



Emancipation of Subaltern : A Discourse from Kabir Ramesh Kumar

PhD Research Scholar, BBAU, Lucknow, U.P., India

Article Info

Volume 5, Issue 2

Page Number : 09-15

Publication Issue :

March-April-2022

Article History

Accepted : 15 March 2022

Published : 30 March 2022

Abstract- Bhakti movement emerged in medieval India against the exploitative social order. It challenged the prevailing hegemony of Brahmins and Mullah and similarly denounced the other social evils like religious dogmas, exploitative caste and immoral practices of the priests and the ruling classes. The Saint of Bhakti movement critiqued the dominant social order founded on oppression, humiliation, and exploitation. Scholars of the Bhakti movement criticised and offered an alternative to the prevalent social system envisioned of an egalitarian, democratic, and humanist society. This paper highlights the ideas of Kabir on which they condemned the prevalent social order and which were the major cause of oppression of subalterns, especially the marginal section of the society. This paper describes the ideas of Kabir, which are the inspiration for subaltern emancipation.

Keywords - Bhakti, Emancipation, Sufism, salvation, Subaltern.

Introduction:- During the Middle Age, various social, political, cultural and religious movements arose in India to bring people together peacefully. Bhakti movement played a significant role in this regard. When the world was in a state of disarray, chaos abounded and turmoil in every aspect of life, including politics, socio-economics, culture and religion. Then Bhakti movement attempted to restore the chaotic society of the time by promoting the hovel philosophy. Kabir was among them who played a leading role in the Bhakti movement. Kabir gave the idea of various social problems which were the cause of the poor condition of the general masses. His ideas varied from caste systems to economic systems. He emphasised the moral and spiritual highness of an individual. He harshly criticised all those practices impeding the growth and development of individuals and society at large. His ideas are more focused on society's social aspects, highlighting the discrimination and hypocritical practices of Hinduism.

Structure of Hinduism - The core of Hinduism is Chatuvarna system which is the essential character of Hindu society. From this structure, the notion of the Varna system merged (Sharma, 1987:33). Varna is different from caste groups. Varna provides an ideological framework, whereas caste is on-ground practice. It can be said that Varnas refer to broad divisions of Hindu society, whereas castes signify the occupational endogamous groups.

The Hindu hierarchical system contains the categories of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The Knowledge systems and social values are designed to uphold and sustain the superior status of

the higher Varnas. This ideology is generally known as Brahmanism, which created the notion of Dharma in India. This frame of ideology is designed to cater to higher Varnas' needs, and similarly, it damaged the existence of lower Varnas. The dichotomy has brought Bhakti tradition that questioned the hegemony of Brahmanism in India. The Bhakti movement revolted against the hierarchical social order, and it provided the spiritual right to subaltern strata of society to access religious scripture and participate in the Bhakti of God. In this way, lower sections got an opportunity to elevate their religious, spiritual and cultural status.

Genesis of Bhakti- Many Hindu sacred texts like The Bhagawat Gita, Bhagawat Purana, Bhakti Sutra of Narada, Shandilya and Ramayana etc., have thrown light on Bhakti, but the picture is obscure. None of them defined the concept of Bhakti in a proper manner (Tyagisananda, 2014:23). The term Bhakti was first mentioned and viewed in Svetasvatra Upanishad. The word Bhakti or "Bhaj" means faith, worship, attachment and adoration to God. The term Bhakti signifies the allegiance between the worshipper and the worshipped. Bhakti is love divined by the beam of knowledge (Carpenter, 1921:244). Ramdhari Singh Dinkar mentions the initial example of Bhakti in the *Bhagawat Gita*, where Lord Krishna talks about bhakti in terms of *Shaswat*, *Bhagawat* and *Panchratra dharma*. (Dinkar 1956: 294).

