and the rot set in the contemporary society also corroborates his lineage from Nath sect yogis.
The fact that Kabir was born neither in a staunch Hindu or a devout Muslim family is of great significance in view of his poems wherein he mercilessly seems to lash evil sides of both the religions:

Mullah, why so loudly

Do you call?

Ram-Rahim vibrates in all. (Mahajan 64)

Pundit, what a lie you utter!

Only saying Ram redeems,

Is mouth sweet by saying sugar? (35)

About his formal education, Kabir appears to admit, ‘never touched ink or paper, never held a pen in hand’. (8) This only means that he was illiterate. Despite his illiteracy, Kabir seems to have attained the highest possible level of education, though it was informal education and with the help of the informal education Kabir has presented a deep understanding of man’s predicament.

What a crazy thing
You did, O fool,
All through youth
You never knew Him!
Awaken! Behold,
Your bed is barren,
He went away early,
Leaving you alone.
The sleeping-self awakens Kabir,
As arrow of the Word
Pierces the heart. (32)

3.2 Kabir’s Poems

As one finds various beliefs about Kabir’s life, one also finds different opinions and beliefs about his poems. Nonetheless, followers of Kabir consider ‘Beejak’ as an authentic canon of Kabir’s works. (Dwivedi 19) Kabir’s works are available in three types viz ‘Rameini’, ‘Sakhi’ and ‘Sabad’. ‘Rameini’ derives from ‘raman’ which means to roam. Thus, ‘Rameini’ means ‘roaming in Vedas.’ ‘Sakhi’ comes from ‘sakshi’ meaning witness. A witness is one who
has seen the truth by his very eyes. (Dwivedi 24) Similarly, ‘Sabad’ means couplets or poems about God. It must be noted that Kabir did not write his works rather his disciples and devotees wrote for him. Commenting on Kabir’s language, Dr Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari says:

Because Kabir’s disciples and devotees came from various regions and Kabir himself was an itinerant saint, Kabir’s cannon was influenced by a good number of languages, dialects and patois, which sometimes renders Kabir’s poems incomprehensible. (Tiwari 1)

Notwithstanding the problem of comprehension posed by Kabir’s works, scholars have attempted to present various easy versions and translations of his works for readers to enjoy. Though Kabir was not a social reformer, he did not seem to have minced his words when he exposed and lashed hypocrisy, superstitions and ostentation found in so-called religions and priests. Throughout his poems, one can notice his vehement rejection of cults, creeds, rituals and superstitions that prevailed during his days. What accounts for this vehement rejection does not seem to be Kabir’s predilection for some other dogmas but his belief in empiricism:
Mein kahta ankhin ki dekhi, tu kahta kagad ki
lekhi Atam gyan bin jag jootha, kya Mathura
kya kasha. (25)

You are telling me all the things you have read
in your books, but I am telling you what I know
within myself, that I have seen with my Divine
vision.

His poems known as ‘Sabad’ narrates his journey from sleep to awakening,
imagining an individual soul as a young bride who, lost in sleep, is unaware of
having been separated from her Lord. However, once she awakes, she
realises what she is missing and then she starts a quest for it.

The pain emanating from Kabir’s poems seems to be the pain of a beloved
expressed on her separation from her Lord. The pain belongs to a person
who can see his siblings drowning but cannot rescue them. It also appears to
be a pain of loss or lack of communication. Kabir’s words “Says Kabir, listen O
saints” does not seem to be merely his hallmark but they appear to be his
earnest appeal to his followers and devotees to wake up from the slumber of
complacency and blind faith. Kabir seems to be aware of the fact that human
mind, despite being very subtle, has immense potential. It holds such a
powerful sway on readers that led by it in Sant Kripal Singh Ji’s words:
We worship light and music outside, but ignore
the flaming and sounding word within, to
which they point. (Kripal Singhji 195)

People seem to accept symbols as truths and the ultimate truth appears to get lost in a maze of symbols and philosophy. Mind is mobile and further it also thrusts its mobility on the self. Nonetheless Kabir seems to have realised that mind alone can alter the world by altering itself. However, this alteration seems to be possible only through awakening and that is why the main emphasis of Kabir’s poems appears to be on awakening.

Awaken! behold

Your bed is barren,

He went away early,

Leaving you alone. (Mahajan 32)

Fascinated by glamour of the world, a soul appears to forget that this life is just a passing pilgrim through the world. The poet urges readers to recall their real home:

Where your roots lie,

O swan, and
Where are you going? (168)

According to Kabir, it appears that only the fire of love that can purify the soul and rid it of the bondage of mind. This very purification seems to make it aware of the agony of separation from its true love and as a result the soul appears to hanker after Him in pain:

    O darling,

    Come home to me,

    Away from you,

    Life is a tale of misery. (110)

Despite its separation from Him, the soul appears to be sure of its everlasting bond with Him:

    As tongue is aware of

    The agony of eyes,

    Ears of the agony of tongue. (101)

There is no denying that the underlying message of Kabir’s poems is love. His poetry comes to humanity as a revelation that God appears to be nothing but love. Moreover He is a personal experience and not a subject of philosophical discourses. (Dwivedi 23) The very experience defies description.
Akath kahani prem ki, kachhu kahi na jai.

