

## Transcendental Aesthetics: Verses of Experience of a Sage

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Shankra, the 9th century Indian mystic-philosopher, writes:

Erudition, well-articulated speech, a wealth of words, and skills in expounding the scriptures-these things give pleasure to the learned but they don't bring liberation.

Study of scriptures is fruitless as long as *Brahman* has not been experienced. And when *Brahman* has been experienced, it is useless to read the scriptures.<sup>1</sup>

Saint Thomas Aquinas, it is said, laid aside his theology once the supreme vision had settled upon him, saying: 'All that I have written seems to me like straw compared with what has now been revealed to me.'<sup>2</sup>

Before the mystic's experiential knowledge, the intellectual formulations of the scholar and the theologian seem inadequate, and stand challenged.

No other sage has so persistently, and with such eloquence, invoked the scholars to go beyond the intellectual concepts to the experience of the sacred, as the 15th century saint-poet Kabir in India.

The Vedas  
The rites, the customs  
The tradition  
All are like a stone  
Around one's neck

O seeker  
Lift the stone.<sup>3</sup>

....  
O *Pandit*  
Of what avail  
is all this knowledge  
of the Vedas and the Purans ?  
Like a donkey  
loaded with Sandalwood  
How unaware you are  
of their fragrance !<sup>4</sup>

As an unlettered, low-caste weaver, Kabir received none of the formal knowledge of the Hindu or Muslim scriptures. Yet in thousands of his songs and couplets-most likely compiled by his two disciples Kabir brings us as close to a sense of the Divine as any sage has done throughout the ages :

The Lord resides in us all  
Like the life that is in every seed.  
O friend, don't be vain,  
Look within :  
A million suns are ablaze there,  
And oceans and the heavens are all aglow.  
Make your self at home,  
and all your suffering well vanish.  
The unstruck music shall burst forth  
And love would permeate everywhere.  
Without water  
rains will pour,  
and pearls would fill the rivers !  
O dear friend, love throbs  
In all corners of the universe  
Open your eyes and see.  
Not through the eyes of reason ;  
For they see only separation and distinction  
Blind they are who sit  
In the house of logic and intellect,  
O Kabir, how blessed am I,  
I sing joyously within my own vessel,  
Of the divinity of all things.<sup>5</sup>

Kabir has been called a monist, an *advaitist*, a Pantheist, a transcendentalist, a

Sufi, a *Nirguni* a *Nath-Panthi*, a *Vaisnava*, a *Tantric*, and so on and on. There is not a stream of spiritual thought that has not somehow found a sympathetic chord in Kabir. Indeed he encompasses them all, like the ocean that receives water from all rivers. But his vision is not circumscribed by any one of them. Like the transcendental Reality that he seeks, beyond names and beyond attributes, Kabir too is not to be caught in any labels or "isms". If he is to be given any name at all, he should be called, as he suggests himself, a *premi* : a Lover. Kabir is a lover, in love with the Divine :

O dear friend

A real seeker is one who gets  
caught in no school of thought, monism  
and dualism alike,  
For no system of philosophy  
can comprehend Him.

Just as one strand is attached to another,  
So all life is inter-woven.

O Brother

He understands who does not stand aloof  
For he is one with One, and he sees  
Through the eyes of love.

There is no other way.

To see the Whole, one must be Whole  
So Whole it remains.<sup>6</sup>

Fifteenth century India was ridden with many strifes between the Hindus and the Muslims. The holy city of Kashi where Kabir lived was a hot-bed of the *pandits* and the *brahmans* ; theological debates and idol worship were rampant, The *untouchables* and the low caste men and women like Kabir, were greatly shunned and barred from all spiritual knowledge. In the brilliant light of Kabir's vision, however, anyone or anything that darkened the face of Truth, though charlatanism or cleverness, dogma or habit, stood exposed :

Look at him, the Yogi,  
How he has dyed his attire  
And yet not a drop of love  
has touched him.

