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Surely the Holy One is (not) Deaf – Women Subjects and Kabir’s Poetry

Święty na pewno (nie) jest głuchy – Postaci kobiet i poezja Kabira

Abstract

This paper revolves around poems by the 15th century saint poet Kabir Das who argues for a non-hierarchical society sans religion, caste and class discriminations. Kabir is understood as a social reformer of his times. The paper tries to understand prevailing gendered cultural histories along the lines of History of Literature in India from a feminist perspective. It unravels the social frame constructed to analyze, view and understand women as subordinate to men in the social hierarchy. The paper demonstrates Kabir’s philosophical positions that lead to his male chauvinistic and patriarchal perspectives of doubting women and looking down upon them. It reveals the physical and philosophical boundaries set for women in a given society.

Keywords: Women Subjects, Devotion, Feminism, Indian Philosophy, Marginalization, Patriarchy.

To argue on behalf of women for their will to power, questioning of the exclusion and to demand for inclusion is not an easy task in a feudal, patriarchal society. It sometimes does not even take the form of dissent. Hegemonic exercise and the hierarchical practice of power over the powerless and the marginalised are built into society. Certain happenings, though sectional notions; are considered as the holistic notion of a people. Most of the time the so-called ‘whole’ excludes the under-privileged, physically and economically weak and those who are not directly related to the State. Restricting women to certain physical and philosophical spheres and to

believe and make them believe that this is natural, itself is a notion considered as very normal and gains social acceptance.

According to Michele Barrett, “Ideology is an extremely important site of construction of gender but that it should be understood as part of a social totality rather than an autonomous practice or discourse”¹.

In the conceptualisation of separate spheres for men and women in society, are embedded many assumptions about their status, appropriate behaviour and geographic boundaries within which they are bound to operate/function. The ideology of domesticity influences men to observe gender boundaries and play gendered roles, thus supporting the dominance of male power. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned aspects, in this paper I shall attempt to analyse the attitude towards women in Kabir’s poetry. I would thereby try to prove how this attitude towards women in Kabir reflects the dominant societal ideology of that time. The paper also looks at how Kabir’s poems resurface in present times and once again women remain unheard by the dominant ideologies.

Kabir, an important social reformer and poet in the bhakti tradition lived in the 15th century. That was the time when Lodis invited Afghans to help them to tackle the Turks who were still powerful. Sharquis, the main opponent of Lodis ruled Jaunpur. Jaunpur was an important political and cultural centre. Savitri Chandra Shoba describes how, “Kashi and Juanpur were the axis around which a new cultural tradition of liberalism, and of dissent and protest against the existing system was being developed”². Kabir spent most of his lifetime at these places.

“The advent of Islam in India had a profound effect on its political, religious and cultural life”³. Various social groups moved in different directions in the social hierarchy at this time. The groups previously in the lower strata of the hierarchy, participated in the developmental sectors and improvisation of the economic condition of the state and were part of urbanisation. This also might have made them feel their importance. The social ideal of Islam where all were equal in the eyes of God gave space for outcaste who were till then within the hegemonic frames constructed by the brahminical society. This confrontation and interaction between two major forces, Hindu and Muslim gave rise to new forms of thinking.

¹ M. Barrett, *Ideology and cultural production of gender*, in: *Feminist criticism and social change – sex, class and race in literature and culture*, edited by J. Newton and D. Rosenfelt, Methuen, New York, 1985.

² S. Chandra Shoba, *Social philosophy of Kabir Das*, in: *Social Life and Concepts in Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry – A socio-cultural study*, Chandrayan Publications, New Delhi 1983, p. 47–48.

³ R. Pande, *The Social Content of the Bhakti Movement – in: A study in Kabir, Indian History Congress, forty-sixth session*, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar 1985, p. 230.

It also created spaces to those like Kabir who had undergone denial and had strived for acceptance. They got a voice to openly criticise the dominant brahminical social order that had ruled them till then. Irfan Habeeb notes, “Kabir’s verses might suggest the first misgivings of the artisan over caste restraints and his lowly position within the social order”⁴. Drastic changes occurred transforming the mode of Bhakti into a social reform movement, which shaped the social character of the rigid society of the time.

