

## Sant Kabir : The Weaver of God's Name

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Most scholars agree with the Kabirpanthis that 'Niru', a poor weaver, and his wife 'Nima' found the infant Kabir on a lotus leaf in Lahar Tank in Benares. But it is said that the names of his parents seem to have emerged a century after Kabir's death, or perhaps even later. Niru and Nima were Julaha or Muslim weavers who lived on the outskirts of Kashi. Hindus believe that Kabir was the illegitimate son of a Brahmin widow. Muslims believe he was a child of Muslim parents. The theory of his immaculate birth has been rejected by most scholars. Kabir himself declared: 'I am neither a Hindu nor a Musalman'.<sup>1</sup>

Living on earth simply, touching the sky with enormous spiritual accomplishments and composing poetry and music, Kabir remained a legend and mystery in his lifetime and beyond. Many of the stories about his life and poetry have been repeated by various authors. A disciple of the great Hindu pundit-preacher and philosopher-reformer, Saint Rāmānanda, he was at the focal point of Bhakti cult and was steeped in Hindu philosophy and esoteric practices. 'I am the child of Allah and of Rām', he said. Temple and mosque, idol and holy water, scriptures and priests were usually renounced by him. He cared little whether people knew him as a Brahmin or a Mohammedan, a Sufi or a Vedantin, a Vaishnavite or a Rāmānandi.<sup>2</sup>

Evelyn Underhill wrote about him,

A great religious reformer, the founder of a sect to which nearly a million northern Hindus still belong. His wonderful songs survive; the spontaneous expressions of his vision and his love; and it is by these, not by the didactic teachings associated with his name, that he makes his immortal appeal to the heart. . . . Though Mohammedan legends speak of the famous Sufi Pir, Takki of Jhansi, as Kabir's master in later life, the Hindu saint is the only human teacher to whom in his songs he acknowledges indebtedness . . . the disciple of Rāmānanda, joining in the theological and philosophical arguments which his master held with all the great Mullahs and Brahmans of his day; and to this source we may perhaps trace his acquaintance with the terms of Hindu and Sufi philosophy.

Kabir was plainly a heretic; and his frank dislike of all institutional religion, all external observance—which was as thorough and as intense as that of the Quakers themselves—completed, so far as ecclesiastical opinion was concerned, his reputation as a dangerous man. (Underhill/ *Songs of Kabir*/Introduction)

Swami Sivananda writes:

Kabir was born in 1440 A.D. The probable date of his death is 1519 A.D. as mentioned in 'Kabir Ka Santi'. A Kazi was called in to give the child a name. The Kazi told Niru that the child was a demon and should be killed immediately. A miracle happened. The knife was plunged into the heart of the child. No drop of blood came out. Kabir uttered a verse which made them understand that he was not ordinary flesh and blood.

Then the name 'Kabir' was given to the child. The word 'Kabir' means 'great' in the Arabic language. (Sivananda/*Kabir*)

In his book *Kabir the Weaver of God's Name*, V. K. Sethi writes that he was born in 1389 and lived up to 1518.

### **Guru-shishya relationship**

Here is a very interesting story as to how Kabir established himself as the disciple of the famous Guru Rāmānanda. The story reveals that a strong will makes the impossible possible.

Rāmānand, a great sage of Banaras at that time, was a staunch devotee of the Vaishnava school of Hindu religion. He was a great saint and philosopher of his time. Rāmānand was an orthodox pundit and religious leader. He would not look at the untouchables and would not entertain a low caste. Kabir, [was] a Muslim of no standing. So it was almost impossible for him to gain his discipleship. But Kabir was so enamoured of him from his early age. Once in the early pre-dawn twilight when Rāmānand used to take bath at the Ganga, Kabir lay down at the steps of the river ghat and the sage without knowing or seeing stepped over him, hitting his head with his foot. Startled, he uttered, 'Rām, Rām!' At this Kabir silently got up and declared that he was the disciple of great Rāmānand. Rāmānand's Hindu disciples were much perturbed at this and questioned why their master had granted such a person a discipleship. The Guru denied and Kabir was brought in. Habitually as to such persons to avoid looking at them, he spoke to Kabir from behind a curtain. He asked why Kabir made such a false claim as to be his disciple. Kabir replied, 'Sir, I was initiated on the steps of the ghat. You touched my forehead with your foot and gave me the mantra, 'Rām Rām'. (Sethi 11)

