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How Does Kabir Still Speak To Us?

By: Vipul Rikhi

The tendency of the human mind, whether fighting for personal territory or fighting for justice, is to create an enemy: self vs the other, us vs them. good vs evil. In our times, which seem more divided than ever, Kabir invites us to look beyond easy binaries.

*Kabira khada bazaar mein, liye lukaathi haath
Jo ghar jaare aapna, chalo hamaare saath*

*Kabir stands in the marketplace
Flaming torch in hand
Whoever can burn their house down
Come, walk with me!*

Kabir is a historically hazy figure who lived in the 15th century by the Ganga in Varanasi. Little is known of his life with absolute certainty. On the other hand, there is a plethora of legends that have sprung around him. What we do know through his own words is that he was a ‘low-caste’ weaver who did not read or write. Yet his words, through his poetry and songs, have survived and flourished for over five centuries, because the people of this country have never stopped repeating them or singing them. He was probably born in a Muslim household, and probably had a wife and children, though both of these probabilities are disputed by people of various persuasions.

But Kabir is more than just a historical figure. . He represents a stream of thought and feeling that the ordinary folk of India have moulded according to their own needs. He represents a voice that people need to hear, that people need to speak in, that people need to sing in! That is already quite a remarkable feat: to become a voice that continues to sing, to breathe fire and to bring solace, all at the same time, hundreds of years after your lifetime. The other wonder is that Kabir continues to speak to us with the same passion and relevance that he did in his own time. (These are themes I explore in my book, *Drunk on Love: The Life, Vision and Songs of Kabir*, HarperCollins India.)

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Kabir stood in the marketplace. He remains in the marketplace. He doesn't talk to us from the aloof comfort of a mountain-top or a forest retreat. He is very much here now. But he also sees more than what we see in our usual battle-ready modes. He invites us to leave our entrenched positions, the emotional, intellectual and psychological houses we feel safe in. He invites us to touch a higher truth.

In our own times, we may seem to feel that we are burdened with historically unprecedented challenges, that violence, conflict and oppression roam abroad unfettered, and that things are at an extremity, where everything must very soon fall apart. But over a hundred years ago, WB Yeats wrote in his famous poem “The Second Coming”:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

We have been here before. Indeed, perhaps we are where we always were. This is despair for those who would believe in a linear model of progress or a liberal evolution of humanity or at least of social structures. But if history teaches us anything, it is that there are no simple answers to anything, least of all knotty moral and social issues.