Vaudeville argued with many motifs like Bhakti as personal devotion to one god popularised by the *Alwar Bhakti* saints of South India between the 5th and 9th century AD. In North, India, Bhakti was popularised by the disciples of Ramananda, such as Kabir, who used the local language for preaching. (Partin, Vaudeville, 1964: 191-201); Grierson (1910) defined *Bhakti* as having the primary meaning of "adoration", while the related term *Bhagavata* (which the author always capitalises) means "the Adorable One" (in the sense of "One who is adored"). In this form of interpretation, Bhakti denoted a personal belief and attachment to a God.

Scholars like H.H. Wilson (1976), while discussing the Bhakti movement in India, emphasise "Krishna Bhakti"; thus "Bhakti" was interpreted as an Indian version of Protestant Christianity by nineteenth-century missionaries. However, this form of Western interpretation of Bhakti is challenged by Indian scholars like Krishna Sharma, who has discussed that there are also many traditions of the Bhakti movement in India. She points out the correlation between 'Krishna Bhakti' and the generic 'Bhakti' movement is a misnomer and argues that the Bhakti movement emerged against caste discrimination. This attracted massive participation of the masses in the emergent sects. Indian society had many sects that worshipped their form of god. There are votaries' from a particular divinity worshipping him as the supreme god. Devotion to a particular god and total surrender to him is termed Bhakti.

Vaudeville and Partin (1999) discussed a strong correlation between the influxes of Islamic groups into India with the rise of the Bhakti movement. They portrayed Bhakti as a liberal creed that provided a spiritual forum for people drawn from different castes. He cites the regional aspect evident in the variation of language and dialect of the teachings of the gospels. Along with the regional variations, the Bhakti movement was explicitly divided into two folds; namely, I) *Nirguna* and ii) *Saguna Tradition*. The former took a radical stand leading to the formation of various new and unorthodox sects.

Bhakti Movement and its Philosophy- Krishna Sharma (2000) argued that Kabir Das was the first person who has separated Nirguna Bhakti from Saguna Bhakti. Nirguna school of Kabir presents similar kind of phenomena *astika* and *Nastika*. First, make the distinction between the *Nirguna* and *Saguna Tradition*-*'The Saguna bhaktas had strengthened the existent sects and had supported the established socio-religious norms. As against this, the Nirguna bhaktas had taken a radical position and their teachings had led to the formation of new and unorthodox sects. The Bhakti movement, therefore, embodied the conservative and the liberal as well as the revivalist and reformist trends. It contained both conformism and dissent* (Prentiss. 1999:27). On the other hand, Max Weber (1967) stated that Saguni Bhakti liberated only the upper caste and excluded other sections of society, including women and Shudra. In contrast to Saguni, Nirguni Bhakti opens the door to all sections of society, including women, Shudra and the other non-privileged group of society. Max Weber further argued that Nirgun Bhakti is more liberal and rational; most saints come from the lower strata of the society, whereas Saguni is more conservative; most of the saints come from the upper strata of society. Kabirdas advocated Nirguna Bhakti which is also known as Gyanmargi path of Bhakti.

Kabir argued for a universal religion in which people from any class, irrespective of caste, creed or colour, could worship the Supreme Lord and find mental peace. Each religion's central message is to join with the Supreme. By serving one's fellowmen, one can find one's soul.

Only a real, selfless, tolerant, and compassionate person can think of others' well-being and aid those in need. These are the fundamental characteristics of humanism. A real Bhakta recognises his God in every atom in the universe. He senses the Adored God's presence all around him. Over time, the Bhakta's Bhakti power allows him to perceive the world in a completely new perspective.

Life of Kabir - Kabir occupied a unique position in Bhakti tradition in India. There was controversy about his birth and death. According to a legendary account, he was probably born in 1398 A.D. (Hedayetullah, 1977:1). According to one other scholar, he was born to a *Brahman's* widow, and in society, it is considered unethical to bear a child with the widow. Therefore due to societal norms and values widow left her child on a lotus flower near a pond of Lahar Tara near Banaras (Singh, 2004:33). Niru and Nima, a Muslim weaver couple, found the child in a pond, and they took the child to their home and nurtured him and gave him the name of Kabir, "great", an epithet of Allah. (Keay, 1995:122-23).

