

THE IDEA OF TIME IN EARLY MODERN HINDI POETRY: LOVE, MORALITY AND DECAY IN KABIR'S KALIYUGA

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Abstract

This paper is dedicated to examining the idea of time in early modern Hindi poetry through the figure of Kaliyuga in the poetry of Kabir. While classical traditions describe Kaliyuga as an age of degeneration, ritual corruption, and the weakening of Dharma, Kabir transforms it into a rhetorical and ethical device through which he critiques social hierarchies, empty ritualism, institutional religion, and the illusion of deferred salvation. The paper demonstrates that Kabir's engagement with time operates on three interconnected levels. First, he inherits the traditional discourse of Kaliyuga yet radicalizes it into a critique of Brahmanical authority, ritual practices, and the structures of religious mediation. Second, he uses time to foreground the urgency of human existence, emphasizing remembrance (*sumiran*), inner devotion, and ethical awakening over ritual observance. Third, Kabir reimagines death not as a fearful culmination within the cycle of rebirth but as a transformative moment of union with the divine, often articulated through intimate and gendered metaphors. In doing so, Kabir shifts the discourse of time from abstract cosmology to embodied human experience. The paper also draws attention to the fact that rejecting the postponement of liberation to an afterlife or future birth, Kabir privileges lived experience over scriptural authority and democratizes spiritual realization by locating truth within individual consciousness. Through this intervention, Kabir not only redefines Bhakti but also offers a profound critique of religious and social structures in early modern India. Ultimately, it is suggested that Kabir transforms Kaliyuga from a symbol of despair into a site of ethical confrontation, poetic resistance, and spiritual immediacy.

Keywords: *Kabir, Kaliyuga, Temporality, early modern Hindi poetry, Bhakti.*

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Introduction

The idea of time in Indian philosophical and religious tradition is not linear. Time does not end in a final day of judgment rather keeps on circulating like a cosmos wheel. The cycle of birth and rebirth, the noblest goal of a human thus to become enlightened and break the cycle of birth and rebirth. The paradox is that time in this circular motion also becomes the measuring tool of morality and human attribute. This circular motion of time keeps on flowing, giving time an indefinite circle. The Indian religious and philosophical traditions divide time in four epochs – Satyuga, Tretayuga, Dwaparyuga and Kaliyuga. With each yuga, the morality and human values decline ever further. Kaliyuga becomes the epitome of immorality, decline of Dharma and truth. Early modern Hindi poets inherited this concept of time and carried it forward. Most of them strengthened or repeated the notions of time. Among these poets, Kabir stands apart. He reconfigures time not merely as a cosmological category but also as a framework for rethinking Bhakti, the devotion and human existence. He destabilizes inherited notions of temporality and relocates time within lived human experience.

Rather than treating Kaliyuga merely as an epoch of degeneration of values, truth and Dharma, Kabir transforms it into a diagnostic and rhetorical device. Time, in his poetry, becomes the medium through which false religiosity is exposed, ethical urgency is intensified, and devotion is stripped of ritual postponement. Kabir's insistence is clear: What you get is here and now, there is no thereafter. Promises of karma playing out the amassed consequences in another life, another age, or another form is nothing but illusion.

It is argued here that Kabir's discourse of time operates on three interconnected levels. First, he inherits classical yuga theory and radicalizes it into a critique of social and religious authority. Second, he uses time to foreground the wasting of human life and the necessity of inner love over ritual action. Third, he refigures death not as an end or reward but as a pedagogical force that exposes the truth of the present. Through these moves, Kabir collapses cosmology into ethics and metaphysics into effect.

Time in classical tradition

The concept of time as a circular cosmos wheel appears first in the ancient text Rigveda, also credited as the oldest text of the Indian subcontinent. Later, Mahabharata, the grand narrative defines time as a wheel with spokes-

*A single cosmic wheel turns, fitted with its twelve spokes.
Three hubs hold it together – yet who truly understands it?
Within that wheel are set the seven hidden forms,
and in it rests the single, unageing principle.*

[Griffith 1896, Rigveda, 1.164.11–13]

This idea of time as wheel first appeared in Rigveda. Rigveda likewise defines time as a wheel.

*The twelve-spoked wheel, of the true (sun) revolves round the heavens, and never (tends) to decay; seven hundred and twenty children in pairs, Agni, abide in it.*¹
[Griffith 1896, Rigveda, 1.164.11]

The time as having four yugas (Chaturyuga) is introduced by the Puranic tradition. Vishnu Puran depicts the Chaturyuga, the four ages. In Vishnu Puran, the depiction of Kaliyuga is manifested in detail. The concept of Kaliyuga comes with Purans. Vaishnav tradition holds that Kaliyuga comes after Krishna's departure. Kaliyuga is seen and described as the worst of times where values get deteriorated, humans degrade. Vishnu Puran goes in detail and describes this time when fake Gurus, Oppressive rulers will be there. There will be so much materialism and immorality in society. People will have a short lifespan. The Vedic learning will be lost. Amid all this, Vishnu will incarnate as Kalki and save the world. Mahabharat tells us –

In the Treta Yuga, anger begins to arise; in the Dvapara it increases still more. But in the Kali Yuga [...] it is desire alone that dominates mankind.
[Van Buitenen 1979]

Non-Sanskrit tradition and Kaliyuga

This tradition of Kaliyuga also reaches non-Sanskrit traditions. In Ram Charit Manas of the 16th century, Tulsi Das describes the effects of Kaliyuga which are characterised by the house of sins, people consistently lying and are indulging in heinous acts.