And his relationship with his Guru became legendary. Here are some taken

from his biographer, V. K. Sethi. He writes:

Rāmānand used to worship his deity through mental imagination. Once he forgot to place the garland in deity's neck before putting the crown on his head. His garland wasn't of a size to go over the crown. He stopped perplexed what to do. Kabir was waiting outside beyond the curtain to pay obeisance to his Guru. He said from outside,

'Gurudev, untie the knot of the garland and then tie it around the idol's neck.'

Rāmānand was startled. How could Kabir know of his predicament? . . . The vulnerable sage called out to one of his disciples, 'Remove the curtain, for what can one hide from Kabir?' Ushered into his presence, Kabir respectfully bowed to his Master, but Rāmānand stood up and embraced him.

Once, on the death anniversary of Rāmānand's ancestors, preparations were made to make an offering of rice to the departed souls. Kabir said to his Guru, 'Sir, this lowly Kabir is perplexed: The crows eat up the rice, how can it reach your ancestors?' (Sethi 12)

But these were at the initial stage. Kabir was a true seeker and visited many places and met many holy men and in his own way realized the hollowness of rituals and modes of worship. Though Rāmānanda was upholder of Hindu metaphysics and strictly followed the traditions, he had the catholicity to accept Kabir's finding his truth. It has been stated that he even sometimes allowed himself to be guided by Kabir's intuitive truth and his ideas which changed the Guru in certain matters. The Guru would hear him more, barriers being removed between them, take his hints of inner path and its ways. Ahmed Shah, in his impartial introduction to the *Bijak*, remarks: 'There is every reason to suppose that Rāmānand was largely influenced by Kabir.'<sup>3</sup> It has been opined that the acceptance of low-caste devotees in his fold

like Ravidās, Dhannā, Sadnā and some others confirms this fact.

Though Kabir proudly maintained that he was the disciple of the great Rāmānanda, it transpired that in course of time he adopted some other spiritual methods to suit his purpose. After his maturity a realized Kabir taught his disciples a path of God-realization based on 'Shabd Marg', a path of outward pursuits but going inside in search of God.

Rāmānanda was initially a saint of Shri tradition of the Vaishnava cult worshipping Lord Vishnu and Lakshmi. But later he switched over to Rāma and Sitā. He was not a *Shabd-mārgi*. Though Kabir was steeped in Hindu philosophy and ideas and followed the path of Rāmānanda in arguments in different stages of religious debates, he acquired, it has been rightly argued, his leaning towards *Shabd-mārg* from a different source. Going inward is the way of the Yogis. This was the path of some great *sādhakas* like Jaidev, Nāmadev, Hazrat Nizamuddin, Khwaja Muinuddin and some others. Whatever way one chooses, finally God-realization happens at the inner level of heart and psyche, the inner chamber of the devotee.

In this context a poem, the only poem by Rāmānanda which has found place in Adī Granth Sahib of the Sikhs that suggests his nearness to Kabir than Goswāmi Tulasi Dās, a great devotee of Rāma, the incarnation of Vishnu. Though this type of realization might be common with *sādhakas* of many other paths, this definitely points to *Shabd-mārg*. Let us relish the remarkable inner journey and realization of Rāmānanda through his poem.

Where need I go, for within my home I have been dyed in the divine hue. My mind has ceased from its wanderings—it has become lame.

One day my mind was overcome with a longing to meet the Lord; I prepared sandalwood paste and perfumes from saffron, mask and many a fragrant herb, and proceeded to the temple to worship the Lord.

But that Lord, my Guru revealed to me within my heart. Wherever I go, I find water and stone, while Thou, O Lord, fillest each particle of the creation.

I delved into Veda and Purana, and I searched; only go there if God is not here.

