



The Problem of Caste: Bhakti and Equality in Kabir

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Introduction

According to Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Kabir's poetry has a unique quality of embracing the rationale of say caste only to turn against it and therefore rejecting it. This is evident in the following song attributed to Kabir.

“O saintly men, don't ask again the man devoted to the God without qualities what his caste is. The brahmin's good, the warrior's good, the trader's caste is good. The thirty-six clans, they're all good- it's your question then, that's crooked. The barber's good, the washer man's good, the carpenter's caste is good. Raidas, the saint, was good, Supac, the seer, was good- though they were scavengers. Both Hindus and Turks have demeaned themselves- they can fathom nothing.”¹

The inherent logic of this poem questions the organization of the caste system, firstly by embracing different castes when it says that all the castes are good and tries to break the binaries of the hierarchical structure of caste by bringing them at par with each other. As pointed out by Vinay Dharwadker, “this poem

1 Vinay Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, (India: Penguin Books, 2003).

is grounded in the historical fact that, over time, many of the famous bhakta have come from the low castes and from untouchable groups". This category of bhakta (devotee) is very important as it is devoid of any 'societal power structures' operating on it. Through this category of bhakta (devotee) one can see Kabir's vehement rejection of inequalities prevalent in the society based on caste and religion. Therefore, through the poems attributed to Kabir, one can discern the idea of equality present in them. Arguing against the critics of the Bhakti movement that it seeks to establish equality only in the realm of spiritual and is unable to do so in the social sphere, Kabir's idea of equality, as can be understood through his poems and verses, seeks to establish the equal moral worth of an individual irrespective of caste and religion. This can be seen through his direct engagement with the spiritual and temporal authorities and with the society, which represents a kind of power structure that was oppressive in its very nature. This offers him a unique position in Bhakti.

The following paper will thus seek to understand the notion of equality emergent in Kabir's poem and how it can be materialized in the context of India. The second important question that this paper will address is regarding the contemporary significance of Kabir in his vehement opposition to the hierarchies of the caste system. The paper will further investigate the question of the influence of Kabir over Ambedkar, as recent studies by scholars like Kanwal Bharti have shown. He argues that there was a profound influence of Kabir on Ambedkar and the reason for this was that both were victims of the same socio-religious background.² For Kabir, the epitome of the power structures were the Maulvies and Pundits, who were not only the religious heads of their respective religions but also responsible for entrenching the rituals of the piety and the Varna system. Kabir directly engages with the spiritual authorities of his time and this is evident from his poems when he refers to them as, 'hey pundit', 'listen maulvi'. 'Mr Qazi', 'think pandit', 'Pandit you have got it wrong' etc. This also shows the challenge to the caste structures operationalized by the religious authorities, through Kabir's dissenting voice and disrespect for their intellectual authority and knowledge system of the Brahmins, which was very much exclusive in nature. Kanwal Bharti argues that similarly to Kabir, these religious authorities were also a problem for Ambedkar.

2 Vinay Dharwadker, *The Weaver's Songs*, (India: Penguin Books, 2003).
<https://www.forwardpress.in/2017/07/kabirs-nirgunvad-influenced-ambedkar/>

Caste in India

The caste system has not only led to social but economic and political inequalities. The castes which were docile and submissive have become more assertive and militant recently. The theories of organization of caste defined purely by hierarchy and purity are no longer sustainable because of the assertiveness of the low caste identity in contemporary times.³ According to the sociologist Louis Dumont, the caste system in India was defined in terms of 'Pure hierarchy' in which the Brahmins occupied the top most position, and the rest of the castes fell in line behind the Brahmins, completely agreeing with the ideology of hierarchy. This is why he called the Indian society 'Homo Hierarchicus'.⁴ The two extreme ends of this hierarchy are the pious Brahmins and the impure Untouchables, thereby making 'purity and pollution' the bedrock of the hierarchy of the caste system. Politics and wealth have only an interstitial role in this hierarchy. However, Dipankar Gupta argues that this theory of pure hierarchy is failing because each caste had ideological underpinnings from which they drew their 'symbolic energy' for political and economic mobilizations and hence were able to value themselves deeply.⁵ For instance, the Julaha caste can be seen as representing their origins and history differently and simultaneously glorifying their own lineage. This is precisely what Dwivedi argues when he says that the weaving castes never liked to be represented as inferior to Brahmins. In fact, they called themselves Brahmins at times.⁶ He further argues that Dumont was aware of the parcelization of pure hierarchy into competing blocks, but he failed to provide a reason for the same.