If the political and economic fronts were characterised by feudal oppression, the social front was characterised by brahmins’ oppression. Rekha Pande describes, “in order to maintain their status quo, the brahmins practiced complex rites and rituals. Those who did not fit into the four varnas were termed as chandalas or outcastes”⁵. Kabir says, the brahmins engrossed in reading *vedas*, have forgotten to recognise the soul and are busy with *karmas* like *snana*, *sandhya*, *puja*, *tarpana*, *japa* and *homa*. Ram is in everyone and yet on being touched by anyone they take bath. Now it was for one to judge who is the lower of the two. They had to realise that this pride would take them nowhere because God was also against such pride⁶.

Denouncing all the superficial modes of *bhakti*, Kabir says,

I don’t know what sort of a God we have been talking about.
The caller calls in a loud voice to the Holy One at dusk.
Why? Surely the Holy One is not deaf.
He hears the delicate anklets that ring on the feet of an insect as it walks.
Go over and over your beads, paint weird designs on your forehead,
wear your hair matted, long and ostentatious,
but when deep inside you there is a loaded gun, how can you have
God?⁷

Kabir criticised the rituals and practices of both Hindus and Muslims saying, God is neither in the temple nor in the mosque, neither in Kaba nor in Kailash, He is neither in rites or ceremonies, nor in yoga or renunciation. If one is a true seeker, he will find God immediately near him because he is the breath of all breaths⁸. According to Savitri Chandra Shoba, the “equality and oneness of the humankind was a central theme of Kabir’s social philosophy. He condemned the inequality of men on the basis of religion, caste, tribe or family”⁹. He says love is the ultimate. Mosques and shrines, priests and

⁴ I. Habeeb, *Economic History of the Delhi Sultanate – An Essay in Interpretation*, IHR 1978, IV(2), p. 297.

⁵ R. Pande..., p. 231.

⁶ L. B. Ram ‘Ananth’, *Kabir Granthavali*, p. 452, 465.

⁷ Robert Bly, *The Kabir Book, 44 of the ecstatic poems of Kabir*, Beacon Press, Boston 1977, p. 2.

⁸ Hazari prasad Dwivedi, *Kabir*, Raj Kamal Prakashan, p. 190.

⁹ S. Chandra Shoba, *Social philosophy of Kabir Das*, in: *Social Life and Concepts in Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry – A socio-cultural study*, Chandrayan Publications, New Delhi 1983, p. 48.

mullahs, shastras and koran did not have anything to say. Love is above all these superficial elements. It is precious than any other ritual. That which comes as an obstacle on this path is the meanest of the meanest.

Kabir says, God resting inside the body in the form of shabda (speech) is the ultimate. One like me who has overcome maya can attain shabda. My shabda is like the kalpataru that offers anything that is asked for¹⁰. May be woman, who was identified as metaphor for lust and as an obstacle between man and God did not belong to any of the categories mentioned here.

Construction of the woman-subject in Kabir

For a person with such rational ideas, strangely the idea of woman serves as a metaphor to define all illness. Both in the feudal oppression and the brahmin oppression, exploitation of women was seen as very natural. This attitude continued to remain in Kabir who voiced dissent, for the oppressed and the outcaste. The burden of all ills and sins were transferred on to women, who remained unnoticed by the task of the social reform undertaken by Kabir. They remained to occupy the space of outcaste of the outcastes. He criticises the brahmin, who does not mind eating the food served by a woman, who by birth is a *shudra*, but minds touching a *shudra*¹¹.

