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# UNIT 13 KABIR: RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES AND THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL HARMONY\*

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## 13.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this unit is to familiarise you with the nature and key aspects of 15<sup>th</sup> century Indian mystic, saint and philosopher, Kabir's ideas on religion and social harmony. After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Describe Kabir's ideas on politics and society
- Explain Kabir's views on religious harmony
- Examine Kabir's thoughts on women; and
- Evaluate the legacy of Kabir

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## 13.1 INTRODUCTION

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Kabir was one of the shining lights of the *Bhakti* movement which started around eighth century in India. Bhakti movement was syncretic with a strong focus on love and devotion to God. It did not confine itself to the religious domain and had a much larger influence on society. Followers of the Bhakti movement questioned several regressive social practices of the time. Bhakti movement has been seen by scholars as a means of protest and rebellion against the divisions and unfairness of the existing social order through the path of devotion and love. It transcended religions, castes and had universal appeal with followers from diverse faiths and regions. As a matter of fact, *Sufism*, an Islamic syncretic sect,

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\*Dr. Abhiruchi Ojha, Assistant Professor, Department of Politics & Governance, Central University of Kashmir

is seen by many as being part of the larger Bhakti movement. Sufism also focused on love and devotion to God with a universal message and appeal. Some of the key figures of the Bhakti movement include the famous 12<sup>th</sup> century saint, *Ramanuja* (1016 CE to 1137 CE).

The influence of Bhakti movement was spread across the country. It was a mass movement that drew followers from people from different strata of society. This was partly because of the fact that many of the key figures of the Bhakti movement used largely local languages spoken by the common people to convey their ideas, instead of limiting themselves to Sanskrit. Kabir himself is believed to have used an *older* version of *Hindi*. This meant that more people could understand the precepts of the Bhakti movement without language acting as a barrier. Many leaders of the Bhakti movement including Kabir also made a conscious attempt to simplify theological concepts and make them practically relevant and comprehensible for the common people. The themes they chose were relatable to common people and they used appealing songs, poems, parables from everyday life and incorporated folk practices to make their ideas reach a wider section of the population.

One of the key features of the Bhakti movement was its focus on progressive social reform. The leaders of the Bhakti movement which included saints, poets, musicians, social reformers and radical thinkers, questioned many regressive social practices of their times, including the hierarchical caste system, class divisions that were widely prevalent and religious antagonisms. Through their promotion of a syncretic God of love, they sought to unite Indian society which was then divided by religious, caste, regional and class fault lines. It is, thus, undeniable that the Bhakti movement left a lasting impact on the social, cultural, political and religious life of Indian society. It influenced many modern leaders of India like Mahatma Gandhi and continues to inspire spiritual awakening among people from diverse religious backgrounds.

It is in the context of such an influential and popular movement with a rich tapestry, one has to locate Kabir, his works and their enduring legacy. Despite his great popularity, the life of Kabir still remains shrouded in *mystery*. There is scant evidence with respect to the finer details of the life of Kabir. Myths and parables intermingle freely with historical facts, making it really difficult to separate reality from fiction. It is known with certainty that Kabir lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but beyond that it is difficult to specify particular years for his birth and death. Some of his followers claim without much hard historical evidence that he was born in 1398 CE and died in 1518 CE. This would make him a contemporary of *Ramananda*, who was a central figure of the Bhakti movement in North India. However, many modern scholars place his birth in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, around 1440 CE and death in 1518 CE. Kabir was also a contemporary of *Saint Ravidas*, another influential leader of the Bhakti movement.

Kabir is believed to have been born near the city of Banaras, present day Varanasi, to a family of Muslim weavers. Kabir also became a weaver like his father and lived most of his life in Banaras. However, it is worth noting that there are *several other* versions of his birth in circulation among people. By one account, Kabir is believed to have been born miraculously to a *Brahmin* woman and was brought up in Banaras by his *foster* parents, a Muslim weaver and his

wife. Banaras, a culturally vibrant and historically significant city, quite certainly played a key role in the life of Kabir. The social, political, cultural, religious and economic ethos of 15<sup>th</sup> century Banaras was a great influence on Kabir and his ideas.