Another attack that comes to Dumont's theory is from Andre Beteille, who argues that the caste system in India is leading to 'dispersed inequalities'. Highlighting the problems of 'comparative sociology', Beteille argues that the hierarchical society like India (where hierarchy permeates every sphere of life) is placed in opposition to the 'homo equalis' (societies that are zealously attached to the principle of

3 See introduction in Dipankar Gupta ed. *Caste in Question: Identity Or Hierarchy?*, Vol. 12, (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), p.x.

4 Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, trans. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont and Basia Gulati, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 60-75.

5 Gupta ed. *Caste in Question: Identity Or Hierarchy?* pp. x-xi.

6 Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Kabir, (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2008), p.19.

equality). This comparison between the 'Homo Hierarchicus' and 'Homo Equalis' comes from the lack of understanding of the context of the former and prejudice towards the latter.⁷ The western societies are the exemplar of the 'Homo Equalis', and the sociologists of the West accept the diverse views in the West, thereby making it more egalitarian in nature. However, when it comes to hierarchical societies, the western scholars are satisfied with the less differentiated view of the latter.⁸ This allows the western scholars to judge the hierarchical societies not based on their experience of the modern struggles against discrimination but their image of the past. For instance, India's modern struggles against the inequalities of caste and untouchability have been pushed into the background, just to bring the hierarchical Varna and Caste system upfront.⁹ This possibly arises from the anxiety of the West to show itself in the light of equality by using the non-West in the background, which reflects the built-in structures of inequalities. Therefore Beteille suggests that the specifications of the society are to be understood in the light of both equality and inequality merging together to form a particular design.¹⁰ He simultaneously rejects Dumont's assertion that traditional India knew nothing about the values of equality and liberty. What Beteille brings to the fore is the point that before these categorizations of 'Homo Hierarchicus' and 'Homo Equalis', one needs to study the context and traditions of the so-called hierarchical societies because according to him, no society can lack in the conceptions of equality and justice. Every society therefore has some fundamental concept of equality.

In this background, it becomes essential to study Kabir as a modern figure who was not only fighting against the oppressive caste system but the religion that sanctioned it. Kabir serves as an example that the idea of equality was not entirely absent in India. Besides Kabir, there were other poets of the medieval century that were arguing for a casteless society and this is evident from the utopian society of Begumpura, which Ravidas had propounded.¹¹ According to

7 Andre Beteille, "Homo hierarchicus, homo equalis", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.13, Issue no. 4, (1979): p. 529.

8 Beteille, "Homo hierarchicus, homo equalis" p. 530.

9 Beteille, "Homo hierarchicus, homo equalis", p. 530.

10 Beteille, "Homo hierarchicus, homo equalis", pp. 531-532.

11 Gail Omvedt, *Seeking begumpura*, (New Delhi: Navyana Pub., 2008), p.18.

the hagiographies, Ravidas is considered the contemporary of Kabir, and one often finds stories of their debate on the Sagun and Nirgun Bhakti.¹² Both Kabir and Ravidas belonged to the low castes where the former was a julaha (weaver) and the latter was a 'chamar' or a leather worker and it is in their subalternity that one can see the anti-caste agenda. The city of Begumpura encapsulates the vision of a prosperous and equal society where irrespective of caste and status, everyone walks together and freely.¹³ In a similar way Kabir's city of 'Premnagar' (the city of love) and 'Amarlok' (the city of immortality) too is a utopian vision where love pervades every sphere thereby bringing down the walls of hatred and discrimination.¹⁴ As rightly pointed out by Gail Omvedt, reason and ecstasy form the bedrock of these utopian visions of the subalterns, without access to any knowledge and privileges, they were trying to subvert the hegemonic Brahmanical traditions. Being aware of their positions in the society, the low caste saints were trying to bring a radical transformation to Indian society. The utopias of the subaltern saints could be seen as posing an alternative society that was based on the understanding of history, and the way to achieve it was through reasonable actions.¹⁵ Whereas Brahmanism had no such vision of a just society, but in fact, they placed emphasis only on the deeply hierarchical society to be regulated by the Varna system. It is also important, therefore, to understand that the Varna system that sought to maintain stability and coherence in society was itself responsible for the rising inequalities. This is because, as Beteille would argue, the very criteria of evaluation that an organization sets for an individual is responsible for inequalities.¹⁶ For instance, the criteria for evaluation, on the basis of birth for the admission into the caste system, points towards the inherent tendency to be unequal. Therefore, this idea of evaluation is a 'social or cultural process' because this standard of evaluation is applied not only to the material things but to the human beings, thereby making them part of the collective

12 David N Lorenzen, *Praises to a Formless God: Nirguni Texts from North India*, (New Delhi: SUNY Press, 1996). pp168-190.

