

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 22

Bhakti Mysticism and Poetics IV

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. We are discussing Bhakti mysticism and poetics. Today we are going to take up a new Bhakti poet Kabir Das. So Kabir Das or Kabir belong to a large section of populace, Indian populace who were you know part of the syncretic culture. They were, they claimed to be both Hindu and Muslim or to put in other words they were people who had neither of the religions, who had affiliation purely neither with Hinduism nor with Islam. So they were, they could be seen, many critics see them as potential swimmers or followers who took to the mystic streams of Sufism and Bhakti and they flowed across the country, they flowed you know from one zone or one school to another very smoothly, fertilizing in their sway the spirit and literature of India.

They were symptomatic of the syncretic culture that Bhakti greatly celebrated. So mystic's performances involved emotional appeal, spiritual richness of the experience, the experience that is emerging from immediacy, right? The immediate effect of godliness or divinity, the simplification of the divine, the rhythm and joy of community-singing or bhajankirtan which elevated and refined the individual through poetry and also provided a therapeutic release apart from also providing the devotees, the practitioners with a lifeline to hold on to. I recall in one of my previous lectures in this module I was talking about the nature of Bhakti composition, the compositions by the Bhakti poets; rather than the 'what' of the poetry, the meaning or analytical aspect of the poetry, the focus is more on the impact of this poetry or this artform on the people, how it transforms an individual, takes an individual from one plane to the other, right? So the effect, the praxis finds, the praxis vis-a-vis artworks finds a lot of importance in the Bhakti tradition. Bhakti tradition is not only about theoretically understanding religion, religiosity and spirituality, it is also about its impact, its lived and lively aspects.

Now Kabir's Sakhis, we call them as the Sakhis, illustrate Kabir's involvement with the culture of yoga. It is called the Bijak of Kabir. Kabir's work is called the Bijak of Kabir. And this is how a part of his writing goes:

Snake coiled round the sandal tree.

What can the sandal do?

Every pore choked with poison

where can nectar go?

...

Flickering, struggling, swaying

no one is left out.

Gorakh got stuck in Death City.

So who's a yogi?

So who is a yogi? I will read this poem again. "Snake coiled round the sandal tree, what can the sandal do? Every pore choked with poison, where can nectar go? Flickering, struggling, swaying, no one is left out. Gorakh got stuck in death city. So who is a yogi?" So very evidently Kabir here is talking about human existence. Sandal tree in all probability refers to the human body, the human existence, the ephemeral form and its different impediments and hardships in terms of spiritual elevation of such a body.

There are so many earthly distractions and here the snake has a very esoteric significance. It could refer to the Kundalini that is much eluded in the tantric tradition. According to tantra, when a human is able to discover all the chakras and padmas in the different parts of the body, the sleeping or dormant Kundalini is awakened, it reaches the sahasrar or the tip of the head, that is the snake awakened. But here the snake itself is in a state of jeopardy. There are so many earthly distractions that the Kundalini cannot be awakened fully.

So the metaphor of body comes again and again in Kabir Das. There is a very famous bhajan by Kabir Das where he says, "So chadar sur naara muni odhe, odhke maili kii ni chadariya, jhini jhini bini chadariya". That is how the bhajan goes. And in the end as part

of bhanita, he says, "das Kabir jatan se odhe, das Kabir jatan se odhe, jo ki to dhar dini chadariya." Here chadariya or the cloth, the sheet refers to the human body.

"Sai seeyat das maas lagi", for nine and ten months this chadariya is being, this body is being sewn, this body is being formed inside the mother's womb. "Sai seeyat das maas lagi thok thok ke bini chadariya." By and by, this human form is being composed inside the mother's womb. And in the end as part of bhanita, he says that- I am dedicating this chadariya, this body of mine, the way it is to God. I am submitting this body to God.

