

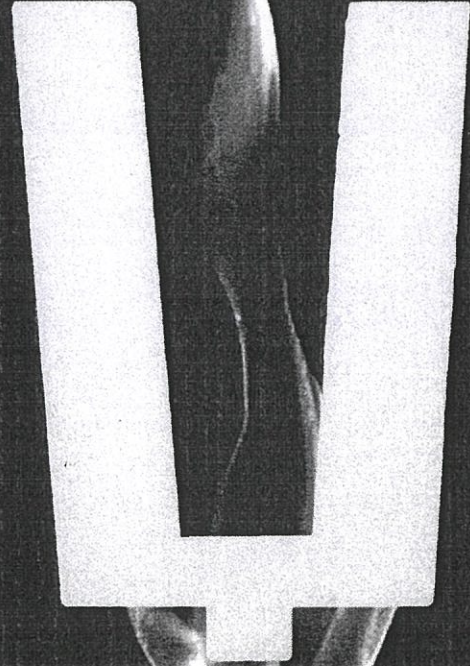
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मुंबई विद्यापीठ



डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर अंतर्राष्ट्रीय संशोधन केंद्र
मुंबई विश्वविद्यालय

कधीच विमर्श



संपादक

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के सौजन्य से प्रकाशित

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मुम्बई हिन्दी अकादमी

संतों, सहज समाधि भली।
साँझते मिलन भयो जा दिनतें सुरत न अंत चली॥
आँख न मूँदूँ, कान न रूँधूँ, काया कष्ट न धारूँ।
खुले नैन मैं हँस हँस देखूँ, सुन्दर रूप निहारूँ॥
कहूँ सो नाम सुनूँ सो सुमिरन, जो कुछ करूँ सो पूजा।
गिरह-उद्यान एकसम देखू, भाव मिटाऊँ दूजा॥
जहँ जहँ जाऊँ सोई परिकरमा, जो कुछ करूँ सो सेवा।
जब सोऊँ तब करूँ दंडवत, पूजूँ और न देवा॥
शब्द निरंतर मनुआ राता, मलिन बचन का त्यागी।
ऊठत-बैठत कबहुँ न बिसरै, ऐसी तारी लागी॥
कहैं कबीर यह उनमुनि रहनी, सो परगट कर गाई।
सुख-दुख के इक परे परम सुख, तेहि में रहा समाई॥

- संत कबीर

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Kabir and Ambedkar on Religious Traditions: Critiques and Reconstructions

● Dr. Amita Valmiki

The images are all lifeless, they cannot speak:

I know, for I have cried aloud to them.

The Puranas and the Koran are mere words:

Lifting up the curtain, I have seen.

-Kabir¹

I like the religion that teaches liberty, equality and fraternity.

-B. R. Ambedkar²

Once you label me you negate me.

-Soren Kierkegaard³

The quotes reveal that all three thinkers champion deconstruction of organized religion. But this is also followed by reconstruction. Sant Kabir (a 15th century mystic-poet from Benares), Soren Kierkegaard (b. 1813, d. 1855), a Danish 19th century (theistic) existentialist and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (b. 1891, d. 1956) found that prevailing religious formalism is both structurally and ontologically inappropriate for humanity. A drastic metamorphosis seemed to be mandatory in their times; and equally true in contemporary religious architecture. They belong to different epochs and different cultures, but one sees an overlap in their philosophies of religion: they think beyond its fanatical avatars to advocate an emancipatory relationship with religion based on choice.

Kabir (c. b.1440, c. d. 1518), a great mystic, spoke about of

the only 'Real', the 'Truth' (the 'God'). For him, rituals, practices of different religions had no use 'if the purpose of mental one-pointed concentration on God was forgotten'. The history, though not known very precisely, says that Kabir was born in a family of Mohammedan weavers or brought up in a family of Mohammedan weavers who were most probably recent converts from the prevalent faith of the common people in which Gorakhanath was held in great reverence, and, therefore they worshipped both, Allah and Ram. (There is difference of opinion among scholars regarding the historical data as Hindus called him Kabir Das while the Muslims believed he was a Sufi; anyways, as the name Kabir comes from the Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, etc. meaning 'the Great', [the 'Big', the 'Majestic'], the 37th name of God in Islam).⁴ Kabir disliked the bigotry and superstitions of all formal religions, as he was under the influence of both bhakti of Vaisnavism and Sufism. His writing was completely devotional, and he baptized his Lord as 'Allah-Ram'. As a result of this, however, he was persecuted by both the Hindus and the Mohammedans. As noted by Dasgupta, "With him (Kabir) and his followers, such as Ruidas and Dadu, we find a religion which shook off all the traditional limitations of formal religions, with their belief in revealed books and their acceptance of mythological stories, and dogmas and creeds that often obscure the purity of the religious light... When Kabir's parents found that they could not subdue his Hindu tendencies, they wanted to circumcise him, and at this he said:

'Whence have come the Hindus and Mussulmans? Who hath put them in their different ways?