13 Omvedt, *Seeking begumpura*, pp.106-107.

14 Omvedt, *Seeking begumpura*, p. 18.

15 Omvedt, *Seeking begumpura*, p.14-15.

16 Andre Beteille, *Inequality among men* (UK: Blackwell, 1977), pp. 4-6.

representations (for example caste).¹⁷ This places the individual in a ranking order based on, for example, their birth in an Indian Caste system.

The envisioning of the utopia thus can also be seen in the form of dissent and social protest against the divisive forces prevalent during the medieval centuries. However, in the case of Kabir, it is important to remember that not only was he simultaneously envisioning an ideal simple state that is 'sahaj sthiti' which means true liberation, but he was directly engaging with the dominant forces and was not somebody who denied his material existence. In fact, he sought to acknowledge them and then tried to bring about a radical transformation. Therefore, when Gail Omvedt argues that the lower caste saints utopia of casteless society was to be accomplished through the reason guided actions because this utopia represented a combination of reason and ecstasy. Kabir actually is doing both, envisioning of an ideal city of 'Premnagar' and 'Amarlok' and at the same time questioning the orthodox brahmanical authorities. For instance, in his following verse he is seen to be questioning the very logic of caste- based inequalities. "It's all one skin and bone, one piss and shit, one blood, one meat. From one drop, a universe. Who's Brahmin? Who's Shudra?"¹⁸

The Paradox between Hindu Kabir and the Dalit Kabir

In order to see how Kabir understands caste, it is important, to see how Hindu authors and Dalit authors have tried to understand and then appropriate Kabir. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi compares Kabir with the Narsimha avatar (a half lion and a half-man incarnation) of Vishnu because both stood at the intersection of impossible and contradictory situations. While the latter was a creation to kill Hiranyakashapu (king of demons) who had asked for his killer to be neither a man nor an animal, that he should not be killed by a weapon neither made of metal nor stone and many other eccentric conditions required to kill him. This points to an impossible yet extraordinary task. Kabir too stands in a similar way

17 Beteille, *Inequality among men* pp 8-9.

18 Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. and ed. Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, (New York: OUP, 2002), p.19

at the intersection of contradictory conditions, of being a Hindu and a Muslim, of being learned and untutored and of being the preacher of nirguna (God without attributes) and a seeker of saguna¹⁹ (God with attributes). Therefore for Dwivedi Kabir stands at the crossroads of mutually contradictory doctrines similar to that of 'Narsimha' avatar of God Vishnu and this is where he paints Kabir as the savior of Hinduism.²⁰ Kabir becomes for Dwivedi the 'romantic rebel' who seeks to save Hinduism from Islam. Referring to Kabir as 'Phakkar' (rebellious), Dwivedi argues that Kabir criticized all the customs and traditions and inaugurated a Nirguna Bhakti. He calls Kabir a 'dharamguru' (religious leader) and throws light upon the unique personality which becomes essential for the historical project of Hindi. It was Dwivedi who brought Kabir and his mysticism in the center of the debate, where he was seen to represent new ethics of individualism in the discourse of nationalism, after a continuous attack from Ramchandra Shukla who was trying to establish Tulsidas and Surdas as the most influential saints of North India and in whom the dominant idea of community and nationalism was being construed.²¹ The enumeration of an 'unique individual' and marginal status in the caste system represented by Kabir becomes essential for Dwivedi for opposing the Islamic creed by bringing Kabir within the fold of Hinduism resting upon his shoulders the task of radically changing the social norms of the traditional Indian society. Why a marginal figure of Kabir becomes important for Dwivedi is because a homogenous and consolidated national tradition could emerge only with the accord between the low castes and the elites. Therefore for Dwivedi, Kabir is neither a Dalit nor a Muslim, but a unique modern Hindu.²² This tendency of assimilating Kabir within the Hindu tradition is criticized by Dalit scholars like Dr. Dharamvir.²³

Kabir, according to the Dalit scholars is Dalit God instituting a religion of its own. This veneration of Kabir as a Dalit God was essential for Dharamvir to construct the history of the subalterns which was denied by the hegemonic brahmanical

19 Dwivedi, Kabir, pp 143-145.

20 Milind Wakankar, *Subalternity and Religion: The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), p.81. Hereafter I will be using the analysis made by Wakankar in the same book.