Kabir did not affiliate himself with any major religions of their time, whether Hinduism or Islam. Instead, Kabir referred to himself as a Banarasi wearer. Since his foster parents were members of the Jogi caste, Saree wearers had recently converted to Islam (Dwivedi, 1976:29). He maintained a distance from organised religions by referring to himself as a son of both Allah and Ram. He stressed the flaws and strengths of both religions. Despite not having obtained formal education, he was a well-informed person.

Kabir belonged to lower strata and adopted his father's occupation of weaving. He lived a very simple life. He was married to Loui and had two children; his son named Kamal and a daughter named Kamali. He was the disciple of Ramananda. As there was controversy regarding his birth, there is also controversy about his death. However, according to a legend, he has died in Maghar in 1518 A.D. (Musin, 1943:187). It is believed that there was again a dispute among Hindus and Muslims about his cremation after death. Hindus wanted to cremate his body, and Muslims wanted to

bury his body. However, when the shroud was removed from his body, there was nothing to be found except a bunch of flowers. To pacify both religions' followers flower was equally divided into two parts among the Hindu and Muslim. Kabir's goal was to preach a religion of love that united all caste and creeds. Further, he rejected Hinduism and Islam, which was against the spirit of humanism and focused on the welfare of the individual. (Tarachand. (1946:121). His preaching is collected in the book known as *Bijak*; most of his preaching was also found in *Adi Granth* of the Sikh religion.

Contribution of Kabir- Kabir das is one of medieval India's most prominent and influential saints. In the beginning, Kabir focused on mysticism, which conceived that humans live their lives under the universe with one god, one humanity, and one faith. He claimed, Hinduism and Islam were the same and accurate. As a result, he refused to accept that religious differences exist among humans, such as Hindus and Muslims.

So, he never claimed to be a follower of a particular religion, sect or country, nor did he subscribe to any political or ideological school of thought. He felt himself to be Hindu as well as Muslim. He did not distinguish between any religious communities. Through Bhakti, he solely attempted to bring individuals from different religions together. He claims that ultimate truth reigns in supreme living beings because they all come from the same source of life and light.

*“Ram Rahim Ek Hai, Naam Dharai Dui
Kahe Kabir Do Naam Suni Bhrami Pare Mat Koi
Krishna Karim Ek Hai, Naam Dharai Dui
Kahe Kabir Do Naam Suni Bhrami Pare Mat Koi’*

(Singh: 2001:15)

(Ram and Rahim is the same person though they have different names. According to Kabirdas, it is a common misconception that Ram and Rahim are two unique beings. Both Krishna and Karim is the same person; the only difference is that they have different names. As a result, after knowing this, one should not make a mistake).

Kabir's view on religion automatically manifest in his gospel by the way he denounces meaningless ritual, show off, superstition, ostentatious activities, so his writing is evident that religion is not of pretence. However, he believed in the devotion of the mould. If Kabir denounced the evils of Hindu and Muslim religions, his purpose was not to despise religion, but here he criticised only the malpractices that were the cause of religion's exploitation.

His criticism of the Mullah Islamic religion is also astounding, like his criticism of Brahminical Hinduism. His criticisms are the same time, directed against the two collectively.

*The one reads the Veda; the other does the qutba,
This one is a Maulana that one is a Panda:
They bear different names, but they are pots from the same clay!
Says Kabir, both have gone astray
And neither has found God.... The one kills a goat, the other slays a cow:
In quibbles they have wasted their life!*

(Vaudeville, C., & Partin, 1964:193)

Kabir believed that religion is cognizant and not dependent on any ritual, but it should be open and accessible to all. The purpose of religion is to perform one's devotion with mind, word and deed,

which paves the way to the presidency and salvation of God. Those who take the shelter of religion and do not persecute other human beings and those who renounce all demerits find God. Kabir says further how one can get God in his gospel.