So, body as a chadariya, body as a sandal tree or a tree is very rife, it is a metaphor that comes back again and again in different Bhakti poets, especially in the bhajans of Kabirdas. This also reminds me of, you know, the tradition of Charyapada, where human body is compared with a boat. It is sometimes tilting to the right, sometimes tilting to the left, so referring to Purush and Bama, right, tilting to the right and tilting to the left and it has to cross the Bhava Sagar, this ephemeral ocean; it has to cross and ultimately reach on to the other side. So, this way human body as a boat is very much available in the Charyapada poems, the verses of Charyapada available in Bengali. So, Kabirdas' references to yoga in his poetry signify that he took his practice of yoga rather seriously and he actually experienced some of the effects, remarkable effects of yoga as described in yoga literature.

And however, we see that in Kabirdas' Bhakti everything else is subordinate to and used as a means to his reunion with Ram. Kabir uses a number of yoga terminology, modifies these terminologies and consecrates them however only to express the idea of his merging with Ram. The nectar in Kabir's language becomes the liquor. It has an intoxicating quality, you know, it is similar to the intoxicating quality of the essence of Ram's name. Taking Ram's name has similar intoxicating quality.

Drinking the ambrosial nectar of Rama's verses dripping from the lotus of Kabir's Bhakti is supposed to offer immortality in the form of ecstasy and joy. So and this joy is realized ultimately through his way of union with Rama, the devotee's union with the devoted, the seeker's union with the sought. In Kabir's poetry, the employment of unusual metaphors and symbolic language facilitates transcendence. The use of contradictory predicates and paradoxical statements are quite a set characteristic of the

devotee's experience. The devotee's experience in other words is described through contradictory predicates, through paradoxes.

Here are some of the lines composed by Kabir Das. The world is overflowing with that water, the water where sound and sea divide, where Vedas and Sikhs rights are born, where dwell both God and soul. That water holds earth, sky and light, the water from which all bodies spring. Who knows its secret, not even Kabir. So it is part of Bijak 64-65.

Once again I will read it. ...The world is overflowing
with that water.

The water where sound and sea divide,
where Vedas and six rites are born,
where dwell both god and soul,
that water holds earth,
sky and light.

The water from which all bodies spring
who knows its secret?
Not even Kabir.
So very esoteric in nature.

It could be interpreted in several ways. This water could refer to knowledge, it could refer to none other than God, the concept of God itself, the concept of Brahman from where everything originates. In this poem Kabir uses the most surreal of metaphors and unusual ideas in order to create an otherwise ungraspable mystic experience. Now Guru Nanak's poetry communicates the ineffable or something that escapes expression through words by using the neti-neti method, the neti-neti method of negative dialects. So according to critic Matilal, Matilal comments that- "...it is believed that if this is done repeatedly several times with a variety of possible descriptions, the general idea will get across" (Matilal 152).

Kabir's style of words is very similar to the characteristic style of Nanak's poetry and the way it ends is typical as well. The term that Nanak uses most frequently for the divine is Hari. So Nanak's bhajan goes like this, "Hari bin tero kon sahai," right? Nanak is talking about Hari. Although Nanak also talks about Ram, Nanak envisions or imagines God mainly through the name Hari, whereas for Kabir, it is generally Ram.

It is always Ram and Ram's love that Kabir is seeking through esoterism, through yoga and other different practices associated with Bhakti. Kabir's treatment of the yogic states of pranayama and samadhi which is withdrawal from the physical reality is also ultimately aiming at unification with the divinity that he calls as Ram. All aspects of yogic states and of yogic aestheticism are utilized to refurbish the story of Rama. So here is how another poem goes. It is a work, it is a composition by Kabir that is found in Adi Granth:

In the silent cave,
I sit in a yogic posture;
forsaking the world in my sect.
My King, I am the yogi of love;
I grieve neither at death nor separation.

