

SAINT KABIR

Kabir was one of the greatest poets of Bhakti Era. He was the son of a widow and was looked after by a couple, Neema and Neeru in Varanasi. He belonged to the downtrodden society which made him suffer a lot. He was against social evils such as untouchability, religious extremism etc. He wrote against the priests. He is well known for his 'Panchmel', 'Khichdi' or 'Sadhukdi'. His mentor was Sri Ramanand. Whatever he wrote was based on his personal experience. He moved a lot and used whatever local language was used at that time. He was exponent of 'Gyanashrayi' branch of Bhakti Era. He was a worshipper of Abstract form of Ram. His famous works are called Sabad and Sakhi.



SAINT KABIR

"I and you are of one blood
and one life animates us both.
From one mother is the world born
What knowledge is this which makes us separate?
All have come from the same country
And have landed at one ghat;
But the evil influence of this world
Has divided us into innumerable sects."

The poem given above is the English translation of the poetic outpouring of Saint Kabir by a scholar. Kabir was against caste system and division of mankind on the basis of caste and sect. He is one of the great luminaries who occupy a very distinct position as a ruthless critic of the weaknesses and failings of religions during his period. His songs castigated casteism, ritualism and orthodoxy. He had to wage a relentless

war against obscurantism, orthodox Brahminism and Islam. He lived during the period from 1448 A.D. to 1518 A.D. It is said that he was born of a Hindu mother and later on brought up by a Muslim weaver Niru and his wife Nima. They lived in Banaras now called Varanasi, which was a citadel of Hindu orthodoxy and culture. Kabir and his family lived in abject poverty and hostile environment. During this time Buddhism was waning and the Brahminism was on the ascendancy. Islam was having the royal patronage of Muslim rulers who were hostile to Hinduism. Both the orthodox Hindu priests and Maulavis hated Kabir and they complained against him to Emperor Sikander Lodi who banished him from Banaras itself later in his life.



In his young age Kabir became a disciple of saint Ramananda, who was a Vaishnava ascetic propounding faith in a personal God. His message was that through personal devotion to one's own God irrespective of one's caste or creed or status in social life, one could attain bliss and salvation. Saint Ramananda had among his disciples Sena, the barber; Dhana, the Jat; Ravi Das, the cobbler; and Kabir, the Muslim weaver. Kabir was the foremost among his disciples. Ramananda tutored and moulded Kabir and made him a follower of his liberal, social outlook and concern for the low-caste people. In addition to this, Kabir had also the good fortune of coming into contact with Shaikh Taqqi, who was a Sufi saint. He had the knowledge and influence of both Hinduism and Islam which he utilised fully to face the challenges during his struggle against elitism and orthodoxy. With considerable fortitude and independence he attacked both Hinduism and Islam and pointed out their weaknesses. He rejected the authority of the traditional scriptures and the then prevailing superstitious beliefs and rituals of both the Hindus and the Muslims. He exposed their apparent contradictions in their conduct.

He was against idol worship. He was not in favour of the display of siddhis by yogis and condemned some of their practices. He rejected the varna and caste system with utmost contempt. He vehemently denounced untouchability and despised all those who were perpetuating these unjust and pernicious practices.

While criticising the outward form and superstitions of both the Muslims and the Hindus, he was himself not in favour of creating a new system or propounding a new philosophy. He preached that institutional religions which thrive on sectarian and social differences had no use for him. He was bold and original. Kabir did not believe that only Pundits and Maulavis had the monopoly as guardians of religions and gods. He had no respect for booklore and pedantic platitudes. His approach to people was direct and simple. Kabir's appeal was to the non-literate masses and not to the so-called intellectuals and the elite.

Through contacts with the people and personal experience Kabir was able to convey to them his message of love, compassion and brotherhood. He emphasised that before God there is no Hindu or Muslim. His fortitude and unwavering faith to rid the society of religious bigotry and superstitions was so intense that he announced thus:

"Kabir is standing in a market place with a burning stick in his hand"

This declaration by Kabir shows that he was a rebel. He was keen to wipe out the evils in society with a view to bringing about a new social order and authentic religion based on equality and brotherhood.

He preached tolerance. He said that one should give flowers in return to those who give pain and sorrow. It is said that after Kabir's death both the Hindus and the Muslims claimed his body, the former wanting cremation and the latter burial. When the shroud was removed, there was nobody except bunches of flowers. These were shared by both the communities, each acting according to its desires. Thus in death as in life, Kabir symbolised brotherhood among the two major religious communities.

He was a great non-conformist in the tradition of Buddha and other saints in Indian civilization who registered their dissent and protest and sought to reform the Indian society. His teachings in brief are as follows:-

- i) Total rejection of caste system, the practice of untouchability and all divisions based on caste, creed and religion.
- ii) Denial of any special status or authority of the priests and mullas for religious functions or their being holy.
- iii) Repudiation of the authority of the religious scriptures and blind beliefs.
- iv) Mere booklore promoting pride and pedantry without any connection and communication with the common people serves no purpose.
- v) Disapproval of the discord and distinction between the Hindus and the Muslims.
- vi) No preference for any religion.
- vii) Condemnation of idolatory, mythology of divine incarnations, superstitious beliefs and ceremonies and all external ramifications in the name of religion and sectarianism.

Kabir earned his livelihood at the loom and continued to be a weaver all his life. But at the same time, he never departed from his path of virtue and reform.

Kabir was a saint-poet for non-literate masses. And his songs are moving and sung by the common people even today in north India. He was a people's poet. Through his positive approach emphasising unity of men, non-violence, love, compassion, tolerance, truth and belief in one God, he is still remembered and revered by vast masses of the people even after a lapse of about five centuries.

Although there is no evidence to show that Kabir formally organised any sect or initiated any disciples, we have today what is called

'Kabir Panth'. A Large number of sects trace their origin to the preachings of Kabir. Saint Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikh religion, was greatly influenced by Kabir. Adi Grantha, the sacred book of the Sikhs, contains a large number of verses of Kabir. Although there are other sects influenced by Kabir, the point to be remembered is that Kabir's immortal message of equality, love, communal amity and brotherhood without distinctions on the basis of caste, creed and religion remains the beacon light for us. It should continue to inspire and guide us particularly in the present context when the country is passing through crisis resulting from communal violence, caste conflicts, atrocities on the scheduled caste and tribes and the weaker sections, and erosion of ethical and spiritual values in our society.



EXERCISES

A. Let's Answer

1. Who was Kabir? What did he think about caste system and division of mankind? Do you agree with his view? Give reasons.
2. Why did orthodox Hindu priests and Maulavis hate Kabir?
3. What did Kabir preach? To whom did he appeal?
4. What happened with Kabir's body after his death?
5. Why is Kabir remembered even today?
6. What kind of social order did Kabir want to bring about?
7. What do you mean by tolerance? What did Kabir say in this connection?
8. Summarise in your own words Kabir's teachings. How far are they relevant in the contemporary society?

B. Let's Discuss

- a. The essence of religion lies in love and forgiveness.

C. Let's Do

1. Recite two verses of Kabir and translate them into English.
2. Do a project work on 'Kabir Panth and its relevance today'. You may take help of your teacher or consult any reference book in your school library.

