

**Bhakti Movement and Religious Transformation: A
Sociological Study of Kabir Panth**

Abstract

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ABSTRACT

Many reformist movements which emerged in India raise the voice against the corrupt practices of Hindu religion. Bhakti movement was one of them that played a very important role in this process. Many poets and saints are associated with the Bhakti movement, and one of the most popular among them is Saint Kabir Das, who led a movement against the malpractices of Hinduism and Islam. Building upon such criticisms, he tried to evoke a new synthesis, taking good elements of both Hinduism and Islam. Hence this study has focused on the role of Kabir in evolving a new synthesis, borrowing from both Hindu and Muslim faith, is due course of time consolidated into an institutionalized form paving the way for the creation of '*Kabir Panth.*' Through Kabir Panth, Kabir's ideas were encoded in the daily life practices of people. This research has focused on the formation of Kabir Panth and its evolution over the period of years and schism within the Kabir Panth.

Objectives

1. To locate Kabir Panth within the Bhakti tradition
2. To examine the socio-historical background leading to the formation of sects and the divergence that took place within Kabir Panth.
3. To locate Kabir Panth within the contemporary socio-political landscape and their engagement on the question of emancipation of the disadvantage and marginalized sections.

Research Design

This study has been descriptive and analytical in nature. It has explored the changing nature of Kabir Panth from pre-independence to post independence. This study is qualitative in nature. It has focused on various aspects of Kabir panth.

Sampling of the Respondents

The respondents to the study were Kabir Panthi. In this manner the respondents have been selected and interviewed from the study which includes the chief of the math (mathadish), pujari, Kothari and various followers of Kabir.

Techniques of data collection

The data has been collected through using in-depth interviews, group discussions, and participant observation and field work. The nature of the interview was interactive.

Along with it focused group discussions has been carried out with the office bearers. The research data has also taken from secondary sources like archival documents, government records, and gazetteers books, journals, and pamphlets that which has given a rich account on the historical development of the Bhakti tradition and the Kabir panth.

The chapter characterizes the religion in general and Hinduism and Bhakti movement in particular is discussed. The analysis includes textual interpretation of Bhakti by using the sources from Vedas, Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavata Purana, Narada and Shandilya Bhakti Sutra. Further, it briefly discussed the movement in Regional context i.e. North and South India. It includes Alwar Bhakti movement and Veershiva movement and the four schools of thought which are namely Advaita Vedanta, Visishtadaita Vedanta, Dvaita Vedanta and Dvaitadvita Vedanta. In North India, emphasis is on Ramananda and Guru Nanak. The preaching's of Mirabai and Chaitanya is also discussed. In order to find out the fooling research method has used.

It can be said that Bhakti movement had different variations and forms across South to North. The first phase was the textual interpretation of Vedas, Upanishids, and Gita etc. The second phase of Bhakti had its origin in south in the form of Alwar Bhakti, In South; there were school of thoughts which come under the ambit of Vedanta philosophy. Its philosophy played an important role in the spread of the Bhakti movement in rest of India. Bhakti movement spread in North India during the fourteenth century A.D. Ramanada played an iconic role in its spread along with his disciples Kabir, Raidas, Tulsidas etc.

Bhakti movement in India is discussed elaborately including some Bhakti movement characteristics along with some reformist saints from North as well as in South India. Future study has devoted to Bhakti movement and its ideologue. The focus is on Saints of U.P who are born and brought up in U.P. but their ideas cannot be and should not be confined to any geographical territory but they are universally popularized. They are as follows like Ramanada, Tulsidas, Surdas, Raidas, Kabirdas. Further, these Saints are divided into two philosophical schools that are Saguna and Nirguna, therefore the differences between two would be discussed in this chapter. These saints wanted to

transform entire discourse of social structure in the term of caste, class, gender, and Varna. They challenged rampant social order and they wanted to liberate lower section from suppression of the upper class people in society which was based on caste, class, gender and Varna.

The root of bhakti in North India though come from the south but it had a great difference in term of social custom, religious idea believes and rituals. In the philosophy of saints like Nanak, Kabir, Dadu, etc. broke conventional thought of bhakti from South. Bhakti movement has a keen different Saguna and Nirguna shape and become very visible in Uttar Pradesh because most prominent reformist belongs to Uttar Pradesh which include Ramananda and his follower and his disciple like Kabir, Raidas, Tulsidas, this legacy was carried by them along with important role played by Surdads, Vallbhacharya and all of them who worked in Uttar Pradesh. These Saints belongs to bhakti tradition but their ideology was different in term of faith and believes, which was divided into two schools of thought which is known as Sagun and Nirgun bhakti. Before starting the discussion on the contribution of many Saints and their role, let have a light on the difference between Saguni and Nirguni.