Gunge keri sarkara, khay va muskay

(Snatak, 153)

God appears to be love and each individual experiences love in various ways. God, Kabir seems to believe, is found neither in temples nor in mosques but He seems to be in every heart, in the void between two breaths that Kabir often refers to in his poems. Every breath that comes in conveys His message. However, people seem to be fast asleep and fail to notice the message. And, therefore, the endeavour Kabir is so ardently making appears to be just to awaken humankind to this message.

3.3 Humanism in Kabir’s Poems

At a very early stage, Kabir seems to have realised the fact that any kind of tenets, dogmas, precepts, principles and cult are counterproductive as far as true devotion is concerned as all these things breed dogmatism and fanaticism, which ultimately do not allow humankind to see the truth as it is. That is why, probably, many of his poems appear to urge to discard creeds and beliefs that embrace without any rational thinking.
Without such a faith,

You pluck the leaves,

And hit your head

Against the temple wall. (Mahajan 63)

Besides, Kabir appears to talk of the God that does not live at a holy shrine or a temple but within man. However, Kabir seems to say that ironically that is why people cannot notice God and oblivious of their real self they keep thronging at Kashi and Kaba:

How funny!

In the midst of water

A fish thirsts for water.

The thing lies at home,

But searching for it,

In the woods, they roam.

Without self knowledge,

The world is false,

Be it Mathura or Kashi. (62)
Here, Kabir seems to believe that as a fish lives in water and is surrounded by water, human beings live in God and are surrounded by God but they are still away from God because in vain they seek Him outside. There is all probability of our seeking Him outside as we have probably cared never to look within. Moreover, the very statement of Kabir that God is within man and not in mosques and temples seems to indicate that man is a pivotal figure in his poems, though he talks of God using various names such as “Ram” or “Hari”.

It is interesting to note that Kabir’s humanism appears to have several aspects to it. For example, when Kabir challenges established beliefs and practices, he appears to emerge as an iconoclast, he emerges as an empiricist when he seems to base his wisdom on his personal experience and many of his poems that mock superstitions and rites, appear to be brimming with rationalism.

3.3.1 Kabir as an iconoclast

Kabir’s wisdom does not appear to spring from any conventional way of learning or scriptures. Rather it comes from his profound understanding of human mind. And, therefore, many a time, his poems may sharply contradict popular beliefs. On the other hand, when Kabir appears to have realised that
it was bigotry that became the biggest barrier between people and the truth, 
he might have deliberately challenged popular creeds and myths. For 
example, he seems to have mocked futile divisions of religions such as Hindu 
and Muslim and derided man’s unfruitful effort to seek God outside:

Where do you look for me, dear?

I am closer than close to you.

Neither in temple-mosque am I,

Nor in Kaba-kailash,

Nor in rituals, nor in yoga-ways.

Neither in goat-sheep am I,

Nor in axe-knife,

Nor in skin-tail, nor in flesh and bone.

He who yearns, finds at once,

Far from the crowd,

I live in a quiet refuge.

Listen to me in the void, says Kabir.

In between all the breaths. (41)
Reading of the above-mentioned poem clearly suggests that Kabir did not appear to believe in rites at all and tried to make people aware of their futility. Though what he points at seems to be very mysterious, his focus seems to be man. In other words, his God does not seem to dwell in mosques or temples but He resides within man. The very declaration of finding God in man appears to indicate that humanity occupies a predominant place in Kabir’s thinking.

Furthermore, Kabir severely criticises orthodox people for practising the rites prevalent at that time. For example, it is believed that there was a cult of saints who remained naked and thought refraining from clothes will lead them to God and some believed that by getting their head shaved they can realise God. Kabir derided this practice in some of his poems:

What of going naked

Or wearing a sack-cloth,

If you see not Ram in all?

If one could find God

By going naked,

Would not the deer find Him?
If one could reach heaven by
Tonsuring,

Would not the sheep be there?

If one could be self-realised

By preserving the seed,

Would not the eunuchs be so? (70)

Thus, it is very clear that Kabir does not appear to have any faith in forced celibacy but he has faith in the spirit of questioning and the natural course of life.

3.3.2 Empiricism in Kabir:

Kabir does not trust mere philosophising but he believes in firsthand experience. Though priests preach that by going to temples and mosques, worshiping idols and reading Koran or other Holy Scriptures one can attain God. Kabir does not believe so. Says he:

All the holy-places are just rivers,

They wash off nothing;

I have had a bath in them.
All the idols are lifeless, brother,
They feel nothing;
I have cried to them.