Having thought and reflected in thy heart, answer this—who shall obtain Heaven and who Hell.'

(From Bijak).⁵

Kabir forewarned people about the stratification found in society in name of religion, caste, race and gender too (though we find contradictory verses in his poems regarding gender and feminism).⁶ In fact Kabir looked forward to democratize religion. Kabir was a mystic because of his non-dualistic approach towards the Real that

makes his path more humane. Kabir spoke of 'subjective inwardness' that was elaborated by his predecessors and popularized further by Kabir. We find that the harbinger of Kabir were adherent of midsection path-the Sagunis where Brahman is qualified and Nirgunis, the unqualified Brahman. Kabir epitomizes the Nirgunis so that momentous or consequential aspect surmises into casteless society, pure monism, imbibing all-love for God and with work ethic and dignity of labour a resigned and quietist life of harmony and peace in society. Kabir said, "I searched for God for years and years and I could not find him. Then I dropped the whole idea and I became still and loving.- Now I know the way-it is not in formalities, but in an informal friendliness with the existence."⁷

Kabir believed in complete solidarity and was unconditionally against caste system and any kind of social hierarchy. Kabir says (Kabir Granthavali 179),

*"Were the Creator,
Concerned about caste,
we'd arrive in the world
With a caste mark on the forehead."*

Kabir was disliked by orthodox Brahmins who heaped him with casteist slurs such as 'mleccha' (out caste). The mullahs labeled him as Kafr (infidel) since Kabir spoke of his Lord as 'Ram-Allah' (or Allah-Ram). This is because they speculated on their own respective Gods with particular limits. Probably reasoning and doctrines do not allow one to transgress one's limited boundaries and Kabir was exactly opposed to this.

Kabir's approach is quite similar to existentialists such as Kierkegaard and Jaspers who redefined religion. Kabir was a mystic; ('theistic mysticism' is dependent upon mystic's intuitions, insight or is claimed that he has a direct intuitive perception of God; it is 'super sense-perceptual experience; and Existentialism is "the philosophical theory which holds that a further set of categories, governed by the norm of authenticity, is necessary to grasp human existence. To approach existentialism in this categorical way may seem to conceal

what is often taken to be its "heart" (Kaufmann 1968: 12), namely, its character as a gesture of protest against academic philosophy, its anti-system sensibility, its flight from the "iron cage" of reason."⁸

Both the approaches (the mystic's and existentialists') belittled the importance of reason. Also, that everybody had the chance or rather have 'choice to become'. The medieval period mystic/saints in India believed that becoming is realizing the Truth that is One, while existentialists concentrated just on the universal concept of 'becoming'. (The term 'universal' is not in the paradigmatic form but has to be taken as 'access to all', especially 'the others.) Though the joy is immense for the mystics, the existentialists may say that it may follow or may not in the 'process of becoming'. Again, both have emphasized on the concept of 'hope' for all to 'become', but the 'essence' for Kabir, or say for any theistic mystic is 'God', while Kierkegaard, or say any existentialist-there is 'denial of essence'. Well, these differences are found, but, in fact my point is not that how do they expound the 'philosophy of becoming', the point is that they have an open approach, this joy of exercising freedom of choice or dread of it is not consequential, but enjoying dread of exercising freedom-for all is too secular approach where all differences are given up.

Kabir says, (in Bijak) 'You and I are of one blood; one life exists in us both. From one mother the world is born, what then is this sense of separateness? We have all come from the same country; we all drink from the same fountain; yet the ignorant divide us into innumerable sects.'⁹

