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A Comparative Perspective on Kabir and George Herbert's Poetry

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Abstract: The Bhakti movement in India attempted reforms by fighting caste rigidities and superstitions. Almost around the same time the Cambridge reformers were attempting to reform the Catholic Church and propagating Protestant ideas. This paper attempts a comparative perspective on George Herbert's poetry in relation to some aspects of Bhakti poetry in India, especially with reference to Kabir. George Herbert who was a Metaphysical poet is classified as a devotional poet for the corpus of religious poetry he wrote. The approach of this Metaphysical poet and poets like Kabir from the Bhakti movement has certain points of comparison. Certain similarities in the discourse of the disciple as slave to his Lord; as the lover in search of a union etc. finds place in this discussion. This paper engages in a close study of the religious poetry of George Herbert and that of Kabir in relation to the trends of the Bhakti movement. The language used by most Bhakti poets is simple and words from the vernacular languages of India find a presence in pure or mixed form. Kabir uses the 'sadhukkadi' or 'kichdi' language. Though Herbert wrote in the English language the world-view of both the poets is quite similar. Some of the images and the philosophy that manifests itself in the two poets are examined through this comparative study.

Keywords: Bhakti movement, Metaphysical poetry, Doha, Religious reform

Language: English and Hindi (Sadhukkadi)

About the Author



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Introduction

In the sixteenth century the Cambridge Reformers and primarily William Tyndale began the translation of the Bible in 1522 with the goal of making the Bible accessible to everyone. It is Tyndale's Bible that forms the basis of the Authorised version of the Bible of 1611. His Bible was motivated by the desire to make the Bible available to the masses but more than that it attempted to propagate Protestant ideas. Countering the Roman Catholic institution was almost analogous to the intention of the Bhakti movement in India. To reach God sans the institutionalised religion were the common goals of the Protestants of the seventeenth century Britain and of the Bhakti movement in India in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. While Tyndale dreamt that even a peasant should have access to his Bible, poets like George Herbert (1593-1633) wished also to remove every barrier between the disciple and God. This too was the aspiration of the Bhakti movement poets, especially the Nirgun poets who sought to unite the devotee with their God.



This paper attempts a comparative study of George Herbert's religious poetry in relation to the philosophy that inspired a Nirgun Bhakti poet like Kabir. While the Bhakti movement was attempting reforms in society and attitudes towards religion; was fighting caste rigidities and superstitions, the Cambridge Reformers were attempting to propagate reformatory ideas to reform the Catholic Church.

George Herbert's metaphysical poetry and the Reformation

George Herbert who was a metaphysical poet was popular as a devotional poet. The approach of this Welsh poet, orator and theologian who served the Anglican Church is close to the philosophy of a poet like Kabir of the Bhakti movement. The interface between the metaphysical poetry of George Herbert and the Bhakti poetry of Kabir Das wherein the rapport between the disciple and God is of sacrosanct importance is the focus of this study.

While the fifteenth and the sixteenth century witnessed the breakdown of mediaeval ideology in Europe, a similar process was taking shape in India for quite some time and came to be recognised as the culmination of the Bhakti period which had been around but manifested itself in a recognisable form between 1350 to 1650. Hence, a trans-continental similarity is perceptible in the interface between metaphysical poetry and aspects of the Gyanmargi Bhakti movement.

In Europe, during Reformation between the fourteenth and sixteenth century, society was increasingly anxious about the Catholic Church, its doctrines and ritualistic worship. There was a reaction to the sale of letters of indulgences which were morally outrageous. Earlier, John Wyclif, the star of the Reformation led the revolt against the evils that had crept into the church. His ideas influenced the German reformer Martin Luther and spread like wild fire across Europe. Protestant Reformation influenced the practice of Christianity. The Anglican Church tried to mediate between the Protestants and the Catholic Church. The beliefs of the Reformers regarding what ailed religion echo the ideas expressed by the Indian saint Bhakti poets who aspired to reform religion and society from customary and ritualistic practices. Alongside, they aimed at reforming society by purging it of caste rigidities which vitiated society and religion. The Christian Reformation believed that faith and not pious acts can secure the grace of God. The principle of 'sola fide' (faith alone) can secure the grace of God became the guiding principle. God's pardon for guilty sinners is received by faith alone echoes the idea of submission and surrender that inspires the poetry of Kabir Das, Mirabai, Surdas and numerous other Bhakti poets.