So we have already discussed the three different qualities that Bhakti associates with the human body or human nature. The Gunas, the three different Gunas which permeate all matter in varying degrees, the Satva Guna which is the goodness or light, the Raja Guna which is action and passion and the Tamagun which is dullness, darkness and sluggishness.

So the various ways in which these three Gunas intermingle are responsible for the multiple manifestations of reality that the world bears around us. So in the form of different creatures, different reality we have combinations of these three primary Gunas. So the three Gunas constitute the material constituents of reality. Kabir puts the three

Gunas outside of the concept of Ram. Ram encompasses and yet is above, is beyond all these three Gunas that define the ephemeral or worldly beings.

While Gunas occur most frequently in compounds and thereby refer to the Sagun God, Kabir's conceptualization of Ram is beyond the Gun's qualities. It is not exactly a Sagun God that Kabir is envisioning through Rama. So Kabir's Ram contains all the qualities and yet is more than these qualities and therefore Kabir's Ram is essentially Nirguna. Kabir often addresses the supreme being as Ram or by any other synonymous attributes. Here is how another composition by Kabir goes found in Adi Granth:

On the moonless day, give up longing.

Remember Ram who knows our innermost thoughts.

While living, find salvation's door:

Perceive the real Word and Source of all things.

So here the 'real word' also refers to Ram.

So this is something Kabir and Nanak both reiterate again and again. The world is a delusion, the world is a Maya and the only true word that one should rote in mind, Jap karna, Simran of the one true word that is Ram. "Jo ek Neer hai Ganga ji ek Nam hai Ram." There's just one Neer or river that we recognize it is that of Ganga ji, and then just one name that we rote in our heart in order to attain salvation.

It is the name of Ram. Just like there is one moon and one sun, "ek Chandra hai ek Suraj ek Nam hai Ram". Just like there is one moon and one sun, there is just one word that is true in this, you know, otherwise delusionary world, in this Maya, which is the name of Ram. This is how both Kabir and Nanak are treating, you know, the word Ram, the concept of Ram and even Hari. The Sant tradition to which Kabir and Nanak belonged, distinguished itself from the Bhakti movement at large by its complete denial of any ritualistic practices as well as idol worship. Its insistence on the formlessness of God and the Nirguna Bhakti, which essentially perceives God as formless and one with the.. the

supreme one, the supreme spirit or essence is available both in Nanak and Kabir's compositions.

Kabir writes the following, O Nirgun,
to whom can I tell your tale?

who can be so wise?

Kabir says

‘Only those who ignite

see the flash.’

This is available in Adi Granth 75. Kabir predicates other gunas of Ram such as omnipresence, limitlessness, flawlessness and also the focal point onto which all creations merge. Ram is the point or the source from where we all came and ultimately all creations go back, and so Ram cannot be defined through the three gunas. And gunas are a part of Ram but Ram is beyond or something more than what these gunas signify, right? So, Kabir makes all the creatures and the transient world subject to Rama's will.

Ram, Ram, so fearless are You
that You Yourself become the raft
in order to save us.

Now you and I are One:

seeing us unite,

my heart is filled with pleasure.

...

(Adi Granth 101-102)

Now you and I are One:

seeing us unite,

my heart is filled with pleasure.

...

This is from Adi Granth 101, 102. In Kabir's shlokas there is a sense in which passivity is raised to the level of normative behaviour for the mystic.

So here we see a kind of dejection, a kind of pessimism in Kabir Das, which in a way does not agree with Guru Nanak's basic tenets of Sikhism. Sikhism thrives in positivity, in optimism with respect to human existence. Here what does Kabir say? Kabir is saying:

"Kabir, whatever I propose, God disposes;

so why propose and scheme?

For, what God proposes, He does;

and does He what one cannot even dream?", right? It is from Salok 219, Adi Granth 1376. So it is a kind of, one could say it is a kind of surrendering to the larger schemes, but also there is a tone of dejection.