21 Wakankar, *Subalternity and Religion: The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia* pp.117-118.

22 Wakankar, *Subalternity and Religion: The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia*, p. 74.

23 Dr. Dharamvir, *Kabir Ke Alochak*, (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2015).

traditions. Therefore to dissociate themselves with 'e' Hinduism is very much radical for the Dalit movement initiated by B. R. Ambedkar. Whereas Kabir is a rebel who seeks to go beyond Caste for Dwivedi, for Dalit scholars he becomes a victim of caste always pointing at the inherent inequality of the caste system. But in this, as has been pointed out by Wakankar both Dwivedi and Dharamvir keeps Brahmanism at the centre where the former seeks to move towards it and the latter seeks to depart from it. This often ignores in the process what is 'intransigence for the low castes in their struggle for recognition and autonomy'.²⁴ The difference between Dwivedi's Kabir and Dharamvir's Kabir can also be looked at as how they understand his notion of Nirguna God (without attributes). While Dwivedi argues that Kabir's nirguna Bhakti was a way to achieve the Saguna God (with attributes), for Dharamvir Kabir himself was a Dalit God.

In the light of the above discussion, it is important to see that while Dwivedi was trying to do away with the caste, Dharamvir brought it to the fore. For both, therefore caste remains central, where the former is trying to ignore the inherent inequalities of it for the larger project of a homogenous tradition, the latter unveils the inherent inequalities. However, the problem with the Dalit appropriation of Kabir as Dalit God confines him within the institution of organized religion. Another point that needs to be taken into consideration is that when Kabir refers to his identity as a Julaha or of his low caste status, the purpose is to reject the institution of caste and then the institution of any religion. One might argue that possibly for Kabir the hierarchies within the institutions eventually led to the inequalities and therefore it was crucial to reject not only those institutions (specifically caste and religion) but the very ideology of those institutions. But this is not the case with the Dalit scholars as they very well are skeptical of leaving behind their identities which are being used as a bargain for the sake of their representation and equal rights.

24 Wakankar, Subalternity and Religion: The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia, p.77.

Kabir's Idea of Equality

The Hindu religious authorities were exclusionary by their very nature because they granted access to knowledge and privileges only to the upper caste. This phenomenon of binaries based on the caste is not something new but has been entrenched in the minds of those who favour it and those who want to destroy it. In such a case, Ambedkar argued for the 'annihilation of the caste' in the early twentieth century, and similar to this, Kabir too was fighting against this in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. One might argue that both launched a strong attack against the Brahmanical ideology and the prevalent power structures that sought to repress one section of the society while favouring the ideology of those who ruled. However, both differed in their ways of doing so, whereas Ambedkar suggested leaving the fold of Hindu religion and joining Buddhism²⁵, for Kabir the entire practice of following institutionalized religion and any external authority that sought to dictate the lives of individuals needed to be rejected. Therefore, for Kabir these binaries had to be rejected and the practice of 'interiorizing faith'²⁶ needed to be inculcated. One can argue that in rejecting these binaries there was an idea of non-discrimination and equality present in Kabir and he sought to materialize it through the 'principle of sameness'. This principle can be seen in the following sabda (a form of folk song) where Kabir argues that every individual is made from the same bone; same flesh and has the same blood running through their veins.

"Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge. Tell me where untouchability came from, since you believe in it. Mix red juice, white juice and air—a body bakes in a body. As soon as the eight lotuses are ready, it comes into the world. Then what's untouchable? Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels decay into dust, while the potter keeps slapping

25 Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, *Annihilation of caste: An undelivered speech*. (New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1990), pp. 40-42.