In Kabir, one can read a set of notions explaining the way women were expected to behave in society. The traditional boundaries and spaces accorded to women are wholeheartedly accepted. There is a classification of women made into two categories, the good women and the bad women. Those who were loyal to their husband and devoted to the family members, i.e., parents, brothers and sisters of the husband belonged to the first category. He strongly supported the concept of chastity (*pativratha*). A woman though ugly, unclean, dark or bad, no blame will touch her if she is a *pativratha*, he says. Women had no participation in the public life and were supposed to stay inside the house, behind the *purdha*. According to him, a devoted wife should surrender herself completely to her husband's wishes, and adapt herself to whatever way he wanted to live. In fact, she lived only for her husband. She talked and laughed only in his presence. Kabir proposed that a faithful wife was to be cherished and protected. She was always considered to be one of the many properties acquired by man. A subordinate and a dependant upon whom the husband had all the powers, including the power to protect or reject depending on whether her behaviour would fit into the social framework created for her.

¹⁰ D.R. Bendre, *Kabira Vachanavali*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, p.22.

¹¹ Ahmad Shah, *The Bijak of Kabir*, Asian Publication Service, New Delhi 1977, p. 6-7.

The second category being, the loose or public women or those who, out of their pride in their beauty, try to entice other men. They were equated with *maya* and were compared to venomous snakes, or to poisonous fruits, or to burning fire or to the pit of hell. Even the sight of such a woman was dangerous; leave alone her touch, says Kabir. Such character of a woman or the woman herself as such a character was seen as an evil force or *maya*. People who ran after such women came to bad end ultimately¹². The criticism towards such men was not as severe as it was for women. The *maya* poems also reflect behaviour of women that did not come under the set of rules constructed for her by the feudal, patriarchal society. It also records the attitude of the society towards such women. *Maya*, for Kabir, is the force of evil, which alienates man from God. He compares *maya* with a prostitute¹³. Kabir associates *maya* with a clever evil woman, a beguiler full of lascivious charm, a witch who entangles men with her deceit. ‘Men’ deluded by her are not released from the toils of *Karma*.

The notion of good women and bad women is clearly portrayed in his poems. This to some extent defines the role assigned to women in the patriarchal society of that time.

Kabir nowhere applied the concept of equality to the relations between man and woman; perhaps the very idea was alien to his time. Apart from inequality, intolerance, arrogance, avarice, attachment to the worldly objects and ignorance, Kabir equated woman with lust and considered lust to be a major factor behind the troubles and sorrows in society, and an obstacle in the path of a true devotee (*bhakta*). He considered that there were very few true devotees and they fell prey to temptations of various kinds. Of these, *kama* was the most powerful from which even *bairagis* could not escape. Woman was an image associated with lust. Woman was read as a symbol of sex, and was called as the sinful (*papini*), a destroyer (*dakini*), or enticer (*mohini*). Kabir believed that woman was an object to be dealt with carefully.

Kabir hates the sin and not the sinner. So he hated women towards whom men were attracted to and equated them with sin. He says, associating with woman is like associating oneself with hell. The world that relates to her or influenced by her is a world that is strengthless and lifeless¹⁴. He says, undergoing crucifixion sometimes may save one’s life but a woman is more dangerous than that and there is no chance of living for the one who is involved with women¹⁵. Kabir compares a lustful woman to a biting cat and a venomous cobra¹⁶. Elsewhere he says, if the shadow of woman falling

¹² S. Chandra Shoba, *Social philosophy ...*, p. 121.

¹³ Notes for Kabir granthavali ed by Shamsunder Das, Kabir – Saakhi, Prakashan kendra, Lucknow, p. 150.

¹⁴ B.S. Misra, *Kabir Vachanavali*, p. 108.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 108.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 105.

on the five-hooded cobra can make him go blind, what about common people who had a daily acquaintance with women¹⁷.

He had a clear view of social institutions like marriage and condemned the Muslims for conducting marriage within the families, and among close relatives. He nowhere condemned child marriage, or advocated widow re-marriage, or denounced polygamy by the upper classes. Kabir even praised the practice of *sati*, equating it with the reunion of the soul (*atma*) with God (*paramatma*). Going for Sati, he says is *dharma* that has to be followed¹⁸. Even the cremation ground praised dedication and bravery of a sati, he says. He also spoke about *Purdha* as a normal practice¹⁹. Certain physical and philosophical boundaries were set for women. They were expected to hide behind the *purdha* and were not supposed to talk to other men except their husband. The woman was restricted to the household and had no entry into public life. While asking for detachment from worldly pleasures, emphasis was on sexual urge with which Kabir identifies woman. This in turn portrays the fact that they were treated as objects of lust.