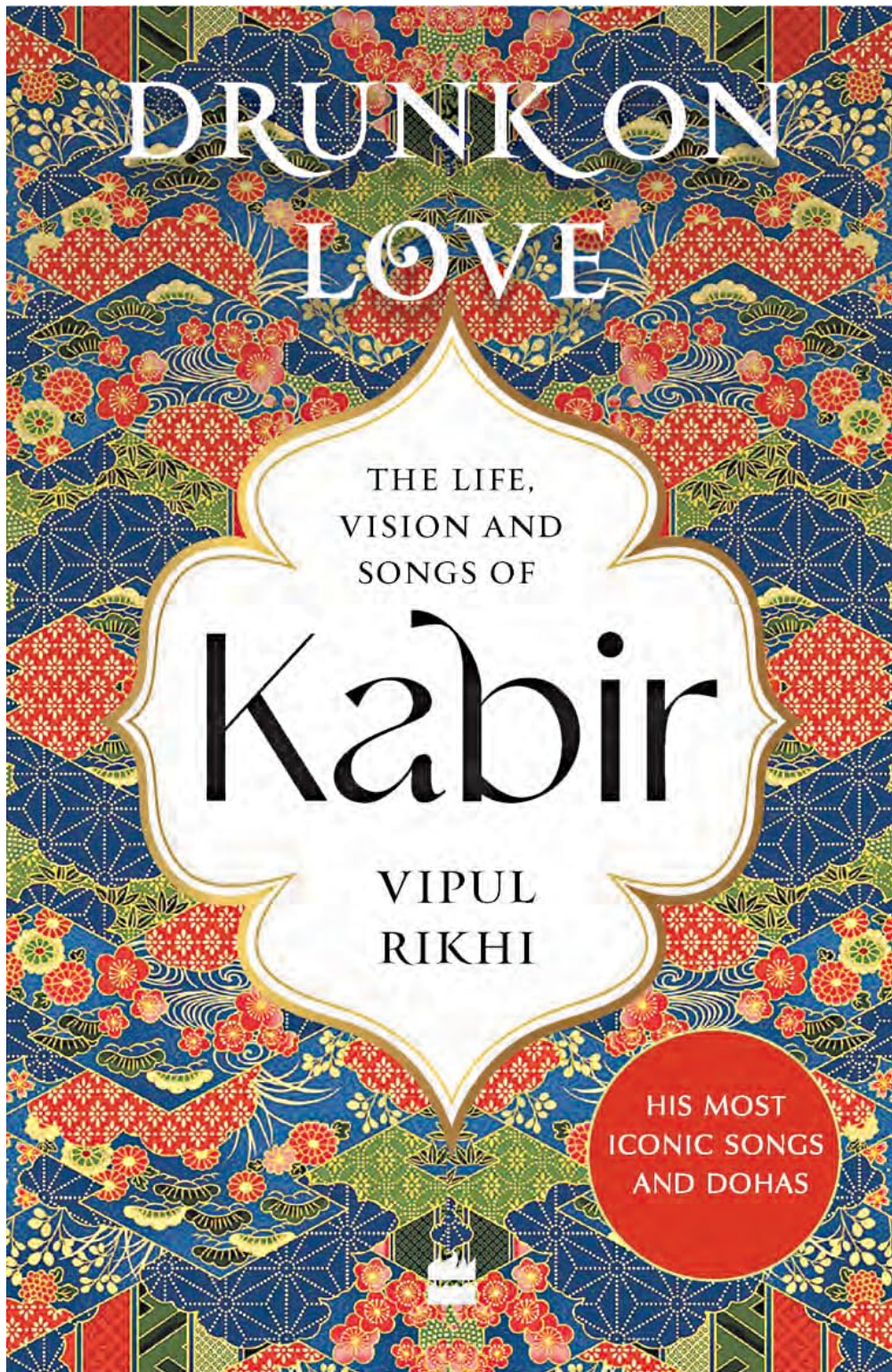
Take the example of religious division and conflict. Of the trite tropes that have sprung up around Kabir, especially in activist circles, one of the tritest is that he was an advocate of ‘Hindu-Muslim unity’, or that he could be ‘used’ to advocate for Hindu-Muslim unity. Kabir couldn’t care less about ‘Hindu-Muslim unity’ in the sense that we mean it. He says that we are already all one. Not just Hindus and Muslims. Not at some point in the future. It is what is already true, whether we see it or not. It applies to everyone, regardless of how we continue to divide ourselves across lines of religion, caste, nation or race. It is not something theoretical, or some hoped-for future social end, it is the truth that he is already witnessing, experiencing and singing about. This truth is what makes his words so powerful, so resonant, so meaningful, over 500 years after his death.

***Sab aaya ek hi ghaat se, aur utra ek hi baat
Beech mein taati bharam ki, to ho gaye baarah baat***

*We all came from one place
And landed on the same path
A wall of ignorance within
Split us into a dozen paths*

***Raam Rahima ek hai, aur Kaaba Kashi ek
Maida ek pakvaan bahu, baith Kabira dekh***

*Raam and Rahim are one
Mecca and Varanasi are the same
One grain, many dishes
Kabir watches in wonder*



*Kaaba phir Kashi bhaya, aur Raam hi bhaya Rahim
Mot choon maida bhaya, aur baith Kabira jeem*

*Mecca is Varanasi again
And Raam has become Rahim
The coarse grain has been ground fine
Kabir eats with relish*

As we see, Kabir does speak about unity. But the oneness that Kabir is signalling is beyond the limits of orthodox religion or any other such human division. And till this reality is grasped as a living experience (Kabir ‘watches’ it himself, he even ‘eats’ it, he doesn’t rely on scripture or authority or theory or ideology), all attempts at manufacturing any kind of superficial social harmony are bound to fail. You need to have an actual taste of this dish. This fine, *jheena* (subtle) flavour, tasted for oneself, is what brings about a real sense of harmony, inside and without. Diversity, for instance, cannot be mandated or achieved by force. Acceptance and appreciation of diversity of all kinds has to be built on the edifice of oneness.