Herbert who was an Anglican priest is classified as a metaphysical poet. Metaphysical poetry, a term used by John Dryden and adopted by Samuel Johnson, best describes the poetry of the seventeenth century such as John Donne, George Herbert, Vaughan, Marvell and others. The word 'metaphysical' is derived from 'meta' which translates as above/ after the 'physical', that is above the physical plane – which is to say it refers to something that cannot be explained by science. Thus exploring the nature of reality in a philosophical way was the thrust of this school of poetry.

Similarities between the poetry of Kabir and George Herbert

George Herbert's poetry depicts the dilemma of a believer. He described his poetry as "a picture of many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus, my master, in whose service I have now found perfect freedom" Drury (2014: 24-133). The Idea of conflict central to his poetry is a theme often voiced by the Bhakti poets of India as well. Parallels can be seen between the consciousness of class rigidity in Western society and the caste- rigidities prevalent in India against which the Bhakti poets raised their voice. The discourse of George Herbert echoes some of the anxieties of Kabir and other Bhakti poets. Despite cultural peculiarities, there are striking similarities between the two discourses of the disciple as the slave of the Lord; as lover etc.

Herbert belonged to the vocation of the Church yet it never came in his way or in his spiritual path. He was a practising Christian while being a priest and a progressive Reformation theologian. The edifice of his poetry is erected on the bedrock of personal faith. Subservience to God and complete submission despite initial conflicts seems to affect him as much as it affects the Gyanmargi Bhakti poets of India. The confusion of a chaotic period of religious conflicts outside gets mirrored in Herbert's poetry. **The Collar** reflects the agony of conflict. It depicts the conflict between freedom and discipline. The collar on the one hand represents the collar of restraint upon an



animal on the one hand, and on the other it represents the badge of the priest's profession. Images of restraint, of a harvest and of serving a Lord are found in Herbert's poetry as also in Kabir's dohas. The persona of *The Collar* says:

Recover all thy sigh- blown age
On double pleasures, leave thy cold dispute
Of what is fit and not, forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,
Which Pettie thoughts have made and made to thee,
Good cable to enforce and draw
And be thy law. (*Rhys*,158)

Kabir expresses a similar view in his doha about the dilemma of the devotee:

तन को जोगी सब करै, मन को करै न कोय।
सहजै सब सिधि पाइए, जो मन जोगी होय।। (कबीर,१३५)

The total surrender desired for the union with God is an anxiety in both the poets. Abandoning worldliness and materialist desire can be the only means of realisation for both Kabir Das and Herbert.

The Rapport Between the Disciple and God in the Reformation and the Bhakti movement

In a poem aptly titled *The Search*, Herbert questions "Where is my God? What hidden place conceals thee still?

What covert dare eclipse Thy face?" The curious search for the creator and desire for union with God inspire the disciple in Herbert's poem. On the other hand Kabir dwells on the man- made dichotomy that separates man from God; the 'atman' from 'paramatman' in a similar manner when he concedes:

जल में कुंभ कुंभ में जल है, बाहर भीतर पानी ।
फूटा कुंभ जल जल ही समाना, यह तब कहयो ग्यानी।। (कबीर,११)

That is, a pot full of water, when immersed in water separates the two waters. However, when splintered, the pot results in the union of the two waters. The poet reveals that the barriers in the union of the disciple with God are often man- made.

