

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.



THE EYES ARE NOT HERE

Ruskin Bond

RUSKIN BOND (b.1934) has written over a hundred short stories, essays, novels and books for children. He got the Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing in India in 1992. The present story, "The Eyes Are Not Here", is a highly sensitive and thoughtful story. It deals with the point that insight is superior to eyesight.



THE EYES ARE NOT HERE

I had the compartment to myself up to Rohana, and then a girl got in. The couple who saw her off were probably her parents: they seemed very anxious about her comfort, and the woman gave the girl detailed instructions as to where to keep her things, when not to lean out of the windows, and how to avoid speaking to strangers. They said their good-byes: the train pulled out of the station.

As I was totally blind at the time, my eyes sensitive only to light and darkness, I was unable to tell what the girl looked like: but I knew she wore slippers from the way they slapped against her heels. It would take me some time to discover something about her looks, and perhaps I never would. But I liked the sound of her voice, and even the sound of her slippers.

"Are you going all the way to Dehra?" I asked.

I must have been sitting in a dark corner, because my voice startled her. She gave a little exclamation and said, "I didn't know anyone else was here."

Well, it often happens that people with good eyesight fail to see what is right in front of them. They have too much to take in, I suppose. Whereas people who cannot see (or see very little) have to take in only the essentials, whatever registers most tellingly on their remaining senses.

"I didn't see you either," I said. "But I heard you come in."

I wondered if I would be able to prevent her from discovering that I was blind. I thought "Provided I keep to my seat, it shouldn't be too difficult."

The girl said, "I'm getting down at Saharanpur. My aunt is meeting me there."

"Then I had better not be too familiar," I said. "Aunts are usually formidable creatures."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To Dehra, and then to Mussoorie."

"Oh, how lucky you are, I wish I were going to Mussoorie. I love the hills. Especially in October."

"Yes, this is the best time," I said, calling on my memories. "The hills are covered with wild dahlias, the sun is delicious, and at night you can sit in front of a log fire and drink a little brandy. Most of the tourists have gone, and the roads are quiet and almost deserted. Yes, October is the best time."

She was silent, and I wondered if my words had touched her, or whether she thought me a romantic fool. Then I made a mistake.

"What is it like?" I asked.

She seemed to find nothing strange in the question. Had she noticed already that I could not see? But her next question removed my doubts.

"Why don't you look out of window?" she asked.

I moved easily along the berth and felt for the window ledge. The window was open, and I faced it, making a pretence of studying the landscape. I heard the panting of the engine, the rumble of the wheels, and, in my mind's eye, I could see the telegraph-posts flashing by.

"Have you noticed," I ventured, "that the trees seem to be moving while we seem to be standing still?"

"That always happens," she said. "Do you see any animals?" hardly any animals left in the forests near Dehra.

I turned from the window and faced the girl, and for a while we sat in silence.

"You have an interesting face," I remarked. I was becoming quite daring, but it was a safe remark. Few girls can resist flattery.

She laughed pleasantly, a clear, ringing laugh.

"It's nice to be told I have an interesting face. I'm tired of people telling me I have a pretty face."

Oh, so you do have a pretty face, thought I, and aloud I said: "Well, an interesting face can also be pretty."

"You are a very gallant young man," she said. "But why are you so serious?"

I thought then, that I would try to laugh for her; but the thought of laughter only made me feel troubled and lonely.

"We'll soon be at your station," I said.

"Thank goodness it's a short journey. I can't bear to sit in a train for more than two or three hours."

Yet I was prepared to sit there for almost any length of time, just to listen to her talking. Her voice had the sparkle of a mountain stream. As soon as she left the train, she would forget our brief encounter; but it would stay with me for the rest of the journey, and for some time after.

The engine's whistle shrieked, the carriage wheels changed their sound and rhythm.

The girl got up and began to collect her things. I wondered if she wore her hair in a bun, or if it was plaited, or if it hung loose over her shoulders, or if it was cut very short.

The train drew slowly into the station. Outside, there was the shouting of porters and vendors and a high-pitched female voice near the carriage door which must have belonged to the girl's aunt.

"Good-bye," said the girl.

She was standing very close to me, so close that the perfume from her hair was tantalising. I wanted to raise my hand and touch her hair; but she moved away, and only the perfume still lingered where she had stood.

'You may break, you may shatter the vase if you will. But the scent of the roses will linger there still.....'

There was some confusion in the doorway. A man, getting into the compartment, stammered an apology. Then the door banged shut, and the world was shut out again. I returned to my berth. The guard blew his whistle and we moved off. Once again, I had a game to play and a new fellow-traveller.

The train gathered speed, the wheels took up their song, the carriage groaned and shook. I found the window and sat in front of it, staring into the daylight that was darkness for me.

So many things were happening outside the window. It could be a fascinating game, guessing what went on out there.

The man who had entered the compartment broke into my reverie.

"You must be disappointed," he said, "I'm sorry I'm not as attractive a travelling companion as the one who just left."

"She was an interesting girl," I said. "Can you tell me – did she keep her hair long or short?"

"I don't remember," he said, sounding puzzled, "It was her eyes I noticed, not her hair. She had beautiful eyes – but they were of no use to her, she was completely blind. Didn't you notice?"

EXERCISES

A. Let's Answer

1. Why did the writer ask the man who entered the compartment: 'Can you tell me - did she keep her hair long or short?' What does the man reply? What hint does it

throw on the similarity of the two - the narrator and the girl?

2. How will you describe the experience of the narrator: interesting, dull or instructive? Describe a similar experience of your own.
3. Describe the personality of the writer on the basis of the story.
4. Was the girl a lover of natural scenes and situations? Describe the behaviour of the girl highlighting what strikes you as odd.
5. Why were the girl's beautiful eyes of no use to her? Attempt a character sketch of the girl.
6. What light does the story throw on human behaviour?

B. Let's Discuss

Discuss the following in groups or pairs

- a. Appearance is deceptive.

C. Let's Do

- a. Do a project work on the problems and challenges faced by a physically challenged man.