26 Vaudeville, Charlotte. *A Weaver named Kabir: Selected Verses with a Detailed Biographical and Historical Introduction*, Vol. 6. USA: Oxford University Press, 1993.

clay on the wheel, and with a touch cuts each one off. We eat by touching, we wash by touching, from a touch the world was born. So who's untouched? asks Kabir. Only she who's free from delusion"²⁷

The metaphor 'clay' denotes the substance with which the body comes into existence and which according to Kabir is the same for every individual. In the above poem, one can see how Kabir, like Socrates, has a 'hammerlock' over the argument, while the 'interlocutor' in this case 'Pandit' becomes the subject.²⁸ The passion with which Kabir is arguing reflects his anguish towards discrimination based on caste, purity and impurity and most importantly 'touch'. The question that Kabir raises, that 'from where did untouchability come?' is very pertinent to the idea of equality and hierarchy that one can draw from Kabir. Hierarchy for Kabir was composed of the oppressed and the oppressors, in his case the low castes and the upper castes respectively. This hierarchy was based on access to the knowledge of the Vedas (the oldest Hindu texts), birth, pure-impure, power and wealth. This hierarchy that Kabir sought to eliminate and thereby establish equality not only on the ontological but also moral basis. The idea of equality was not that of demanding political rights but that of equal moral status in the society by not only drawing upon the natural basis of equality (that of flesh, bone and blood) but also by rejecting the acquired inequalities based on hierarchies of caste and varna system. Coming back to the above mentioned sabda, Kabir attacks the notion of untouchability by embracing the idea of 'touch'. Kabir argues that without the action of 'touching', one can neither perform their everyday functions nor can they come into existence. No human body remains untouched in this world. Therefore Kabir is questioning the very premises on which the untouchability is based, if touch which is the essence of everyday activity of every individual being. He calls this the questioning of 'illusoriness of touch'. Since every body is made of the 'same essential substance' and that each body is produced from another body, at what point does the defilement take place?²⁹ This question raised by Kabir challenges the notion of purity and impurity, which were developed by the Brahmanical authorities based on touch and sight. The

27 Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.17.

28 Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 27. Special emphasis on the footnotes.

29 Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pg 17.

world which is seen as the creation by touch ³⁰ in the above verse highlights its importance thereby negating the very essence of untouchability. This is in a way very procedural because the things that go into the making of an individual are the same and the procedure of reproduction is too the same. So the basis for inequality or ascription of lower status to the shudras by the Brahmins on the basis of birth becomes redundant.

It is important to analyze the resistance against the Brahmanical orthodoxy that one sees in Kabir. This resistance stems from him being conscious of his caste and his surroundings. The very fact that some scholars have argued that Kabir belonged to the community of converts and Kabir himself referring to as either 'julaha' or 'kori' is indicative of his awareness towards his caste. Kabir asks individuals to reject the organization of caste and Varna. The following 'Ramaini' and this reflects that he was aware of the inherent inequalities in the organization of caste. "Drop family, drop status, seek the nonexistent space, destroy the shoot, destroy the seed, reach the unembodied place." ³¹ This can be seen in yet another sakhi (a short verse) coming from the Rajasthani Granthavali – "I've burned my own house down, the torch is in my hand. Now I'll burn down the house of anyone who wants to follow me."³²

It is important to see that he was not just challenging the hierarchy of upper and the lower caste but the different power structures leading to inequalities. This is how his idea of equality becomes universal because he was not just challenging the status and power of the dominant sections but also the sources from where they were drawing upon them such prestige, for instance, the knowledge of the Vedas, scriptures, birth, wealth and language etc. The aim was. therefore to destroy the roots or the source of inequality. It is important here to cite one of the famous hagiographical accounts concerning the ritual of birth and death in the Hindu tradition. According to this ritual, dying in Magahar (a town in UP) led to the re-birth as a donkey, whereas dying in Kashi (a town in UP) meant liberation.

30 Kabir, The Bijak of Kabir, pg 18.

31 Kabir, The Bijak of Kabir, pg 86.

32 Linda Hess. "The cow is sucking at the calf's teaKabir's upside-down language." History of Religions Vol 22, Issue no. 4 (1983): pp. 313-337.

