



## An Odyssey into the Future, holding Kabir's hand

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### Abstract

In the vast expanse of the universe, the human race has been eternally seeking the truth that has been omnipresent- yet not seen, omnipotent - yet not felt; and, in their endeavour to attain the omniscient, the seekers have left behind a huge repository of their sublime thoughts for the posterity. Although many of them are not a living presence in today's world, their spirits pervade and provide spiritual energy even to the modern-day seeker. This knowledge and its realization is called spirituality and all paths (or Religions) lead to the same destination (Supreme Soul). Thus, the various man-made religions of the world serve as potent vehicles on the odyssey to the spiritual light at the end of the tunnel. The profound teachings of the great Masters of yore have a universal import and are the same on the time line (past, present, and future) and the space graph (here, there, and everywhere).

This article is an analysis of the select songs of Kabir - a *Sufi-Bhakti* saint of India who is believed to have been born into a Hindu family, brought up by Muslim parents, chose to be the disciple of a staunch Hindu *guru*, became a source for the holy *Guru Granth Sahib* (the holy book of the Sikhs), an apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity and a harbinger of the ideal of a universal religion of Love. An attempt is made to portray the significance of love (Divine) and the relevance of the same in the modern-day love - starved world by yoking together the past and the present, thus throwing light on the future.

Kabir guides the seeker by edifying the method of freeing the mind (*atma*) from the matter (*jeeva*), in the process, acquiring communion with the unending source of energy (*paramatma*). His was a voice against the then existing Hindu caste hierarchy and religious antagonism. Through his *dohas* and songs, he exemplified i) the futility of meaningless religious rites and rituals, ii) the importance of love for God realization, iii) the Upanishadic concept of *advaita* - seeking the Divine within and not without and iv) the gaining of spiritual wealth as the ultimate wealth. Kabir's profound thoughts, recorded in the simple rustic dialect of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Avadh, Braj and Bhojpuri, cross the boundaries of time, geographical demarcation, gender, age, and any such perceivable human differences. In an odyssey through the 21<sup>st</sup> century strife-ridden world, Kabir, at once the child of Allah and of Ram, takes us towards the Light of Divinity.

**Keywords:** *Divine, Supreme, dohas, bhakti*

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In the vast expanse of the universe, the human race has been eternally seeking the truth that has been omnipresent- yet not seen, omnipotent - yet not felt; and, in their endeavour to attain the omniscient, the seekers have left behind a huge repository of their sublime thoughts for the posterity. Although many of them are not a living presence in today's world, their spirits pervade and provide spiritual energy even to the modern-day seeker. This knowledge and realization is called spirituality and all paths (or Religions) lead to the same destination (the Supreme Soul). Thus, the various human-contrived religions of the world serve as potent vehicles on the odyssey to the spiritual light at the end of the tunnel. The profound teachings of the great Masters of yore have a universal import and are the same on the time line - past, present, and future - and the space graph - here, there, and everywhere.

This article is an analysis of the select songs and *dohas* of Kabir - a *Bhakti-Sufi* saint of India who is believed to have been born into a Hindu family, brought up by Muslim parents, chose to be the disciple of a staunch Hindu *guru*, became a source for the holy *Guru Granth Sahib* (the holy book of the Sikhs), was an apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity and a harbinger of the ideal of a universal religion of Love. His realization of the Supreme through sublime love bears significance and relevance in today's love-starved world. This study is therefore an attempt to yoke together the past and the present, holding Kabir's hands, thus throwing light on the future. To restrict the ocean of wisdom left by Kabir to a few songs and *dohas* and to accommodate all his thoughts in a pigmy-sized article of this nature is indeed a colossal task.

Kabir has often been admired for his simple versification and his poetry has been the subject of study for both the philosopher as well as the literary critic. Even though he never received any formal education, he has left behind a huge repertoire of his teachings in the form of *dohas* and songs which were later compiled by the *Kabirpanthis* in the *Bijak*, *Sakhi*, *AdiGranth*, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, etc. On reading Kabir, one understands that he guides the seeker by edifying the method of freeing the mind (*atma*) from the matter (*jeeva*), in the process, acquiring

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communion with the unending source of energy (*paramatma*). Such a union will undoubtedly lead to a state of permanent bliss (*paramananda*). His was a voice against the then existing orthodox Hindu caste hierarchy and religious antagonism. Through his *dohas* and songs, he exemplified - the futility of meaningless religious rites and rituals, the importance of love for God realization, the Upanishadic concept of *advaita* - seeking the Divine within and not without and the gaining of spiritual wealth as the ultimate wealth. Kabir's profound thoughts, recorded in the simple rustic dialect of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Avadh, Braj and Bhojpuri, cross the boundaries of time, geographical demarcation, language, gender, age, and any such perceivable human differences. Thus, Kabir, at once the child of Allah and of Ram, helps us in our journey towards the Light of Divinity.