Kabir kuaan ek hai, panihaari hain anek

Bartan sabke nyaare hain, par paani sab mein ek

Kabir says, the well is one

Water-bearers many

Each one has a different vessel

But they all contain the same water

Why is this so important? The tendency of the human mind, whether fighting for personal territory or fighting for justice or a ‘better world’, is to create an enemy. Self and other, us and them. Good and evil, devils versus angels. When we create enemies, especially really ‘evil’ ones, we lose our grounding in reality. This may seem counter-intuitive. The usual objection will be, ‘But there are really evil people in the world, that is the actual reality’. No doubt there is evil embodied in some people, and goodness embodied in some others. But who is to judge? Each side thinks the other side is more evil than itself. Each side tends to think that it is fighting for the truth or for progress or for justice. In our times which seem more divided than ever, Kabir invites us to look beyond such easy binaries.

Our actions, whether in service to other human beings or in the service of an ideal, become stronger when we are grounded in what Kabir calls the reality of oneness. That includes getting over the notion of one’s own superior goodness in comparison with other people’s evil.

This is not an advocating for moral relativism, or a *laissez-faire* attitude. Indeed, one must speak and act according to the strength of one’s convictions. But is it possible to be, to speak and to act without fostering in our own hearts the hatred that we decry in others? Our actions, whether in service to other human beings or in the service of an ideal, become stronger when we are grounded in what Kabir calls the reality of oneness. That includes getting over the notion of one’s own superior goodness in comparison with other people’s evil. This is a really hard notion for the human mind and heart to accept. The sense of one’s own importance, whether the self is conceptualised as a beacon of virtue and goodness or as an embodiment of naked power, is overwhelming for the human mind. I define myself in opposition to certain others. Kabir, on the other hand, asks us to get out of the way – and then act.

Jab lag meri, meri kare, tab lag kaaj ekai na sare

Jab meri, meri mati jaaye, tab Hari kaaj savaare aaye

As long as we chant, I, I, I

All our acts are haphazard and awry

When we destroy the obsession with I

Hari himself makes our acts worthwhile

The obsession with I and mine is not exclusively the domain of power-hungry or ruthless people. It is a feature of the entire human race, not excluding those who would do good. This deeply affects our attitudes and thus our actions. To go beyond this divisive tendency in oneself means being humble, listening, seeing without the ego’s agitations (fear or desire), and then acting from a place of a higher knowledge and understanding. It means knowing when to act, how to act, and when to hold back, and how to hold back. It joins the power of truth to one’s actions. We stop considering our actions as superior to other people’s actions. We also stop fretting about achieving particular results. This is what it means to let go of the ‘fruits of action’. We stop losing patience, getting frustrated and burning out. We stop expecting the world to change or become perfect tomorrow, or even day after. But we continue to speak or act, as Kabir did, without fear, because that is the only thing we can do. And we find that it’s a way of being that brings strength instead of draining us.

*Kabir teri jhonpdi galkatiyan ke paas
Karega so bharega, tu kyun bhayo udaas?*

*Kabir, your hut is next to
Cut-throats and butchers
As they sow, so shall they reap
Why fret or weep?*

A feature of how Kabir is fragmented and appropriated by different groups is his being marshalled for strikingly different purposes. Social activists tend to view Kabir as a radical revolutionary, striking at the very heart of caste and religious prejudices, speaking truth to power fearlessly. Kabir's 'followers' on the other hand—Kabir didn't want any followers, he only asked for fellow seekers to walk with him—tend to elevate him to the status of saint or even God, someone not at all of this world. Other, earlier commentators tried to paint Kabir as a Vaishnavite devotee in the orthodox lineage of Ramanand. In this view, Kabir is a proponent of traditional Vaishnava bhakti (invoked in the figures of Raam and Krishna).

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None of these conceptions do justice to the power and scope of the figure of Kabir. He is at once a social revolutionary and a spiritual seeker. He is at the same time intellectually rigorous, supremely critical of social hierarchies and deeply reverential of the divine, which he calls by many names, not just the Vaishnava ones. Kabir beckons us into the complexity of real life. Division of black and white, left and right, fail to hold here.

*Haan kahun to hai nahin, na bhi kahyo nahin jaaye
Haan aur na ke beech mein, mera satguru raha samaaye*

*If I say 'yes', it isn't so
But I also cannot say 'no'
My true guru is to be found
In the space between 'yes' and 'no'*

'This world' is not divorced from 'the divine', contemplation and action are not diametrical opposites. A sense of the sacred pervades Kabir's poetry. At the same time, Kabir is also socially engaged and critical. But he makes his scathing social critiques on the basis of his anchoring in the sacred, in a higher dimension, something beyond the merely human. Kabir is not a 'humanistic' poet in this sense. His solutions are not the solutions of a virtuous and well-meaning ideology. Kabir is a poet of the sacred. Another name that he calls this by is love. The sense of the sacred, or love, is what gives him courage to speak the bald truth, even if it means a threat to his personal well-being, as it must have done in his time. The sacred is his sustenance – and can be ours.