In his verse *Denial*, God's denial of favour may be a theme but the emphasis is on man's faulty belief that ritualistic pursuit can help man attain God. Herbert says:

"When my devotions could not pierce Thy silent ears
Then was my heart broke, as was my verse
My breast was full of fears And disorder
My heart was in my knee But no hearing..." (*Rhys*,76)

Kabir's oft- quoted doha:

माला फेरत जुग भया, फिरा न मन का फेर।
कर का मनका डारि दे, मन का मनका फेर।। (कबीर,१७)

seems to highlight in a similar way the hindrance posed by ritualistic prayer indicated by Herbert in, "my heart was in my knee". Instead of kneeling in prayer a more honest rapport needs to be established in the devotee/ God relationship. The image of the plea of man not piercing God's ears is satirically indicated by Kabir



when he chides the believer for resorting to rituals to reach God Hess & Singh (2000:3-37). He mocks the believer for his shallow devotion:

कांकर पाथर जोडि के, मस्जिद लइ बनाय।

ताचढि मुल्ला बांग दे,बहिरो हुआ खुदाया।।(कबीर,१५)

The importance of the rapport between man and God is once again given importance over rituals. Both poets stress that loud- mouthed prayers do not unite man and God, on the contrary such efforts fall on deaf ears. The Idea that God is not deaf is ironically emphasized by both poets.

Experiments in form in Kabir and George Herbert's Poetry

The Temple is George Herbert's wittiest collection of lyrics of a wide variety. The poems range from hymns to complaints; from quarrels to elation and are couched in diverse forms. This variety has compelled the admiration of critics who believe that Herbert is the most avid experimenter of the English lyrical form in this age. The compactness of form and use of conceits that marked Metaphysical poetry have been outstanding features of this age. Though he does not use conceits as Donne does, the brevity and impact in his poems such as a sonnet like *Redemption* where he packs in a lot of punch is remarkable. This quality of his poetry is comparable to Kabir's dohas (couplets) that seem to unfold through their brief form an ocean of meaning. The use of commonplace images such as thorn, fruit, wine, cable, lease etc. in Herbert and the use of pot, lime, water, bubbles in Kabir indicate the urge of both poets to use images that the common could identify with. These images while being commonplace would enable him to dwell on issues pertaining to man's place in the world; his relation to God and his dilemma of faith. Herbert's Protestant faith stressed the importance of the scripture, its personal reading and interpretation in Christian life which comes close to Kabir's outlook on religion.

For Herbert the devastating consciousness of sin, found in various poets of the seventeenth century was an occasion to declare subservience to God. The master- slave relationship between man and God became the basis for many of his poems. Curiously, Kabir too uses the image of the devotee as slave ('das/ दास) in many of his dohas/ couplets. He believes in complete surrender and obedience towards the master, the Lord. These according to him are the characteristics of the true servant of God, the true devotee that Kabir aspires to be. In the following couplet he puts forth this idea stating:

सेवक सेवा में रहे, सेवक कहिए सोय।

कहै कबीर सेवा बिना, सेवक कभी न होय।। (कबीर,१८०)

Similarly, Herbert's poem *Man* images himself as a servant of God:

Since then my God thou hast

So brave a Palace built; O dwell in it

That it may dwell with thee at least

Till then afford so much wit

That as the world serves us, we may serve thee

And both thy servants be (*Rhys*,88)

The relevance of man's life is only when he serves God. This idea permeates the poetry of both poets. Herbert, like Kabir repeatedly reiterates the image of the devotee as servant in his poem *The Altar* where he says: "A broken ALTAR, Lord thy servant rears/ Made of a heart and cemented with tears" (*Rhys*,17). Humility is a characteristic both Herbert and Kabir stress through the image of the servant. The concept of the self as sinner and the dilemma of faith inspires a spirit of restlessness and vacillation in the persona of both Kabir and Herbert's poetry.