Oh Satguru, I sacrifice my all to You, You who have cut the chains of my confusion, my delusion. The Lord pervades all, says Rāmānand, and the Guru's Shabd eradicates a million Karma.<sup>4</sup>

### **Kabir : A spiritual leader**

Kabir showed signs of a spiritual inclination from an early age and maintained it and proved a master of it in his mature age. Born with keen intellect, a discerning mind, extraordinary judgement and understanding, he was above the average people of his age and society. During his adolescence he sometimes remained aloof from family matters and got immersed in spiritual introspection much to the dislike of his parents. Yet he was the cynosure of his family and friends due to his affectionate, compassionate nature and kind disposition. Once during his childhood he was so upset at the prospect of an animal sacrifice on a festive day that his father had to reverse the decision. While going to sell clothes in the market he donated the entire lot to a shivering recluse.

Given to marriage by his parents, Kabir was in favour of a family life rather than forced celibacy; sublimation was the bliss of his natural spiritual experiences. He used to work daily in his loom earning his living 'Like Paul the tentmaker, Boehme the cobbler, Bunyan the tinker, Tersteegen the

ribbon-maker, he knew how to combine vision and industry; the work of his hands helped rather than hindered the impassioned meditation of his heart. . . .’ writes Evelyn Underhill (Underhill/*Songs of Kabir*/ Introduction).

He carried a portable loom wherever he went and worked on it. His love for loom and living on his humble labour motivated him to live even on poverty rather than asking for any help from anybody. He was in good sense a precursor to M. K. Gandhi, enamoured with his charka, almost to the extent of obsessive love for it.

Fifteenth century was the time for the efflorescence of ‘Bhakti Poetry’ in India by the great devotees and poets like Vidyāpati, Umāpati, Mirā Bāi, Ravidās (also known as Raidās or Ruhidās), Narsi Mehta and the great Sri Chaitanya Mahāprabhu. This trend actually started in Tamil Nadu in the sixth century initiated by the Vaishnavite and Shaivite saints. Kabir’s life and work enriched this movement.

Thus the syncretistic tendencies of Bhakti religion had reached its full development.

Kabir was a religious reformer and had his own distinct way of teaching the aspirants which is called ‘panth’. His followers therefore are called Kabirpanthis. ‘Kabir attempted to transcend the religious boundaries of northern India and to promote harmony between Hinduism, Islam, and other non-Hindu religions. In this he was a forerunner of Ramakrishna and Gandhi. His eclectic faith focused on bhakti, devotion to God. Kabir was a master of the “interior religion,” which was loving surrender to God who dwelt in the heart.’ Names of God tend to be Vaishnava, for Kabir’s guru was Rāmānanda. But though Kabir often mentions Rām, Hari, and the “name of Rām,” he is using these as names for the all-

pervading Reality which is beyond words and “beyond the beyond,” being identified with *shunya*, the void, or what Kabir calls *sahaj*, the ineffable state. . . .’<sup>2</sup> writes Sivananda.

### **Some anecdotes of Kabir’s life : pride and humility**

There was a learned Brahmin versed in the Vedas and other scriptures. He named himself Sarvajit as he defeated many great scholars. His mother once met Kabir and was initiated by him. She asked her arrogant son to defeat Kabir. With books loaded on a bullock he went to meet Kabir and challenged him to a debate in any aspect of philosophy or scriptures. Kabir admitted his ignorance. Admitting his defeat, he told Sarvajit that he had not even seen so many books at a time. Elated, Sarvajit asked him to give it in writing to which Kabir said that he was unlettered but knew only to sign his name. So Sarvajit wrote in paper, ‘Sarvajit has defeated Kabir’ and Kabir signed it. He took it to his mother. But when he brought it out before her to read, it read, ‘Kabir has defeated Sarvajit’. Perplexed, he again went to Kabir and again wrote it and Kabir signed without any dispute. But it became the same as he came to show it to his mother. He repeated this effort several times but got the same result each time. He said to his mother that Kabir must be a magician who changed the words of his certificate as he approached his mother. The mother, however, replied that due to the impurities of his mind Sarvajit could not know Kabir. She said, ‘Son, in order to argue about what the scriptures say, you had to study them thoroughly. In the same way, to draw Kabir into a debate you should learn from him what his message is. . . . See how humble he is, not ashamed to admit his own ignorance. To defeat Kabir, you have to be humble with

him, for arrogance can never vanquish humility.' (Sethi 21-22)

Sarvajit again went to Kabir and learnt things at his feet and was initiated as his disciple. Swami Sivananda writes, however, that this episode had taken place when Sarvajit came to Kashi and challenged Rāmānanda. The latter deputed Kabir to face the challenge.