Kabir's poems, songs and sayings, popularly dubbed as 'Kabirvanis', began to be collected only several decades after his death. Kabir himself did *not likely* write down his ideas. Kabirvanis include couplets called as 'dohas' and short songs called as 'sabdhas' or 'padas'. Moreover, Kabirvanis have been co-opted over the centuries by people belonging to diverse cultures, religious and regions. This has resulted in significant variations in linguistic aspects as well as other sensibilities in Kabir's works. Questions have also been raised about the authenticity of many of the writings attributed to him as Kabir inspired many copycat poets in subsequent centuries. Scholars have been making progress in authenticating Kabirvanis through critical textual analysis and other methods. Today, some of the key sources to explore the ideas of Kabir include *Adi Granth*, *Bijak*, *Panchvani*, *Sarvangi* and *Granthavali*. There are significant variations between these sources and it is through a comparative analysis of these different sources, one can get close to understanding the historical Kabir and his thoughts.

The universal and transcendental nature of Kabir's influence is highlighted by the fact that his legacy is equally claimed by people of different faiths. Kabir has been viewed as a *Sufi Muslim* as many of his ideas are somewhat comparable to those expressed by Sufi saints. On the other hand, Kabir has been viewed as a *Vaishnavite* by some, while Sikh holy books also have references of Kabir. In reality, Kabir was critical of traditional religions of any kind, be it Islam or Hinduism. During his lifetime, Kabir was disliked by orthodox forces of both Islam and Hinduism. He advocated a direct relationship to God through love and devotion. His ideas cannot be bracketed that easily within one religion or sect. Kabir's influence has also been applauded by many, especially by modern scholars, for encouraging unity among Muslims and Hindus. As noted earlier, many myths and legends have emerged about Kabir's life. A popular one about his death is revealing. It is said that Hindus and Muslims fought for the right over his dead body. Eventually, the body is believed to have turned into flower petals which were equally shared by Hindus and Muslims who laid them to rest according to their respective customs. This myth highlights how Kabir came to be perceived, as a figure who belonged equally to both Islam and Hinduism. Further, as noted earlier, Sikhism has also embraced Kabir with great enthusiasm with their holy book *Adi Granth* comprising more than five hundred sayings of Kabir. These show the truly inclusive and transcendental nature of Kabir's ideas.

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## **13.2 RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL HARMONY IN KABIR**

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Kabir was pained and repelled by the violence that took place in the name of religion which resulted in people killing each other. He saw all human beings as equal with no hierarchies between them based on religion or caste or any other factor. As a matter of fact, Kabir even rejected the idea that human beings are superior to animals. He saw all creations of God as equal. This is because, in his view, all souls were inhabited by the same Supreme Being and therefore, it is

pointless to fight over differences over religious beliefs. Kabir, thus, had a *monotheistic* conception of God. Kabir advocated belief in a formless Supreme Being, a spirit. This conception is referred to as the *nirguna* path as opposed to the *Saguna* path. The former (*nirguna*) philosophy saw God as formless and without attributes. While the latter (*saguna*) philosophy saw God as having form and attributes. Being an advocate of the *nirguna* path, Kabir was opposed to idol worship and ritualistic practices in all religions, be it Islam or Hinduism. However, it has to be noted that some depictions of Kabir do portray him as having elements of the *saguna* tradition *as well* (Omvedt, 2008). This is another testimony to the transcendental nature of Kabir's philosophy and the efforts of diverse groups to appropriate his legacy.

The argument that all creations are endowed with the same supreme spirit was a deeply spiritual one, something which would inspire Mahatma Gandhi later, who also spoke about a cosmic spirit inhabiting all creatures. For Kabir, the individual soul in all human beings, the *Jivatma* and the divine soul, *Paramatma* have to become one for a human being to attain salvation. Though not identical, there are indeed other Indian philosophical traditions like the *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy which express similar spiritual ideas, inspired by the Upanishads. Kabir argued that Hindus and Muslims were the children of the same God, and therefore, blessed with the same supreme divine spirit, the *Paramatma*. They, then, share the same goal for salvation, i.e. becoming one with the divine spirit.

*"Who can be called a Hindu and who a Turk (Muslim) when the same God is the Father of both, and they are brothers embodying the same spirit?" (Kabir, Bijak)*

Kabir believed strongly that even though different people and different religions have their own names for God, ultimately God is one, the eternal supreme spirit that inhabits the soul of all human beings and all creations. People might worship God in diverse ways, but ultimately because God is one, it did not make a difference how one worshipped. This was a *radical* conception of spiritual unity. However, what is interesting to note is that to advocate his ideas of the unity of God and equality of all human beings, Kabir *not* only put forward spiritual arguments, but also practical ones based on *reason* and *common sense*.