Speculative philosophies may differ in their approaches as well as in conclusions. This is avoided by mystics. The mystic's vision is the experience of 'identity'. This is clearly reflected in Kabir's philosophy. The mystics and their experiences of unity are entirely independent of advancements in learning or civilization. Therefore, amelioration of science or stratification found in society in the name of religion, caste, race, and gender has no significance for the mystics. Mystical experience is the experience of that single authorship, a

provenience that which a universal substratum of all that existed, exists and will be existing. (This is more of a theistic mysticism.) Such experience is the cognition through revelation; an ecstatic experience, a sort of déjà vu and is comprehensively noetic in nature. It is a cosmic consciousness; and this experience is transient and ethereal.¹⁰ As such mystical experience has existed uninterrupted aeons ago. Those who have had the mystical experience transcend all the distinctions that human beings are entangled. "Mysticism, therefore, is an idealist point of view which asserts the possibility of the direct apperception of the ultimate reality in a rare, profound, and purely introspective experience, wherein an extraordinarily intimate knowledge of the noumenal Source and the nature of the universe and human existence is acquired."¹¹ Indeed we have ignored and overlooked this aspect.

At this juncture, it is potent to raise a question, is there any resemblance between the mystical philosophy of Kabir and (theistic) existential philosophy of Kierkegaard to B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy? Reading through Ambedkar's literature I found he is very analogous to Kabir, as well as, Kierkegaard.

Ambedkar says, "Religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules, it ceases to be a religion, as it kills responsibility which is an essence of the true religious act."¹² From the quote it has to be introspected as to was Ambedkar totally anti-religion or atheist or non-believer? The question is intriguing and discloses the layers of Ambedkar's thoughts on religion per se; and that is the requirement of the time. The above quote reveals Ambedkar's take, on orthodox religion that is inclined towards dogma and blind faith.

Ambedkar had impressive and intense views on religion, specifically Brahmanical Hinduism. Ambedkar writes, "What is called Religion by the Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions."¹³ He could never affiliate himself with the religion of the popular masses of India, as it abandoned him and the underprivileged castes (especially when caste system is called as

varna system in pliable and tolerable terminology).

Though Ambedkar remained Hindu larger part of his life, he could never ever associate himself with Hinduism. Therefore, religion was out of his prelude. Ambedkar propagated egalitarian and non-discriminatory approach. Therefore, he gave us a personal and a uniform code.

There is a discernible parallel that can be drawn between Antonio Francesco Gramsci (b. 1891, d. 1937), an Italian Neo-Marxist and Ambedkar's thoughts principally and exclusively when the term secularism is introspected upon. Both came from the distressed and persecuted marginalized cluster. Therefore, the pangs of obliteration and barbarity were felt equally. Gramsci was bent toward establishing equality, by 'intellectual and moral reform' and Ambedkar by 'social and moral consciousness of society.'¹⁴ Gramsci says, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in the interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."¹⁵ Both the iconoclasts were from the scratch aware of the problems and complications faced by these oppressed groups. The master-slave issue was and is common everywhere and this disparity in any scheme need to be annulled. Both Gramsci and Ambedkar were anta towards religion and were motivated by Marxist principles, though "considered religion culturally and politically relevant; both assessed the presence of subalterns through social, cultural and historical analysis, and sought to negotiate a rightful place within the state, society and history/historiography for these 'excluded' individuals."¹⁶

Given that Ambedkar shares so much with a Marxist thinker, (despite his text "Buddhaor Karl Marx" where he is critical of Marxism) religion should have been a secondary idea for him. However, he did not think given the unique Indian position on religion.

The question is though Ambedkar appears to 'oppose' religion, why was he, to certain extent 'for' religion? Religion is for Ambedkar, a form of adhesive that ties the populace and to bring about social revolution by enforcing laws, structuring political strategies and bringing

economic reconstruction, for this religion is indispensable; otherwise, these would lose its essence and renovation if not subordinated by a common substratum (called religion). Religion is utilized in form of a binding factor and therefore religion plays a pivotal role in social, economic and political life of people in any nation. Therefore, religion is essential but it needs to have a scientific and rational/logical basis. So, Ambedkar says, "Religion, if it is to survive, it must be in consonance with reason, which is another name for science."¹⁷ This requires education, a vital factor to advocate rational and dialectic reflection that will reinforce the virtues of equality and justice. The formal, conservative and authoritative religion not only lack this, but promotes the orthodoxy further, that too not for some years, but for eternity.