According to Suresh Agrawal, popular notions of Santhmath on vogue during Kabir's time were:

1. Belief in the *nirgun nirakaari* Ram.
2. Denunciation of the concept of having more than one God and reincarnations.
3. Importance of the teacher.
4. Opposing the caste system.
5. Opposing the blind practices of superstitions.
6. Promoting love and truth, and
7. Slandering women²⁰.

Kabir's definition of an ideal man was that, "he should not have a superiority about his race, religion or family, nor should he be bound by the external faith"²¹. A true saint should have all ethical and social values: he should have full control over the senses, he should be attached to *yoga* or self-discipline and not to *bhoga* or enjoyment of the flesh. A true saint was not dominated by sexual desires, unlike other human beings. In fact, *kama* or sensual cravings were his slaves, says Kabir²². Like women, Kabir also portrays men who cross the set social rules. Those who are attracted by other women,

¹⁷ S. Agrawal, *Representative ancient poets of Hindi*, Ashok Prahashan, New Delhi, p. 65.

¹⁸ B S Misra Kabir Vachanavali, p. 178,179.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 108.

²⁰ S. Agrawal, *Representative ancient poets...*, p. 64-65.

²¹ S. Chandra Shoba, *Social philosophy...*, 1983, p. 53.

²² Ibidem, p. 54.

wives of other men (*paranaari*)²³, those bound to the worldly pleasures, those always wanting to associate themselves with *maya* etc. His criticism of such men is not as harsh as that of women. This also shows that men enjoyed certain liberties and it was women who were always cornered and blamed even for the mistakes committed by men.

Though “KABIR portrayed a complete picture of social life in his poems”²⁴. His concept of ‘mankind’ gave a limited space or may be no space at all for women. When the attitude towards women reflecting in Kabir’s poetry is taken into consideration, the status of women seemed to be the lowest in the social hierarchy.

He was strongly opposed to the idea that a true devotee should break his family ties, and live in the jungle like a recluse. He believed that a true devotee was the one who fulfilled his duty to his chosen profession and to his family. But such a person should not be misguided by *maya*, or afflicted by the senses²⁵. According to Kabir, although this world is a fact yet it is the domain of illusion only in the sense that man should not attach himself to it considering this worldly life to be permanent. Therefore Kabir persistently speaks of the transitoriness of this world and says God alone is permanent.

GOD and WOMAN: relationship between the two concepts

Strangely Kabir takes the form of woman to reach God, the form of a pativratha who transcends all sins. The *sati-pati bhava* of the bhakti tradition gives way to reach God directly without any mediator. Without this form there is no reunion with God for Kabir.