*"No Hindu came out of the womb with knowledge of the Vedas, and no Muslim came out of the womb being circumcised. All people are born from the womb of the mother, and after birth they accepted many pretended forms and actions. Then we are both of the same blood, and the same breath sustains us. Then with what kind of knowledge you became different from one another as Hindus and Muslims?" (Kabir, Ramaini).*

The above saying of Kabir is an example of how he used common sense and practical arguments which appealed to people from all strata of the society. Through his spiritual doctrine of cosmic unity, aided further by his practical arguments, Kabir questions the madness of religious partisanship and hostility between people of different religious faiths. To give another example of the same, consider the following words of Kabir -

*"Brother, where did your two gods come from? Tell me, who made you mad? Ram, Allah, Keshav, Karim, Hari, Hazrat – so many names. So*

*many ornaments, all one gold, it has no double nature. For conversation we make two – this namaz, that puja, this Mahadev, that Muhammed, this Brahma, that Adam, This a Hindu, that a Turk, but all belong to earth. Vedas, Korans, all these books, those Mullas and those Brahmins – so many names, so many names, but the pots are all one clay”* (Kabir, Bijak)

In the above example, Kabir uses simple, easily relatable arguments, like giving the analogy of how different ornaments are made from the same gold or the analogy of different pots being made from the same clay, to point out that despite outwardly appearance of differences, God is one, and all human beings are equal. Such sayings, due to their simplicity despite their spiritual depth, endeared Kabir to the common people.

Kabir’s advocacy of human equality extended beyond just religion and also included caste hierarchies which was a prevalent reality in 15<sup>th</sup> century Banaras. It has to be noted that the Muslim weaver family Kabir grew up in belonged to a lower caste, known as *Julaha*. Hence, he must have faced caste oppression and discrimination while growing up in Banaras. Again, Kabir’s critique of caste system is *both* spiritual and rational. The spiritual critique flows from his belief about the supreme spirit and its universal prevalence. The fact that all human beings are endowed with the spirit of the same God, makes everyone spiritually equal for Kabir, regardless of their caste. There can be, thus, no spiritual argument in favour of the caste system. Rationally, Kabir argues that there is no evidence to indicate that people of some castes are superior to others. Everybody has the same flesh and do everything in similar manner. There is no biological difference between an upper caste person and a lower caste person. Kabir then asks, how then can it be that people of some castes can claim to be superior to others?

*“It is all one skin and bone, one piss and shit, One blood, one meat... Who is a brahman, who is a shudra?... Kabir says plunge into Ram, There no Hindu, no Turk”* (Kabir, Bijak)

As a matter of fact, Kabir was very aggressive in his attack on the caste system and its proponents as shown by the following verses -

*“Pandit, look in your heart to know. Tell me how untouchability was born – untouchability is what you made so... We eat by touching, we wash by touching, from a touch the world was born. Says Kabir, only he’s untouched who has no link with Maya”* (Kabir, quoted in Omvedt 2008)

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*“All are born as human beings, this is known by all, Sudras are made by lying rogues: this is Kabir’s call”* (Kabir, quoted in Omvedt 2008)

Kabir was quite consistent in his belief that *not* just human beings, but *all* creations of God are equal because of his conviction that they are all endowed with the same supreme spirit. He is therefore, critical of *slaughtering* of animals, even for religious rituals in the name of God and preached humane treatment of animals. This was a *very radical* idea for that time and to a great extent is a progressive idea even in the present times. Kabir was unequivocal in expressing his belief about the equality of animals and humans.

“Beast meat and man meat are the same, Both have blood that is red...  
For gods and goddesses of clay, You slaughter living beast! If your God  
is real, why can't he go to the field and have his feast!” (Kabir, *Bijak*)

Kabir’s devotion and love towards God extended as a love of all God’s creations. He, thus, preaches compassion and love for all species. It is this fraternity of all creation which lies at the core of Kabir’s philosophy that forms the basis of the religious and social harmony advocated by him. After all, if people realized that they share the same supreme spirit with not just each other but even with animals, how will they think of people from different religions and castes with enmity? Spiritual arguments aside, as noted earlier, Kabir’s impact was also due to the practical and accessible arguments he offered. His couplets and songs with illuminating examples and parables made people think and even question their long held beliefs about critical social issues like religion and caste.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. According to Kabir, how does one attain Salvation?

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2. What is the basis for social and religious harmony in Kabir’s philosophy?

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### 13.3 KABIR’S POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IDEAS

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Kabir’s political and social ideals were encapsulated in his utopian ideas which were proposed by him as a worthy alternative to the society of his time. The term *Begumpura* i.e. a place without sorrow, is often attributed to *Saint Ravidas* who was a contemporary of Kabir (Omvedt, 2008). Ravidas’ idea of *Begumpura*, an utopian village society, has long captured the imagination of people. It is akin to *Plato’s Republic* in imagining an ideal city. Kabir’s thoughts on ideal state of affairs have also greatly contributed to the general conception of *Begumpura* (Roy 2017). Kabir had his own terms for the utopian society as he sang of *Amarpur* i.e. Immortal Place and *Premnagar*, i.e. Land of Love (Kumar, 2019).

