

“And Kabir Stands in the Marketplace”: Politics and Poetics in an Era of Global Strife

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This paper is being written at a definitive crossroad in South Asian politics as religion and state vie to gain dominance over one another. Violence, in the name of religion, is a commonplace in the world today (Asad, Blee and Creasap, Bhatt, Troch). In the Indian sub-continent, nationalism is the new buzzword which has been excavated, as it were, from the era of anti-colonial struggles, when it worked as an enabling concept to fight imperialism. Within a renewed vigor of nationalism which continues to exclude women and the Dalits, a new normative discourse of nationalism based on majoritarian religious ideology has been taking shape. Various stereotypes of aggression, links to terrorism and other accusations of violence are tied together to construct the Other that needs to be controlled and subdued. (Anand 23) On the other hand, nationalism becomes an increasingly sanctified word that is ostensibly value neutral; the overt language of nationalism is really about suppression of minority discourse not yet prefixed with the word Hindu but all but moving towards that. As several critics have pointed out, the main target of this hyper nationalism is often the Indian Muslim community. (Bhatt, Jaffrelot) While the separatist movements of the eighties and the vacuous ideologies of secularism can be blamed for this, the new nationalism mandated by electoral arithmetic is posing serious challenges to a democratic trajectory in India. In his essay “Contested Meanings: India’s National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety” written right after the violence of Ayodhya, Ashutosh Varshney had demonstrated the possibility of a civilizational end to India if “BJP came to power supported by the right wing.” (258) The elections of 2019 have seen an unprecedented majority of the ruling party supported by its right-wing factions.

Ideologically and in terms of realpolitik, there is much that is at stake in the current socio- political scenario in India. Communities are polarized and violence is often the manifestation. Within this larger framework, I offer Kabir’s poetic praxis as an intervention into the cultural understandings of identity in the light of contemporary debates about minorities and secular citizenship within the nation space. The argument, based on the work of Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, musician and the co-creator of archives and a web museum on Kabir, demonstrates the politics of cultural representation; it also interprets and analyzes Kabir’s music and poetry in order to explore the aesthetics of belonging. Here are some lines that are seen as typically Kabir and that could be resonant in contemporary times:

Alakh (the Invisible) and Elahi (the Lord) are one, with two names/
Ram and Rahim are one, with two names
Krishna and Karim are one, with two names
Kashi and Kaaba are but one, with two names. (Hess)

Kabir's upbringing, arguably in an environment of economic hardships, and as part of a marginalized community, the Julahas, had exposed him early in life to the nuances of difference as experienced through identity politics (Hess). Kabir had later taken on the Hindu-Muslim debate, uttering complexities in simple ways. Without mincing words, he declared Kashi — another name for Benares, revered as a holy pilgrimage by Hindus and Kaaba — the Muslim holy shrine — were the same, just known by different names. Like his unifying world view, Kabir himself embodies the synthesis that Benares is — generations of Hindus and Muslims coexisting without much incident. It is no wonder that he has been called iconoclastic and it is perhaps this quality of his that we can harness for our times.

Kabir is a 15th century mystic poet and singer and his probable dates are 1440-1518. His birth and origins are shrouded in mystery. Linda Hess, arguably the most well-known Kabir scholar in American academia, has shown conclusively that his understanding of religion, his immersion was deeply in Hindu structures of thought (256). The name, Kabir, however, is clearly of Islamic origin. While there is so little written evidence, these stray facts are definitive — he grew up in a Muslim weaver's family, he sang songs and he went to the marketplace. He was born in Kashi/Varanasi, one of the primary religious destinations for Hindu devotees and, he could not be clearly identified as Hindu, Muslim or Yogi. The important thing about Kabir is that he started an oral tradition that has survived centuries. Thousands of verses are attributed to him but only a few written collections have survived the centuries. Much of his work has been divided into dohas, padaks and bijaks. Some Kabir scholars have claimed that he was not uniformly liked in his time but once he died there was much strife over claiming his dead body between the Hindus and Muslims. "Kabir had no patience for either the religion of the temple or the mosque," said the eminent Kabir scholar Purushottam Agarwal. "He drew from the knowledge base of both Hindu and Islamic traditions, but his spirituality went beyond any religion. He was a rationalist who wasn't afraid to question or criticize anyone (Agarwal)." This is indicative of some amount of anxiety that he must have caused even during his life-time through his poems and songs which are articulate, in their critique of religion. For example:

Does Khuda, live only in the mosque?
 Is Ram, only in idols and holy grounds?
 Have you searched and found Him there?
 You imagine that Hari [Vishnu] is in the East, and Allah is in the West;
 But search for Him only in the heart-that is where Ram and Karim both rest. (Hess and Singh 73-74)

Historians and historians of religion have studied Kabir within the framework of the Bhakti movement. The Bhakti movement was not a concerted movement but more a stringing together of multiple religious reformers, saints, poets through the rejection of organized religion and the generative principle of bhakti or devotion. (Novetzke). Common scholarly conventions interpret bhakti to mean "personal devotion" or a sentiment of intimacy with a deity, but the term is also used in highly abstract contexts where the "personal" is not present. In any case, both in scholarship and within the Indian public sphere, bhakti denotes a "movement" of social protest against caste, class, religious, or gender inequities. Many scholars including Christian Lee Novetzke refer to a "bhakti movement" as a heterogenous field of texts and practices produced and maintained in South Asia since the sixth century Common Era but it is since the 12th

century that it gained momentum. The kernel of the Bhakti movement was in the message of love, and the relationship between God and the devotee was re-defined by love and faith rather than divisive mechanisms. Bhakti movement had made a lasting impression on Hinduism as it is practiced today, claims Karine Schomer, in her book *Sant Traditions*. It is what gives “present-day Hinduism its emotional texture, its spiritual and social values, and its basic philosophical assumptions.” (Schomer 121)

Most importantly, the Bhakti movement proves that Kabir was not alone. Tukaram, Namdeo, Mira Bai, Nanak were all speaking against formal religion. This is important as there are a group of scholars have been claiming that caste system never existed in the Hindu religion and it was a colonial construct¹ There were others who were thinking about religion and trying to understand ways in which dominant practices of religion were exclusionary and could be re-defined. To some extent all of them, were extolling a personal relationship with God but Kabir was specifically relocating this quest within the person: Kabir says: “Student, tell me, what is God? /He is the breath inside the breath. (Hess) An eminent scholar of Kabir, Puroshattam Agarwal, has written of this time frame and convincingly argued that modernity had arrived in India long before the British did; in the west, modernity in the sense of the spirit of critique and questioning had to come in to be able to question religion and in India this was already being done in the 16th century. This spirit of inquiry was most manifest in Kabir’s works:

If God be within the mosque, then to whom does this world belong?
If Ram be within the image which you find upon your pilgrimage,
Then who is there to know what happens without?

In poems and songs like these, Kabir is foreshadowing a Kantian moment. In other poems, his utterances are more complex:

Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat. My shoulder is against yours.
You will not find me in the stupas, not in Indian shrine rooms,
Nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals:
Not in masses, nor kirtans, not in legs winding around your own neck, nor in eating nothing
but vegetables.
When you really look for me, you will see me instantly –you will find me in the tiniest
house of time. (Hess)

Here “me” is a troubling entity; is it God, one’s own self or spirituality? Most singer saints who are part of the Bhakti movement or Sufi singers define God and Enlightenment in terms of love. They are lovers and God is their beloved. But for Kabir, self-realization is the true enlightenment. Linda Hess has an animated chapter on the relationship between spiritualism and political commitment in *Bodies of Song* which throws light on the ways Kabir’s work can be relevant in understanding the relationship between state and religion. (392) The rest of the song, quoted above, is an embedded social critique of religious practices; most of his songs are similar – strident, articulate and at the same time enigmatic.

The current political scenario in South Asia fraught with layers of debates on nationalism is a good point at which Kabir’s stories can be told and re-told. And Kabir needs to be narrated and performed. In my attempts to understand Kabir, I have drawn inspiration from the works of Shabnam Virmani who runs the Kabir project in India.³ She has made four films on Kabir and she is in the process of putting together a massive archive on the poet-singer. Her documentary film *Had Anhad* is a journey to connect with Kabir and the exponents of Kabir’s music in remote areas of India as well as in Pakistan. The metaphor

of the journey, literal and figurative, signifies different destinations and new starting points. Virmani's journey, which begins in Ayodhya is entrenched in Kabir's question: Do the different Gods live only in specific sites? This questioning, brought about through the musical rendition of various artistes, gives us a sense of the transformative power of Kabir.