Education understood from Kabir's point of view, it is discernible to see, that though Kabir was illiterate but used to recite his poems, to his disciples in the language of people for he must be aware that the regional languages bring the basic nuances of virtues that need to be practiced in life. His poems are in Hindi, Avadhi, Braj Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, Punjabi etc. (especially his Sakhis meaning Sakshi in Hindi, that is 'witness'); and since Kabir poems are composed in many dialects and languages, often his work is known in Hindi (literature) as Panchmail Khichari (mixture of many languages) or Sadhukkadi (a regional dialect spoken in the North India, especially Hindi speaking regions).¹⁸ This shows how Kabir transcended the linguistic barrier that opened up vistas of spiritual pursuits for all, especially for the subalterns. Mystics like Kabir and many others in his time popularized vernaculars and disseminated the importance of regional languages. This was an accost and a challenge, to the language of the scriptures, and that was Sanskrit, which was considered as the exclusive sacred language.

In cognizance with enhancing the importance of regional languages, Kabir at the same time spoke with lot of veneration for Gurus (teachers) and wrote in one of his couplets (dohas),

Guru Govind dohukharde

Kin ke lagoon paaye

BalihariGurudevki

Govind diyobataye.

[As God and Guru both stand before me

At whose feet should I fall?

I choose the Guru

Because he has led me to God.]¹⁹

Therefore, in Kabir one can notice a complete metamorphosis of formalistic religion and this brought about a social revolution in his time. There was an urgent need to change the presumed thoughts in matter of religion. This needed to be reassessed and revitalized.

Similar pattern of thought is seen in Kierkegaard; for "Kierkegaard Christian faith is not a matter of blindly following church dogma. It is a matter of individual subjective passion, which cannot be mediated by the clergy or by human artefacts."²⁰ The point to be noted that Existentialism, especially considering theological or theistic existentialism that was initiated by Kierkegaard, was a movement against the logic of 'pure Being'; they were not against logic of a 'thinking being', but logic of deduction and of verbal formula. Therefore, Existentialism is defined as 'a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stressed freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts.'²¹ Especially Kierkegaard was of the opinion that neither 'thought' nor imagination is superior when confronted with each other; in fact they stand on equal pedestal. We need to unify them in simultaneity and the realm of their unification is 'existence'. Kierkegaard was haunted with reflective philosophy and religion (indeed in his case it was Christianity) and the ecclesiastics were trying to establish the authority of religious dogma by providing psychological and social resolutions. This did not appeal to Kierkegaard. Keeping with Kierkegardian approach to orthodox religion, his antagonism to it, one can distinctly notice that both Kabir and Ambedkar too endorsed the same view. Kabir could not sanction

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the bisecting forces of religion that discriminates individual from another individual especially in the name of caste. And the aforementioned ideology is unmistakably perceived in Ambedkar's thought. Ambedkar says, "Hindus must consider whether the time has come for them to recognize that there is nothing fixed, nothing eternal....everything is changing, that change is the law of life for the individual as well as for society. In a changing society there must be a constant revolution of old values."²² And Kabir says,

*"The donkey is far better than Brahmin
Dog is better than other castes
The cock is better than the Mullah
They wake the people by their blasts."*²³

Therefore the message from these giants was very clear; one has to elevate oneself by knowledge, not of verbal jugglery, but knowledge of the existing being, to overthrow the bigotry and fanatic approach in matter of religion. In similar fashion one finds the same philosophical pattern in Ambedkar's thought process; and for Ambedkar it was Hinduism that upheld the Code of Manu as final, blindly enforcing on the marginalized castes. Ambedkar, like Gramsci could not accept this in any case. In this matter he was opposed to religion; but the religion that he felt was beyond all these orthodoxies and fanaticism was Buddhism. For Ambedkar's understanding of Buddhism was in relation to ethical religion where mores of kinship, nationalism and religion are comprehended, that too in 'oriental context'. It should in no ways to be understood as patriotic or subordinate to Brahmanical Hinduism.

At this very juncture you find a striking similarity between Kabir and Ambedkar where the intermediary position is of theistic existentialism in a new garb. In fact, Ambedkar's father Ramji Maloji Sakpal who was in British army, was a Kabir-panthi as we know; therefore, it seems to be a platitude that Ambedkar was quite apprised of Kabir.²⁴ [For Kabir caste or religion did not matter. Therefore, some untouchable families adopted Kabir Panth.] De facto his life was propelled by Buddha, Kabir and Mahatma Phule.