Koran and Purana are just words,
They reveal nothing;
I have seen beyond the cover.

All that is not felt on the pulse,
Says Kabir,
Is simply hollow and false. (42)

Unlike other saint of his time, Kabir seems to have never encouraged blind following of his sermon. He rather encouraged people to examine and re-examine everything in the light of consciousness. Thus, the researcher thinks that it will not be wrong to say that Kabir kindled a lamp of disbelief among people. To illustrate this, Kabir says,

I wonder

Who your Lord is!

Mullah in the mosque

Calls out so loud,
Is your Lord deaf?

The Lord hears

The tinkling anklets

On the feet of an ant.

What of wearing tilak,

Growing matted-locks,

Or telling your beads?

You cannot meet Lord

Till you carry within

The dagger of disbelief. (42)

His statement “The Lord hears/The tinkling anklets/On the feet of an ant” appears to present Kabir as a humanist because his God is not somebody who is utterly detached from the world. Rather he is somebody with such an extraordinary sensitivity that every subtle movement of life seems to be reflected in him. However, Kabir’s God mercilessly seems to condemn priests who are haughty hypocrites and perform useless rites ostentatiously. Besides, in the researcher’s view, the word ‘disbelief’ also stands for a keen sense of inquiry which leads a person to the truth if pursued fully.
3.3.3 Kabir as a Rationalist

Kabir’s devotion looks to be not a blind devotion born of an impulse. Rather it seems to be an application of his belief in logic and evidence. The researcher holds that Kabir scoffs at the prevalent ritual of chanting God’s name on beads, despite the fact that in Hindu and Muslim religions chanting God’s name is believed to liberate one from suffering of this life.

Pundit, what a lie you utter!

Only saying Ram redeems,

Is mouth sweet by saying sugar?

If saying fire singes the foot,

Saying water quenches thirst,

Saying food appeases hunger,

All will go across the ocean. (35)

His emphasis appears to be on fully understanding the meaning of words and not merely reciting them mechanically.

The mimic parrot chants hari,

But knows not His fame,

Away from man in the forest,
It never recalls the name. (36)

If a parrot is trained properly, it can chant very clearly the name “hari”. However, this is all without realising the meaning of “hari” or God. But when it is left alone untrained in a jungle far from human beings, it does not know the chant “hari”. Kabir’s teaching does not believe in any kind of learning that comes from outside but it believes in the real learning coming from within a person. Knowledge is a great transforming force. However, borrowed knowledge, the knowledge which is simply imitated mechanically, can work no wonder. It is the realisation of the truth that emanates from the very core of one’s being can help one change his being. This logically gives an impression that Kabir attaches a great importance to intuition. Moreover, these lines make us re-examine how we are conditioned just like a parrot by our religion, Kabir thus appears to try to encourage us to get rid of this kind of conditioning, however religious it may be, and finally realise our real self.

It appears that being a rationalist Kabir does not agree that some destiny is responsible for what we are. Instead, it seems that that he believes that whatever we are is a result of what we have been doing so far.

Who can stop

If you opt for a fall?
You will suffer
For what you do.
If you do not
Heed the guide
You lose your way
In the wild (37)

These lines properly support the theory of Karma as expounded by Lord Krishna in *The Bhagwad Gita*. Moreover, in the researcher’s opinion these words must have been like a blasphemy to the people of those days who foolishly seemed to believe in destiny and did not appear to have ability to think rationally. Therefore, this was and is a very much pertinent idea of rationalism, especially for those who are easily duped by palmists, fortune tellers and some priests who capitalise on people’s gullibility. This is how Kabir makes people of his time not be trapped in the realm of superstitions. Here, his stance appears to be didactic in a way that he cautions the people of his time about unhealthy practices.

### 3.3.4 Various values in Kabir’s poems
The researcher would like to discuss what rationalism is and examine to what extent Kabir’s poems exhibit traits of rationalism. Therefore, the researcher would like to quote some definitions of rationalism.

1. “Rationalism is an approach to life based on reason and evidence.”

   (Bandiste, 12)

2. “Rationalism encourages ethical and philosophical ideas that can be tested by experience and rejects authority that cannot be proved by experience.”

   (12)

3. “.... rationalism encourages people to think for themselves,..” (13)

4. “Rationalism, in the broader, popular meaning of the term, is used to designate any mode of thought in which human reason holds the place of supreme criterion of truth; in this sense, it is especially applied to such modes of thought as contrasted with faith. Thus, Atheism, Materialism, Naturalism, Pantheism, Scepticism, etc., fall under the umbrella category of rationalistic systems.” (13)

5. “Rationalism, in Western philosophy, is the view that regards reason as the chief source and test of knowledge. Holding that reality itself has an inherently logical structure, the rationalist asserts that a class of truths exists that the intellect can grasp directly.” (14)
With the first glance at these definitions it becomes very clear that rationalism centres on “reason”, “evidence”, “experience” and “logical structure”. Similarly, the researcher believes that a study of Kabir’s poems reveals that his philosophy adheres to parameters of experience and he seems not to be ready to accept anything that cannot pass the test of reason.