This spirit that we find across Kabir's lyrics is also the spirit that imbues Virmani's film. Virmani offers a beautiful tapestry of music through singers like Mukhtiyar Ali and Farid Ayaz. She spends a long time with each singer as they share their stories and melodies, and each narrate their unique understanding of Kabir. Subtle nuances apart, all are in unison on one point – Kabir was impatient with the trappings of organized religion

Where do you search me?
 I am with you
 Not in pilgrimage, nor in icons
 Neither in solitudes
 Not in temples, nor in mosques
 Neither in Kaba nor in Kailash
 I am with you O man
 I am with you
 Seek earnestly and discover
 In but a moment of search
 Says Kabir, Listen with care
 Where your faith is, I am there.

As we watch the film, we realize that each practitioner has an interpretation of Kabir that is complex, rooted in their own experience but never quite contradictory. "No one knows Kabir like I do" claims Farid Ayaz in the film. (*Had Anhad*) He describes Kabir as an earthquake which threatened to demolish all kinds of shrines – mosques and temples. This is a particularly sensitive topic as Virmani's film begins at the point where a mosque has been destroyed as it had allegedly been built over the birthplace of Rama, the hero of the epic tale *Ramayana* and who is worshipped as a God. The film's political positioning is clear but nuanced.

Virmani portrays conversations and interactions and uses voice over very minimally. The audience is encouraged to experience the music as well as the conversations, and this technique blurs the lines between documentary and fiction film. The different voices are juxtaposed and the singers and speakers are given equivalent space and time. In her body of work, the filmmaker, Virmani uses what E Ann Kaplan has called "creative treatment of actuality" (206). The film offers a montage of places: Ayodhya/Karachi, the barrenness of desert at the border and the vibrance and clamor of post-colonial cities on either side of the border. It is also an assemblage of people, impressions, climates, culinary moments, exaggerated border routines of the armies, and of Ram, the mythological figure, his detractors and worshippers, and most importantly, of Kabir the icon-in-the-making. Virmani's 'creative treatment of actuality' maps the cultural interstices across geo-political borders and clears a space for intervention which resonate with Kabir's music and poetry.

Had Anhad (Bounded-Boundless) offers a different way of thinking through faith, intersectionality between communities, secularism, the relationship between religion and state. It offers ways of mobilizing people and involving communities that are positive, energized and inclusive. Virmani's particular strength, in fact, has been the ability to tell

affective stories through a deliberately minimalist video camera, hand held, and through focused images of bodies and objects – singing faces, hands playing instruments, vocal participation and expressive countenances, and with all these mechanisms she is able to draw the viewer into the experiences of those bodies. Virmani, the person, does not occupy a very visible position in the documentary; we hear her speaking and engaging in conversations as if she were approaching the artistes she interviewed but she never claims to know them or speak for them. They are never the objects of her quest. E Ann Kaplan while discussing Trinh T Minha's work has written, "She seeks a position that functions in the gap, namely speaking nearby (208)." The phrase conveys an idea of closeness that involves approaching the other rather than knowing them. This closeness between communities and people of different religions who are caught up in continuing wars and border skirmishes is a significant point being made in *Had/Anhad*. Virmani has been trying to communicate through her film and her work in the Kabir archives that connections between communities is important at all levels; that is where the word secularism and the concept behind it can be re-invigorated and Kabir can offer a great multi-dimensional platform.

Kabir's songs, when performed, offer something that is part of a holistic and "embodied" experience says the filmmaker/singer (personal interview). This embodiment is what she is suggesting creates a transformative space. Embodiment is linked to a totality of experience, immersion and participatory listening. A committed listening and a committed performance are both inseparable aspects of embodied experiences. Bernadette Wegenstein, a documentary film maker and theorist has also written in detail about a fully interactive and embodied approach. (Wegenstein 63, 64) Shabnam Virmani's film *Bounded-Boundless* conclusively shows the importance of the embodied approach through her journeys and her interactions with the performers. This embodiment also serves as a link between communities and people. Linda Hess asserts about Kabir — "To know Kabir, you should know people (26)." In her book, *Bodies of Song*, she re-iterates that oral traditions are connected with people; "where I see the importance of oral tradition is the way in which poets and texts are constructed by people and in oral traditions, one can see that process in action" (289). Kabir's poetic praxis is about people; and as we see in Virmani's film, every singer adds an interpretation to Kabir and thus the community expands. People's participation and their remembrance of the words and the song makes it possible for us to recount him today.