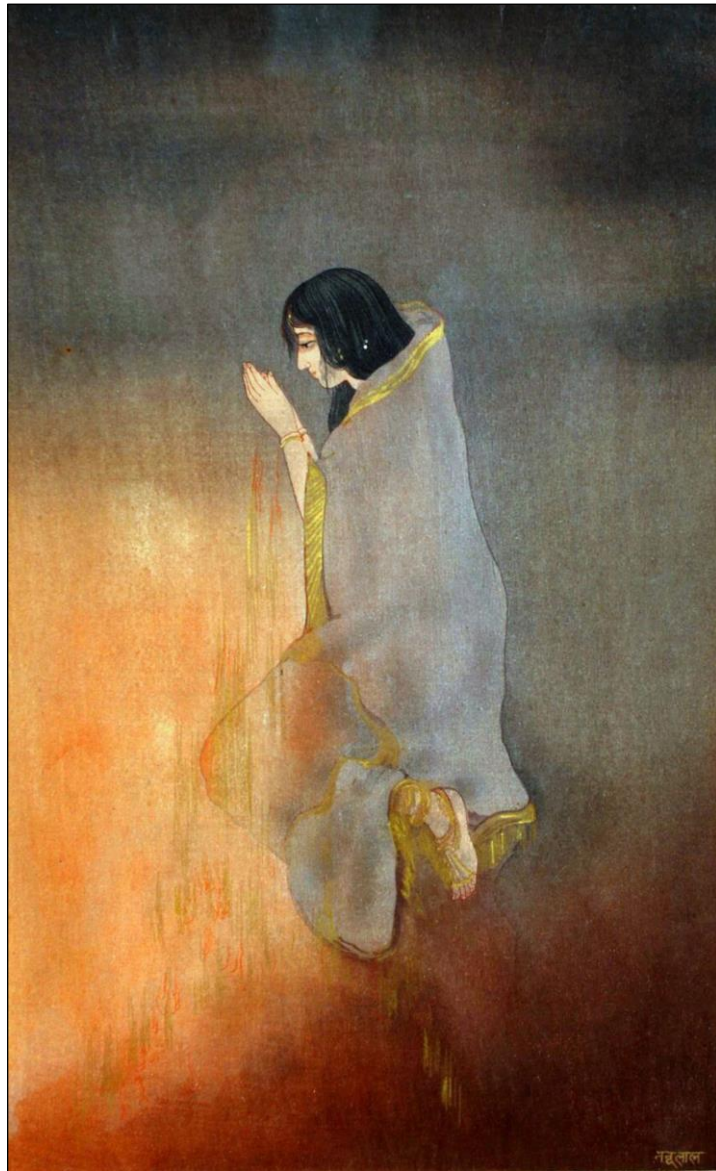
*My body and my mind are in depression because
you are not with me
Then what is this love of mine?
The bride wants her lover as much as a thirsty man wants water*²⁶.

²³ Notes for *Kabir granthavali*, edited by Shamsunder Das, Kabir – Saakhi, Prakashan kendra, Lucknow, p. 174–175.

²⁴ S. Chandra Shoba, *Social philosophy...*, 1983.

²⁵ Idem, *Position of women as reflected in Hindi bhakti poetry*, in: *Social Life and Concepts in Medieval Hindi Bhakti Poetry – A socio – cultural study*, Chandrayan Publications, New Delhi, 1983.

²⁶ Robert Bly, *The Kabir Book*, 44 of the ecstatic poems of Kabir, Beacon Press, Boston, 1977. p. 20.



1. Nandalal Bose: *Sati* (1907/1943), Aquatint on paper heightened with gold (26,5x17,5cm)

Kabir says, that there is a passion to drink the juice of love and at the same time wish to restore the virtue. How is it possible?²⁷ I am satisfied drinking the beloved's love. Now anxiously waiting to meet him. I have tried preparing all kinds of dishes (*rasayana*), none other is equivalent to love. Once the pleasure enters the body, the

²⁷ D. R. Bendre, *op.cit.*, p.33.

entire body transforms into a feeling as precious as gold²⁸. It is easier to bear the heat of fire, it is easier to bear the wound made by the sword, but it is a tough task to maintain love on the same pace says Kabir.

Kabir's reformist zeal, always in favour of the marginalised groups, had in a sense marginalised women. The only position available for him to see God as superior to men, was that of a woman. That was the only space that allowed him to surrender himself without questioning. So he had no other alternative but to take the form of woman without which neither bhakti nor the beloved God exists. Kabir who all through had argued for equality and abolition of caste system and social hierarchy, could think of woman as the only subordinate who submits herself to the husband and let him execute all his powers on her. This could be because Kabir's demand for equality for the whole of 'mankind', excluded women after a certain point. This was natural for him because he could not have considered the problems relating to women as serious in spite of the reformist zeal in him. Instead, he argued that women were the sole cause for problems in society.

