

# EXPLORING SOCIO-CULTURAL REFORMATION: THE POETRY OF SANT KABIR AND SANT TUKARAM AND ITS RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

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## Abstract

*Bhakti tradition poets Sant Kabir and Sant Tukaram are from two different times and two different regions of India yet with resembling poetic output. Indian society at the times of Kabir and later during the lifetime of Tukaram was grappling with superstition, hypocrisy, irrational conventions and tradition, caste discrimination, untouchability, religious fanaticism, and other social, political, and economic injustices. Kabir and Tukaram have condemned discrimination based on Varna, untouchability, animal sacrifice and meaningless rites and rituals. It needed a great courage to condemn the evil norms of the society and to propagate noble and revolutionary ideas with the intention of reforming the society. Both were persecuted by conservative society for their radical thinking. Their poetry was not to entertain the people but to change their hearts and make them walk on the true path of Bhakti. Asserting oneness of all human beings they taught that irrespective of caste, gender, religion, one can achieve salvation through true devotion. This paper explores how these two great saint poets were instrumental in the socio-cultural reformation by their powerful and everlasting poetry. As true saints, both have tried to create awareness among the masses against ignorance, disparity, hypocrisy, and irrationality and helped in uniting the social fabric of the nation.*

**Keywords:** Reformation, Bhakti Tradition, Social Harmony, Unity, Oneness, Devotion, Kabir, Tukaram

## INTRODUCTION

In Ramaini-15 Kabir explains how the medieval India was plunged into darkness due to widespread ignorance among the people. There were too many religious scriptures and the leaders of religion, and gurus who have themselves lost the track and unable to guide the people. (Prem Prakash 16). The social condition at the time was chaotic due to many disparities among the people. Both Hindus and Muslims were daggers drawn against each other and followed their respective religious and social norms strictly. They felt insecure and apprehensive of each other. Hindus were afraid of being uprooted and Muslims were anxious to establish themselves. The real purpose of religion was lost, and rituals took the precedence in both the religions. (Mahajan 11). Greed, hypocrisy, superstition, vanity etc. was widespread in the society and Hindus and Muslims constantly fought over petty issues. Kabir exposed the shallowness of both the religions without sparing anyone, therefore, he was not liked by any of the vested interests from both the religions. (Pandey 36).

Hindus were divided in the unjust Varna system and the Varna's at the lower level of the ladder were controlled and exploited by the Varna's at the higher position. This discrimination had caused great harm to the society. It is believed that whenever ignorance, misconduct, violence, atrocity, injustice is spread in the world, the God sends angels on the earth to eradicate it. As if to make this belief true, in the utter darkness of medieval times Kabir was born in Kashi. Sushila Mahajan opines that Kabir was a chosen seed of God sown at the right time (Mahajan Sushila 1).

However, it needed tremendous courage and efforts to challenge the established norms as they were guarded by the leaders of the religion and sects. They had strong notions about life and death, God and Worship, Paap and Punya etc. Kabir was not the only and the first Saint to challenge this system. Several Saints from Bhakti Movement showed the true path of Bhakti to the people. The movement tried to remove the people from dark deep dungeons of ignorance. Starting in south India, Bhakti movement had spread across all over India in medieval times. Sant Ramanand was the first saint who started mass movement against the wrong doctrines, dogmas, and social practices. Kabir followed the bhakti poets to further this movement. He was not an anti-traditional but a progressive thinker who dared to question the unjust and inhuman practices. (Pandey, A P, 37). He preached true Bhakti spreading love, equality, tolerance, harmony and universal brotherhood.

It is worth to note here that though most of the Kabir scholars assert that Kabir tried to unite Hindus and Muslims, Purushottam Agarwal in his article "But for Kabir in this Kaliyuga..." argues that as Kabir rejected organized religion, he is unsuitable to be an icon of Hindu-Muslim unity. Kabir criticized almost everything traditional in both the religions and his philosophy was beyond the boundaries of caste or religious practices. Kabir did not want to establish any new religion but merely trying to establish a relationship of love and equality with all

human beings from all sects and creeds. (41-45) Nevertheless, Kabir's poetry was instrumental in reflection of the soul that shook the slumbering humanity. His scathing attack on the wrongs and appeal for peace, harmony and love for all living beings has significant impact on his times as well as generations to come.

