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Kabir's Bhakti

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Bhakti - which can be translated as 'participation in God' - denotes diverse and widespread forms and practices of South Asian spiritual and cultural tradition that were long neglected by scholars of religion and South Asianists - or treated "lopsidedly," as Martin Fuchs critically puts it ([Fuchs 2018: 125](#)).

The renewed interest by many scholars, artists and social activists in a philosophical and moral compass provided by *bhakti* can also be seen as a response to the rise of majoritarian nationalism and perceived 'crisis' of secularism in India, as well as a search for a new shared basis to form 'deep ties of friendship between diverse groups' ([Schneider 2020: 26](#); see also [Gudavarthy 2018](#)).¹ This particularly holds true for the recent 'rediscovery' of 15th-century saint-poet Kabir for whom 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' were not dichotomous categories and who strongly criticized the caste ideology of the Brahmanic Sanskrit tradition as well as institutionalized Islam in India. Kabir, "whose fame has spread, and endured until today" is thus considered one of the most outspoken religious and social critics ([Fuchs 2018: 131](#)).

Like Raidas (or Ravidas), another famous poet-sant who was born in the 15th or early 16th century, Kabir was a prominent member of the North Indian *nirguna bhakti* tradition.² *Nirguna* can be translated as "formless" or "without distinction" and denotes a stream of the multifaceted *bhakti* movement that focuses on the idea of an image- or formless supreme being instead of a practice of devotion to God in a physical form (*sagun*).³ *Bhakti* poets of the 15th and early 16th century and North Indian tradition are referred to as "sants" or "poet-sants" ([Bergunder 2013: 47](#)).

According to Fuchs, *bhakti* "threatens the idea of a unitary character of 'Hinduism'" and "weakens the distinctions between Hinduism and other religions, as it develops into a thread that infiltrates ever-wider circles of Indian religion" (Fuchs 2018: 131). In the context of [RePLITO's](#) enquiry into concepts and global repertoires of living together, *bhakti's* link to individual experience and mutual recognition - not only by and through God, but also through other humans - is of particular relevance.

Mutual recognition in *bhakti* is a triangular constellation, as Fuchs explains:

"The underlying assumption is that human subjects can relate to themselves in a positive manner, and assure themselves of their identity, only when they experience themselves as fully accepted by others. "[...] The meaning of the relationship to other humans is that of confirming the individual's experience of interaction with the Divine, as it prepares the other bhaktas for their personal

experience of God. And as some forms of bhakti contend, God too requires recognition by humans who love or worship him or her (Fuchs 2018: 133)."

Bhakti poetry was originally oral. Its form varies from region to region and has also changed over time. Fuchs argues that the "poems and songs bring out the very different modes of bhaktas' experiences of God and allow for articulating alternative (social) imaginaries."

With regard to Kabir's poems, however, it is very difficult to identify authentic verses among the work which today is ascribed to him. As Michael Bergunder writes, "the historical Kabir has been obscured by the long history of his influence ("Wirkungsgeschichte")([Bergunder 2013: 47](#)) . But as Uttaran Dutta details, the communicative act of composers of every era who ascribed their poems and songs to Kabir, for instance, often by using the words "*kahat kabir suno bhai sadho*" ("As Kabir said, oh dear spiritual-follower"), can also be read differently. On the one hand, composers are thereby "expressing their sincere gratitude to their spiritual lineages/leaders as well as celebrating the experiential unity with the renowned saints" ([Dutta 2019: 9](#)). On the other hand, Dutta argues that this can also be seen as a communicative strategy used by members of extremely marginalized communities to hide or 'camouflage' their real identity for "protecting themselves and their spiritual followers" (ibid.).

The more recent 'rediscovery' of Kabir has also been informed and inspired by the circulation of a series of feature-length documentaries by filmmaker [Shabnam Virmani](#) (see the two video links below to her films "*Kabira Khada Bazaar Mein: Journeys with Sacred & Secular Kabir*" ("In the Market Stands Kabir"), 94min, 2009, and "*Had Anhad: Journeys with Ram & Kabir*" ("Bounded-Boundless"), 103min, 2009).