In a poem titled *Faith* Herbert says:

If blive had lien in art or strength



None but the wise or strong had gained it,
 Where now my Faith all arms are of a length
 One size doth all candidates fit
 A peasant may believe as much
 As a great Clerk and reach thy highest state
 Thus dost thou make proud knowledge bend and crouch,
 While grace fills up uneven nature (*Rhys*,42)

The poet emphasizes that the learned or the privileged alone do not have the monopoly of faith. God seeks devotion and irrespective of status grace may be available to them. The humble peasant and the learned clergyman are equal in the eyes of God. Kabir stresses this idea of spontaneous faith in many of his dohas. In one of the dohas, he says:

नाम भजो मन बसि करो, यही बात है तंत।
 काहे को पढ़ि पचि मरो, कोटिन ज्ञान गिरंथ।। (कबीर,४२)

The knowledge of the scriptures does not lead to liberation: it is the path of humble submission and faith that leads to liberation according to the poet. The virtue of humility, faith and submission is reiterated by him again in the following doha:

ऊंचा पानी ना टिकै, नीचै ही ठहराय।
 नीचा होय सो भरि पिये, ऊंच पियासा जाए।। (कबीर,१३९)

Just as water can be drunk to satisfy one's thirst by bending towards the stream, humility and faith can help the humble succeed. On the other hand the arrogant and unbending, rigid believer may not attain salvation nor unite with God.

The Dilemma of the Believer

Herbert in his poems *Sepulchre* and *Vanitie* stresses the Idea of man wasting his life and time in his meandering search. Success evades him due to his limitations. Kabir too stresses the need for introspection and submission is regarded as more sacred than ritualistic worship. The obstruction to faith comes from within and without. Man is lost in the materialism around him and hence unable to find God. The persona in Herbert's poem *Search* says:

My searches are my daily bread
 Yet never prove.... (*Rhys*,167)
 In yet another poem *Aaron*, the persona dwells on the tarnished soul lost in worldliness:
 Profaneness in my head
 Defects and darkness in my breast,
 A noise of passions ringing me for dead
 Unto a place where is no rest (*Rhys*,181)

Kabir shares his insight about true faith and mocks man's materialistic distractions when he suggests:

माला तो कर में फिरै, जीभ फिरे मुख माहीं।
 मनवा तो चहुँदिसि फिरै, यह तो सुमिरन नाहिं ।। (कबीर,१७)

He indicts the ritualistic practices that had crept into Indian society and mocks specially the priestly class that promoted vain rituals. He satirizes the devotee who poses to be lost in worship with the prayer beads in his hands, whereas his mind wanders in worldly matters.



In Herbert's famous poem *Affliction*, the autobiographical persona who is self-critical confesses: " I was entangled in the world of strife/ Before I had the power to change my life" (*Rhys*,39). Redemptive grace may be available even to thieves and murderers for God is kind and forgiving according to him. This idea is highlighted yet again in *Redemption*. The self as tarnished soul reappears in *Love III* where the persona confesses that love bade him welcome yet he is "guilty of dust and sin" (*Rhys*,197). The ways to attain God are manifold. One of the principles of Christianity, namely service to God through humanity is an aspect shared in many of Herbert's poems. In his poem *Elixir* he says, "Teach me my God and King/ In all things to see;/ And what I do in anything/ To do it as for Thee" (*Rhys*,192). Kabir's pantheism is analogous to that of Herbert and stresses that man should reach out to God through humanity and not idol- worship. According to him:

कबीर जेता आत्मा, तेता सालिगराम।

बोलनहारा पूजिये, नहिं पाहन सौं काम।। (कबीर,१३८)

Man should seek God who exists in all life as the soul. He should serve the living around him and not get lost in idol- worship or worship of a stone. There is a remarkable similarity in the in the thought of Kabir and the philosophy of Herbert on this point of pantheism. A life dedicated to service of humanity is worthwhile as life is brief and should be treasured. The ephemeral and transient nature of life has been a favourite theme of devotional poetry. Using the image of flowers Herbert comments on man's existence in his poem *Life* where he says, "Farewell dear flowers, sweetly your time ye spent/ Fit while ye lived, for smell or ornament,/ And after death for cures/ I follow straight without complaints or grief/ Since if my scent be good, I care not if/ It be as short as yours" (*Rhys*,91). The transience of life and the need to utilise it to serve humanity is stressed by both poets.Kabir, in his verse stresses the need to make life meaningful and exhorts man to treasure it by making judicious use of life. In the famous doha:

पानी केरा बुदबुदा, अस मानुष की जात।

देखत ही छिप जाएंगे, ज्यौं तारा परभात।। (कबीर,१२५)

Man's life is comparable to short-lived bubbles. Similar is the brevity and short life of the stars that disappear with the dawn.