It can be said that entire Bhakti movement is against the malpractices of existing society including against caste, system superstition gender, and feudal order of the society and it preaches their teachings in local languages by which it can reach meaningfully to the larger masses. The philosophy divided into two schools of thought that Saguna and Nirguna in which five things have been discussed that Notion of Brahman, Jiva, Maya, Moksha, Jagat have given different view according to their school of thought. The radical Bhakti movement particular Nirguna saints attacked harshly caste, Varna ashram, and ritual that has given an alternative through their utopia in which Raidas was seeking in Begampura city which provided that there was no discrimination on the basis of disability, caste, class, caste, Gender. Whereas Saguna Bhakti wanted to maintain status quo in other world and it talks about gradual changes in the society. The prominent saints of Saguna Bhakti were Ramananda, Tulasi Das and Surdas who advocated for status quo in the society.

There are many sociologists who reflect religion in different ways. Karl Marx stated that religion is an instrument in hands of dominant section of society to exploit lower section of the society and justified their position. Where Max Weber mention religion of non-

privileged where marginal section of the society revolted against established religion and form their own religion with idea of universalistic principle. The chapter would focus on religion of non-privileged under which epistemology of religion, would be studied. Study would include view of classical sociologist on religion. On the other hand chapter also reflects Buddhism, Ambedkar view on religion and Bhakti movement and its transforming social order would be studied. This Chapter also reflects the role of Bhakti movement and Kabir and how society got transformed in terms of social, religious and spiritual context.

Religion is inseparable part of the human being, in due course of time society passes through various phases like simple to complex; likewise religion also transform by reformist saints from orthodox to unorthodox. Classical thinker reflects on religion in different way. On other hand in Indian context Bhakti movement played an important role and Bhakti saints like Kabir das who transformed religion which was core of humanism. On the basis of Kabir philosophy, Kabir panth came in to being; latter on embraced all things which internally protested against rituals, myths, and beliefs. Ambedkar shows paradox in Indian society, one hand people have equality, liberty fraternity in constitution but on the other hand in Hindu society such thing does exit consequently he advocated annihilation of caste system and finally he embraced Buddhism. Whereas Gandhi wanted to reform caste within Hindu folds which will be different from traditional Varna ashram. Gandhi believed in self-evolution, therefore his position on caste and supported inter caste marriage.

Kabir and Kabir Panth would focus in this chapter and emphasizes on transformative nature of Kabir philosophy and Kabir Panth. Sociological analysis of Kabir philosophy has discussed which includes, Kabir's philosophy on religion, caste, class and gender. This study emphasized on organization of Kabir panth and its transformative nature over the year.

Kabir occupied very unique place in Bhakti tradition. Kabir notion of Bhakti gave new direction to the masses. Kabir attacked on all kind orthodoxy, mal practice including caste class gender and religion and tried to give new synthesis from borrowing good things from Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. After the Kabir organization Kabir panth has been taken place by his disciples. Kabir panth would try to continue tradition against the mal practices and Brahmanism therefore large number of marginal section of the

society joined the Kabir panth. But Kabir Panth was able to cope up with Hinduism that initially they protested against. So it can be said that dynamic features of Kabir panth which has brought transformation among society while period of time it also get transformed. This transformation has taken on the ideological basis as result; there were many forms Kabir Panth exists in contemporary time.

Conclusion Objective I stated that “To locate Kabir Panth within the Bhakti tradition” from this objective major finding is that Indian society organized on basis of caste and Varna system. Kabir panth came against the religious dogmas, extreme caste practices, supremacy of the priestly classes and the ruling classes. They critiqued the dominant social order that was founded on oppression, sufferings and exploitations. At the same time, they accessed alternative which was envisioned with the establishment of egalitarian, democratic and humanist society.

Objective II says that “To examine the socio-historical background leading to the formation of sects and the divergence that took place within Kabir Panth” from this objective major finding is that over period of time his disciple strongly felt that forming of Kabir panth was necessary to counter Hinduism and provided alternative religion to marginal section of the society because they were neglected in Hinduism religion. Consequently the Kabir panth was formed by his four immediate disciples, Surti Gopal, Dharmdas, Jagodas and Bhagudas. Everyone claimed themselves as real successor of Kabir. After some time there was ideological differences has taken place among them and they get separated and formed new math at different places. Example like Dharmdas formed Math in Madhya Pradesh which is now in Chhattisgarh who believed that Kabir was incarnation of Satpurash which ideology was totally different as compare to Kabir chaura of Banaras who believed that Kabir was spiritually evolve human and not incarnation of any of God.

Objective III “To locate Kabir Panth within the contemporary socio-political landscape and their engagement on the question of emancipation of the disadvantage and marginalized sections” from this objective major finding is that Kabir Panth is comprise upper, middle and lower castes and have traditionally better privileges than the ex-chamar caste men, now. Hence, the improvement in the economic, educational and

occupational status of Kabir Panthi would not be such as to tilt the balance entirely in their favour.

Though the Kabir panth has been passed through many phases and transform some of its original feature and split into various sections but instead of that it is still play vital role to provide alternative religion to marginal section of the society. In present context, Kabir panth divided into many fractions but all these Kabir panth is have one core values that spirit of humanism which is based scientific notion of thought. Kabir philosophy is based on scientific understanding and core values, which legacy is continued by Kabir panth so it can be said Kabir panthis take cultural identity from Kabir and Kabir panth.