The wealth of Indian wisdom is obviously seen in the rich haul of our philosophical treatises like the ancient *Srutis*, *Smritis*, *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Upanishads*, *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, all of which stand testimony to the fact that ancient philosophy is the beacon light for the future. Subramanian's *101 Mystics of India* pictures an unbroken continuity of hundred and one mystics who graced the Indian sub-continent from 2500 B C to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., defying the barriers of religion, region, language, gender, and social status. These were the saints and seers who were drawn towards the Godhead, experienced joy and rapture in their spiritual quest, attained realization and mystical union, and shared their thoughts, philosophy, and experience with the common man through metrical or non-metrical expressions, which were later recorded by their followers or disciples and came to be reckoned as a whole new form of literature.

In the line of such spiritual seekers and attained souls, also fall the great Sufi saints of yore, who sought the Absolute Truth in their own way. They were votaries of the ideology that religion is no bar in the intense craving for the Supreme and that the Almighty is not concerned with one's religion but with love. The great Sufi masters Rumi, Attar, Sadi, Sanai, Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, Hazrat Nizamuddin, Hazrat Babajan, Amir Khusro, etc., lived like ordinary folk, hiding their true self from the others, enumerates R.K.Gupta in his book *Yogis in Silence*. They believed

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in leading apparently normal worldly lives, at the same time yoked to the eternal quest for the Sublime. Kabir was one such soul who treads the path and acts as a beacon light for those who chose to follow the path of the perpetual quest.

In her introduction to Rabindranath Tagore's *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, Evelyn Underhill addresses Kabir as a "...great religious reformer, the founder of a sect to which nearly a million northern Hindus still belong, it is yet supremely as a mystical poet that Kabir lives for us.... A hater of religious exclusivism, and seeking above all things to initiate men into the liberty of the children of God, 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." He is attributed to be at once "Brahman or Sufi, Vedantist or Vaishnavite" (Tagore, vi - vii).

Kabir is believed to have been born to redeem the 15<sup>th</sup> century north India of its religious strife, exclusivism, intolerance, orthodox conventionalism, and the unbending rites and rituals on the so-called spiritual journey. While the proponents of the *Bhakti* cult of medieval India like Tukaram, Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath, Samarth Ramdas, Kanakadasa, Madhwacharya, Vidyaranya, Tulsidas, Surdas, Ravidas, Meera Bai, Swami Ramananda, and so on, sang in praise of their own chosen deity, Kabir differed from them in that he chose a non-sectarian path. Although we find the name of 'Ram' mentioned in his songs, he himself clarifies his non-sectarian stand when he sings (as translated by G.N. Das) "Hindu says Rama is dear to him/ Muslim says Rahim/ Both quarrel, fight and kill each other/ Not knowing the root of thing." (246) Hence, he was at once regarded as a *Sufi pir* and also a *bhakti* saint, propagating a unique concept of religion. Realizing both Hindu and Sufi philosophies, Kabir atoned, in simple lay man's language, the loftiest thoughts and philosophies that could be practically followed by a true seeker on the spiritual path, irrespective of his religion.

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The boldness and originality of Kabir's attitude may not appear strange in the modern times, but we must definitely credit him for his courage and daring to speak as he did, in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century orthodox backdrop of Indian socio-cultural milieu. As Underhill states, "From the point of view of orthodox sanctity, whether Hindu or Mohammedan, 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 Quakers themselves – completed, so far as ecclesiastical opinion was concerned, his reputation as a dangerous man." (Tagore, x – xi) But a true seeker can never deny Kabir's contribution to the society, not only of his times, but also to these days of strife and struggle, where man has reached the zenith of all material gains, but ironically enough, seems to be in the nadir of true spiritual knowledge. A deeper reading of Kabir leaves us with some valuable thoughts that recur in his songs and are critical to the present times. Some of them are elaborated in the present study.