Your Lord is near: yet you are climbing the palm-tree to seek Him.

The Brâhman priest goes from house to house and initiates people into faith:

Alas! the true fountain of life is beside you, and you have set up a stone to worship. (Tagore, 52)

Here Kabir appears to express his strong disapproval of the very idea that God is outside and we have to seek Him outside. Besides, the above-quoted lines also reveal how meaningless the Brahman’s ritual is.

In another poem, “It is needless to ask of a saint the caste to which he belongs” (59) Kabir logically refutes barriers of castes. And the logic he proposes clearly shows the meaning of the word “reason” as it has been used in the above-given definitions of rationalism.
It is needless to ask of a saint the caste to which he belongs; For the priest, the warrior, the tradesman, and all the thirty-six castes, alike are seeking for God.

It is but folly to ask what the caste of a saint may be;

The barber has sought God, the washerwoman, and the carpenter—

Even Raidas was a seeker after God.

The Rishi Swapacha was a tanner by caste.

Hindus and Moslems alike have achieved that End, where remains no mark of distinction. (34)

This kind of egalitarianism, the researcher assumes, seems to be a need of the time when Kabir lived, as society was presumably divided into various strata of hierarchy and those belonging to the lower strata were believed to bear the brunt of inhumane discrimination, ostracism and untouchability. Thus, Kabir might have opposed differentiation made on the basis of castes not because he is a social reformer but because he is a rationalist in his thinking and a humanist at heart:
O brother! when I was forgetful, my true Guru showed me the Way.

Then I left off all rites and ceremonies, I bathed no more in the holy water:

Then I learned that it was I alone who was mad, and the whole world beside me was sane; and I had disturbed these wise people.

From that time forth I knew no more how to roll in the dust in obeisance:

I do not ring the temple bell:

I do not set the idol on its throne:

I do not worship the image with flowers.

It is not the austerities that mortify the flesh which are pleasing to the Lord,

When you leave off your clothes and kill your senses, you do not please the Lord:

The man who is kind and who practises righteousness, who remains passive amidst the
affairs of the world, who considers all creatures 
on earth as his own self, 
He attains the Immortal Being, the true God is 
ever with him. 
Kabir says: "He attains the true Name whose 
words are pure, and 
who is free from pride and conceit. (23)

The poet launches another scathing attack on idolatry and unrealistic barriers 
in the name of religion. Interestingly, though Kabir does not mince his words 
while he is criticising religions and religious practices, these lines indicate his 
high level of spirituality that has its roots in the very human being that is of 
flesh and blood and walks on this very earth rather than an imaginary God 
that is believed to live in the sky. 

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. (44)

In this poem, Kabir seems to reject the popular belief that God is in mosques or in idol and seems to agree that God is neither in east nor in west but he lives within a person. God knows everything happening outside and inside a person. Thus, the researches thinks that Kabir views God as a pure omniscient consciousness. Kabir’s very declaration “All the men and women of the world are His living forms” (Snatak 124) is a culmination of his humanist rationalism. Besides, his words “Kabîr is the child of Allah and of Ram: He is my Guru, He is my Pir” (124) succinctly articulate his disapproval of and objection to divisions of religions. On account of Kabir’s radical humanism and rationalism, most people seem to believe him to be merely a social reformer or an iconoclast, but a closer look at his poems reveals that after all he looks to be a spiritual person having faith in humanity, though he may not be a religious person.
According to American Humanist Association:

Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities.

(www.americanhumanist.org)

As it is mentioned in the above-quoted lines that though humanism does not accept existence of supernatural beings, it believes in certain values—natural and human. Since Kabir was a humanist, his poems imply certain values, such as:

Pothi padhi padhi jag mua,

pandit bhaya na koi

Dhai aakhar prem ka,

padhe so pandit hoye
Read all books in the world
it will not make you wise
only wise ones are that know
four letter that love comprise

(www.poems2remember.blogspot.com)

Here, Kabir does not seem to attach any importance to erudition. He seems to exalt the pure feeling of love as a great liberating force. These days when humanity is faced with the threat of terrorism and violence, Kabir’s message of love becomes more pertinent as in the researcher’s opinion it is only through love that a person can bring about peace and harmony. Moreover, it is evident that bookish learning is not learning at all and it leads nowhere; rather it at times becomes burden. To support this view, we have many instances of highly educated and learned people turning bigoted and fanatic.