In the seventeenth century Maharashtra, Tukaram revolted in the same vein against the anarchic and unjust social system. Though there was a gap of around hundred years in the lifetimes of Kabir and Tukaram, the social conditions were not so different. The same evil practices in the society were rampant during Tukaram's time too. Tukaram's poetry teaches social harmony, communal harmony, devotion to God, oneness, shunning of all vices, fellow feeling, etc. Dilip Chitre in the introduction to Says Tuka observes that Tukaram had universal humanistic concern which is evident in his astute critique of deteriorating condition of Brahminical Hinduism and his stringent remarks on bigotry, extravagance, exploitation in the name of religion (xvi). Belonging to Bhakti tradition, both Kabir's and Tukaram's poetry is spiritual as well as progressive. They were the social reformers who rejected and condemned unjust and evil practices and tried to weed out the evils from the society. They were distressed to see the plight of people who were wallowing in the mud of ignorance as sung by Kabir in the following lines,

"Sukhiya sab sansar hai khave aur sove  
Dukhiya das Kabir hai jage aur rove"

The enlightened Kabir is distressed to see the people indulged in pleasures without realizing that they are wasting away their invaluable life in worldly pleasure. (Shukl 117)

Similarly, Tukaram was also concerned about the degradation of the life of the people as said in the following lines,

"Budati he jan dekhavena dola  
Yeto kalavala mhanoniya" (Tukaram Gatha 23).

The people were indulging in worldly pleasures and therefore they were sinking in the darkness. Concerned about them, Tukaram starts enlightening them teaching true devotion. As a saint poet, Tukaram wanted to show the right path to the people and not merely entertain them therefore he declares,

"Hitavari yave  
Koni bolile ya bhave  
Nave vindo uttar  
Keli ranjavaya char" (STA Gatha 386)

Kabir and Tukaram both being rational poets condemned wrong and unjust practices vehemently and criticised religious fanaticism. The ostentatious display of devotion was disapproved by both the saints. According to Kabir both Hindus and Muslims were wrong in their interpretation of religion and lived in spiritual darkness giving more importance to the irrelevant rituals instead of walking on the path of truth. For Kabir, God is omnipresent who is not simply present in a mosque or temple or in any other specific place. He believed in oneness of God and criticized the pretentious religious scholars who divided God into many forms and names. In one of his poems, Kabir says that Jogis, Hindus and Muslims thought themselves as different people from each other. All of them fought with each over religious supremacy.

"Hindu kahe mohe ram pyara, turk kahe rahmana,  
Aapas me doye ladi-ladi moye, maram na kahu jana" (Prem Prakash 71)

The aforementioned lines imply that a Hindu says that he loves Ram, a Muslim says he loves Rahman. Both fight against each other without knowing the truth. Kabir was disheartened to see the division in the society in the name of God and he tried to bring all the people together by emphasizing oneness of God.

Like the times of Kabir, the seventeenth century Maharashtra was facing the challenges of communal disharmony and social discrimination. Tukaram propagating oneness of the God says,

"Harihara bhed nahi  
Karu naye vaad" (Tukaram Gatha 150)

The lines mean that all the gods are one as Hari (Vishnu) and Hara (Shiva) are not different forms of God but manifestation of one supreme God. God does not discriminate with his own children hence no one should do it. Many cultures and cults all over the world believe in animal sacrifice to please, thank or to ask for something to the gods. Muslims practised rites and rituals like sacrificing a goat, killing a cow, practising azzan, offering namaaz, practicing circumcision etc. Kabir was very critical of animal sacrifice as he thought that the God created all the creatures. He says that God does need sacrifices of his own children (goats, cows) to please him.

"Din ko rahat hai roja, rati hanat hai gay  
Yah khun vah bandagi, kyonkar khushi khuday" (Prem Prakash 42)

As per the translation of the above lines by Prem Prakash God cannot be pleased by contradictory practices like killing living beings on one hand and on the other offering namaz to God.