### **Futility of religious rites and rituals**

The ancient wisdom of India recorded in the *Upanishadic* era taught man to find the true happiness through Universal Love and non-sectarian practices. However, this was lost somewhere in the process of evolving when religious practices started assuming greater importance. Kabir, a believer in the doctrine of '*vasudeva kutumbakam*' and an ardent seeker on the path of spirituality himself, became a detester of religious exclusivism and tried to shed the veil of orthodox ritualism, which was hitherto considered to be the only path of attaining divine communion. His songs and *dohas*, written in a local dialect of Hindi, are the spontaneous expressions of his vision, mystical experience and universal love, which stand good for all times and all people. In his opinion, as one of his songs goes, the Lord is "neither in temple nor in mosque: I am neither / in Kaaba nor in Kailash: / Neither am I in rites and ceremonies, nor in Yoga / and renunciation." (Tagore, 1)

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Kabir not only poses the problem by reckoning where one cannot find the Supreme, he also gives a solution in the same breath that the Lord exists in all: “Kabîr says, ‘O Sadhu! God is the breath of all / breath’” (Tagore, 1). This is a clear expression of the *Upanishadic* concept of “*Tat Twam asi*” (Thou art this). The futility of meaningless ritualistic worship of God was a pressing concern of the great poet-seer that made him advice man to go beyond such rituals and look inside his own self to realize the transcendental. To him, “The musk is in the deer, but it seeks it not within / itself: it wanders in quest of grass” (Tagore, 4). One can read the future (to be precise, our contemporary times) when man has achieved almost all contrivable achievements but lacks in conviction and devotion. The present-day world seems to be ridden with innumerable sects and sub-sects and the enthusiasts of each sect are running riot, giving the clarion call, trying to prove that theirs is the best sect and the only path towards the Supreme. In contrast, Kabir points out, “Alas! The true fountain of life is beside you, and / you have set up a stone to worship / ... I may never express how sweet my / Lord is. Yoga and the telling of beads, / virtue and vice – these are naught to Him” (Tagore, 18). When God is perceived as an awe-inspiring entity there is no room for love and precisely at this point Kabir takes a departure from others who seek God through various religious austerities. The folly of looking for the Divine in meaningless monotonous rituals is a simple, plain ironical attack on the social practices of not only Kabir’s times, but even of the present day.

There was no need to seek Him far and wide, the omnipresent awaited discovery everywhere, and was as accessible to ‘the washerwoman and the carpenter’ as to the ascetic. Elsewhere, Kabir brings out the vanity in visiting holy places, worshiping idols, and mere reading of the scriptures thus:

*tîrath men to sab pânîhai*

“THERE is nothing but water at the holy bathing places; and I know that they are useless, for I have bathed in them.

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The images 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.

Kabîr gives utterance to the words of experience;

and he knows very well that all other things  
are untrue.” (Tagore, 31)

These lines also highlight Kabir’s belief in a non-sectarian concept of the Supreme. They reinforce his dislike for the use of external symbols as an aid in the Divine search for the essence of the Supreme. If the modern man were to comprehend the essence of Kabir’s thoughts, humankind would be delivered of the existing fanaticism and be absolved of all sins committed in the name of religion.

### **Love - leading to God Realization**

Dispensing with rigorous ritualism and condemning meaningless practices, Kabir takes us in the path of God realization through ‘Love’.

“To Thee Thou hast drawn my love, O Fakir!/ I was sleeping in my own chamber, and /  
Thou didst awaken me; ...”( Tagore, 6)

In a world which pursues physical pleasures and weighs human relations on a material scale, divine love is inconspicuous and far-fetched. Kabir’s songs stand in good stead as they teach us the importance of the highest human emotion – that of love. As Swami Sivananda says in his *Essence of Bhakti Yoga*, “*Bhakti* in essence is twofold: on the one hand there is an intense attachment towards God nurtured by deep emotion, and on the other, an earnest urge of love for Him. When these two elements are combined, we find *bhakti* to be either an attachment emerging out of love or love being manifested itself as an attachment...in relation to the Highest

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– the supreme Lovable One who is Real and imperishable....”(Swami Sivananda,11). As one of his celebrated *dohas* translated by G. N. Das goes: “Reading and reading all the scriptures/ None becomes a wise man/ Knowing the two syllables ‘Love’/ Makes you the wise one.” (36) Kabir introduces his followers to the necessity and the urgency to realize the Supreme and also defines the place to find the Divine. Through the simple analogy of the mortal and the immortal as the lover and the beloved, Kabir whispers in our ears: “O my heart! The Supreme Spirit, the /Great Master, is near you: wake, /Oh wake!/ Run to the feet of your Beloved: for / Your Lord stands near...” (Tagore, 17)