Very frequently it is this kind of highly learned people who are instigators of gruesome carnage. Without love, great erudition is not only useless but also dangerous. The message of peace and harmony appears to be a recurrent motif in Kabir’s poems.
Aisi baani boliye,
man ka aapa khoye
Auran ko seetal kare,
aapahu seetal hoye

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

(www.poems2remember.blogspot.com)

Kabir seems to believe that a person has to be careful of what he speaks and ensure that his words do not hurt anybody. It is observed that though means of communication have increased, communication between two people has decreased because people unnecessarily indulge in grumbling about and criticising others. Consequently nobody is ready to listen. If a person speaks words imbued with love, other people will love to hear him. On the other hand, if he keeps bitching about others, he will alienate a lot of people and lose his friends. As a result, a person will be left alone and the loneliness will tear him asunder. Thus, being polite in our speech is very much essential for social solidarity.
A look at a newspaper shows that man is full of turmoil, which he vents out through negative emotions such as anger, vanity, jealousy, hatred, and ego. And among all these, ego is probably the deadliest enemy of man. Most of our altercations and wars are caused by ego only. Therefore, to overcome ego, Kabir advocates humility in his songs. He says even God is not spared from repercussions of ego:

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.

(www.gutenberg.org)
Thus, whatever takes a form is destined to pass away. In the light of this realisation, Kabir calls himself a servant to God who is present within and thereby everywhere. These lines probably give a glimpse of humble state of mind where peace pervades.

3.3.5 Love in Kabir’s humanism

Love is thought to be a core principal of humanism as Todd Steifel says:

- Humanism is real love – love without supernatural deities.
- Humanism is good love – love that encourages good for goodness sake.
- Humanism is the love of life – love that increases happiness.
- Humanism is love with freedom – love without servitude to masters and scripture.
- Humanism is love with integrity – love with honesty, fairness and accountability.
- Humanism is love with reason – love embracing inquiry, education and science.
Humanism is benevolent love — love that rejects killing, terror, and damnation.

Humanism is equal love — love that welcomes everyone equally.

Humanism is the love of the future — love that is growing quickly.

Humanism is love now — love we can enjoy during our lifetime.

(www.americanhumanist.org)

Thus, love is a chief quality of humanism and it is also reflected in Kabir’s works. Evelyn Underhill says:

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 pervaded 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. (Underhill 4)

The above-quoted statement seems to make it absolutely clear that Kabir’s God is not something ethereal but something real that belongs to this very world in which we live and breathe. Therefore, his life exemplified how an ordinary man can attain the truth despite having a family and social responsibilities.

Kabîr says, "O brother! He who has seen that radiance of love, he is saved. (Tagore 21)

This means that love appears to bring about our redemption from our tribulation. Without love, life is futile and leads nowhere. Love, Kabir thinks, is a lamp that enlightens us.

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. (33)
In Kabir’s views, practising all rituals looks to be of no use if the heart is not aflame with love. This life and the world seem banal to those who are devoid of love but those who are brimming with love find everything intriguing. And Kabir is one of them, he says:

There falls the rhythmic beat of life and death:

Rapture wells forth, and all space is radiant with light.

There the Unstruck Music is sounded; it is the music of the love of the three worlds.

There millions of lamps of sun and of moon are burning;

There the drum beats, and the lover swings in play. (45)

Such is the bliss of those who are full of love. The manifestation Kabir talks of emanates from love.

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.
Kabir says: There have I witnessed the sport of
One Bliss! (46)

Kabir waxes eloquent when he talks about love and his mysticism springs from love.

3.3.6 Acceptance of this life in Kabir’s songs

“To humanists this life and living as good a life while we are here are what matter most.” (www.humanismforschools.org) One quality that distinguishes Kabir from other saints of his time is that though he felt affinity with God, he does not seem to condemn this life and this world; rather he appears to extol it. Thus, his very acceptance of this life is reflected in his own life as he lived as a weaver but his worldly life was imbued in love and wisdom that are indicative of a higher level of consciousness.

The shadows of evening fall thick and deep,

and the darkness of love envelops the body
and the mind.

Open the window to the west, and be lost in
the sky of love;
Drink the sweet honey that steeps the petals of
the lotus of the heart.

Receive the waves in your body: what
splendour is in the region of the sea!

Hark! the sounds of conches and bells are
rising.

Kabir says: "O brother, behold! the Lord is in
this vessel of my body." (Tagore 38)

The aesthetic description of nature that Kabir seems to present here is
inspired by his love for this life and this world. Besides, contrary to orthodox
saints who condemn the human body and human life as a punishment for
‘the original sin’, Kabir seems to be all praises for this human life and human
body and his tone is full of gratitude.

More than all else do I cherish at heart that
love which makes me to live a limitless life in
this world.

It is like the lotus, which lives in the water and
blooms in the water:
yet the water cannot touch its petals, they
open beyond its reach.