Kabir was in fact seen as more aggressive in the tone of his criticism of society and its evils in comparison to Ravidas. Before one discusses the nature and key elements of Kabir's political and social ideas, one has to locate the socio-political milieu which inspired Kabir towards proposing alternate political and social ideals. Kabir's political imagination emerged in the context of 15<sup>th</sup> century Banaras. Hence, a little understanding of the social, economic and cultural forces of that period is needed to fully understand the driving factors behind Kabir's ideas.

Banaras of 15<sup>th</sup> century was a key centre of trade, religion, culture and politics. Kabir, as noted earlier, was himself a weaver in Banaras, likely trading his produce of textiles in the bustling markets of Banaras. This was a period when trade was increasing in Banaras, thereby enabling people from lower sections of the society to have slightly increased social mobility. Increased trade and rise of a strong, new merchant class often leads to questioning and dismantling of old feudal structures and privileges like the caste system. It is thus likely that Kabir's critique of caste system can be partly attributed to him being part of a period in which merchant classes were on the rise, questioning some of the privileges of the dominant old feudal classes. However, it has to be kept in mind that the *big* traders still belonged to the traditional trading castes. Hence, Kabir was also critical of the trading classes and he even compares them to rogues. While 15<sup>th</sup> century Banaras offered social mobility for small traders like him, they continued to be looked down upon by the traditional feudal castes. Much of the economy was still dominated by agriculture or related activities with feudal landlords being very powerful. It was a period when big traders and big landlords (Zamindars) comprised of both Hindus and Muslims and they exploited the poor who also belonged to both the religions (Roy, 2017). This domination was made possible by the presence of a strong administrative state as well as a priestly class which provided a religious justification of the exploitation. The former imposed taxes while the latter constructed a cultural hegemony through religious myths which served the purpose of keeping people in their allotted social positions (Roy, 2017). The exploitation of the poor was the result of a collusion between the urban as well as the rural rich, the administrative state and the priestly classes of all religions. Hence, it is no wonder that Kabir rages against all of these structures in his couplets and songs without any regard for religion, caste or sect. He advocates for a complete reconceptualization of society, wherein such differences disappear and people live together peacefully, without any discrimination.

It is thus clear that Kabir's political and social ideas were based on his experiences and observations of the society of his time. Kabir wishes to remove all societal evils, hierarchies and exploitation from society. In his view, this can only be achieved through 'Bhakti', the devotion and love of people towards God. His ideal society will not have the exploitation of the poor by the rich. This is achieved partly because there will *not* be any *private property* in his conception of ideal society. All resources will be shared. Kabir is also not in favour of having a hierarchical government which ends up oppressing people and reinforcing feudal structures of power. In his view, people should take part in collective decision making without any need for a king or a hierarchical

government. Therefore, there will not be any taxation, nor will there be any need for it because of the nature of his society. Moreover, discriminatory social structures like the caste system will also not exist in his ideal society. Similarly, religious animosity will not be present in Kabir's vision of ideal society (Roy, 2017).

Such an ideal society is only possible through devotion and love of its residents to God, or to be precise, Kabir's idea of God.

*“Kabir calls out, write two things down, worship God and feed the hungry. The world died of reading tomes, no one turned out wise; from the single word of ‘love’ wisdom will arise” (Kabir, quoted in Omvedt 2008)*

Residents of Kabir's ideal society will be followers of the monotheistic, syncretic God of Kabir such that they are not judgmental of different religions. This would, of course, enable them to not discriminate against each other based on caste or religion or class as they would recognise that the same supreme spirit exists within all human beings. They would also show respect for all God's creations and will not be motivated by greed or money or jealousy. Kabir's quest for an ideal society is a genuine expression of his devotion to God based on a firm belief that bhakti can make people transcend social evils and live in harmony with each other. He truly believed that people can tear down the old social order and create a new one through bhakti as expressed in his call in the following verse –

*“Kabir stands in the market, flaming torch in hand. Burn down your home, then come and walk with me” (Kabir, quoted in Santhanam 2018).*

Kabir was a revolutionary whose quest for harmony involved rejection of old social norms.