Rather than accepting the divine will with a positive attitude, Kabir here seems to want to escape from life, surrendering all proposing and scheming for the sake of living. Now this escapist attitude is directly opposed to the Sikh vision. Like I was saying, the Sikh vision that harbours an action-oriented life in the world and a joyous acceptance of the divine will in any given situation, be it favourable or not. So at the heart of Sikhism there is an action-oriented life and a kind of sheer optimism where it is no question of giving up. For the gurus of the Sikhs, creative activity in the world is the yardstick of one's progress in the life of spirituality through action, through mundane action, through service to people one can progress in the life of spirituality.

So Amardas seems to respond to Kabir's view through the following lines. What does Amardas say? He himself puts care (chinta) in us,

He himself makes us carefree (achintu):

Nanak, give praise to that One

who takes care of all. (M3, Salok 220, AG:1376) The word Chinta in the current context means care and anxiety that one experiences in one's life while participating in worldly affairs.

Guru Amardas asserts that one should put one's faith exclusively in the divinity that is dwelling in us, who looks after everyone in his or her mundane concerns. So by submitting to the divine will cheerfully one can become carefree or Achintu and gain confidence to cope with any situation of negativity. It could be anguish or despair just by thinking that every happening is coming from God. Whatever is happening is a part of God's will and so we have to accept it. Here the Guru, Guru Amardas clearly provides a corrective to Kabir's dejected view, his dejected worldview, his withdrawal, self-withdrawal and complete giving up on self-will through stressing the need to confront life with a positive attitude.

Kabir has a sense of, you know, resignation. He is resigning almost his faith whereas Gurudas wants, you know, people, the devotees to confront life with a positive attitude. In order to guard against excessive indulgence on the other hand or even overconfidence in material world, Guru Arjan adds a further comment. This is how it goes... So while we should not be completely resigned and completely withdrawn from life, we also should not be overindulgent and overconfident. This is how Guru Arjan looks at the question of overindulgence in materiality:

Kabir! man meditated not on Ram,
he wandered, following his desires.
Whilst given to sin, he died:
in one moment, his life span was over.

(M5, Salok 221, AG:1376).

This is also from Salok 2.21, Adi Granth. So here Guru Arjan employs signatures of Kabir. It is interesting that Arjan, Guru Arjan is writing with a bhanita or signature of Kabir here, and describing the nature of the uncontrolled man overindulgent in materiality who is so attached to his passions for worldly pleasures that he has forgotten God and he wastes his entire life in sinfulness.

So the remark is clearly intended to create a harmonized balance between extremes. On the one hand, withdrawing completely from worldliness and on the other excessively indulging in the things of the world. Both are seen negatively. Thus, the Guru's comments serve to highlight the distinctive Sikh way of life. "What can one take in return, Kabir, for revealing the mystery (ram nam ke patantarai) of the divine Name?"

What [gift of mine] could please the Guru who provides contentment? I am just surrendering [my self] within." (Kartarpur MS, f. 943/2)

The word Patantara, Patantara stands for the contents of an official document, which are confidential in nature. In the present context of this verse Kabir employs it in connection with the mystery of the divine name, which refers to the contemporary esoteric practice of giving a naam or name to the disciples who were induced into or inducted into the inner Sant circles because Kabir is a part of the Sant tradition. Because a devotee, a disciple is inducted into, made into a part of the Gharana, he is given a name by the Guru.

Here is a reference to that tradition, the name-giving tradition. He further proclaims that the divine name is itself a priceless gift and that no present can repay it. The name that Guru has given, which the word Patantara here is kind of trying to represent. Guru has given me a certain official document, an identity, a name in his Gharana and no gift can recompense, can pay for this priceless gift. So here in all probability he is referring to the Indian tradition of Guru Dakshina, according to which it is customary for the disciple to make an offering to the teacher once he has received the name in the form of a sacred mantra.

I will stop my lecture here today. In the next lecture we will start with the discussion on another Bhakti poet. Thank you. Thank you.