It is like a wife, who enters the fire at the
bidding of love.

She burns and lets others grieve, yet never
dishonours love.

This ocean of the world is hard to cross: its
waters are very deep.

Kabir says: "Listen to me, O Sadhu! Few there
are who have reached its end. (49)

Kabir’s words - “More than all else do I cherish at heart that love which
makes me to live a limitless life in this world” seem to provide a glimpse of
his love for this very life. Enlightenment, Kabir appears to believe, is not
attained by escaping from this life and pain and pleasure it brings but it can
be attained by living the very life and accepting agony and ecstasy it offers
with love and gratitude. Therefore, those who live in orthodoxy about a saint
may not accept Kabir a true saint as he had a family life and shouldered his
social responsibilities.
While other religious gurus and saints see in this life a barrier, Kabir appears to see an opportunity in this life.

O friend! Hope for Him whilst you live, know whilst you live,
understand whilst you live: for in life deliverance abides.
If your bonds be not broken whilst living, what hope of deliverance in death?
It is but an empty dream, that the soul shall have union with Him because it has passed from the body:
If He is found now, He is found then,
If not, we do but go to dwell in the City of Death.
If you have union now, you shall have it hereafter.
Bathe in the truth, know the true Guru, have faith in the true Name!
Kabir says: "It is the Spirit of the quest which helps; I am the slave of this Spirit of the quest."

(54)

Kabir seems to say that enlightenment is possible only during this life and there is nothing after this life. Therefore, he appears to rebuke those who have a desire to attain enlightenment to strive for it this very moment and not to believe in “an empty dream” i.e. false promises of heaven after death. Furthermore, his ardent faith in this very life and emphasis on “Spirit of the quest” also seems to imply his pragmatist stance found in any humanist. Though Kabir appears to be an enlightened mystic, he has his feet on the ground and seems to openly admit how arduous it is to detach oneself from the worldly maya i.e. illusion. Though one can control the mind that goes astray in the labyrinth of maya, and overcome passion, anger, greed, vanity and pride but in the end one is likely to get entangled in words.

Tell me, Brother, how can I renounce Maya?

When I gave up the tying of ribbons,

still I tied my garment about me:

When I gave up tying my garment, still I covered my body in its folds.
So, when I give up passion, I see that anger remains;

And when I renounce anger, greed is with me still;

And when greed is vanquished, pride and vainglory remain;

When the mind is detached and casts Maya away, still it clings to the letter.

Kabir says, "Listen to me, dear Sadhu! the true path is rarely found." (36)

Besides, he does not seem to credit asceticism. His God is assumed to be found not in self-imposed isolation but in a maze of social life.

Kabir 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. (72)
Thus, Kabir appears to emerge as a rare combination of Godliness and worldliness based on solid reality.

O Sadhu! The simple union is the best.

Since the day when I met with my Lord,

there has been no end to the sport of our love.

I shut not my eyes, I close not my ears, I do not mortify my body;

“I see with eyes open and smile, and behold His beauty everywhere:

I utter His Name, and whatever I see, it reminds me of Him;

whatever I do, it becomes His worship.

The rising and the setting are one to me; all contradictions are solved.

Wherever I go, I move round Him,

All I achieve is His service:

When I lie down, I lie prostrate at His feet.”

(78)
Here Kabir appears to say that he is so much engrossed in his love with God that the flame of the love keeps burning in him no matter what he does. Thus, Kabir entirely means to eradicate the apparent divide between the worldly and the otherworldly.

3.3.7 Kabir as a Great Social Reformer

As a humanist concerns himself with welfare of humanity at large and tries to eradicate whatever evil he notices in the society, Kabir also seems to have prepared himself to fight evil prevalent in the society those days and did not seem to mince his words when he appeared to reveal the vices like hypocrisy, superstitions, disparity on basis of castes and idolatry. During his time, it seems to be a common belief that there prevailed a lot of religious practices that were totally futile, still people observed them without doubt. Kabir questioned these kinds of practices and tried to make people see futility of useless rites.

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. (66)

People seem to live in illusion that having a bath would exonerate them from all their sins. So, people presumably became less afraid of committing sins as a panacea for their sins was very simple – a bath in the Ganges. Therefore, committing sins and having a bath in the Ganges became a regular ritual people have continued doing mechanically. Kabir might have wanted people to wake up to their real problems and get rid of religious mumbo jumbo, so he might have openly scorned rituals. One such ritual he seems to criticise is the ritual of saying the rosary.

Aeons have passed whirling rosary, restless
remains the mind

Give up the beads of rosary and rotate the beads of mind. (www.boloji.com)
He appears to say that in vain people chant God’s name in parrot fashion as repeating God’s name without any understanding. This appears to lead nowhere. It is the mind that one has to work with. Kabir’s wisdom, in the researcher’s view, springs from his firsthand experience and not from reading scriptures or merely philosophising. Therefore, he appears to urge people to come out of confinement of erudition.