With pierced ears, and a long beard,  
How like a goat he looks !

Reciting the *Gita*  
An empty, endless chatterer !<sup>7</sup>

.... ....  
There are thousands of scriptures  
But all useless  
Take my word :  
Throw them into a well.  
O seeker, he who is not free himself  
How can he talk of freedom to others ?<sup>8</sup>

.... ....  
In this city, there are many a man  
Some scholars of the *Vedas*  
Some steeped in melancholy.  
There are ascetics  
and there are hedonists  
Some are given to alcohol  
Some to mind-altering drugs.  
There are *siddhas*  
and there are pilgrims  
*Sadhus, pirs* and *Yogis*  
Brahmans, priests and *pandas*  
Alas, All lost in the webs  
of *maya*  
Unaware ! Unconscious !<sup>9</sup>

Kabir's insistence on the Experience of the Sacred as the primary spiritual pursuit finds expression in his songs again and again :

The Purans and the Koran,  
O seeker, are only words,  
They reveal not,  
For lifting up the curtain  
I have seen.  
Truth is to be experienced, O Kabir  
All else is a mere shabow. <sup>10</sup>  
O dear friend  
Why speak with a clever tongue ?  
Leaving the straight road,  
Why go on a crooked path ?  
Listen : He encompasses everything  
And yet He is Nothing.  
They say He is immortal, He is omnipresent  
Yet they see Him not and He remains

hidden from them.  
 It is true that He has no colour, no form.  
 But he resides in all things, and thus  
 All colours are His, and He has all forms.  
 Without a beginning, Without an end is He  
 Beyond time  
 Beyond colour and form,  
 Beyond death and immortality  
 Beyond and beyond  
 O Brother  
 Beyond  
 And so near is He !II  
 Not from the scriptures  
 do I quote  
 I describe  
 Only  
 What I have seen  
 with my own eyes  
 Experience, O seeker  
 is the essence  
 of all things  
 When the bride  
 is in the arms  
 of her Lover  
 Who cares  
 About the wedding party !12

The body of poetical work attributed to Kabir is large and varied ; for decades, there has been much debate about the authenticity of the various verses, However Kabir's verses are utterances of a visionary, rather than literary compositions. As such in all of his work, there are no narratives or allegories, epics or fables, commentaries or arguments. Only a raw, roaring, rhapsodic outburst of his experience of the Divine !

He is like this or He is like that,  
 O dear friend, those are more abstractions  
 If I say He is only within,  
 The whole creation would seem illusory  
 If I say He is without,  
 Then the One

Who makes all this creation real,  
 Would be false.  
 In truth, outside, inside,  
 He is everywhere,  
 But neither intellect nor sight  
 can know Him  
 And the books reveal  
 Him not  
 But those who understand,  
 Understand,  
 And others, I know  
 Would believe me not.

Kabir neither needs nor renders any intellectual proofs to establish the 'reality' of his Beloved. Like the celestial perfumes that filled the cell of St. Catherine of Siena, or the physical wounds experienced by St. Teresa and St. Francis, or the music that echoed in the ears of Richard Rolle, or the light that Suso 'saw', Kabir sees Him 'Face to Face', as *Saksat Isvara*.

O seeker  
 His splendour  
 is beyond imagination  
 And all words  
 belie the sight  
 Why argue and speculate  
 Why not see Him  
 Face to Face ?  
 Will that not be  
 the proof of all proofs !14

Kabir has been hailed as "a great poet, one of the greatest in India. As a mystical poet, he has probably never been surpassed."<sup>15</sup> Yet Kabir was first and foremost a visionary ; poetry was a mere "by-product" of his vision. His verses thus require at every step, a higher *subjectivity*, the necessity of 'seeing the Beloved through the eyes of the lover.' As such Kabir's poetry, as that of other sages, is of an entirely different genre than those of the poets. In the words of William Kingland :