Magahar was a town where the low caste or the ones who performed unclean jobs resided. This clearly shows that Kabir's conscious decision to die in Magahar meant his complete rejection of the rituals associated with death and afterlife.³³ This shows that Kabir, a critical individual, was trying to bring forth the problems of external rituals, social differentiations and sectarianism. Hence according to Baidyanath Saraswati one can see a tradition of non-conformism in Kabir.³⁴ For Kabir the inherent qualities of an individual had nothing to do with the caste³⁵ and this is evident in the following lines of Ramaini (another type of composition associated with Kabir). "The maker himself became a potter, the potter shaped all kinds of pots. He set them in one place, the creator— carefully he made those pots! He baked them in the belly's fire, guarding them the whole time. Then carefully he brought them out and "Shiva," "Shakti," named them all. If the son of the house is stupid, clever ones don't follow him. I'm telling you my own truth, madmen follow others' dreams. Hidden and visible—all milk. Who's the Brahmin? Who's the Shudra? Don't get lost in false pride. False is the Hindu, false the Turk."³⁶ This clearly stands in opposition to the division of castes on the basis of inherent qualities as for Kabir one can bring about a change in the existing social conditions through one's labour and this is evident from his life account as a julaha weaving the cloth for the subsistence of the family.

The falsity of rituals, religious identities and caste identities and anything which are hypocritical are often associated with 'Maya' in Kabir's verses. According to Linda Hess, Maya represents the 'phenomenal universe', 'the ephemera of transient forms'.³⁷ Since these forms are evanescent and their existence is temporary, Maya therefore constitutes 'illusion' which often leads us astray from the true path to salvation. Therefore, for Kabir, all the religions, caste and rituals are forms of Maya. Often it is representative of lowly passions and desires, which clouds the judgement of individuals, pushing them to pursue the temporary pleasures

33 Baidyanath Saraswati, "Notes on Kabir: A Non-Literate Intellectual" in, *Dissent, Protest, and Reform in Indian Civilization*. Vol. 24, Malik, Subhash Chandra ed., (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), pg 172-173.

34 Saraswati, "Notes on Kabir: A Non-Literate Intellectual", p. 173.

35 Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, see footnote to ramaini 26.4.

36 Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 83.

37 Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir* pg 197.

of the phenomenal universe. Sometimes Maya is also personified as a female seductress leading people into bewilderment and distractions. This concept of Maya found in Kabir is understood by Kumkum Sangari through three types of femaleness on which Kabir draws upon – the ‘fallen’ femaleness of *strisvabhav* (nature of a woman), the noble precepts of *stridharma* (duty of a woman) and the ‘higher’ femaleness emerging in *bhakti* compositions.³⁸ The *stridharma* often found in the marriage along with the ‘higher’ femaleness enables the individual to free themselves from the clutches of lower passions and desires of *strisvabhav*. Maya is the basis of distinctions between different kinds of women on the basis of the above categories but also simultaneously defines a woman’s essential nature.³⁹ The first category that of ‘*strisvabhav*’ views women as an impediment in the path of *Bhakti*, hence it is associated with the characteristics of deceit, sensual pleasures, greed and lies. For instance, in the following *sabda* one can see Kabir referring to Maya as a trickster swaying people away from the path of salvation.

“Maya's the super swindler. Trailing the noose of three qualities, she wanders, whispering honeyed words. For Vishnu she's Lakshmi, for Shiva she's Shakti, for priests an idol, for pilgrims a river. To a monk she's a nun, to a king she's a queen, in one house a jewel, in one a shell. For devotees she's a pious lady, for Brahma, Mrs. Brahma. Kabir says, seekers, listen well: this is a story no one can tell.”⁴⁰

Thus, Maya is present within oneself and Kabir argues that Maya and Mind become one thereby creating a delusional world. In this sense the *strisvabhav* therefore becomes a ‘principle of male self-division’ where there is a constant struggle between the male striving for higher truth and Maya creating distortions.⁴¹ The *strisvabhav* runs contrary to the *stridharma* which refers to the ‘*pativrata*’ women surrendering her life for the betterment of her husband and children. Kabir is often seen immersing himself in the *Bhakti* of God in the pursuit of *stridharma*

38 Kumkum Sangari, “Mirabai And The Spiritual Economy of Bhakti”, *Occasional Papers on History and Society*, XXVIII, (1990), p. 78.

39 Sangari, “Mirabai And The Spiritual Economy of Bhakti”, p. 78.

40 Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 41.

