

## "Shifts in Paradigms propelled by the Bhakti Movement: A Study of Kabir's Renderings."

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### **Abstract**

Bhakti movement brought paradigm shift in the religious philosophy of India. This movement was also a precursor to Hindu Muslim integration in Medieval north India. The focus of this paper shall be on the *bhakti sants* of the northern India, especially Kabirdas. The earliest source of the Bhakti movement is traced somewhere in south India. Gradually, this movement engulfed the whole of India and became a pan-India movement. The *bhakti* was both devotional and emotional. For the first time the concept of personal God was introduced in *bhakti*. These *sant* poets/singers made a huge contribution to the vocabulary of *bhakti* and also Hindi literature. They used vernacular languages more popularly known as '*Sadhukkadi*' for their poetic expressions. There was a time when *bhakti* was spoken in the entire north India. This movement also abolished the caste hierarchy. The study wishes to explore the reasons behind the upsurge of the Bhakti movement, and also how it altered the social order of a society. Kabirdas took care of large section of the population that comprised of both Hindu as well as Muslims who did not believe in *sagun* (with attributes) form of God. Therefore, the focus shall be on understanding his perspective of *bhakti*.

**Keywords:** Bhakti movement, Vaishnav movement, vernacular languages, salvation, *nirgun* and Advait vedanta.

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*Veergatha Kaal* (Heroic Period) from 993-1318 C.E. was followed by *Bhakti kaal* (Bhakti period) from 1318-1643 C.E. This movement gained momentum after the decadence of Buddhism. There was loss of *dharmā* in *bhakti*. The Bhakti movement in north India is known in literature as the "Vaishnav revival movement." The source of this movement is traced in southern India. However, historian Krishna Sharma in her book, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective* opines that the influence of Protestant Christians caused Historians to represent *bhakti* as a Vaishnava movement. This was due to the similarities in the theology of *bhakti* with the Protestants perception of God. She believed that this idea of historicization deformed the realities of *bhakti* theology. According to her, *bhakti* was timeless.

The first ever mention of *bhakti* sant poets is found in Nabhadās' *Bhaktamal* or legends of the *sants*. It focused on the lives of two hundred *sant* poets. It is written in the Braj bhasha dialect (Western Rajasthani). The *sant* poets from north India contributed hugely to the vocabulary of *bhakti* and Hindi literature. The verses of these poets are still alive in the hearts of Indians as they were nearly five hundred years ago. Most of the people can recite something from the poetry of some of the legendary *sants* like Tulsidas, Mirabai, Raidas, Guru Nanak, Kabirdas and Surdas because their poems are universal in theme. They address the issues like trials and tribulations in the society, the human aspiration for salvation, friendships and betrayals, birth and death, besides many other such topics.

In the fifteenth century there were numerous *bhakti sant* poets/singers who came from all walks of life and challenged the existing Hindu religion and the existing social structure which was very rigid in those days. The list includes the names of Guru Nanak, Mirabai, Chaitnya, Tukaram, Vallabhacharya and many others. Vallabhacharya gained significant name as he started the '*pushti marg*' or the path of nourishment. Guru Nanak founded the Sikh religion while Chaitnya began the Bengali Vaishnav movement. The most significant change was that lower castes and women were accepted as disciples. The acceptance of lower castes was a big challenge to the established authority of Brahmans. All these *sants* contributed towards the rise of the Bhakti movement in India. Basavanna, a renowned twelfth century scholar also played a prominent role in expanding the Bhakti movement.

The following lines from *Bhagvatamahatmya* throw light on the spread of Bhakti movement from one region to another:

*aham bhaktir iti khyata (...)*  
*utpanna dravide saham vrddhim karnatake gata*  
*kvacit kvacin maharastre gurjare jirnatm gata (...)*  
*vrndavanam punah prapya navineva surupini*

*jatahm yuvati samyak prestharupa tu sampratam*

Bhagavatamahatmya I.44-49 (partim)

" [I am called Bhakti (...)]