The mystic may not always be a master of language, but it is the truth which he endeavours to express that we should do well to seize ; and learn also to make a proper allowance for the inadequacy of language to express the deepest truths. No one knows better than the greatest master of technic how inadequate are the materials with which he has

to work ; no one realises more clearly than the greatest master of language, how little language can express of the living truth with which his inmost nature is on fire.<sup>16</sup>

Kabir composed thousands of exquisite songs and couplets but he never ceased from saying that the experience of the sacred was 'beyond all the Vedas, the scriptures, the Koran, the chanting and the rosaries, the temples and the mosques Beyond and Beyond.' It is beyond, he said, even his own poems and all the metaphors that they employ. By lifting poetry thus from the real of the ordinary human consciousness, Kabir made it truly the voice of gods. To do so, he employed many concrete symbols and myths and metaphors, but often even they seemed inadequate to convey the 'total otherness of the experience of the holy.'

On many such occasions there is a clear breakdown of all language, as Kabir resorts to the 'language of absurdity' that renders itself to no understanding, easy or otherwise. Sometimes there is an inversion, an obvious contrariness : 'a lotus that blossoms without water', 'a river that is drowned in the boat,' the son of a barren woman,' the oil cozing out of sand', Such modes or expression have been called *ulatabamsis*, 'the language of inversion', There have been several valiant attempts to 'decode' such utterances but they remain largely elusive. This 'absurd or paradoxical use of language is sometimes referred to as *sandhya-bhasa*, the twilight language', the language that mediates, like twilight, between light and darkness. It is not merely an allegorical style ; its absurd enigmatic quality may be a deliberate attempt to allude to the transcendental nature of the mystical experience.<sup>17</sup>

This intentional hotch-potch of words and concepts by Kabir need not necessarily be viewed as a new challenge to one's intellect ; it may be a way—an unorthodox one, no doubt -of indicating the realms of Knowledge that lie beyond intellect. The Greek author Kazantzakis once wrote that words are a prison but God is free. Kazantzakis too may be echoing the Upanishadic strain of *neti, neti*- 'not this', 'not this' against words and concepts that aspire to contain everything, even the experience of the holy.

Kabir's *ulatabamsis* thus call our attention not so much to their absurd and contradictory nature but to the futility of words to express the Experience of the 'Beyond and the Beyond'.

In one way or another, all traditions in mystical poetry have cautioned us against considering words as 'the vehicle of Truth' ; the mystical experience remains ineffable. It is said that after composing the *Puranas* and the *Mahabharat*, the great sage Vyas begged of the gods for forgiveness for attempting' to make the invisible visible, the all-pervasive localized and the ineffable articulated'.<sup>18</sup>

Through his verses, Kabir too was attempting to make the *Real* accessible. But all his verses, fade into oblivion in the face of the experience of the holy :

Like a dumb man  
Having tasted the sweetest of fruits  
I can say nothing  
But only smile.<sup>19</sup>

There is a zen saying : 'The finger that points at the moon is not the moon.' Through his verses, Kabir is only pointing at the 'moon'. Once one looks at the moon, all the pointers and even the moon itself lose their significance.

Kabir's *sakhis* and *padas* thus bring us only so far, and then there is an inevitable silence :

O dear friends  
I have said all  
that could be said  
Now, no more  
The words and the *sakhis*  
are all useless,  
Washed away  
in the torrents of love.  
No more  
No more  
There is nothing more to say  
He is this, He is that  
He is solid, He moves  
All these are words of ignorance  
One utters them only  
so long as one has not seen Him.  
O Kabir  
Now there is nothing  
Nothing  
But the One !<sup>20</sup>

Here are a few of the most celebrated of Kabir's *sakhis* that speak of his Experience beyond the words :<sup>21</sup>

1. Ah, there is  
many a scholar  
Who has read  
All the scriptures,  
But only rarely  
is there

A man of knowledge  
O dear friend  
To be a man of knowledge  
One needs to understand  
Only one word :  
Love.



