

ORALITY, ORAL TRADITIONS AND KABIR

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Introduction

The paper examines *Kabir's relationship with orality and oral tradition* from the period of 1398 to the the present. The paper will do so by firstly, understanding the tone and methodology of Kabir's teachings with reference to his response to Islamic or Brahmanic traditions, religion and love. Secondly, the paper will delve into Kabir's teachings being carried forward by understanding the subjectivity of oral means that diminish the importance that written texts have had in our academic contexts. It is important to understand that to understand Kabir, it is not enough to say that the written and oral have a symbiotic relationship. In fact, oral traditions relating to Kabir have led to the global dissemination of the knowledge we possess about him.

1. Nature of Kabir's Tone and Methodology

It is widely known, especially in the western texts that the understanding of Kabir is often not dependent on the translations of his poetry. This is primarily because of the simplicity and bluntness of his style, and further; because of his way of looking and speaking of things that is more modern than classical, more individual than idealized (*Karine Schomer, W. H. McLeod, 1987*).

Kabir does not take the route that every other classical poet has taken to describe his imagination. He in fact, connects with the audience because of his personal accounts and insights. Whilst Tulsi, Mira and Sur are praising God, Kabir writes about us. About himself. This moves the audience, forming the fundamental basis of Kabir's methodology as rhetoric. A very strong example to extend this argument can be seen in the poem given below, by Kabir:-

*There's no creation or creator there
No gross or fine, no wind or fire,
No sun, moon, earth or water,
No radiant form, no time there,
No word, no flesh, no faith
No cause and effect, nor any thought of Veda,
No Hari, or Brahma,
No Shiva aur Shakti, no pilgrimage,
And no rituals, no mother, father
Or Guru there.*

From his writing, it is evident that the method he uses is vocative and sabotages passivity. (Poem from Page 8, Karine Schomer, W. H. McLeod, 1987) This invokes in the reader, a sense of engagement from the onset, and a questioning of beliefs that takes place by questioning the premise of existence in itself. Kabir is not overtly pessimistic in

his critique of religion. He in fact makes the reader understand that we need to see within ourselves first, in order to achieve the ability to measure the outer. He does not only criticize one religion, but all religious faith and customs that are maneuvered to suit circumstances.

Karine Schomer, W. H. McLeod have made a comparison of Kabir to that of Socrates. The ways in which they both did not hesitate to call out a wrongdoing, or irrationality, is something worth understanding, to know the rhetoric of Kabir. He criticizes Hindu Kings in Hindu Kingdoms and Muslims in Muslim Kingdoms (Karine Schomer, W. H. McLeod, 1987). Although he didn't have the risk of death like Socrates did, he still did have difficulty in propagating his idea of truth, for not many listened.

Kabir is thus, marked as a poet who is not only 'mystic' (Fish,), but also a bridge in understanding of things as they are, instead of our perceptions, that may be false. This process of differentiation is brought about by Kabir in his poems that stand for centuries later as ones of relevance, importance and something that we need to keep alive as a philosophy that not only helps us see things differently, but as they are.

2. Kabir: An observation of Orality vs Written Text

In all cultures, and especially in the Indian, the oral and the written are deeply intermeshed. A work may be composed orally but transmitted in writing. . . . Or it may be composed in writing ... but the text kept alive by . . . reciters who know it by heart and chant it aloud. Thus, over a

long history, a story may go through many phases. An oral story gets written up or written down.

- Who Needs Folklore? , AK Ramanujan

Ramanujan's writing on folklore, by and large signifies the relationship that oral and written texts share. It is not that one is more believable or real. It is the question of authenticity. Oral histories and stories have always been read less as academic due to their methodology. Given that oral histories are extremely subjective and based on people's biases coming from different contexts, it automatically thus becomes easier to rely on empirical texts and sources that are written.