I was born in Dravida,

grew mature in Karnataka,

Went here and there in Maharashtra,

then in Gujarat became old and worn (...)

But on reaching Brindavan I was renewed,

I became lovely once again,

So that now I go about as I ought:

a young woman of superb appearance."

( EFEO - Training - Archaeology of Bhakti)

Muslim incursions into India coincided with the writing of *Tantralok* by Abhinavgupta in 1000 C.E. *Tantralok* became the basis of both Shaiv and Tantric traditions. Several years later in 1050 C.E., Ramanujacharya started extending the teachings of Shankaracharya. He strongly propagated the idea that God is also a person and He is living beyond the realm of this world. Shankaracharya's name emerges as the most important one as the founder of the Hindu religion. He wrote commentaries on Vedanta philosophy under the guidance of his guru Govind Bhagvatapada. Shankaracharya travelled widely within India and after contesting with many scholars and winning over them, he re-established the significance of Vedas. He is also known as the founder of the Advaita (non-dualism) school of Vedanta. Abhinavgupta's popularity mainly rested on his concept of *Shanta-ras* in *bhakti* poetry. Tantric traditions did not gain ground for long.

*Bhakti* marked the shift from the world of Vedas and Upanishads which was more ontological in approach to the theological vision within *bhakti*. The world of Vedas and Upanishads engaged everyone ontologically whereas this relatively newly found *bhakti* was theologically engaging. It can be described as the shift from the realm of the ordinary world to the extraordinary world that assimilated within its realm different *rasas*. The idea of *bhakti* was seen in the early texts like *Shvetashvatra Upanishad* and *Bhagavad Gita* as one of the paths to liberation. *Bhakti-marg* is one of the four ways to attain oneness with God besides *karam-marg* *raj-marg* and *jnana-marg*. *Bhakti* poetry is an amalgamation of Sanskrit with India's vernacular traditions. It first appeared as a new thing in Tamil Nadu in the eighth or ninth century. Many scholars have mentioned about the socio-political aspect of the *Bhakti* poetry as they were instrumental in abolishing the

caste hierarchy. Most of the *bhakti* poets belonged to the oppressed section of the society. A *sant* generated a new hope for the common man, and their God was the God of love who assured hope of salvation to everyone. *Bhakti* became the only path for improvement in the position of common man in the society. Its vision was based on pan-Indian themes of liberation and enlightenment. *Bhakti* took inspiration from Sanskrit tradition, vernacular cultures and collective Tamil literature. *Bhakti* poets were deliberately anti-traditional as their poems subverted the traditions. The word *Bhakti* originated from the Sanskrit word *bhaj* which means to adore or worship God. The term *bhakti* was derived from the Sanskrit word *bhaj* and it implied sharing, partaking, singing and dancing besides much more. Mirabai, Chaitnaya and many more *bhakti sants* travelled from one place to another and they danced in trance to express their blissful state of mind. The use of vernacular languages had wider appeal and reach in the masses. It also helped in bridging the gaps between Hindus and Muslims. There was another significant shift from the Sanskrit language (*dev bhasha*) to vernacular languages (*lok bhasha*). There was lot of unrest during the Mughal regime due to the frictions between Hindus and Muslims. As a *bhakt*, one no longer needed the expertise to understand the *Puranic* literature to embark on the path of spiritual journey. People could easily follow *bhakti* while fulfilling their household duties. It was purifying and auspicious and also came with the promise to liberate them from the worldly ties. The *sants* composed their songs orally in vernacular languages and they could be easily remembered and transmitted from one to another. The whole experience of listening and reciting *bhajans* was powerful enough to connect with God.