The self- deprecatory and humbling knowledge of man in the verses of both poets is counterpointed by the grace of God. The grace of God can transform from stone or base metal to gold as does the touchstone. Hence for both the poets God is the alchemist who can transform man and make his life meaningful. In Herbert's poem *The Elixir*, he says of God: "This is the famous stone/ That turneth all to gold/ For that which God doth touch and own/ Cannot for less be told" (*Rhys*,192). That is to say that God can make one priceless. In his other poem *Easter*, he celebrates the rising of Christ: "That as his death calcined thee to dust His life may make thee gold" (*Rhys*,33). The transformative power of God is expressed with gratitude by Kabir too who uses the image of the touchstone (पारस) for God/ the guru. In his doha:

गुरु पारस को अन्तरो, जानत हैं सब संत।

वह लोहा कंचन करे, ये करि लेय महंत।। (कबीर,१६३)

The transformative magic of God/ guru, who is like a touchstone that transforms man to gold or the humble devotee to the learned man (the gyani or mahant) is dwelt on in these verses.

His grace transforms all alike in the magical way that a touchstone transforms stone or base metal (echoed in the verse of Surdas). The secular and egalitarian approach to religion seen amongst the Bhakti poets left a significant impact on society and religion through the compact verses.

While the terseness of verse concentration of thought in metaphysical poetry is comparable to the verse of Kabir, there are differences as well. Pithiness and sinewy compactness strike the reader with the precision of the poet. It would not be an exaggeration to call the metaphysical poem an extended epigram as Helen Gardner describes it Gardner (1960:i-xii) Paradoxes and contradictions, nimble reversals of meaning indicate the dialectical construction is an entertaining aspect of metaphysical poetry. While George Herbert's poems are regarding the conflicts of a believer and are presented in the conversational tone, Kabir's dohas are rendered as truths validated



by a seer and are complemented with barbs of satire at times. However, the devotional poetry of both poets is about their devotional practice which is based on a democratic approach to religion.

Conclusion

The famous anthropologist Irawati Karve compares the age of the **Mahabharata** and the Bhakti movement and finds the latter more sentimental and escapist Karve (1991: 183-214). Perhaps the thrust on blind devotion among some of the Bhakti poets and abandon about how to lead one's day to day life compelled her to say so. However, despite the stark idealism and rationalism of the age of the **Mahabharata**, we can see a quite liberal outlook in the pantheism and egalitarianism of some of the Bhakti poets like Kabir and others. They not only came from diverse and oppressed, marginalized sections and communities but also made efforts to wipe out communal and caste differences. However, though steps were taken to fight caste rigidities, gender- discrimination and a patri-lineal view of God continued down the ages. God was perceived as a patriarch and never as a woman by the European devotional poets like Herbert and the Nirgun poets of the Bhakti movement alike.

The concept of God is an anthropomorphism that is an entity which is not human and yet perceived in terms that are human. Hence God is man's alter-ego. Even psychoanalysts like Freud, Jung and philosophers like Frederic Nietzsche have concluded that God is the projection of man's ego. Hence due to the anthropomorphic concept of God there is an impossibility of complete formlessness even when we discuss the formless God of the Nirgun poets of the Bhakti movement. The concept of God willy-nilly gets humanized in one way or the other. Hence Kabir describes God as Ram or Allah at times and on the other hand George Herbert perceives him as God the Father, sometimes as Christ or sometimes as the angry God of the Old Testament. There seems to be unanimity in both poets in describing God as a patriarch. The discourse of Kabir and George Herbert, like that of many other religious poets remains phallogocentric despite the urge to secularise religion.

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