41 Sangari, “Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti”, p. 85.

where the latter represents a perfect male protecting their respective wives. This reflects upon the undivided self which when separated from the god becomes unworthy but becomes complete on uniting with God.⁴² The *strisvabhav* and *stridharm* therefore reflects the contradictory virtues – ‘femaleness of male frailty’ desirous of lowly pleasures preventing both men and women from attaining salvation on the one hand and ‘femaleness of higher male desires’ respectively. This is therefore legitimizing the *stridharm* as a married woman who chastises the lowly desires created by *strisvabhav*. However, the problem in such a kind of division where on the one hand woman is a mere trickster and on the other helps in chastisement reflects upon the dual nature of women either being bad or good. This representation is very much patriarchal in nature where again women have not only been reduced to as being evil and good but have been placed in subordination to the men. The powerful femaleness of ‘*strisvabhav*’, which can be rather interpreted as an independent force, is rendered as evil. This therefore reflects the persistence of patriarchal values in Kabir’s verses. The problem in such a claim might arise from the fact that Kabir’s poems have been orally transmitted and from the western to eastern texts there have been additions. So, whether these values were present in the original compositions or have been later additions remains an enigma, hence the idea of equality in Kabir remains incomplete. This makes the contextual reading of Kabir all the more important.

Kabir, Gandhi and Ambedkar on Inequality, Caste and Toleration

It would not be wrong to suggest that one can identify a common thread between Kabir, Gandhi and Ambedkar. Where Gandhi often recited Kabir’s verses and the recent Dalit scholars have argued that there was a consistency in the thought of Kabir and Ambedkar. Also, the influence of Kabir is seen on Ambedkar because his parents were Kabir Panthi’s.⁴³ Three of them raised the important questions of untouchability and inequality of the caste system; however, their respective ways of approaching the problems were different. Kabir, as has already been pointed

42 Sangri, “Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti”, pp 85-90.

43 Bharti, “Kabir’s ‘Nirgunvad’ influenced Ambedkar”.

above, rejected the external rituals of caste and religion in totality. He argued for the elimination of the two, which were leading to the inequalities in the society. He sought to achieve equality by arguing a case for biological sameness.⁴⁴ Kabir not only rejected the distinctions of caste and varnas but also rejected the scriptures in which they were rooted. Kabir rejected the existence of different God's for different people and in fact placed importance on the unity of God, which was immanent.

However, for Gandhi, religion was an important aspect of one's life and he is often seen claiming in 'Hind Swaraj' that Indians are becoming irreligious. Gandhi explains that Indians are 'turning away from God' and this because of the dawn of modern civilization, in front of which the religious superstitions seem harmless. This however does not mean that he was supporting the superstitions but instead argued that one could not do away with them by disregarding religion.⁴⁵ One can therefore see the underlying difference between Kabir and Gandhi in the way they approached religion wherein the former sought to dissipate the existence of religion, the latter sought to conserve it. This 'conserving of religion' by Gandhi steers the way to his principle of toleration which relied on accepting the faults of every religion, thereby leading to the fact that all religions are imperfect. It is in the acceptance of these imperfections that the principle of tolerance develops. However, later, Gandhi had transformed the meaning of tolerance to 'goodwill' as he thought the former to be judgmental and condescending.⁴⁶ For Gandhi, therefore "Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling?"⁴⁷ Therefore for Gandhi religion was a "resource, a body of insights to be extracted, combined and interpreted in the way he thought proper".⁴⁸ Whereas for Kabir different religions were the delusions

44 This sameness is based on the flesh, bones and blood which is common to all the human beings. the faculty that separates human beings from the animals is that of reason and criticality, the two of which are the essence of Kabir's verses.

45 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, (India: Navjivan Publishing House, 2014), pp.38-39.

46 Bhikhu Parekh, 'Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction', (United States: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.118.

47 Gandhi, *Hind swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, p. 49.

48 Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 47.

of Maya that led people astray from the path of salvation. Therefore, in the light of this Saral Jhingan, the argument that both Mahatma and Kabir emphasized the importance of unity of all religions is rendered redundant.⁴⁹ Though, both were facing the communal discord during their times, yet their approach for settlement of the conflict varied. For Kabir, tolerance of religion was by no means an option when he rejects the basis of external differentiations of human beings based on the same.