The upper class in India comprised of four *varnas*: Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The religious and spiritual supremacy of Brahman was unchallenged partially because they were well versed with Vedic scriptures and also because they were required as mediators to worship God. The introduction of the concept of personal God implied that no mediator was required between *bhakt* and *Bhagwan*(God). The massive Bhakti movement transcended all existing caste barriers within the framework of society. Masses immersed equally and unequivocally in the river of *bhakti* whether it was a Brahman, a cobbler like *sant* Ravidas, a weaver like Kabirdas, a royal princess like Mirabai, a farmer or a washerman. *Chandalas* who were responsible for the cleaning of villages were at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. It was emphasized that a *chandala* practicing sincere devotion could be closer to God than a Brahman lacking proper devotion. All *bhakt*s were regarded as equals and this encouraged common people to become a part of it, especially the lower caste people and women who were at the bottom of the hierarchy in the society. It can be said that *bhakti* transcended caste. Kabir wrote, "*Jaati na poocho sadhu ki pooch lijiye gyaan*" (Kulshrestha, 2017). This means that the caste of a *sant* is insignificant and hence, his status should be based on his knowledge.

Bhakti existed in Gujarat as Advait and Krishna *bhakti*. The most significant propagator from Gujarat was Narsimha Mehta from Junagadh who composed "*vaishnav jan to*." Mirabai of Rajasthan was another Krishna *bhakt* and she is best known for *kant bhav* or bridal mysticism in her poetry. Kabirdas from Varanasi was an Advaitic though most of his other disciples were Vedantins. Kabir's guru Ramanandacharya was a very big influence in north India. It is significant to note that there were many similarities between the poets from south India and the poets from north India. *Nayanyar* and *Alvar* in south India came to be known as *Nath* and *Siddh* in north India. There were many similarities between Shaivism and Vaishnavism of south and the expansion of the same in northern India. Thus, it became a pan-India movement when it embraced the whole of India.

Kabir was born in 1398 C.E. in Varanasi. Kabir's *Bijak* is a generous mix of Hindu and Muslim thoughts. A part of his collections is compiled in *Adi Granth* in 1604. The literal meaning of *Bijak* is "an invoice, or account-book, or perhaps a document by which a hidden treasure can be located" (Keay, 1989). "*Bijak* is an old Avadhi dialect of Hindi" (Keay, 1989). It is believed that Kabir's verses were compiled by his disciple Bhago Das. There are various metres in *Bijak*; some are *dohe* (couplet) and some are *chaupai* (a quatrain of four half lines). It is evident from the lack of rhyme and prosody in Kabir's poetry that he lacked formal education. Caste system has been prevalent in India since times immemorial. Everyone is born into a particular caste and those castes have their own norms to abide. Kabir did not discriminate between Hindus and Muslims at all. He reprimanded both of them equally of Sikhs for their hypocrisies. His *Ramainis* substantiate his personal beliefs that all the discriminations leading to disharmony, bigotry and intolerance were propagated by ignorant people. He did not adhere to any fake ideologies or class divisions that were promoted by some people due to their vested interests. He was popularly known as a weaver from Kashi. He believed in *moksh* (salvation) as the goal of *bhakti*, and this goal could be attained through good *karma* (deeds). There was a popular belief that death in Kashi could ensure *moksh*. Therefore, Kabir deliberately moved to Maghar to breathe his last, in order to prove such beliefs were baseless. Kabir belonged to the *nirgun* tradition and he followed the Ram cult. However, both Acharya Ramchander Shukla and Hazar Prasad Dwivedi accepted that Kabir's poetry was both *sagun* and *nirgun* in form. Acharya Ramchander Shukla is critical of Kabir on the account that Kabir was unduly harsh on both Hindus and Muslims. Kabir's poetry is best known for the use of twilight language or upside-down language. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra quotes an example where he thinks that his language is "more or less right-side-up" when he transforms the ancient Hindu image of the mare who lives deep in the sea and holds in her mouth the fire that will emerge at doomsday to destroy the universe:

Kabir uses this image as a more or less right-side-up poem to express the soul burning for God: 'There's a fire/ Raging in the ocean'. But in the upside-down poems, the statement that water catches fire or The sea's ablaze, now regarded as a logical impossibility, is explicitly said to be a part of 'Topsy-turvy-Veda'.