Virmani initiated [The Kabir Project](#) as a response to the anti-Muslim pogroms in the West Indian state of Gujarat in 2002. In her films, she uses the personal formless (*nirguna*) Ram of Kabir as a counter-image to the increasingly militant form of Ram which is at the center of Hindu nationalist mobilizations and the ideology of Hindutva.

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Kabira Khada Bazaar Mein: Journeys with Sacred & Secular Kabir (English)

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

'Had Anhad: Journeys with Ram & Kabir'

It is nevertheless important to bear in mind that Kabir is appropriated by various groups and to very different purposes in South Asia. As Linda Hess argues, there has also been a tendency to split Kabir along political and spiritual lines ([Hess 2015](#)). This is vividly illustrated by Vivek Virani who observes, for instance, how in front of an urban “middle-class Hindu crowd in a modern concert hall, the devotional Kabir is celebrated and the political is excluded and largely unknown” ([Virani 2016: 226](#)). Contrary to this, among “non-elite and especially rural populations, political movements have always been characterized by, rather than separated from, spirituality and devotion”, and accordingly, “Kabir is mystical, devotional, and political all at once” (ibid.):

“Kabir is distinguished by his confrontational voice that denounces hypocrisy, false piety, and social violence. His most scathing criticism is directed toward religious authorities who use the language of faith to divide and exploit people for material or political gain.

*The pious awake at dawn to perform ablutions,
but never cleanse their wicked minds
Forgetting the Inner Divinity,
they worship a stone – they understand nothing!
Hindus claim, ‘our Ram is God,’
Muslims shout of their Rahim
The two factions fight and die,
Nobody discovers the truth ([Virani 2018: 154](#)).”*

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Deepika Bora, a 10th standard student from Uttarakhand in North India, responds to an adaptation of a verse of Kabir. Other videos from [Fathima Nizaruddin's ongoing project "Bura Na Milya Koi"](#) (I didn't find anyone evil) can be found on the same YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3MBPUbAT1Btx14DG0rLL1A/videos>

Footnotes

1. In her ongoing project "Bura Na Milya Koi (I didn't find anyone evil): The Philosophy of Kabir and Possibilities for Transmedia Interventions within Right-Wing WhatsApp Circulations", media scholar and documentary filmmaker Fathima Nizaruddin uses "practice-based artistic research methodology to understand the ways in which transmedial work drawing inspiration from the philosophy of the South Asian saint-poet Kabir can contribute to the creation of safer WhatsApp ecosystems. Kabir's work stresses the absurdity of divisions and invokes love as a framing principle for social interactions." <https://www.irgac.org/fellows-staff/fathimanizaruddin/> ↵

2.

Under the term of "Begumpura" (lit. "city without sorrow or pain), Raidas advocated for a utopian society living together without discrimination or inequality. As Santosh K. Singh describes, Ravidas' egalitarian philosophy was popular across caste and community in his time. Today, however, he is primarily associated with marginalized communities in north India, especially in the states of Punjab and Haryana, as well as with the assertion of Ravidassia identity among globally networked communities in the 21st century. See, for instance, Gail Omvedt (2008). *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals*; Santosh K. Singh (2017). "The Caste Question and Songs of Protest in Punjab". *EPW* Vol 52, Issue 34; Dhanya Fee Kirchhof (2019). "Ravidassia. Neither Sikh nor Hindu? Mediatized Religion in Anti-Caste Contexts". *Mediatized Religion in Asia: Studies on Digital Media and Religion*, ed. Kerstin Radde-Antweiler/Xenia Zeiler. Routledge, 121-138.

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3.

For a detailed discussion of the important Krishna bhakti tradition, see for instance Barbara A. Holdrege (2015). *Bhakti and embodiment: fashioning divine bodies and devotional bodies in Krishna bhakti*. Routledge.

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8.

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