### Prejudice

'Tatwa' and 'Jiwa', two Brahmin brothers, were seekers of truth. They lived on the banks of Narmada near Baroach. A banyan tree on an island just opposite their house withered. The two brothers washed the feet of the holy men visiting the nearby Shukla Tirth and sprinkled that holy water at the root of the tree for years without any result. During one of Kabir's visit to Gujarat the brothers invited him. Traditionally Kabir washed his feet before entering the inhouse and one of the brothers collected a few drops of his feet-washed water and sprinkled it to the roots of the tree. In a few days the tree began to be rejuvenated with new leaves. It is said that still now the tree stands covering an area of some four acres which is 12 miles east of the city of Baroach called 'Kabir Vat.'

However, the effect of the brothers' acceptance of the discipleship of the saint proved to be ominous. The whole Brahmin community of the area ostracized their family. As a result, they could not get appropriate matches for their son and daughter. They went to their Master who advised them to announce that they would get their son and daughter married to each other. At this the whole community was stunned and shocked. After their requests to the brothers to reverse their decision failed, there was a meeting of the community and they, as a special case, allowed the

punishment to be withdrawn. Brother and sister got married in the usual way without any hassle.

### Real and illusion

A devotee was under the illusion that whenever he closed his eyes Krishna with Gopis danced before his eyes. Kabir sat before the devotee and asked him to hold the hands of Krishna as he danced before him. As advised, he caught hold of his hand but Krishna tried to free his hand. At this the man opened his eyes and found that he was holding his own hand. Kabir said that the Krishna he daily saw dancing before his eyes was his mental projection and that it was good that the illusion was broken.

Nevertheless it may be stated here that all were not illusions when people really saw such dances or held conversation with their beloved Godhead like Sri Ramakrishna's direct contact with Mother Kāli. But such happenings are always rare and possible with such saints like Sri Ramakrishna or Sant Kabir. Kabir had the capacity to discern which is real vision and which is illusory.

### Kafir and Momin

Jahan Gasht Shah, a Muslim dervish met many holy men in India. Hearing about Kabir he wanted to meet him. One day Gasht came to Kabir. But he was shocked when he saw a pig tied to Kabir's hut. Incensed, he turned back. Seeing him going back (Knowing his approach Kabir did it deliberately to teach him) Kabir came out and asked why he was going back. He replied, 'Kabir, I had heard that you are a pious man, but I have found that you have kept an impure being at your door. I expected you to know the tenets better—your conduct befits a *kafir*.'

Kabir came near and offering a Salaam said, 'Friend, I have kept the impure one

outside my house; you have given it shelter within your heart. Did not your eyes flash with anger and hatred for me? Are anger and hatred pure and within the tenets of religion?’ (Sethi 27)

The dervish was nonplussed. Kabir led him into the house and said that in God’s creation no being should be despised. How could one love God with disdain and hatred in heart? He further said that there was no such thing as *kafir* or infidel and *momin* or faithful to Islam. He further explained that one who injures God’s creature is a *kafir* and one who loves God and sees Him in all His creatures is a true *momin*. Jahan Gasht spent a few days in Kabir’s elevating company.

#### **True devotee and perfect Master**

One Dharam Das, a wealthy businessman, was worshipping some stones on the bank of Ganges with his wife. While passing by that way Kabir stopped and commented that the large stones must be for weighing two seers and the smaller ones for a quarter. Annoyed at this, Dharam Das looked at the speaker who spoke again, ‘Tell me, have they ever spoken to you, have they ever responded to your prayers?’ Saying this he vanished.

Months passed. Dharam Das and his wife were performing a *havan*, a religious rite, in which clarified butter was being poured and incense were burnt profusely. Suddenly Kabir appeared and said, ‘Dharam Das, you seem to be a great sinner.’

