

In the Footsteps of Kabir by Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh

Possibly the most-quoted poet-saint of north India is Kabir, the illiterate, 15th century mystic who belonged to a class of weavers in the ancient city of Varanasi. Kabir was a 'nirguni', one who believes in a formless divinity that can be discovered both within and without. His poetry scorns outward rituals and displays of piety with a whip-like wit, exhorting his listeners to seek the divine through self-interrogation, and to recognise the impermanence of manifest reality. What follows is an excerpt from the book 'The Bijak of Kabir', by Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh.

There are volumes of legendary biography about Kabir, but the widely accepted "facts" about his life can be summarized in a few sentences. He was born in Varanasi around the beginning, of the fifteenth century in a class of weavers recently converted to Islam. He learned the family craft (later composing a number of poems with weaving metaphors), probably studied meditative and devotional practices with a Hindu guru, and developed into a powerful teacher and poet, unique in his autonomy, intensity, and abrasiveness. His verses were composed orally and collected by disciples and admirers after varying periods of circulation. He is generally assumed to have been illiterate, and no critic fails to quote the famous verse:

I don't touch ink or paper,
this hand never grasped a pen.
The greatness of four ages
Kabir tells with his mouth alone.

Though of course we cannot prove his illiteracy or his innocence of contact with ink or paper, the notion that he insisted on oral transmission accords well with the gist of his teaching. Of all the terms he used to refer to the enlightenment experience or the means of reaching it, the most prominent is sabda, the Word, along with nama, the Name, and rama, Ram. He stresses direct contact with teacher, indicating that the only authentic teaching is the word from the guru's mouth. And he continually urges immediate understanding, a recognition, which (like the apprehension of a vibrating word) is sahaja, spontaneous, simple...

...While there is evidence that both Hindus and Muslims were ready to assault Kabir physically during his lifetime, they have since his death been ready to assault each other over the privilege of claiming him as their own. A famous legend about Kabir shows his Hindu and Muslim followers massed for combat after his death, each side demanding to

take charge of the body. But before the first blow is struck, someone removes the shroud to discover that a heap of flowers has replaced the cadaver. The two religious groups divide the flowers, and each goes off to bury or burn its half according to prescribed rituals.

The story illustrates the element of absurdity or futility that underlies the career of a great and courageous figure who passes from public contempt to adulation. Kabir was well aware of this element in his attempt to teach what he knew; his awareness is reflected in an irony that flickers throughout his verses, making him unique among the devotional poets of the period. He knew that people would inevitably misunderstand what he was saying, that they didn't want to hear it, that they would twist him into the image of the very gurus he excoriated, and that, after he had spent his life debunking ritual and slavish outward observance, his own devotees would be ready to shed each other's blood over the question of whether his carcass should be buried or burned, to the intonation of syllables in Arabic or Sanskrit.

Saints, I see the world is mad.

If I tell the truth they rush to beat me,

if I lie they trust me.

...But to be a Muslim in North India in the fifteenth century often meant to be still half a Hindu. For several centuries the Muslim invaders had been waging warfare up and down the subcontinent, taking over kingdoms and propagating their faith through the point of the sword. Large groups of local people—usually low-caste Hindus, often laborers and craftspeople—found it convenient to convert en masse to the religion of the conquerors. This did not mean that they forsook their former gods and practices. Old Brahmanic Hinduism, Hindu and Buddhist tantrism, the individualist tantric teaching of the Nath yogis, and the personal devotionism coming up from the South mingled with the austere intimations of image-less godhead promulgated by Islam. Every one of these influences is evident in Kabir, who more than any other poet-saint of the period reflects the unruly, rich conglomerate of religious life that flourished around him.

Some modern commentators have tried to present Kabir as a synthesizer of Hinduism and Islam; but the picture is a false one. While drawing on various traditions as he saw fit, Kabir emphatically, declared his independence from both the major religions of his country-men, vigorously attacked the follies of both, and tried to kindle the fire of a similar autonomy and courage in those who claimed to be his disciples.

In a famous couplet he declares:

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.

If Kabir insisted on anything, it was on the penetration of everything inessential, every layer of dishonesty and delusion. The individual must find the truth in his own body and mind, so simple, so direct, that the line between "him" and "it" disappears. One of the formulaic phrases in Kabir's verses is ghata ghata me, in every body, in every vessel. The truth is close—closer than close. Kabir understood the countless ploys by which we avoid recognizing ourselves. One form our foolish cleverness takes is our desperate, seemingly sincere searching outside ourselves. We try to find other people who have the secret, and then we try to understand them. So we have tried to do with Kabir. But he persistently evades our attempts to define or explain him. Was he a Hindu? A Muslim? Were his ancestors Buddhists? Did he practice Yoga? Did he have a guru? Who was it? The impossibility of ascertaining these basic facts about Kabir's religious life is part of his legacy of teaching.

Razor-Edge Words

If we hear that the story is untellable---or (hewing closer to Kabir's formula, akatha katha), that the utterance is unutterable—we are likely to focus on the first word, "unutterable." Mystical truth is inexpressible; words are useless.

Actually the second word is just as important as the first. There is an utterance. Words are powerful. Even if he never said any more about it, Kabir would testify to this understanding by the mere fact that he uttered so much. But he does say more. The story is untellable, the supreme experience like the taste of sugar in a dumb man's mouth; yet there is a way of using language that is true. Speaking and listening can reveal. Learning how to speak and listen is essential to the practice implicit in Kabir's teaching:

Speech is priceless

if you speak with knowledge.

Weigh it in the scales of the heart

before it comes from the mouth.

Scattered through Kabir's sayings is an education on how to use, and how not to use, tongue and ear. There is much talk that is worthless and deluding:

Pandits sat and read the law,

babbled of what they never saw.

Teaching and preaching,

their mouths filled up with sand.

If a man can't hold his tongue
his heart's not true.

Mind still. Don't talk.

You're a monk? What are you
if you gab without thinking,
if you stab other beings
with the sword of your tongue?

Yet he urges us to listen. In fact, no other word appears so often in the songs as the exhortation, "Listen!" There are different kinds of words, different ways of using words. We need to recognize which are true and which are false.

Between word and word
plenty of difference
Churn out the essence-word

True words are not easy to recognize. They call for a kind of listening, which we are not accustomed to doing:

My speech is of the East,
no one understands me.

Kabir says, rare listeners
hear the song right.

When we develop the faculty of listening, we will be able to understand much more than the meaning of the words spoken. We will also know the nature of the speaker.

On this riverbank, saints or thieves?

You'll know as soon as they talk.

The character deep within
comes out by the road of the mouth.

Into a lion's coat
rushes a goat.

You'll recognize him by his talk.
The word reveals.

Most people are well defended against hearing Kabir's words, and he comments ruefully on the futility of trying to reach them.

As a marble on a dome
rolls down,
on a fool's heart, the word
won't pause.

Man in his stupid acts:
iron mail from head to toe.
Why bother to raise your bow?
No arrow can pierce that.

To those who want to know how to recognize true words, Kabir gives strange instructions:

Everyone says words, words.
That word is bodiless.
It won't come on the tongue.
See it, test it, take it.

Kabir says, listen
to the word spoken
in every body.

Kabir says, he understands
whose heart and mouth are one.

To experience a Kabir folk song sung by the supremely-talented Indian classical singer
Pandit Kumar Gandharva, go [here](#)

For more inspiration, join this Saturday's Awakin Call with Shabnam Virmani, a
singer of Kabir folk songs and documentary filmmaker who helmed the Kabir Project films.
[More details and RSVP info here](#)