Virmani's representation of Kabir's songs and poetry intervenes positively in the project of identity making; additionally, it seeks to answer the question--what are some of the enduring values that can define the pluralistic form of Indian identity? The identity making project has been usurped in post colonial India by the binary of secularism and religion and one of the consequences of this has been the right wing religious revival of fringe elements in contemporary times. There are many reasons that can be associated with this rise of religious extremism. Foremost amongst these is the emptiness of secularism as it is practiced in India. One variant of it is about electoral appeasement and vote bank rationality — and this is irrelevant in a scenario where people want an identity. This search for identity is particularly strong in the diasporic Indian community (Sud). The extent of support Hindutva elements have in the US shows us that this community identity formation extends to diasporas also; this, then, is not exclusive to the geo-political space (Sud). It is a transnational phenomenon that reifies the beliefs of a majoritarian nationalism. This project of identity in the making is very important and needs to be

paid heed to in the war against right wing groups working towards converting India to a Hindu nation; several policy manoeuvres including emphasis on looking for an original and authentic Hindu identity have challenged the diverse and heterogenous culture of the Indian nation space. As a result, this political juncture probably offers us multiple possibilities of identity formation. One of the main ways of achieving a secularization of the community is through identity formation. However, identity can be too easily fetishized, especially cultural identity which in the name of ethnic nationalisms can wreak havoc and play right along the lines of right-wing extremism. But cultural identity is not something that can be wished away within in course of the quest for secular nationalism. Aditya Nigam in his book, *The Crisis of Secular Nationalism in India*, which is sub-titled *The Insurrection of Little Selves* has argued that secularism has failed because the quest for identity has been misunderstood and been made subservient to universal rational discourses which are primarily elitist. More importantly, he has used the work of historians including Partha Chatterjee to show the importance of identity and I quote: "colonial subjugation does something to the [national] enterprise by making it open to all kinds of xenophobic articulations" (308). Arjun Appadurai has called it the crisis of modern subjectivity and he has linked it to the rapid flow of mass-mediated images, scripts, and sensations (21). However one theorizes it, the politics of identity is crucial. In this quest for identity, Kabir's poems which have traditionally been sung, have much to offer in their spiritual and inward turn and their critique of society. In their focus on human elements of a civilization, they are significant aesthetic work of our times. Their social and political commentary is relevant to the post colonial nation's shifting negotiations of identity, nationalism and secularism. Kabir's poetic praxis has a language and thematic trajectory that is spiritual and yet extremely political. Kabir, probably, could not read or write. (Hess) Yet, his verses are studied by large numbers of school children across north India. David Lorenzo has argued about the merits of reading Kabir, in addition, to performing his songs, as it makes it possible to ponder on the meanings at one's leisure. If we are to use Kabir's poetic praxis across the country, it is important to keep alive the practice of reading Kabir.

The accessibility of Kabir's poetry is also linked to the language. His verses are composed in Hindi and not Sanskrit; Sanskrit was the language connected with religion and it was often the prerogative of upper caste scholarly practices. But Kabir's compositions are in Hindi and they also use common metaphors and symbols drawn from daily life – markets and temples, boats and rivers, clay and idols. They are about the common people and their daily activities and struggles:

And Kabir stands in the marketplace
Wishes well for all and one
He is not friends with any
And enemies he has none.

These daily spaces and experiences are what makes Kabir's poetry and music very relevant even today.

Having crossed the river,
where will you go, O friend?
There's no road to tread,
No traveler ahead,
Neither a beginning, nor an end.

There's no water, no boat, no boatman, no cord;
No earth is there, no sky, no time, no bank, no ford.

You have forgotten the Self within,
Your search in the void will be in vain;
In a moment the life will ebb
And in this body you won't remain.

Be ever conscious of this, O friend,
You have to immerse within your Self;
Kabir says, salvation you won't then need,
For what you are, you would be indeed.