*Tum kas baaman, ham kas sooda, ham kas lahu ho, tum kas doodha?
Tu kas baaman bamani jaaya, to aan dwaar se kaahe nahin aaya?*

*Ek haad, maas, mal, moota, ek rudir ek gooda
Ek boond se srishti rachyo hai, ko baaman ko sooda?*

*How are you a Brahmin, I a Shudra?
I have blood in my veins, and do you have milk?
If you're born of a high, noble woman
Why didn't you enter the world from another gate?*

*The same bones, flesh, shit, piss
The same heart and liver
The same drop created the whole universe
Who is a Brahmin, who a Shudra?*

This drop of oneness that has created the whole universe is the ground on which Kabir stands, claiming to have known it himself, within himself, by experience. It is something more real than divisions of caste or religion. That is why he can critique them fearlessly. This other reality is the fabric of existence itself. It has resolved the confusions and frustrations of fragmented aims and actions.

***Jaati julaaha kya kare, hriday base Gopal
Kabir Raamaiya kanth milu, chookahi sab janjaal***

*What have I to do with 'low' or 'high' caste
Gopal lives within my heart
Kabir has embraced his Raam
He's out of all this mess*

How is any of this relevant in our current moment, in this time and place where we find ourselves? I would argue that Kabir gives us the wings on which we can begin to glide towards a kind of liberation, the one he claims to have experienced in his own body. It involves burning down one's house, of whatever hue we have made it, whichever preferred idea, ideal or ideology. Kabir speaks of love as the ultimate reality of life, of the universe (not an ideal, but reality). He invites us to partake of this drink of love. At the same time, he does not disdain to look around him and to engage with his fellow human being, to bring solace to the other, whether it is through action, speech, song or service. The two are of one fabric.

***Kabira ishq ka maata, dui ko door kar dil se
Jo chalna raah naazuk hai, haman sir bojh bhaari kya?***

*Kabir got drunk on love
By removing all duality from his heart
Such a delicate path to tread
Why lug this heavy load on your head?*

Love is not some silly sentimental thing which must be kept out of all 'serious' conversation. Love is our being. Love brings enormous power to our actions. At the same time, it keeps us light and free of all our heavy expectations, whether of ourselves, of others or of the world. It inspires joy and hope and a search for personal and collective freedom, which are immensely necessary in every situation. When our actions spring from this source, everything changes, including and most importantly, the person who acts.

|| Kabir invites us to walk out into a field which lies 'beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing' (in the words of a modern rendering of Rumi), a place beyond neat binaries, and taste the drink of love...

A hugely inspiring recent figure from our times, who urged us to hate the crime but not the criminal, who spoke often of the power of love and with a conviction rooted in something higher, is quoted to have said: "Our greatest ability as humans is not to change the world, but to change ourselves." These words of Gandhi align beautifully with the words of another sage of our times, J Krishnamurti, who said very often: "You are the world."

There is no hard distinction between the world and me. All the violence, anger, greed, envy and lust for power that I see and deplore outside, is also very much in me. Am I going to turn a blind eye to them and only keep fighting the evil other, or am I also going to turn my gaze upon myself at some point? The Punjabi Sufi poet Bulle Shah says:

***Ivein ladada ai roz shaitaan naal Bulleya
Kadi nafs apne naal ladya nai***

*You valiantly fight the devil each day, O Bulleya
But you never bothered to fight your own ego*

Kabir invites us to walk out into a field which lies 'beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing' (in the words of a modern rendering of Rumi), a place beyond neat binaries, and taste the drink of love, which makes our actions and being in the world more meaningful.

***Jab main tha tab Hari nahin, ab Hari hai main naahin
Prem gali ati saankri, ya mein dou samaaye naahin***

When I was, Hari wasn't

Now Hari is, I am not

The path of love is extremely narrow

Two cannot fit in it

Vipul Rikhi is a writer, singer, poet, storyteller and translator immersed in the oral traditions of Kabir and other mystic poets for over a decade. He has authored several books, including a novel, a collection of poems, and a book of translations from the Bhakti, Sufi and Baul traditions.