Coming to the question of caste and varna, Gandhi had rejected the caste system prevalent in India, yet had accepted the Varna system. He argued that Caste has no relation with religion and Varna but also said that Varna defined our duties based on the occupation and is good for the welfare of the society.⁵⁰ Varnashram dharma according to Gandhi was a 'unique contribution of Hinduism' to the entire world. Varna which was based on the division by birth was inherent in human nature and to disregard it was to flout the 'law of Heredity'.⁵¹ Therefore, the four fold varna distinction remained important for Gandhi while the classification into various castes was 'unwarranted'. In fact, when there was a discussion regarding the granting of the communal awards to the lower castes, Gandhi came out in strong opposition to it because according to him their status as untouchables would be further perpetuated without actually reforming Hinduism.⁵² Though he condemned the practice of untouchability of the caste system, he also demanded the Hindus for bringing the reform. It is important to understand that the Varna system is based on the birth but on the worth of an individual and the caste system is based on the birth of an individual. Both in their practice become solidified with clear cut distinctions and this perpetuates inequality. That is why it is important here to reiterate Kabir's idea of equality, which basically emphasized on the equal moral worth of an individual. This basic equality whose remnants are to be found in Kabir is essential for any democratic society. That is why Kabir

49 Saral Jhingan, "Kabir and Gandhi as Apostles of Human Unity, Transcending Religion and Caste-based Discrimination", *Gandhi Marg*, Vol. 32, No.3, (Oct-Dec 2010), accessed on June 5, 2018, <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/kabir-gandhi-apostles-of-human-unity-trascending-religion.html>

50 Ambedkar, *Annihilation of caste*, pg 42.

51 Mahatma Gandhi, 'The essence of Hinduism', (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1987), pp 30-33

52 Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 23.

completely rejected the caste and the Varna system and also rejected their source of knowledge that is Vedas and Puranas.

Echoing in the same contention, Ambedkar in his 'Annihilation of Caste' argues that Hindu society is not a community but an amalgamation of different castes and it is important to do away with the caste and Varna system. The reform of Hinduism was impossible therefore he suggested leaving the fold of Hinduism and converted to Buddhism. Caste according to him was a state of mind and thereupon reform of the caste meant notional change. The deeply held religious beliefs further perpetrated the caste distinction making all the Hindus slaves to the caste system and this could be changed only by leaving the fold of Hindu religion.⁵³

Religion for both Gandhi and Ambedkar was important wherein the former sought to reform Hinduism; the latter sought to reject it by conversion to Buddhism. Though, for Gandhi the cosmic spirit (God) was the truth, which human beings strive for and which was formless that is without qualities, but he was also aware of the disorientation experienced by the human mind (especially Hindus for whom rituals around deities is a way of life) when asked to think of God in a 'non-qualitative' terms.⁵⁴ Therefore, for Gandhi religion becomes central to the reform of the hindu society. In fact, Ambedkar never rejected the religion per se and this is evident from conversion to another religion. However, Kabir completely takes a different course altogether and a much more radical one that is rejecting all the organized religions. Kabir's rejection of religious distinctions and the caste distinctions are based on his idea that every human being is equal and the only hierarchy that exists is that between God and the Bhakta. The Bhakta doesn't know any caste, gender or religion. What is important to note here is that Kabir is not rejecting the possibility of God's existence but the religions, which are a hindrance to the path of salvation. The essence of life⁵⁵ is not to be found in any

53 Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, pp 31-40.

54 Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*, pg 36.

55 By essence of life I am referring to the meaning of our existence which we derive from religion. For instance the various rituals performed to please the deities to bring good fortunes.

religion but within oneself and one's labor. By placing the essence of life within the individual Kabir seeks to create a unity of all the human beings.

Conclusion

Kabir is then seen as rejecting the very idea of the caste and untouchability. Kabir not only challenged the authority of the institutional structures of caste and religion but attacked the very ideology upon which they are founded. While arguing that 'touch' is the essence of our existence, he argues that the Brahmin, Shudra, Muslim, Hindu, etc everybody is born through the touch. Therefore, one can say that Kabir was arguing for an equal moral worth of an individual and through this he sought to unite humanity .

Finally, from the above discussion it can be concluded that Kabir's idea of equality was very much political and social in nature. Not only was he arguing a case for basic equality but simultaneously envisioned the city of love where everyone was equal. The ideal of selfless love and devotion towards God actually burnt the walls of discrimination because it sought to bring every individual on the same plane.

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