Kam Krodh, Trishna Tazai , Tahi Milai Bhgwan.

(One will get god only by leaving his lust, angriness and jealousy)

Hinduism or Islam was not Kabir's religion. Kabir's religion means to love and compassion. Nevertheless, practices like fasting, pilgrims, Namaz, ritual, prayer, these hypocrites have turned us away from religion. So, Kabir has criticised both religious practices as Kabir's idea depicted in translation by Tagore.

There is nothing but water at the holy bathing
Places; and I know that they are useless,
For I have bathed in them.
The 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.
Kabir gives utterance to the words of experience;
And he knows very well that all other
Things are untrue.
(Tagore, 2005:50-51)

Hence, Kabir says that his religion is based on inner realisation and do not require any rituals and practices like holy bathing pilgrims and idol worship.

In the medieval age, saints were usually laymen and householders. Often, they were from Shudra or Untouchable castes. They were often uneducated and illiterate and always taught in the vernaculars. Ramananda is considered as the founder of the North Indian Sant tradition, but Kabir is undoubtedly its most famous spokesman. Kabir was one the famous personality among them. He believed in egalitarian society. He revolted against the mal practice of caste and Verna. Before the Kabir, the voice was raised against caste and Verna discrimination by Vaishnava and Alwar in the south and north India by Boudh-Sidh, Shaiv- Shakt. These voices were as loud as Kabir had. Kabir not only rejected the Verna and caste but also refused six Hindu schools of philosophy as Hess and Mcleod observed.

Kabir refused to acknowledge caste division or to recognise the authority of the six Hindu school of philosophy, nor did he set any store by the four division of life prescribed for Brahmans. He held that religion (dharma) without devotion (bhakti) was religion at all (adharma), and that asceticism, fasting and almsgiving had no value if not accompanied by adoration (bhajanas).

(Hess in Schomer and Mcleod 1987: 139n)

The caste system is the primary root cause of exploitation in the Indian social system. Lower caste and untouchable were denied ritual access to the sacred text and were also denied into the public sphere. Kabir harshly criticised the practice of caste-based hierarchy and discrimination and announced that they consider the talent or intelligence of saints and not their caste.

Bhakti movement as Emancipation means for subaltern- Gail Omvedt (2008) traces modernity in the Indian context from the Bhakti period. She argues that much before the arrival of colonial modernity, the Bhakti movement had emerged as a protest against the unjust society. The Bhakti saints all over India spoke vehemently against the hierarchical social order, exclusion and mindless rituals. There were also throwing light on the existing socio-economic condition of the society.

Likewise, V. Ragavan stated that *bhakti* is the “democratic doctrine which consolidates all people without distinction of caste, community, nationally, or sex” (Ragavan 1966:32). Similarly, Gail Omvedt discusses the “radical bhakti movement that had swept over northern and western India, bringing together women and men of low caste to proclaim equality and reject Brahmanical ritualism and caste hierarchy” (Omvedt 2003: 277). Rohini Mokashi- Punekar described bhakti As a “deeply spiritual and democratising movement” which is characteristically “revolutionary in spirit”, and the focal point was “questing of the orthodox and repressive Brahminical understanding of Hinduism, that makes possible for the lower castes and women to give their religious aspirations, emphasising devotion and love, not knowledge as a means of salvation” (Punekar 2005:123-24). So, in this context, it can be said that Kabir liberated people by his philosophy.

In the context of Kabir-Panth, David N Lorenzen (2004) stated that there has been a vital component of social dissent in Kabir’s teachings which was followed generally by the marginal section such as Shudras, Untouchables, and Tribal to express their refusal of certain aspects of hierarchical caste ideology. At the same time, their membership in the Kabir-Panth has fostered their real assimilation within that same society. It provided an opportunity to help them enhance their social status and positive self-image and self-confidence. He cites Jayant Lele’s words, “the liberating moments of Bhakti tradition” (Lorenzen 2004: 268). It challenges the orthodox exploitative tradition and raises hope for the disadvantaged masses. However, the protest of the oppressed and resistance should not be underestimated. Therefore, in this context, the Emancipator vision was taken by Kabir.