### **13.3.1 Kabir's Thoughts on Women**

Despite his progressive views on many social issues, Kabir's views on women have been criticized as being *regressive* and influenced by *prevalent prejudices* of his time. He has been criticized for idolizing the patriarchal construct of a faithful wife (Roy, 2017). As a matter of fact, it has been pointed out by many that Kabir even looks favourably at the practice of Sati, whereby widowed women were expected to die on the funeral pyre of their husbands (Upadhyay, 2018). Kabir portrays this regressive practice at times as an example of pure love (Upadhyay, 2018). Moreover, in some places, Kabir indicates strongly that women could distract men from true devotion and he warns men about the temptation of women. The following verses are examples of such a depiction by Kabir –

*“Kabir says many have been ruined due to the love for women. Many more will go to the hell laughing all the way through” & “A snake has two hoods, a woman has twenty hoods If she stings one, there is no chance to survive” (Kabir, quoted in Upadhyay 2018)*

Such biased views about women which portrayed them as temptresses and poisonous were common during his period and they find expression in Kabir's

sayings as well. Kabir's *lack of support for gender equality is somewhat surprising* because if the same supreme spirit was present in all creations of God as Kabir believed, then there should have been no reason for Kabir to think of women as any different from men. The same arguments he had put forward against discrimination based on religion and caste should have been logically extended by him to advocate gender equality as well which was unfortunately *not* the case. Even though Kabir talks in praising terms about women as mothers and ideal wives in some places, those favourable descriptions were in line with the prevalent patriarchal notions of that period. As a matter of fact, as noted earlier, some of those glorious depictions did more harm than good as they reinforced problematic social practices like Sati. Kabir's regressive views on women are an *exception* in his otherwise progressive outlook on society.

### **Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. According to Kabir, what is the key for people to be able to build an ideal society?

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2. Briefly describe Kabir's thought on women.

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### **13.4 LET US SUM UP**

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Kabir's ideas were revolutionary for not only his time, but many of them continue to be progressive even in our period. Kabir's poems and songs captured the frustrations of the marginalized sections of society. His belief in a single supreme spirit that permeated through all creations enabled him to conceive a radical conception of equality and advocate for societal unity. He dismissed outwardly differences between religions as immaterial and questioned the ritualistic nature of different faiths. His views greatly influenced calls of unity between Hindus and Muslims even though during his lifetime, he was disliked by the orthodox forces in both Hinduism and Islam.

Further, Kabir firmly opposed caste discrimination in all forms including untouchability and vehemently questioned the supporters of caste system. His sense of compassion extended even to animals as he saw them as having the same supreme spirit. Thereby, he criticized animal sacrifices and argued for humane treatment of them. Kabir lived in 15<sup>th</sup> century Banaras and its socio-political context greatly influenced his ideas. He wished for a society free of the exploitation of an oppressive state that was controlled by rich landlords and greedy traders. He was also critical of the priestly class of all religions who in his view provided religious justification for the exploitation of the poor by the state and the rich. In his ideal society, people would have a direct relationship with God through 'Bhakti' and this did not depend on any ritual or sacrifice. The monotheistic and syncretic God advocated by Kabir provides the foundation for fostering the kind of social unity Kabir desired. However, as noted earlier, Kabir's views on women and gender equality leave much to be desired to say the least.

Kabir has left behind a rich and enduring legacy. As noted earlier, Kabir conveyed his ideas to the common people through not only spiritual arguments, but also through practical and relatable couplets, parables and songs. This endeared him to the people not only during his lifetime but even till today. The fact that different religious traditions, including Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism have co-opted Kabir is a testimony to his universal appeal and unifying effect. Kabir ultimately was a humanist whose ideas on social reform and ideal society still reverberates strongly.

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## 13.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1. Your answer should highlight following points
  - Each person has a personal soul which is called as Jivatma
  - There is one supreme spirit which permeates everything, which is called as Paramatma
  - Salvation is when a person's Jivatma becomes one with the supreme spirit, Paramatma
2. Your answer should highlight following points
  - Kabir believes that one supreme spirit permeates all of creation
  - This means that people of all castes, religions and sects are all endowed with the same supreme spirit
  - This is the basis for social and religious harmony in Kabir's philosophy.

## Check Your Progress Exercise 2

**Kabir: Religious  
Boundaries and  
The Quest for  
Social Harmony**

1. Your answer should highlight following points

- In Kabir's view, Bhakti is the key for building an ideal society
- Bhakti is love and devotion towards God.
- It is that love and devotion which extends towards all creations of God.

2. Your answer should highlight following points

- Kabir idolizes prevalent patriarchal notions of women like ideal wife or mother, even to the extent of glorifying regressive practices like Sati.
- Kabir also portrays women as temptresses who could distract people in their devotion to God.
- Kabir's views on women are regressive.



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