It is surprising that a radical poet like Kabir is so immune to gender questions. The 12th century Vachanakara movement of the south led by Basavanna also included artisans and people from the lower strata of the social hierarchy. It was anti-establishment and anti-brahmin. The social problems it discussed were more or less similar to that of Kabir's. In fact many women poets not only wrote poetry during that time but also have re-defined the role of women. Such an attempt or even an attempt of understanding problems of women is absent in Kabir. There exists a tension between Kabir's radical position viz., caste discrimination and the radical position viz., gender. Such a tension was resolved in Vachanakaras, for they believed that the *jeevatma* within the body of a man or a woman was neither a man nor women. Because of this notion of equality the Vachanakaras' movement with all its limitations, could take a form that provided space for women to interact publicly. Where as in Kabir this dichotomy of *jeevatma* and *paramatma* or the metaphor of *dampatya* itself problematises the position and would not allow to see women as subjects. This category itself presupposes the dominant and subordinate positions and the bhakta has to subscribe for a subordinate role. The position itself believes that the subordinates are subjugated for their good. The metaphor of a family, especially the relationship between husband and wife, permits the bhakta to have an intense relationship with God. Therefore for Kabir, the *jeevatma* is always a woman.

In the philosophical realm Kabir takes the position of a woman where as in the social realm that of a man. His taking the position of a subordinate without questioning the dominant, helps him not to feel responsible for the problems of the subjugated, i.e.,

²⁸ Ibidem, 33.

women; in social realm, thus solving the structural problem of his position. Therefore, bhakti in Kabir can also be read as a form of re-producing patriarchy.

GOD according to Kabir is one and He is a man. Naturally He goes up in the hierarchy and all the attention is given to Him. Men can have a relationship of love, affection, and even a union with Him. The *jeevatma* is always dedicated to the *paramatma*. The *bhakta/jeevatma* takes the form of a woman and addresses to God as the beloved²⁹. Extreme devotion and the process of recreating patriarchy goes hand-in-hand in Kabir's poetry.

The image of the woman was symbolically used to reach God by men, who were supposed to have overcome all the elements they associate with women. But women did not have any space in the philosophical domain, may be because woman was an object in the physical sense with which obstacles to attain the path leading to the almighty was associated.

The criticism Kabir makes about women and the list of don'ts set by him for them is in turn practised by him in the poems where the *bhakta* takes a female form. They not only become acceptable here, but also sets a particular kind of frame in which women were viewed and understood as subordinates to men in the social hierarchy. This can be viewed as a reflection of material conditions of male power and dominance of that time.

To sum up:

- Status of women seemed to be the lowest in the social hierarchy.
- Physical and philosophical boundaries were set for women within which they were expected to function.
- Equality in the relation between men and women was an alien idea for the time.
- To slander women was one of the popular notions in vogue.
- Women were equated with sin.
- Women were identified with sex, which also says that they were treated as an object of lust.
- Exploitation of women was seen as something very natural.
- The social reform with a demand for equality for the whole of mankind excluded women after a certain point.
- Concept of *pativratha*, *dharma* and *sati* were strongly supported.
- Child marriage or polygamy by the upper class was not criticised.
- Widow remarriage was nowhere advocated.
- The burden of all sins and ills were transferred on to women.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 24.

- It was forced to believe that woman was the sole cause for the destruction of the social morals which sought an easy way out in a patriarchal society.
- A particular social frame was constructed to analyse, view and understand women as subordinate to men in the social hierarchy.

With all these restrictions of the feudal society, the insecurity experienced by women of that time must have been severe. This can be sensed in Kabir's poems where bhakti accommodates spaces that recreate patriarchy. The attitude towards women in Kabir reflects his limitations as a social reformer and simultaneously portrays the dominant societal ideology of that time.