Conclusion - So it can be said that Kabir was very much critical of malpractices of Hinduism and Islam, such as rituals, idol worship etc. At the same time, he harshly attacked bad social practices such as discrimination based on caste, class and gender and told to reform the social and religious life of the people. Therefore, Kabir’s emphasis was on internalisation in oneself, and according to him, one should turn his attention away from the outside world that is harmful to their ethical, moral and spiritual cause. Kabir preached to his followers not to get into the trap of rituals and superstitious things, but they should follow a humanist approach in daily life. Kabir told his followers to keep one is away from illicit behaviour and bad habits like smoking, drinking, flesh-eating, etc. As a result, Kabir believes that man’s religion is to understand the non-dual nature of existence. So he advocated oneness for all irrespective of religion and social status.

References

1. Aloysius, G. (2009). Demystifying Modernity: Notes Not so Tentative. *Social Scientist*, 37(9/10), 49-54.
2. Chand, T. (1946). *Influence of Islam on Indian. Culture*, Indian Press, Allahabad.
3. Dinkar, R. S. (1962). *Sanskriti ke char adhyay*. Lokbharati.

4. Ezekiel, I. A. (1966). Kabir: the great mystic. Radha Soami Satsang Beas.
5. Grierson, G. A. (1910); "Bhakti Marga", in Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics. Vol.2,
6. Hedayetullah, M. (1977). Kabir: the apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity. Motilal Banarsidass.
7. Hess, L., & Singh, S. (2015). The Bijak of Kabir. Motilal Banarsidass
8. K P Prentiss & K Pechilis. (1999). The embodiment of Bhakti. Oxford University Press .
9. Keay, F. E. (1995). Kabir and his Followers. Mittal Publications.
10. Mokashi- Punekar, Rohini. 2005. "On the Threshold: The Songs of Chokhamela." In Eleanor Zelliott and Rohini Mokashi- Punekar, eds., Untouchable Saints: An Indian phenomenon,123-42. New Delhi: Manohar.
11. Musin,Fani,(1943) , Dabistan-i-Mazahib or School of Manners, tr. Sheba and Troyer,
12. Navayana Publishing, New Delhi.
13. Omvedt, G. (2008). Seeking Begumpura: The social vision of anticaste intellectuals.
14. Paris,,p. 187
15. Raghavan, V. 1966. The Great Integrators: The Saint- Singers og India . DELHI: Pulication Division, Govement of India.
16. Schomer, K., & McLeod, W. H. (Eds.). (1987). The Sants: studies in a devotional tradition of India. Motilal Banarsidass Publ.
17. Shah Gyansham.(1985). Ant- Untouchability Movement as, Caste. Caste Conflict on Reservation. Delhi.
18. Sharma, K. (1987). Bhakti and the Bhakti movement: a new perspective; a study in the history of ideas. Munshiram Manoharlal Publ.
19. Singh, G. (2004). The Sikh Religion. Cultural and Religious Heritage of India: Sikhism,
20. Singh, R. (2001). Review of "Selected couplets from The Sakhi in transversion" by Kabir. Babel, 47(4), 377-382.
21. Tagore, R. (2005) One Hundred Pomes of Kabir. Delhi.
22. Tyagisananda, S. (2014). Svetasvatara upanishad. Lulu Press.
23. Vaudeville, C., & Partin, H. B. (1964). Kabir and Interior Religion. History of Religions, 3(2), 191-201. Published by: The University of Chicago Press.
24. Weber, M., & Gerth, H. (1967). The religion of India: The sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
25. Wilson, H. H. (1861). Essays and Lectures on the Religions of the Hindus: Selected Works, coll. and ed. Dr. Reinhold Rost 2 vols, 62, 253.