

GURMAT STUDY

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BHAGAT KABIR JI (1398 -1518)

Bhagat Kabir Ji was a revolutionary Saint-poet. Bhagat Ji placed emphasis on the equality and fraternity of all mankind. Bhagat Kabir ji is widely acknowledged as one of the great personalities of the Bhakti movement in North India. He was, as is widely acknowledged, born in year 1398 CE (71 years before Guru Nanak Sahib).

Bhagat Kabir Ji is one of the medieval Indian saints of Bhakti movement whose compositions figure in Guru Granth Sahib. Among all the Bhagats, Kabir ji's contribution is the largest, 227 Padas in 17 ragas and 237 slokas. Under each raga or musical mode marking a section of the Spiritual scripture, Kabir ji's hymns appear at the head of Bhagat Bani, a generic name for the works of contributors other than the Guru Sahib's. The presence of a substantial number of Kabir ji's verses in the Sikh Scripture and chronologically, he being the predecessor of Guru Nanak Sahib, founder of the Sikh faith, misled some Western scholars to describe him as the forerunner of Sikhism. Some have even called him the preceptor of Guru Nanak Sahib. There is, however, ample evidence to prove that Guru Nanak Sahib and Bhagat Kabir ji had never met. In fact their life-periods do not coincide. Kabir Ji's compositions do figure in what are known as Goindval Pothis, anthologies of the hymns of the Guru Sahib's along with those of some of the Bhagats prepared in the time of Guru Amar Das Sahib - Third Nanak. They were included in Guru Granth Sahib as well, but this happened much later when Guru Arjan Sahib – Fifth Nanak in spiritual line from the founder, compiled the spiritual scripture. Besides his own works and those of his four predecessors, he entered in it hymns of some saints and mystics, Hindu and Muslim, Bhagat Kabir ji being one of them.

Bhagat Kabir ji lived in the fifteenth century, which was a time of great political upheaval in India. As is true of many contemporary religious teachers, very little reliable information concerning Kabir Ji's life is available, though there is no dearth of legend around him. Kabir Ji's life centred around Kashi, also called Banaras (Varanasi). Legend has it that he was actually the son of a Brahmin widow who abandoned him fearing social censure, and that he was found by a Muslim weaver named Niru (Ali) and his wife, Nima, who adopted the boy and taught him the weaver's trade. His caste was that of 'Julaha' and from his sayings his caste's hereditary occupation was of weaving. Weavers, in the caste system, were put amongst the lower castes.

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Bhakti movement mainly involved lower-caste Hindu saints while Sufi mysticism involved Muslim saints in medieval India (1200-1700). Kabir ji immensely contributed to the Bhakti Movement and is considered a pioneer of Bhakti along with other Bhagats like Bhagat Ravdas Ji (1376 – 1427), Bhagat (Shekh) Farid Ji (1173 – 1265) and Bhagat Namdev Ji (1270 – 1350). History indicates that Bhagat Ramanand Ji (1366 – 1446) was his preceptor in the initial days.

In the fifteenth century, Banaras was the seat of Brahmin orthodoxy and their learning center. Brahmins had stronghold on all the spheres of life in the society. Thus, Kabir ji, belonging to a low caste of Julaha had to go through great difficulties in practicing his ideology. Kabir ji and his followers would gather at one place in the city and meditate. Brahmins ridiculed him for preaching to prostitutes and other low castes. Kabir ji dryly denounced Brahmins and thus won hearts of people around him. There is no doubt that the most famous person from the city of Banaras in history today is none other than Bhagat Kabir Ji. Kabir ji, through his couplets not only reformed the mindset of common villagers and low caste people, but gave them self confidence to question Brahmins. Kabir ji was in fact among the first person to go against Brahmins and did so successfully. Kabir ji also denounced Mullahs and their rituals of bowing towards Kaba five times a day. Because of open condemnation of established and popular religions, Kabir ji became an object of the wrath of both Hindus and Muslims in and around Banaras.

Bhagat Kabir ji believed in total self-surrender and God's bhakti (meditation). The Kabir panthis (followers of Bhagat Kabir ji) follow a unique style of singing the praises of God, and lead a simple and pure life of devotion. Kabir ji recommends a ceaseless singing of God's praises. He preaches against withdrawal from the world. He was against all ritualistic and ascetic methods as means to salvation. It is true that Kabir ji refers to some yogic terms in describing the meditational and mystic methods of the yogis, but there is no ground to suggest that he himself recommends the yogic path. In fact, far from recommending yoga, Kabir Ji is quite strong in condemning ascetic or yogic methods, and says that yogis, in their meditations, fall prey to maya or materialism.

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The moral tone is quite strong in Kabir ji's hymns. "Kabir, deck thyself with garments of love. Love them and give honour to those whose body and soul speak the truth." "The ruby of goodness is greater than all the mines of rubies; all the wealth of three worlds resides in the goodness of heart. When the wealth of contentment is won, all other wealth is as dust." "Where there is mercy, there is strength, where there is forgiveness, there is He."

Kabir ji suggests inward worship and remembrance of God. For him, true worship is inwards. Put on the rosary inward. By counting beads, the world will be full of light. Bhagat Ji clearly suggests moral discrimination between good and bad deeds. What can the helpless road do, when the traveller does not walk understandingly. "What can one do, if, with lamp in hand, one falls in the well. Or goes astray with open eyes. Discern ye now between good and evil."

It is not surprising that Kabir ji's satire was brought to bear not simply on the vices and weaknesses of men but reached through and beyond them to the very system itself. It was the authority of Vedas and Quran that more than the authority of Brahmin or Qazi which Kabir Ji attacked. Kabir Ji rebelled against the pretension of resolving by the means of books or by way of authority, the mystery of human conditions and the problem of liberation (Moksha). Bhagat Kabir Ji spent his last days living in a place Named Maghar, Town Basti (15 Miles towards West from Gorakhpur), where it was believed that if you die, you would be born as a donkey in next life, just to prove the falsehood of the myth.

Bhagat Kabir ji composed no systematic treatise, rather his work consists of many short didactic poems, often expressed in a vigorous language in the form of Padas, Dohas, Slokas, etc. In addition to his work recorded in 1604 CE in Guru Granth Sahib by Guru Arjan Sahib - Fifth Nanak, and preserved inviolate since, two other collections exist - Kabir Granthavali, and Bijak. The authenticity of much of the writings outside Guru Granth Sahib is suspect because of many statements, which apparently contradict beliefs associated with Bhagat Kabir Ji. In his poems, Kabir Ji was quick to express the illustrations of moral and spiritual truth in the incidents of everyday life, and many of his similes and metaphors are very striking.

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