Kabir propounds ‘love’ to be the highest form of worship and the consummation of love in the final communion with the Supreme Spirit to be the ultimate Truth leading to infinite bliss. He expresses his love and the intense longing for the Divine communion thus: “Listen to me, friend: he under-/ stands who loves. If you feel not love’s / longing for your Beloved One, it is vain to / adorn your body, vain to put unguent on / your eyelids.” (Tagore, 7) To reiterate this idea, a reference to Kabir’s couplet becomes inevitable: “If the heart mingles in the Lord’s/ There is complete union/ As melting ice mingles in water/ In God the man of devotion.” (Das, 28)

In his song, “*sain bin dardkareje hoy*”, Kabir laments the pangs of separation from the Divine beloved thus:

“When I am parted from my Beloved, my  
heart is full of misery: I have no comfort  
in the day, I have no sleep in the night. To whom shall I tell my sorrow?  
The night is dark; the hours slip by. Because my Lord is absent, I start  
up and tremble with fear.

Kabir says:

Listen, my friend! there is no other satisfaction, save in  
The encounter with the Beloved.”(Tagore, 36)

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Kabir concludes his song beginning “*angadhiya deva*”, by saying, “O brother! He who has seen that / radiance of love, he is saved.” (Tagore, 9) Through his song, “*Hari ne apna aap chipaya*” he pronounces the intense craving of a lover (spiritual seeker) for his Beloved (the Supreme Spirit) with grave intensity thus, “I will offer my body and my mind to my Lord: I / will give up my life, but never can I forget / my Lord!”(Tagore, 20)

In his effort to describe the concept of God, Kabir talks of the Divine as an entity possessing no particular form or quality and beyond destruction and decay. After this initial exposition, he effortlessly moves on to paradoxically describe ‘the undescrivable’ and hints at the rapturous ecstasy awaiting a spiritual seeker at the end of his journey.

“*Onkar siwae koi sirjai*”

“All things are created by the Om;  
The love-form is His body.  
He is without form, without quality, without decay:  
Seek thou union with Him!  
But that formless God takes a thousand forms in  
the eyes of His creatures:  
He is pure and indestructible,  
His form is infinite and fathomless,  
He dances in rapture, and waves of form arise  
from His dance.  
The body and the mind cannot contain themselves,  
when they are touched by His great joy.  
He is immersed in all consciousness, all joys, and  
all sorrows; He has no beginning and no end  
He holds all within His bliss.” (Tagore, 21)

### Seeking the Divine within and the concept of Oneness

As the seeker progresses in his spiritual journey, leaving behind the religious rituals, Kabir instills in him the idea of seeking the Divine ‘within’ and not ‘without’. In “*canda jhalkai yahi*

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*ghat mahin*” Kabir proclaims, “The moon shines in my body, but my blind / eyes cannot see it:/ The moon is within me, and so is the sun. / The unstruck drum of Eternity is sounded within / me; but my deaf ears cannot hear it.”(Tagore, 4) Yet again, he asks in “*man mast hua tab kyon bole*”: “Your Lord dwells within you: why need your / outward eyes be opened?” (Tagore, 25) The same idea is reinforced in his song ‘*is ghat antar bag bagice*’, “Within this earthen vessel are bowers/ and groves, and within it is the Creator:/ ... Listen to me, my friend! My beloved Lord is within.” (Tagore, 5-6)

In the present world of materialism and social inequalities where there is no assurance of permanence and peace, the understanding of the Divine in human nature promotes the well-being of the entire universe. Kabir explains how the omnipresent pervades all life forms and finds expression everywhere:

*Jo khoda masjid vasathai...*

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?  
Hari is in the East: Allah is in the West. Look within your heart, for  
There you will find both Karim and Ram:  
All the men and women of the world are His living forms.  
Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram: He is my Guru, He is my Pir. (Tagore, 46)

Kabir extols the right combination of *prema bhakti* and *gnana bhakti* when he sings ‘*grah candra tapan jot barat hai*, “This Light of Thine fulfils the universe: the / lamp of love that burns on the salver of / knowledge.” (Tagore, 16) He believes in and conveys this message to the common man of his times and his prophesy is apparently relevant to the present day world where the gulf between the heart and the head is ever increasing. Kabir’s vision of ‘the lamp of love that burns on the salver of knowledge’ beautifully highlights the right blend of love and intellect in the final communion. Kabir’s deep and broad vision of his times and his prophesy of the need

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of the universe is eternal and universal in nature and hence is applicable to all times, all places, and all people.