Contemporary representations

Poetry has been an important form of art documenting conservative beliefs around women in the name of tradition and religion. Kabir's poems portray perspective of his time. It so well presented that one can visualise the context in which women are trapped. The 'visual arts' is a modern expression of the 19th century. While temple architecture mostly commissioned by kings and local chieftains hardly voice against any such interpretations; the modern art in India efficiently did it. Raja Ravi Varma the celebrated painter from the early 19th century portrayed Indian gods and goddesses, demons and mythological figures for the first time and fixed images towards viewing Indian narratives. He influenced generations of artists and art schools in India. SATI system celebrated in Kabir's poems, suggest that women have no right to live after their husband's death and self immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husband allows them to attain moksha or salvation and leads them to heaven. SATI, an aquatint work by Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) a renowned painter and a pioneer of modern Indian art from the Bengal school depicts the self-immolation of Sati, wife of the Hindu god Shiva, with a spiritual sensibility then praised as 'authentically Indian'.

The Reformist movements of the Indian Nationalist movement in the 1920's came to some extent came to the rescue of women by banning practices like SATI and arguing against the understanding of women as evil, as maaya and as an obstacle in the path of reaching god. Then came much visual documentation by artists portraying atrocities and condemning it.

19th century onwards Kabir's poems have seen innumerable translations in English and other Indian languages. This paper refers to two important works of translations – Kabira Vachanaavali, a Kannada translation by Da Raa Bendre and The Kabir Book, an English translation by Robert Bly. Most of the translations surface towards either claiming and/or appropriating 'Kabir the poet' from the bhakti tradition or revisiting his poems to announce the need for a non-hierarchical society in a given language

culture. Translating Kabir is an on going activity at different socio-political junctures in Indian language literatures.



2. Surekha, *Between Fire and Sky*, 2006, Video still

Today India is witnessing violence, rage and censorships on freedom of speech, democracy and secular notions of this nation executed in the name of religions and traditions by the casteists societies backing the Hindu rightwing political power structures. With the demolition of Babri Masjid, Ayodhya conspiracy and the invoking of Rama as an icon of Hindus followed by immolations, lynching, random arrests and

rapes committed in the name of caste and religion; Kabir has returned in a very big way.

Though Kabir is a celebrated poet among the vocalists from Indian classical music traditions, Kabir has returned through contemporary musicians producing alternative music, young bands, sufi singers, at the protest sites and as a tool to voice against the right wing politics of the casteiest society. Using Kabir's poetry to contest caste discriminations, to condemn violence against Muslims by the Hindu fundamentalists, to talk about the need for an inclusive society has become common and popular. Those poems that propose all of these are recited time and again. While Kabir's poems bring communities together to realise and celebrate diversities. Women remain unheard, gang raped, oppressed, and still abused as incarnations of the enticing maaya. Further, with feminism that has unravelled nuances of representations, women have been speaking through their art. They draw references from the mythological and historical representations of women for voicing their resistance. Artist Surekha's³⁰ BETWEEN FIRE AND SKY, stills from a video appears as important contemporary images of resistance for me. Surely the holy one is not deaf!

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Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest kontekstowi poezji XV-wiecznego świętego poety Kabira Dasa, który opowiada się za ukształtowaniem niehierarchicznej organizacji społeczeństwa pozbawionego religii, kast i dyskryminacji klasowej. Kabir jest postrzegany jako radykalny wizjoner

³⁰ Surekha, a visual artist from India, is exploring artistic forms through installations, video and photography since last two decades. Her works investigate how visuality can engage with gender/ ecology/socio-political aesthetics, negotiating public and private spaces.

społecznej reformy swoich czasów. W artykule podjęto próbę zrozumienia dominacji w historii kultury kategorii płci w Indiach z perspektywy feministycznej. W poezji Kabira określone zostały ramy społeczne skonstruowane w celu analizy, postrzegania i rozumienia kobiet jako podporządkowanych mężczyznom w hierarchii społecznej. Artykuł ukazuje filozoficzne stanowisko Kabira, które prowadzi do jego męskiej, szowinistycznej i patriarchalnej perspektywy podważającej wartość kobiet i patrzenia na nie z góry. Ujawnia to fizyczne i filozoficzne granice wyznaczone kobietom w danym społeczeństwie.

Słowa kluczowe: Postaci kobiet, oddanie, feminizm, filozofia indyjska, marginalizacja, patriarchy