O man, if thou dost not know thine own Lord,

whereof art thou so proud?

Put thy cleverness away: mere words shall never unite thee to Him.

Do not deceive thyself with the witness of the Scriptures:

Love is something other than this,

and he who has sought it truly has found it.

(Tagore 29)

It is believed that those days learned people had a great influence on the society and many times they misused the power and suppressed others under the name of castes and religions. Being a humanist, Kabir could not
stand this kind of injustice, so he scathingly attacked rote learning of scriptures. In the following lines, he has to express his disbelief in other religious rites.

I do not ring the temple bell:

I do not set the idol on its throne:

I do not worship the image with flowers.

It is not the austerities that mortify the flesh which are pleasing to the Lord,

When you leave off your clothes and kill your senses, you do not please the Lord: (30)

Kabir seems to consider idolatry a useless rite and, therefore, he appears to want people to rid themselves of this unnecessary activity. Neither does he think that mortification of our body can lead us to enlightenment.

Though Kabir’s philosophy seems to support egalitarianism, he was not an ‘egalitarian’ in the strictest sense of the term. Basically, he is believed to be a rebellious visionary who never compromised his principles. Besides, he seems to know that only superficial changes were not going to help society.
In a society whose very direction of thinking is fallacious and where people mistake untruth for the truth, a radical change is needed and Kabir seems to have become aware of this need. Kabir might have realised that people’s way of thinking needed to be changed. Consequently, he embarked on a crusade against superstitions and sets of beliefs that were against humanity and the truth. Professor Dwivedi says: “He was a rebel who completely eradicated outer rituals and practices. His way was not compromise.” (Dwivedi 160)

Kabir demonstrated a very high level of audacity and spoke the truth. He was a saint who thought on his own instead of adhering to the traditional thinking. He was such a spontaneous and original thinker that he must have scoffed at bookish learning. Kabir appears to be of the opinion that the truth is not something to be learnt from books but something to be experienced personally. He thought himself to be radically different from others of his time and said:

\[
\text{tu kahata hai kagad lekhi, mey kahta akhan}
\]
\[
\text{dekh (You are telling me all the things you}
\]
\[
\text{have read in your books, but I am telling you}
\]
\[
\text{what I know within myself, that I have seen}
\]
\[
\text{with my Divine vision)" (www.kabir.ca)}
\]
During his time people were believed to have harboured some superstitions about dying at a holy place. People believed that by dying at Kashi they could go to heaven. He took people to task for cherishing such an erroneous belief.

The rigidity against which Kabir launched a crusade was not an ordinary rigidity, it rather seemed to be a rigidity that had been pushed into people’s mind for a long time. Futile rites and irrational practices such as casteism, idolatry, holy ablution, pilgrimage and fasting seemed to have been deeply rooted in people’s mind. Moreover, it is believed that with the invasion of Mogals there came many more useless rituals. Therefore, Kabir did not seem to have spared anybody who propagated rituals and irrational practices and he appears to have mercilessly attacked mullas, pundits and their disciples who slavishly followed them. Kabir saw that pundits and mullas had not realised the truth but they were simply reiterating words written in scriptures.

\[
\text{Pothi Padh Padh Kar Jag Mua,} \\
\text{Pandit Bhayo Na Koye} \\
\text{Dhai Aakhar Prem Ke,} \\
\text{Jo Padhe so Pandit Hoye}
\]
Reading books everyone died,  
none became any wise

One who reads the word of Love, only becomes  
wise. (www.boloji.com)

Pundit, what a lie you utter!  
Only saying Ram redeems,  
Is mouth sweet by saying sugar? (Mahajan 14)

There seems to be rationality in Kabir’s thinking. Since God is everywhere and in everybody, he seems to believe it to be utterly ridiculous to divide people according to their castes and religions. During Kabir’s days there were said to be a lot of cults, traditions and religions and there prevailed mutual hostility among them. Therefore, Kabir seems to have strongly protested this kind of disparity and division and advocated equality among all people. The researcher thinks that this also has brought about social solidarity among them. With very convincing examples, Kabir explained that the differences are merely differences of naming and are not real.

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?

Within the Supreme Brahma, the worlds are being told like beads:

Look upon that rosary with the eyes of wisdom.

(Tagore 69)

After realising ‘the Supreme Brahma’ that is beyond any dualism, there is no possibility of disparity. Kabir seems to be very much sensitive and responsive to his time and could have jumped to an action when he saw vices like idolatry, superstitions, hypocrisy and futile rites growing rampant in the society. He appeared to have felt an urgent need to curb them. Though he was enlightened, he did not get satisfied with his own enlightenment rather he wanted others to taste the same bliss he had tasted, so he lived among
people and invited them to walk on the razor sharp path of the truth.