Startled, his wife returned the charge on Kabir. Then Kabir pointed out how they were burning large number of innocent lives which resided inside the logs being burnt. And he did not wait. With the radiant face of the saint floating before his eyes, the merchant felt deep remorse. The wife then gave a wise suggestion to hold *yajna* ceremony and invite all sadhus for free

meals. ‘I’m sure that he’ll come, for flies always swarm around sugar,’ she said.

Numbers of *yajnas* were performed, numbers of sadhus came but not Kabir. Dharam Das lost all money, his business dwindled. Frustrated, he felt like committing suicide and proceeded to a remote place of the river to drown himself. Suddenly that smiling radiant face appeared before him. Dharam Das said, ‘Day after day, for months I have searched for you from place to place. I performed dozens of *yajnas*. . . .’

The reply was, ‘It had to be so. Your wife said, “Flies always swarm around sugar”. Had I come earlier, you would always have thought devotees can be won over by wealth.’ Raising Dharam Das he said, ‘Arise, Dharam Das, and remember that those who run after wealth like hungry dogs after a piece of bread, are not true devotees. A perfect Master covets nothing from disciples. . . . Satguru is a giver, not a beggar. Material wealth is like the shadow of a tree—it never stays in the same place. Do not worry, I will give you the wealth of Nām. . . .’ (Sethi 27-30)

The merchant and his wife, Amna were initiated by Sant Kabir and they settled as his successor.

#### **God saves a true devotee**

Hindu priests and Muslim Maulvis accused ‘heretic Kabir’ of blasphemy for disregarding all tenets of established religions. They complained against him to Sultan Sikander Lodi (1489 to 1520) who ordered him to be brought to the court.

Brought before the Sultan, Kabir greeted him as one would do to another man. Kazi charged him for not properly bowing to the Sultan. Kabir replied that he knew only One King and he bowed only to Him. While the Hindus charged him with being a man of low caste with many other faults, the

Muslims charged him with heresy, calling him *kafir*. Kabir said that the in-dwelling God is neither a Hindu nor a Turk. Impressed by his straightforwardness and personality, Sikander Lodi dismissed the charges against him. But the orthodoxy made all cliques to bring Kabir back to the court. But looking at the Hindu and Muslim accusers present there, he just smiled. The Sultan asked what amused him. He said, among other things, that, 'They could never bear to stand together in the court of the King of kings, but today it amuses me to see them standing united in the court of a worldly king, a mortal like all others.'

The invectives of the dignitaries convinced the Sultan that Kabir was guilty of blasphemy. In rage he ordered Kabir to be drowned. Kabir said, 'Lord, I live and have always lived under Thy shelter. The world looks upon Thy lovers as its enemies. In life and in death, dear Lord, Thou alone art my support, my succour.' (Sethi 34-35)

Hands and feet bound by heavy chains, he was then thrown into the river but the waves broke the chains and Kabir was seen floating on the water. They said that it was a trick played by the magician. Kabir said, 'O Kabir, no one is mine in this world; in the water and on the earth, my saviour is the Lord.'<sup>5</sup> He was then thrown at the feet of the elephant which refused to trample him in spite of being goaded by the mahout. 'In its heart too dwelt the Lord'<sup>6</sup>, said Kabir.

Coming to the point of trampling by the elephant we prefer to pause. Elephants have so far trampled or thrown many with their trunks—animals and humans. Here, in spite of being goaded by the mahout, the elephant did not abide by his order. The elephant is also Nārāyana; God dwells in it. So it saves the son of God, Kabir. It is one side of the story. But we hear another aspect of the

behaviour of the elephant from Sri Ramakrishna's story.

He said in this parable that once a mad elephant was running amok and a devotee did not flee from its path in spite of warning from the mahout on the belief that Nārāyana or God was also in its heart, so it mustn't do any harm. He ignored the mahout's warning and was thrown by the elephant aside by its trunk. The injured man was told by his Guru that it was a fact that Nārāyana was in the heart of the animal, but was not the same Nārāyana residing in the heart of the mahout? When he believed in the godliness of the elephant, why didn't he recognize the godliness of the mahout?

