

Kabir

Kabir, also known as Kabir the Great, is one of the most famous saints in the Indian tradition (Partin 191). He is a unique saint because both Hindus and Muslims are attracted to his teachings as well as in his sayings (Vaudeville 5052). Some may say he was kind of a mystic poet due to his teachings. His teachings mainly consisted of poems and songs, which were in a language that most Hindus understood. He belongs in the category of the first generation Hindi poets, which contained a Hindi dialect. This dialect is not “amenable” to the classifications of linguists (Partin 191). His works are in the form of mystical poetry of various strengths, which allow the literary aspects to come across with philosophical and religious significance (Stahl 141). Kabir is an individual who was able to give expression to personal experiences of inner divine or absolute reality (Heehs 1).

There is little on the history of Kabir, such as what his personality was like, as well as a detailed biography on him. What is known is that Kabir was born as a low-caste Muslim, also known as a Julaha, around the city of Banaras during the fifteenth century (Vaudeville 5052). He was born in 1440, and passed away in 1518 (Stahl 141). It has been claimed that Kabir was born into a family with a Muslim father who greatly influenced his life (Stahl 141). We know that Kabir was born into a caste of weavers, who had recently become Muslim converts, and was raised in a Muslim lifestyle. It is also believed that Kabir was married, with children, and made his living as a weaver, as the rest of his caste did (Bly ix). However, it is unknown how many children Kabir fathered or who his wife was. Kabir’s family belonged to a caste of married “Jogis” or “Jugis”, which are devotees or performers of *jog*. By practicing this sect of yoga, they

believed they may attain a union with the Supreme Being (Bailey 1). Kabir was also involved in the *bhakti* movement, which was a reaction against Buddhism, as well as parts of the Vedanta philosophy (Stahl 142). *Bhakti* was related to Vishnuite devotion, where God is seen as the main object of devotion (Partin 194).

Kabir viewed the world as a moment fading between two deaths in a world of transmigration. He discusses self interest, the woman as ‘a pit of hell’, and man turning to his innermost self in order to find what is true (Vaudeville 5053). He did not see the significance in bonds between family members, because he believed those relations rested on self-interest (Vaudeville 2052). Another main belief of Kabir was that death encompasses all, and there would be no escape for one except to its own heart. For example, the only way to rid one’s self of negatives in life, such as egoism, would be to search one’s own soul to find the answers (Vaudeville 2052). Only those who find the answers or the “diamond” within oneself, has a chance at achieving eternity. This is relatable to the idea of *jivatma* in Hinduism, which is representative of the individual soul. It was believed by Kabir that if man turned away from the outside world, and focused only on the interior world, then one could be drawn to his innermost conscience. One’s innermost consciousness is related to the status of God, according to Kabir (Partin 196).

The words of Kabir appear to be very tragic, but also show his uniqueness as a poet. The tragedy is present when he discusses the insignificance of family, and how many things remains a mystery in life (Vaudeville 5053). His words are full of metaphors and various rhymes. The works of Kabir are regarded for both their literary qualities, as well as their spiritual qualities (Heehs 26). As a person, as well with his words, he is

compared to the Buddha, due to his great voice in India (Vaudeville 2053). Rather than having a positive outlook on the world like many do, Kabir was very pessimistic and focused on intrinsic actions. Some may call him ungodly, but he seems to be one of the masters of “interior religion” (Partin 192). There are many words of Kabir, also known as Kabirvanis. However, there is not a book or authoritative version of them (Vaudeville 2052). The poems, verses and songs recited orally by Kabir were collected by his disciples, as well as various followers (Hess 3). It is believed that Kabir had been illiterate and was unable to ever write anything down. Many followers and critics of his work say, “I don’t touch ink or paper, this hand has never grasped a pen. The greatness of four ages Kabir tells with his mouth alone,” in order to describe what Kabir may have been like, and why his works were orally passed on through generations (Hess 3). There is no way to prove that Kabir was illiterate. However, it is known that Kabir preferred his words to be passed on orally, rather than by paper. His message was so popular that they were widely imitated before they could be written down. Kabir’s works were largely an oral tradition in the beginning, and in most instances, still are. The main topic of Kabir’s songs seems to be that God is the ultimate truth (Dass preface). The oldest dated words of Kabir are found in the *Guru Granth* of the Sikhs, compiled by Guru Arjun in the Punjab around 1604 (Vaudeville 5052). The poetry was also a union of both the Islamic and Hindu traditions (Stahl 143).

There are many stories about Kabir, but the most famous one involves his death and cremation. It happened in the city of Magahar. As Kabir was about to die, two different groups gathered in order to fight over what would happen to Kabir’s body. The

two groups were the Muslims and the Hindus. It is said that after Kabir went into his tent to die, his body vanished, and all that was left was a heap of flowers (Vaudeville 2052). The flowers were divided between the two parties as a way of symbolizing both groups' possession over the body. The Muslims buried their half of the flowers, whereas the Hindus cremated theirs, and arisen a memorial tomb, also known as *samadhi*, over it. Since the time of his death, a story has circulated claiming that Kabir was born to a Brahman virgin widow, who committed him to the Gangas, and he was later saved and raised by Julahas. This story attempted to "Hinduize" the saint (Vaudeville 2052).

Some Muslims in the past viewed Kabir as being a Sufi because many of his "words" are similar to those of a traditional Sufi (Vaudeville 2052). Even though Kabir was opposed to some practices of the Islamic religion, he still associated himself with Sufi groups (Partin 195). Modern Muslims and Hindus, however, accept the "words" of Kabir. He is also seen as the unifying force between the two religions, even though he himself expressed rejection of "two religions". Kabir was also against idol worship and caste distinctions, this was because he used several Vaisnava names to speak of God. He, in turn, saw the idols as lifeless stones (Partin 192). Kabir also discusses the importance of purity, fasting, pilgrimages and other ritual practices throughout his various works. A verse Kabir's pertaining to the ritual washing, discusses the importance of physical and spiritual cleansing. Kabir states, "What is the good of scrubbing the body on the outside, If the inside is full of filth? Without the name Ram, one will not escape hell, even with a hundred washings!" (Kabir 192). His notion of God also seemed to be more than that of worshipping a personal god, as he alludes to a reality that is beyond words, rather than a god (Vaudeville 2052).

Another interesting fact about Kabir, and his poems, is that he sometimes speaks as a man, and other time speaks as a woman. An example is, “This woman weaves threads that are subtle, and the intensity of her praise makes them fine. Kabir says: I am that woman” (Bly xv). This is interesting because it gives Kabir various identities through his literature.

Kabir, who does not have much of a bibliography is seen as being very popular in various religions. He is one who, through his own intimate experience, believed that God is “the One,” “the True,” and “the Pure” (Partin 201). According to Kabir, God is the only one who is able to meet the challenge of death, because he is the perfect guru (Partin 201). Kabir believed the only way one can interact with God, was to delve into the very depths of one’s own soul, and only then, would God be able to speak with one. Even though Kabir may have rejected the teachings of other religions, he was still followed by many, and created his own group.

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