The reason scholars have found him secular and secular is the evolved understanding of self in Kabir's works which resonates with our concerns today. (Agarwal 42). For example, he speaks of something akin to the ego in the 15th century:

Aisee Vani Boliye, Mun Ka Aapa Khoye
Apna Tan Sheetal Kare, Auran Ko Sukh Hoye.
Speak such words, sans ego's ploy
keep yourself calm, give the listener joy (Translation, mine)

The ego is not a concept available in the 15th century and yet it is that fledgling idea that he was already writing about. As Agarwal has mentioned and I have quoted earlier in the paper, the spirit of modernity had come to the Indian sub-continent as early as the fourteenth century and identity formation was already being discussed. Ironically, however, and the film shows this too, that this aspect of Kabir is not as well known. Desultory audiences may not recall the discussions around self and ego and the space that Kabir has tried to create in between religions and in between rituals and structures. Most importantly, he was trying to use the negative effects of the ego (*apa*) to question the bifurcation of religious ideas. For this reason, there is something ironic about the political powers of the current government setting up academies in Kabir's name while at the same time giving polarizing speeches (Nair). Kabir would have been the most critical of attempts at co-opting him for religious revivalism. His thoughts on religion can be summed up with his sense of humor: "If tonsure were the path to God, how come sheep, sheared so often, don't obtain the abode of Vishnu (Hess)." Kabir's questioning of religion is what makes his work useful for exploring ways of re-thinking identity. This questioning and challenging were a part of the tradition that Kabir had inherited and very likely continued after him. (Agarwal).

Challenging of established orders, simple articulations and the grounded praxis are only some of the reasons for which Kabir needs to be performed and read, and films like *Bounded-Boundless* be understood and appreciated. It is perhaps important to remember, like all saints, Kabir has sectarian followers who have a shrine for him and a holy discourse surrounding him. Known as Kabir panthis, they also claim that Kabir is a Hindu and in doing so, force Kabir into a monolithic mold which his padas, slokas, bijak contradict. As Shabnam Virmani's film helps us understand, Kabir's legacy has many aspects that can lodge him as part of the popular imaginary – the music, the edge in the lyrics, the ability to involve people, the embodiment, the connection with people rather than with policy, and an inclusionary pattern that speaks for Dalits and other marginalized people. In discussing postcolonial cultural interventions, Homi Bhaba writes,

the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. (7)

Kabir's music, it can be argued, does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent, it renews the past refiguring it as a "contingent in between space" (Bhabha 9) that interrupts the performance of the present. The past present becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living. Virmani's journey with Kabir is part of this cultural engagement that offers a new space and challenges monolithic and ritual-ridden reconstructions of the past.

In conclusion, Kabir's lyrics themselves keep us grounded — we cannot co-opt his words as celebratory romance, glorification of the past, or even a fetishisation of identities; nor is this a search for a utopian moment, but for disruptions that can interrupt the narrative of nationalism that is current, vitriolic and conciliatory to a majoritarian discourse. Kabir's music and poetry is volatile, alive and performative. They provide identity to people and connect communities without necessarily being divisive and his works are resistant to cooptation by religious bigots. Film makers like Shabnam Virmani have enriched Kabir further by carrying his music across contentious borders and have shown through documentaries and performances that Kabir's music is enriching and subversive at the same time (*Had Anhad*). It addresses caste politics and stays focused on people and communities. Without being populist or incendiary, Kabir's poetics/praxis challenges easy and monochromatic identity formations. Across his lyrics, we see the refusal of easy binaries:

Watching the grinding stones, it is Kabir who Cries
Inside the Two Stones, no one survives.

The two grinding stones are also binaries that echoes the stalemate of community relationships in contemporary India. It is important to remember that Kabir too was speaking to a society that was torn asunder by caste hierarchies, religious domination and communal strife. Perhaps that world is not too different from the contemporary rise in religious extremism, killings, and even terrorism in the name of religion. While, governments and international bodies are speaking the language of policy and secularism, stronger laws and tighter restrictions, it is important to build connections amongst people and communities through robust frameworks of identity and cultural representation that Kabir's poetry and music offer.

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Notes

¹ S.N. Balgangadhara: *Reconceptualising India Studies*.

² All quotes of Kabir's poems are taken from *ajabshahar.com*

³ The Kabir project is housed in Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology.

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