However, it is important to note, that in Kabir's case, the orality of the text makes the written text diminish in the way it is valued. Oral traditions in Kabir are given much more importance than the *Bijaks* or the song books that people have preserved for centuries. In oral tradition,

texts are brought into being again and again in the matrix of interactions between performers, listeners, readers, media, and circumstances as well as across history and geography. Texts become relatively fluid when sung in live spaces, in contrast to their fixity in written or recorded form. Phrases, lines, and passages easily migrate from one song to another. (Linda Hess, 2015) The examples of the same relationship are given

below:

Religious traditions and sects have their ideologies and preferences. So do individuals. Some singers have told me they prefer nām to rām and consciously substitute the former for the latter. This indicates a more marked disengagement from Vaishnav and saguṇ associations and may be linked to a caste-related preference for the nirguṇ position. “First I meditate on Lord Ganapati (Ganesh) and mother Sharada (Saraswati). Ram, please give your *darśhan*.” But, he continues, “We prefer to sing *satguru*.” Throughout the song, he sings the refrain with *satguru* in place of Ganapati and *guru* in place of Ram.” (Linda Hess, 2015)

Another example of the same oral differences can be seen in Kabir’s Moko Kahan Tu Dhoondhe Re Bande, elucidated by Linda Hess in *Bodies of Song*:

A very popular song begins with the refrain, *Moko kahaṇ dhūṇḍhte re bande, maiṇ to tere pās meṇ*, “Where are you searching for me, friend? I’m right here.” All the lines have the same rhyme, echoing “*pās meṇ*” (very close/right here). They make a series of negative statements— I’m not in the temple, not in the mosque, not in holy mountains and rivers, not in ritual, and so on. This structure is a setup for the last

line, which will make a positive statement. Our friends in Malwa concluded the song with *maiṅ to huṅ vishvās meṅ*, which means, “I am in belief/faith.” That didn’t sit well with me. I was happy to discover that the K. M. Sen text, reprinted in Dvivedi’s *Kabīr*, had a version that ended, *Maiṅ shvāsoṅ ke shvās meṅ*—I am in the breath of the breath (Dvivedi 1971, 234)

There are many instances and examples quoted in *Bodies of Song*, that speak of the discrepancy along Shabnam Veeramani’s interpretation to that of Prahald Tipanya’s. The differences in the two elucidate the subjectivity of using words that we feel, fit Kabir’s meaning of poetry best.

Purushottam Agrawal pays attention to the difference between oral and written traditions and thinks seriously about the former. *From the beginning to the present, he points out, oral and written sources have been “face to face” in the development of Kabir. While respectful of manuscript researchers, he states emphatically that the presence of texts in manuscripts cannot be our only model* (Linda Hess, 2015). This, thus emphasizes on the paper’s explanation of the idea of orality and the oral traditions that come with Kabir.

In *Bodies of Song*, Prahald Tipanya, the major custodian of Kabir’s teachings is the sole carrier of songs that Kabir passed down and thus carries it forward for the generations

in future. Although the fluidity of the language and words remains, Prahlad Ji and other such artists like the ones in Hadd-Anhad- a film by Veeramani, carry on the tradition of Kabir's poetry through their songs and singing from place to place.

His poetry has been widely understood and interpreted through the songs that people have sang in either devotion to him or as interpretations of his poetry. Since these oral traditions of Kabir's poetry have been widely subjective, Kabir as an idea has become that of an empty signifier. A signifier of all-good-things of love, mystic, unity, devotion, utopia, etc. The empty signifier is understood through the interpretations and songs that singers often sing wherein they use the words "Ram" and "Rahim" to convey something that Kabir must have said, only that Kabir never aimed at taking names of idols that we worship today.

Even though there are various diaries and notebooks of Kabir's poetry that have been transcribed in a recorded fashion, it is important to view his legacy in a form of orality. "Orality" has been central to many studies of literature, performance, and communication since 1960, starting with landmark works like Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales* and Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Some distinguish sharply between "oral" and "literate," then slide to "essential" differences between orality and literacy, ear and eye, pre-and post-literate cultures. (Linda Hess, 2015) It is imperative to note that Kabir's history is still based on the oral-performative and not fallen to be tied down to written

texts. This orality is something that Kabir's legacy maintains, and thus is important to study, in order to understand Kabir.

Hearing Tapinya, and other Kabir poets and singers, is enough for us to understand what Kabir stood for, despite the difference in authentic words of Kabir. Despite there not being written texts to point directly to Kabir's teachings as sacrosanct, it is enough for us to hear the oral traditions through the songs and poems that people recite and perform till date. Even though there is a discrepancy in the written and oral in marginal ways, the relationship of orality and Kabir is something that goes from village to village, especially to the illiterates, to spread the message, that written texts cannot. That is the way that teachings of Kabir exist even today.

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