(Mehrotra, 2011)

For this study, I have taken Kabir's *Bijak* by Swami Anand Kulshrestha as the primary text. Kabir's poetry is broadly selected into three parts - *Ramaini*, *Shabda* and *Saakhi*. Kabir spoke at length about the hypocrisies of people in the name of religion. Like a true philosopher he guided everyone through his verses to detach themselves from the worldly desires and also to discard the material desires. It is evident that his verses are largely based on his day to day experiences of life. Like Mirabai and many other bhakti sants, he also believed in oneness with God.

*jab main tha, tab hari nahin*

*jab hari hai main nahi*

(Kulshrestha, 2017)

The translation here is mine:

When there was ego, God did not dwell in his heart. Only when ego vanished, God dwelled in his heart.

Kabir was love personified. It is hard to find some other poet who expresses the pangs, sufferings and exaltation of love so deeply. The following verses substantiate this point:

*prem na baadi upaje, prem na haat bikaay*

*raja praja sau ruchay, sheesh de le jaaye*

(Kulshrestha, 2017)

The translation of the above quote is mine:

A lover has to sacrifice his head to attain love and love is not a trade. Whether it is the ruler or the ruled, everyone needs to sacrifice their head for love.

Also,

*prem pyala so peeye, sheesh dachhina deye*

*lobhi sheesh na de sakey, naam prem ka leye*

(Kulshrestha, 2017)

The translation of the above quote is mine:

Whoever drank the wine of love has to sacrifice his head and a greedy person cannot

sacrifice his life. He may mention the name of love, but that is not enough for true love. Kabir tried hard to unite Hindus and Muslims and remove their differences. Throughout his life, he preached everyone on communal harmony. In *Saakhi*, Kabir explained that human soul should be free from '*maya*' (illusion). He claimed that most of the people do not make conscious efforts to know God. They only imbibed the scriptures and followed rituals of worship in a mechanical way. According to him, God did not dwell in temples or mosques but inside the pure human hearts. A pure heart is free from the longings and material desires. When they fail to do so, they fail to liberate their souls from the worldly bondages. Giving up on their identity of caste and community and becoming a *bhakt* in its true spirit was the only path that could bring eternal freedom. People cling to their dogmatic beliefs when they are spiritually short-sighted. Kabir averred that the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh ruled over the "astral and sub-astral worlds" as they were also deceived by *Maya*:

*moti maya sab tajen, jheeni taji na jaye*  
*peer paigambar auliya, jheeni sabko khaye*

(Das, 2015)

The translation of the above quote is mine:

Kabir told that one can leave wife, children, money and house but one does not leave beauty, name and fame which is also '*maya*' or illusion.

The legends of Kabir have a great significance for *Kabirpanthis* that exist in various parts of India. The legends throw light on the faith and ideologies of Kabir. It is difficult to imagine the existence of *Kabirpanthis* without the legendary stories. The same is true for every religion and its philosophers. Anant das's *Kabir Parachai* is a beautiful collection of Kabir's legends. There are some libraries like Sahitya Sammelan library in Allahabad and Nagar Pracharini Mahasabha library in Varanasi that have done a commendable work in retaining some of the original manuscripts of some legendary writers.

In conclusion, it can be said that Kabir brought many shifts in ideologies when he challenged the existing religious orthodoxies and social hierarchies. More importance is attached to languages and literature in print form, but the poetry of these *bhakti sants* has survived for more than five hundred years only due to oral transmission. Kabir's verses are like the "collective conscious" of people. Most of the books have come in print form in the last two hundred years but the literature has already existed. The biggest flaw of oral transmission is that this literature has been adapted by different folk singers belonging to different regions as per their requirements. The changes that have been brought about by such folk artists are irreversible. Kabir's creations leave an indelible imprint on human minds because

he picked up adwaitism from his guru Ramanand. He imbibed *ahimsa* (non-violence), *prapatti* (absolute surrender) from Vaishnavs. The *nadi chakra* from *Nathpanthis*, *prem bhav*(love element from Sufis), fundamentalism of Paigambar in his thoughts and all the above is reflected in his verses. Therefore, Kabir can be called the father of Hindi poetry.

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