When Kabir anxiously remarks in “*paramatam guru nikat virajain*”, “You have slept for unnumbered ages;/ This morning will you not wake?”(Tagore, 17) we find the thread connecting the past through the present to the future. This exhibits the track of the spiritual odyssey which passes on through eons and Kabir tries to awaken the present day slumbering mankind. Through the pages of History, we have had great seers and philosophers who have tread this earth in the human form, in order to awaken us from our deep sleep. There is no denying the fact that Kabir was one such poet-seer-philosopher for whom man is affected by the ‘cataract’ and hence is unable to see the Divine within.

Great minds like Kabir claim that He can be realized through pure, intense love and a sense of absolute surrender. This love may sometime lead the seeker to look through different angles and assume different associations with the Divine. One may perceive Him to be a Master, while the other may look at Him as a Parent, as a Child, as a Beloved, as a Friend, and so on. Whatever be the assumed relationship between the seeker and the sought, the journey reaches fruition with God realization. As Kabir sings in ‘*grah candra tapan...*’,

“... I have had my Seat on the Self-poised One,  
I have drunk of the Cup of the Ineffable,  
I have found the Key of the Mystery,  
I have reached the Root of Union.  
Travelling by no track, I have come to the Sorrow-  
less Land: very easily has the mercy of the  
great Lord come upon me.  
They have sung of Him as infinite and unattainable:  
but I in my meditations have seen Him without sight.” (Tagore, 13)

Hitherto, the study has been discussing songs that express Kabir’s thought of looking ‘within’, pining for the eternal love and finding ‘oneness’ thus leading the *sadhak* in the right direction.

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Once the seeker discards duality, he undergoes a unique experience and witnesses a Divine Dance which is expressed in the lines that follow:

*Nirgun age sargunnacai*

BEFORE the Unconditioned, the Conditioned dances:  
'Thou and I are one!' this trumpet proclaims.  
The Guru comes, and bows down before the disciple:  
This is the greatest of wonders. (Tagore, 22)

The true master that Kabir is, he not only dwells on the way to proceed, but also warns of impediments therein and unravels the difficult steps involved in the progress thus:

*“avadh, maya taji na jay”*,

“Tell me, Brother, how can I renounce  
Maya?  
When I gave up the tying of ribbons, still I tied  
my garment about me:  
When I gave up tying my garment, still I covered  
my body in its folds.  
So, when I give up passion, I see that anger  
remains;  
And when I renounce anger, greed is with me  
still;  
And when greed is vanquished, pride and vain-  
glory remain;  
When the mind is detached and casts Maya away,  
still it clings to the letter.  
Kabir says, “Listen to me, dear Sadhu! the true  
path is rarely found.” (Tagore,3)

Kabir proclaims that when the “love of the *I* and the *Mine* is dead ... the work of the Lord is done”(Tagore,4). Notwithstanding the shedding of ego and overcoming *maya*, he is astounded by the heights required to be scaled when he sighs: “So high is my Lord’s palace, my heart trembles / to mount its stairs: yet I must not be shy, / if I would enjoy His love.” (Tagore,7) The

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same thought is apparent in a *doha* where he uses the analogy of ‘walking on a razor’ to show the difficulty in the path of devotion (Das, 56). To him a complete and unconditional surrender is inevitable - “My heart must cleave to my Lover; I must with-/draw my veil, and meet Him with all my body.” (Tagore,7)

In the present world of materialism and social inequalities where there is no assurance of permanence and peace unfortunately, modern man deluded by this malady, has fallen prey to the world of illusion (*maya*), and seems to have forgotten the umbilical cord connecting him with the Creator, thus moving into oblivion, far away from his true Self. Kabir extends his hand for every true seeker to hold and walk on the path of spirituality even while being a part of this materialistic world. Kabir himself continued to weave as he sang these songs of the highest philosophical purport, thus expressing the thought that the true seeker’s path was not one of escaping the waves, but of crossing the sea of materialism.

With a tone of persuasion, the following words of Kabir resonate and consolidate the greatest truth that mankind is certainly in need of knowing:

*“Kabira sab jag nirdhana, dhanvantha nahi koi;  
Dhanvantha sohi jhaniye, jako Raamnaam dhan hoi”*

**“The whole world is void of wealth, no one is rich;  
True wealth is found only where the treasure of God’s name exists.”**

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