Kabir was also critical of circumcision practised by Muslims as he says that man cannot become a Turk by circumcision and adds that men would have been born circumcised if God wanted them to be so. He further poses a logical question by asking whether women remain Hindus as they cannot be circumcised. (Westcott 57)

Another significant challenge India has faced for thousands of years is discrimination in the society on the basis of Varna. The Varna system divided the society into social hierarchy where the Varnas higher pedestal enslaved and exploited the people from the lower strata. To impose and perpetuate the system, sham religious leaders took the help of scriptures which were considered sacrosanct. According to them only Brahmin men who were dwaij (twice-born) have the right to read these scriptures and attain the salvation. Shudras who were at the lowest position in the Varna system had no authority to study and gain knowledge. Kabir vehemently criticizes the priests' belief in liberation of soul by repeating Gayatri mantra. It was declared that only dwaijas can attain salvation and the shudras cannot do it. Not even females living in the houses of dwaijas had this right. Kabir firmly says that nobody can attain salvation only by repeating Gayatri manta (Prem Prakash 32). Untouchability, the offshoot of the Varna system is advocated in the Purush Sukta of the Rig Veda. Causing a colossal disparity in the society it has soiled and ruined the whole existence of the downtrodden.

As Dr Ambedkar says, "...it is the mother of all our poverty and lowliness and it has brought us to the abject state we are in today." (267)

Kabir criticised this inhuman system in his poems at the time when nobody could dare against the stringent dictates in the society. In Shabd number 41 Kabir says that the world is born with touch. So no one is untouched, and he asserts that only he who has no taint of Maya is untouched (Prem Prakash 104-105). Likewise Tukaram disapproved of the Varna system and the resultant inequality it created. Tukaram opines that the Varna system is a state of perplexity.

He says,

"Tuka mhane varnadharma

Avaghe aahe sambrahma" (STA Gatha 221)

In Abhang no. 407 in Tukaram Gatha Tukaram describes how Saints from different castes ranging from low to high have achieved salvation through bhakti. He questions Varna system saying that nobody has been sanctified by birth.

"Varnabhimane kon jaale pawan" (Tukaram Gatha 150)

Saint Kabir and Tukaram's poetry has striking similarity in thoughts and compositions. There is a stark similarity in thinking and composing in Tukaram and Kabir at many places. While talking about the merit of a person both emphasize that social position cannot be decided by their birth but rather by the person's virtues and deeds.

Kabir says in a Ramaini of Bijak,

"Unche kul kya janmiya

Karani unch na hoi

Sovan kalash surai bharya

Sadhu nindya soi"

It means that the superiority of a person cannot be determined by being born into a higher caste. The saints will not appreciate even a golden pitcher if it is filled with intoxicant.

Tukaram reiterates the same thought here,

"Tuka mhane patra chad

Kinva vish amrit god" (STA Gatha 448)

Tukaram says here that the pot is not important here but what is kept in it that is important. The value of pot will be decided upon whether it is filled with poison or nectar. Kabir questions pundit's beliefs in untouchability. He chides them in these lines,

"Kahe ko kije Pandey chhut vichar

Chhut hi to upja sab sansar"

Tukaram condemns untouchability and says that whoever follows it are themselves not pure. Their confused mind is filled with illusion. For him, a pure mind is more important than one's caste. He says,

"Maharas shive kope

To Brahman navhe" (STA Gatha 30)

It means that one who becomes angry at touching Mahar is not a (true) Brahmin. Tukaram asks here when there is no difference between skin and meat, how to decide who is touchable and untouchable. As he says,

"Shdhhashudh nivade kaise

Charm maans bhinna nahi" (STA Gatha 448)

Through their verse, Kabir and Tukaram have ferociously opposed untouchability condemning discrimination based on varna system in Indian society and advocated for equality. They spread love, peace and social harmony through their poetry. Their poetry has contributed immensely to the sociocultural reformation in India. Kabir criticized hypocrisy of religious scholars who preached about God but were engaged in various immoral acts. Their actions betrayed their teachings as their mind was full of sins despite their outward display of worship. These sham religious leaders and scholars gave importance to external appearance and deceived the people by their fictional stories as described in the following lines by Kabir:

“Instead of dyeing his mind in the colours of love,  
The yogi dyes his clothes.  
He sits in the temple of God,  
But leaves his Lord to worship a stone.” (Masterman 83)  
For Tukaram too, the outward appearance was not important. Instead of giving importance to reading the Vedas, performing meaningless rites, smearing ash, wearing beads he advocates true unflinching faith in God.  
He says,  
“Nobody becomes a Saint by reciting the Vedas.  
Nobody becomes a Saint by performing rites.  
Nobody becomes a Saint through penance or pilgrimage.  
Says Tuka, all these so-called Saints have worldly desires  
As long as they do not have one unflinching faith.” (Chitre 147)

From these examples, one can understand clearly that both the saints preached true bhakti and disapproved of sham show off. Both the saints have emphasized upon the equality and rejected discrimination based on religion or caste. They both promoted communism which is well recognized all over the world now (Pandey 142). Kabir says that all the differences are made by human beings and are not created by nature.

“No one reads Vedas in the wombs.  
No Turk is born circumcised.  
Dropped from the belly of birth,  
A man puts on his costumes.  
The world was born from one mother.  
What wisdom teaches separation?” (Hess & Singh 79)

Tukaram also did not approve of the Varna system as it was a discriminating system which made lower caste people's lives hell. Like Kabir, he believed in equality of all human beings. He thought that all the people are the children of one God hence equal. He says it in the following lines:

“Avaghi ekachich vin  
Tethe kaiche bhinnabhinna” (STA Gatha 68)  
Both the Saints stressed on equality criticising discrimination based on caste and creed through their poems. They used logical arguments against the vague fictional accounts from scriptures to condemn the social evils through their poetry.  
Kabir says,  
“It's all one skin and bone,  
One piss and shit,  
One blood, one meat.  
From one drop, a universe  
Who's Brahmin? Who's Shudra?” (Hess & Singh 67)

Similarly, Tukaram says,  
“Vishnumay jag vaishnavancha dharma  
Bhedabhed bhram amangal” (STA Gatha 29)  
He says that all the world is of Vishnu (God). How do you differentiate? It is just the illusion.

Scriptures have played significant role in the development of human civilization. They contain spiritual and worldly wisdom which can guide the followers. However, unfortunately, due to misinterpretations, out datedness, and dogmatism, scriptures can cause conflicts, intolerance, discrimination and narrow-mindedness. During the times of Kabir and Tukaram, Scriptures like Vedas and Puranas and Quran were given utmost importance. No one was allowed to analyse the scriptures as they believed that those were written by Gods and examination of scriptures would be considered as sacrilege. Religious preachers manipulated the scriptures to suit their purpose and made the life of lower castes hell. In Bhakti tradition, many saints condemning all the injustices and tried to awaken the people preaching true devotion. Similarly, Kabir and Tukaram revolted against fraud and injustice. They strongly condemned exploitation of the downtrodden and urged people to follow their heart and treat everyone equally. At one place Kabir says, “Veda, Purana: a blind man's mirror” (Hess, Sukhdev, 84). As the mirror is useless to a blind and sandalwood is useless to its bearer donkey so the scriptures to the pundits who themselves are benighted. Since they are plunged into the darkness of the ignorance, they can't show the true path to the people.

Similarly criticising the excessive importance given to the scriptures, Tukaram says,  
“Sakarechya gonya bailachiya pathi  
Tayasi sevati karbade” (STA Gatha 403)

Here, Tukaram considers religious preachers as the bull which is a derogatory term in Marathi used for fools. For him, mugged up knowledge of Vedas is useless. Tukaram denies the authority of the Vedas as he says that he would rather surrender completely to the Lord Panduranga. Unlike Kabir, Tukaram believed in some principles of the Vedas not denying its importance completely. Tukaram rejects the part in the Vedas that propagates discrimination as he says, “Galuniya bhed, praman to aisa ved”. He fiercely criticized the sham scholars who exploited people by manipulating the scriptures. They were not righteous as they were not truly enlightened and there was a difference between their saying and doing.