2. O *Brahman*, I say  
What I have seen  
With my own eyes,  
And you keep quoting  
the scriptures

I speak  
to unravel  
the mystery  
But you insist  
on keeping it  
tangled

How can our paths  
cross ?

3. O Kabir  
Why not leave  
the scriptures alone,  
All this learning  
leads

Only to a dead end  
Unless you are imbued  
with His love,  
O dear friend  
Why shout His name  
In the dark ?

4. God is like  
a necklace of pearls,  
Held together  
With a delicate thread  
By scriptural debates  
You will get  
this necklace  
entangled  
With your logic  
it may even  
fall to pieces.

5. Passion, anger  
Agitation, avarice

So long as one  
is possessed by them,

O my friend  
There is  
little distinction  
Between a fool  
and a scholar.

6. Not by cleverness  
Or intellectual gymnastics,  
does one see  
The face of the Lord

O seeker  
This is the essence  
of all teachings :  
Only he who yearns for  
His love relentlessly  
is sought by Him  
For His embrace.

7. O Kabir  
God is like a tree,  
A man who is  
free of all shackles  
Is its fruit  
A seeker who has  
abandoned  
scriptural debates  
Is the shade  
of this tree.  
Ah, what shelter  
he provides  
For a weary traveller !

8. What a stone  
you have become  
in intellectual pursuits,  
Not a drop of love  
has touched you  
O Kabir, remember  
Without love

- It is all worthless  
And dreary.
9. Ah, what song of love  
has burst forth  
Yet what silence  
has descended  
upon me  
Like a dumb man,  
Having tasted  
the sweetest of fruits  
I can merely smile  
But say nothing.
10. My Lover  
How shall I  
describe His face ?  
Who would believe  
my words, anyway ?

O dear friend  
Why not leave  
the words alone ?  
He is as He is ;  
Just rejoice  
in His sight.

11. Mysterious He is,  
And O seeker, let this  
mystery remain  
Why waste your breath ?  
Even the *Vedas*  
and the *Koran*  
have failed  
to describe Him,  
Then who would  
believe your words ?

### Notes and References

1. Quoted in P.D. Barthwal, *Traditions of Indian Mysticism*, Heritage publishers, New Delhi, 1978, P. 79.
2. *ibid.*, P. 94.
3. P. N. Tiwari, *Kabir-vani-sudh*, 4th ed., Allahabad, 1979, p. 164 All English translations by this author,
4. *ibid.*, P. 178.
5. H. P. Dvivedi, *Kabir*, 4th ed., Bombay, 1953, P. 286 ; R. Tagore, *Songs of Kabir*, Samuel Weister, New York, 1974, P. 142.
6. S. S. Das, ed., *Kabir Granthavali*, 15th ed., Varanasi, 1977, pada 181.
7. Dvivedi, *op. cit.*, p. 171 ; Tagore, *op. cit.*, p. 109,
8. Dvivedi, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
9. Das, *op. cit.*, based on *padas* 187 and 386.
10. Dvivedi, *op. cit.*, p. 262.
11. Das, *op. cit.*, pada 180:
12. *sakhi* VII, 1 Sshdev Kumar, *The Vision of Kabir*, Motilal Benarasidass, Delhi, 1984. All *sakhis* are referred to in this volume.
13. Dvivedi, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
14. *sakhi* VII, 13.
15. Ch, Vaudeville, *Kabir*, Vol. I Oxford, 1974, p. 57.
16. *Rational Mysticism*, London, 1934, p. 57.

17. Mircea Eliade calls *Sandhyabhasa* as a 'process of destroying and reinventing language' till we find ourselves in 'a universe of analogies, homologies and double meanings.' *Yoga Life and Immortality*, London, 1958, pp. 294-5.
18. Quoted in Dvivedi, *op. cit.*, p. 223.
19. sakhi VII.8
20. Dvivedi, *op. cit.*, p. 215
21. All *sakhis* presented here are from this author's *The Vision of Kabir, op. cit.*

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