Here is a reply to a puzzle whether in spite of the in-dwelling divinity one ill behaves with others or always behaves well. Perhaps it is a fact that the Divine allows a being certain freedom to act according to its condition and reap the fruit of its actions. In two stories as we see here, one elephant disobeys its keeper being influenced by the higher consciousness of the man in danger and the other elephant acts according to its frenzy as surmised by its keeper; it acts according to its mental state. I think there is no single rule which has to be followed as God's ways are incomprehensible to ordinary mortals. The complexity of the world is so varied that no single solution to its problems can be guessed.

Let us go back to Kabir. Legend has it that after the elephant refused to hurt him, he was then thrown into fire. But again, Kabir emerged un-burnt emitting divine radiance.

Ashamed, Sikander Lodi then ordered him to be unchained and admitted that he could not realize his greatness! Guilty, he bent his head and Kabir pardoned the Sultan.

This brings us close to the legend of a great lover of Lord Vishnu, Prahlāda, who

was equally and in the same manner persecuted by his demon father Hiranyakashipu. However, he always emerged unhurt by God's grace. The two stories seem to have been weaved in the same thread.

### Unwavering faith

Saint Kabir, it is said, became older than hundred years and he decided to leave Benares to settle at Maghar or Magahar, a small town, 175 miles off Benares. The popular belief is that one dying in Benares would not be reborn, and go to heaven; but one dying at Maghar would be reborn as a donkey. Nevertheless Kabir decided to leave the most auspicious place of the Hindus. According to Swami Sivananda, though Kabir's life was spared, he was banished from Kashi and this took place in 1495 A.D. when Kabir was fifty-six. He says, it was Sikander Lodi who banished him. This is the opinion of some others too.

Anyway Kabir's disciples were shocked. Even his enemies never dreamt it. Kabir always loved to go against tradition and superstition. So he said, 'A hundred sinner will not escape the fires of hell even if he dies in Benares; but a saint of God, even if he dies in Magahar, emancipates the entire fold of his disciples.'<sup>7</sup> He said, 'I have ascended the divine throne and met the Lord. God and Kabir have become one: no one can distinguish who is who.'<sup>8</sup>

The Saint-poet wrote:

What I was once  
I am not now,  
I have reaped the benefit  
Of my precious human birth;

....

Says kabir: Listen friends,  
Let no doubts remain:  
He who has true faith in the Lord,  
For him, holy Kasi and barren Magahar  
Are the same.<sup>9</sup>

The lines that 'I have reaped the benefit / Of my precious human birth' reminds us of the lament of another eighteenth century Saint-poet of Bengal, Ramprasād Sen, the Kālī-worshipper. He said in one of his songs:

O mind, you don't know agriculture:  
Such a fertile field  
as human being  
remains fallow.  
Gold it would yield  
after cultivating. . . .<sup>10</sup>

### The last miracle

One afternoon Saint Kabir was found lying on the floor covered with a white sheet, his face radiating peace and bliss without life in it. The river of his life merged into the ocean of infinity.

There was a great dispute over the dead body of the saint. Hindus led by king Vir Singh Baghela and Muslims led by nawab Bijli Khan claimed his body in order to burn and bury it ceremoniously. When the shroud was removed, a large quantity of flowers was found under it. Half of the flowers was taken by the king of Kashi and burnt on the bank of holy Ganga. The ashes were then buried and a temple was built. This temple is known as Kabir Chaura—a great place of pilgrimage for the followers of Kabir. The other half of the flowers was taken by the Muslims and buried at Maghar. A mosque was built over the grave. This is a place of pilgrimage for the Mohammedans.

'Whether it was really a miracle or the faithful removed the body substituting it with flowers was not known', opines V. K. Sethi in his *Kabir the Weaver of God's Name*. Many of the biographers of Kabir have similarly questioned the veracity of this miracle, though the faithful remain firm in their notion. ■

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Therefore, we look forward to those who are endowed with these means (meditation and *tapasyā*) to uncover the meanings and thereby remove obscurity. The Vedas must stand revealed once more in a new setting to serve the vision and mission of the present age. ■

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