“Mukhe sange brahmdynan  
Janalokanchi kapito maan  
Tuka mhane tochi veda  
Tyache hanuni thobad phoda” (Tukaram Gatha 83)

In the above lines Tukaram says that they preach wisdom, but their actions are deceitful. Tukaram denounces them and their sham teachings. Not only Hindus but also Muslims who gave utmost importance to the religious text were criticised by Kabir. In Ramaini 39 from Bijak, Kabir opines that the eternal and unlimited universal authority cannot be understood only through the religious text and the preachers (Prem Prakash 35). Idol worshipping is very common in Indian society. Kabir condemns needless importance given to this. In one of the poems, Kabir says, ‘if by worshipping stones one can find God, I shall worship a mountain better than these stones (idols) are the stones of the flour mill with which men get their corn’ (Westcott GH 58 ). As Tukaram was oscillating between Nirgun and Sagun Bhakti, he does not reject idol worshipping wholly at the same time he does not give undue importance to it.

“Pashan dev pashan payari  
Puja ekavari pay thevi  
Sar to bhav sar to bhav  
Anubhavi dev te chi jale” (Tukaram Gatha 94)

The above lines convey that the importance of a thing is decided upon the feelings that we possess about it. The same stone may be used for making an idol and making steps, however; we worship an idol and trod upon steps. Thus Tukaram emphasises true devotion, feelings, passion about the God.

Both the poets also attacked meaningless and illogical rituals which were practised by people to a great extent. Even today, people follow many rituals on every important occasion of life like pregnancy, birth, marriage, death etc. Kabir attacks the practice of rituals and asks to look within for God.

“I am neither in rites nor rituals,  
Yoga nor renunciation.  
The true seeker sees me at once,  
Meets me in a moment of time.” (Masterman13)

Rejecting rituals Tukaram says,  
“Kay karu karma akarm  
Bare sapdala varm” (STA Gatha 146)

It means that there is no need of rituals as I have found the secret to worship the God. For him ‘Namsmaran’ (Reciting the God’s name with heart) is the best way of worship. Superstitions are deeply rooted in Indian culture and society and have a great influence on the lives of the people. The superstitions are based on illogical blind beliefs and misconceptions. Known for their profound wisdom and spiritual insights, both the poets criticised superstitious beliefs which were irrational and advocated for personal and direct connection with the God. Here Tukaram asks what the need of husband is if one would have a child by Navas (vow).

“Navase kanya putra hoti  
Tari ka karane lage pati” (STA Gatha 64)

The several examples from poetry of Kabir and Tukaram convey that the poetry of Kabir and Tukaram has been instrumental in bringing socio-cultural reformation in India. Their poetry explored the themes of devotion, truth, inner spirituality and criticized prevalent evils in the society. Both the poets tried to enlighten the people stressing upon devotion, compassion, love, and universal brotherhood. Though composed in medieval India, the poetry of Kabir and Tukaram has created a lasting impact upon socio-cultural sphere of India and still has great significance in modern India. Both had seen a great deal of fraud and falsehood practised in the name of religion. Their poetry was to liberate all the people from all the strata of the society including untouchables, women and even prostitutes challenging the orthodox society. Their critique of wrongs was based on logical argument, scientific temper and rational mind.

Many poetic lines from Kabir and Tukaram’s literary output are used as words of wisdom today. Both the poets have had a great influence over Indian culture and literature. While Kabir’s poetry has enriched Hindi literature, Tukaram’s poetry has stood at the zenith of the literary development by the Varkari sect in Marathi Literature as described in an abhanga of Janabai, a disciple of Tukaram where she praises all the saints who contributed to Bhagwat Dharma in Maharashtra. Kabir and Tukaram’s poetry appeals the consciousness and inspires

individuals to strive for social and communal harmony. The significance of Kabir and Tukaram's poetry increases in Modern India as it is grappled with social disharmony, caste discrimination, communal violence, gender discrimination, and religious intolerance. Their poetry contains the messages of love, compassion, equality, unity, tolerance, and inclusivity which is the need of the hour to form the just and harmonious society. Their immortal poetry is a gift to the whole world which will always be celebrated and appreciated for its relevance.

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