Kabir was completely against the hypocrite and formalized religion and this view was also endorsed by Ambedkar. Kabir voiced the discomfort and torment that wounded the subalterns; and promoted the virtues of compassion and foremost, the concept of 'love' (dhaiaksharapremka) leaving aside the malevolence with anyone. Kabir accentuated the concept of 'dignity of labour'. Indeed, there is an apprehension that was Ambedkar aware of Kabir's philosophy, as there was no translation of any of Kabir's poems in Marathi. It is most probable that Ambedkar must be acquainted by Kabir's poems translated in English by Rabindranath Tagore and published [by MacMillan, London] in 1915, known as One Hundred Poems of Kabir. Kabir was from a Julaha clan known to be untouchables in his time. By the time two powerful movements emerged those who could embrace the shudras and ati-shudras-one, Bhakti of Vaishnavism and Shaktism, and other, Sufism of Islam. Both the movements out rightly rejected the shackles of caste and the oppressive measures of the upper castes. But both the movements deferred from what they preached. The mullahs and pundits were authoritative and nobody could transgress their word that consisted of religious rites and ritual as compulsory; and Vaishnavism never gave up varna system; and the atrocities on the marginalized community continued. In fact, Ramanand, believed to be Kabir's guru, used to convert the chandals (as in those days the untouchables) to the sect of Vaishnavism by not touching them but by whispering in their ears Ram Ram. India lived in a paradoxical world. The precepts were different from the practice. There was a need of a socio-political movement that was initiated and bastioned by Kabir. So, one can say even to start with spiritual ascendance one needs to go through either bypassing the existing norms and orthodoxies (which was not possible in the existing societal structure with large populace following the traditional norms) or had to be a rebel to bring forth revolution. Kabir bannered the revolutionary movement of mysticism and incorporated the sant-parampara rather the bhakti-parampara (though he is said to belong to bhakti-parampara). Under

the veil it seems to be motivated completely by the social structure rather than religious one. In bhakti-parampara the dualism persists, but in sant-parampara the monistic concept dissolves all that is divided and assimilates all, especially 'the others.'

Then the question remains as to why Ambedkar did not adopt Kabir-panth, instead accepted Buddhism? Ananya Vajpeyi in her book *Righteous Republic* explicitly mentions that may be Buddha was much larger figure compared to Kabir who remained provincial among Hindi speaking regions. She notes that Kabir broke the tradition remaining a recluse; while Buddha was spatio-temporally present and revolted against the conventional religion. The universal appeal that Buddhism carried probably was lacking in 'relatively provincial Kabir-panth'.²⁵

Vajpayee may be right to an extent but then the bond between Ambedkar, Kierkegaard and Kabir opens up his relationship to mysticism and the so-called renunciation of Kabir. Kabir's renunciation like Kierkegaard's was directed to institutionalized religion and its failure to give freedom to human beings. Ambedkar too renounced institutionalized religion in this manner. Further Ambedkar reveals the positive qualities of mysticism from Kabir and Kierkegaard. R. D. Ranade has mentioned the qualities of a mystic (a mystic's philosophy is universally applicable irrespective of any distinction, it is of the intellectual level, is emotive, is moral, and the personal aspect of mysticism is 'spiritual realization' that is intuitive²⁶), these attributes belong to all the three-Buddha, Kabir and Ambedkar. From Kierkegaardian point of view too they seem to be completely connected that draws Kabir and Ambedkar very close. Considering Kierkegaard's philosophy, it runs quite parallel to mystics' philosophy, those who have a strong hold on ethical tradition of religion. Kierkegaard passed through different experiential stages-the aesthetic stage, which holds perfectly good in second-ethical stage and religious stage which is the last one. So, existence, freedom and in particular, existing individual is prior to reasoning. Kierkegaard's approach, like a mystic, turns social. The approach therefore is against solipsism

and violence. Therefore, to achieve one's ultimate spiritual identity, according to Kierkegaard, the individual has to cultivate 'mores' like hope, patience, co-operation, excellence, compassion and love. From this angle one can very well equate Kabir and Ambedkar standing on the same pedestal to seek social justice through Buddhist virtues of love and compassion.

Both Kabir and Ambedkar renounced the varna system in their articulation; Kabir by his poems and Ambedkar by his books, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1917), *Riddles in Hinduism* (published posthumously) and many other books. Therefore, their approach and reach to the populace of the horrendous implications of religious dogmatism and caste structure was via their literature. The legacy of existentialism of responsibility, freedom of choice and experiencing the joy (and dread) of 'becoming' turns out to be mystical, which is very clearly and distinctly seen in Kabir and Ambedkar. They both critiqued the orthodox religion and aspired for reconstruction of traditional oppressive religious norms to a moral and ethical religion; in Kabir, through his poems (in *Bijak*, *Adi Guru Granth* and *Kabir Granthavali*) and in Ambedkar's *Buddha and His Dhamma*.



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