(Dwivedi 73)

Kabir’s progressiveness can be attributed to his humanist approach. The researcher holds the view that this singer of the eternal truth is as pertinent today as he was during his own time because the vices like casteism, disparity, superstitions, futile rituals and other evils are still looming large during our time as well. Kabir says:

Kabira khada bazaar me, liye murada hath

Jo ghar bare apna, chale hamare sath. (Snatak 169)

With a corpse in his hands, in the market Kabir stands

Come along only if you are ready to burn your home. (Mahajan 39)

3.3.8: Kabir: a non-believer in God but a firm believer in humanity

The researcher is led to believe that though Kabir was a disciple of Ramananda, he seems to have realised that following a particular set of
scriptures inevitably involved blindly believing in some methods, which later would degenerate into rituals and idolising some exponents, without any rational base. In other words, Kabir seemed to be well aware that following any scriptures mostly leads to bigotry and fanaticism and when scriptures rule minds of people a true human voice gets muffled. Kabir might have perceived two threats on the path of Bhakti—first, cults, and second, scriptures. The researcher is of the view that a cult does not allow a person to look at things objectively, i.e., one’s observation and reactions are coloured by the philosophy of the cult one follows. Similarly, scriptures can guide one as long as they are taken as great literature but when they acquire the status of words of God and therefore unquestionable dogmas, they hamper our thinking and render us bigoted.

Though Kabir advocated Bhakti, i.e. devotion, his Bhakti seems to be nirguna Bhakti, i.e., not believing in any form of God rather considers God as something that permeates all animate and inanimate things. That is why he appears to deride idolatry as a foolish activity that misguides people.

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.

Kabir says, "O Sadhu! God is the breath of all breath." (Tagore 499)

Kabir’s proclamation that God is neither in temples nor in mosques may tempt one into thinking that he is an atheist. However, Kabir’s God is in man.

Gorakhnath asks Kabir:

"Tell me, O Kabir, when did your vocation begin? Where did your love have its rise?"

Kabir answers:

When He whose forms are manifold had not begun His play:
when there was no Guru, and no disciple:

when the world was not spread out:

when the Supreme One was alone—

Then I became an ascetic; then, O Gorakh, my

love was drawn to Brahma.

Brahma did not hold the crown on his head;

the god Vishnu was not anointed as king;

the power of Shiva was still unborn; when I

was instructed in Yoga. (Tagore 22)

These lines appear to establish him as a true humanist who believes in true

love and mankind. A true humanist like him is rare to be found.

Evelyn Underhill aptly observes:

Real worship and communion is in Spirit and in

Truth (XL, XLI, LVI, LXIII, LXV, LXX), therefore

idolatry is an insult to the Divine Lover (XLII,

LXIX) and the devices of professional sanctity

are useless apart from charity and purity of

soul (LIV, LXV, LXVI). Since all things, and
especially the heart of man, are God-inhabited,
God-possessed (XXVI, LVI,
LXXVI, LXXXIX, XCVII), He may best be found in
the here-and-now: in the normal. human,
bodily existence, the "mud" of material life (III,
IV, VI, XXI, XXXIX, XL, XLIII, XLVIII, LXXII).
(Underhill 8)

Kabir seems to emphasise true feelings of love with absolute surrender but if
one lacks this feeling, one may try thousands of methods of yoga and other
rituals but one will not attain anything substantial.

The Kazi is searching the words of the Koran,
and instructing others:

but if his heart be not steeped in that love,
what does it avail,

though he be a teacher of men?

The Yogi dyes his garments with red:
but if he knows naught of That colour of love,
what does it avail though his garments be
tinted?

Kabir says: "Whether I be in the temple or the
balcony, in the camp or in the flower garden,

I tell you truly that every

moment my Lord is taking His delight in me."

(96)

From the above-quoted lines, it is clear that formal practices and rituals make
no sense to Kabir. In the time of Kabir, escapism was very often mistaken for
spirituality and people believed that only those who run away from family
responsibilities could attain enlightenment. Kabir questioned the popular
myth of asceticism.

He is dear to me indeed who can call back the
wanderer to his home.

In the home is the true union, in the home is
enjoyment of life: why should I forsake my
home and wander in the forest?
If Brahma helps me to realize truth,

verily I will find both bondage and deliverance

in home.

He is dear to me indeed who has power to dive
deep into Brahma;

whose mind loses itself with ease in His
contemplation.

He is dear to me who knows Brahma, and can
dwell on His supreme truth in meditation;

and who can play the melody of the

Infinite by uniting love and renunciation in life.

Kabir 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. (80)
Thus, Kabir does not seem to be absolutely an atheist. However, his God does not live away from mankind rather among mankind, in the very place called ‘home’. This can be a very enlightening message to those who seek God in temples, in mosques, mountains and at other places outside.
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