Besides all its decaying nature, Kaliyuga offers an opportunity to be free – Tulsi describes Kaliyuga as an opportunity. He says that in Kaliyuga it is very easy to get out of the birth and rebirth cycle. He says just remembering and repeating the name of God is enough. Here Tulsi as is resonating with the Sanskrit tradition. This focus on remembrance of the name or *sumiran* also becomes the key point in *nirgun*² poets. The difference is when we look at the *nirgun* poetry including that of Kabir, this Sumiran becomes the tool to reject the rituals and dogmas of current religious tradition. Poets like Raidas emphasized the purity of the heart rather the rituals. Tulsi said the same thing, but he was not challenging the ritualistic traditions or

¹ द्वादशारं न हितज्जराय वर्वर्ति चक्रं परि द्यामृतस्य । आपुत्रा अग्ने मिथुनासौ अत्र सप्त शतानि विंशतिश्च तस्युः ॥
द्वादशारं न हि तज्जराय वर्वर्ति चक्रं परि द्यामृतस्य । आपुत्रा अग्ने मिथुनासौ अत्र सप्त शतानि विंशतिश्च तस्युः ॥

² Nirgun poets/saints are those poets who believed that God is formless and can be called by any name.

rejecting them entirely. Regardless of all the differences, both these traditions and Vishnu Puran tend to agree on one aspect – Bhakti or devotion.

While observing Tulsi, Anant Das of the 16th century must be considered, as well. Anant Das gives credit to Namdev for bringing Bhakti to Kaliyuga. Interestingly, while the Sanskrit tradition is lamenting over the loss of Bhakti, this tradition (even though agreeing with the Vaishnav tradition) perceives hope and talks about Saint/Poets as the reformers of Bhakti. Anant Das writes that a 13th-century poet Namdev also had Krishna under his control. This significantly emphasises the aspect that Anant Das believes – the Vaishnav tradition was under control of the Nirguna tradition. The reference to Kaliyuga does not stop here. Born in 1425, King Peepa Das a minor ruler in Rajasthan, India, was a Nirgun saint poet. He aspired to express his gratitude to Kabir, a saint poet. In expression of his gratitude Peepa wrote,

जै कलि नाम कबीर न होते।

तौ लोक बेद अरू कलिजुग मिलि करि भगति रसातलि देते॥

*Had there been no Name (of God) and no Kabir in this Kaliyuga,
then ordinary people, the Vedas, and the dark age of Kali – all together –
would have sunk devotion (bhakti) straight to the bottom of the ocean*

[Sharma Lalit 2012]

Here, Kaliyuga becomes the time where poets like Namdev and Kabir emerge and save Bhakti, which in Kaliyuga is the only way out.

Who was Kabir?

Kabir was born in Varanasi in a Muslim family. Though there are difference of opinion about his birth and death, but Anant Das decides his birth between 1500 and 1525. The popular legend is that he was born of a brahmin widow and she left him in the Ganga River, where a Muslim couple Neema and Neeru found him. Purushottam Agrawal (2009) debunked this legend and ensured that this story was later added to Kabir's biographies. It is important to note that Kabir was born and raised in a Muslim family but was deeply rooted in the Indian philosophic and religious traditions.

Raised in a Muslim family in Banaras, Kabir was familiar with both the traditions of time in two different religious paradigms. Whilst the was sematic tradition was at home ,the hematic tradition was all around in the city of Varanasi. Kabir's idea of time confronts both concepts. He examines and questions the idea of time in these traditions, re-interprets it and uses these concepts as a tool to analyse his own times. Kabir is constantly in dialogue with the traditions of his times and he uses the idea of time to reject notions which had almost acquired the status of universal truths. He is

not arguing to fix a few things rather he is in favour of completely rejecting the idea of institutional religion. He comes as an iconoclast who believes that spirituality can be experienced without any religion.

The perception of Kabir varies for different people. He is seen as a saint in northern India, in 1997, when Maghar, the place of his demise, was created as a new district, it was named Sant Kabir Nagar. However, the Hindi books for school curricula name him a saint poet. Kabir Panth, a sect after his name, sees him as "Great Saint" or "*Parmatama* Kabir Sahib". Scholars have viewed him differently at different times. Hidayutllah (1977) regarded him as an Apostle of Hindu Muslim Unity, Vaudeville (1957) saw him as a master of language, Hess (1983) viewed him as a poet, Robert Bly (2004) saw Kabir as an unapologetic poet. Bly calls him a mouthy weaver who is not afraid of any institution and depicts the truth of his times as it is. The initial scholarship of Ramchandra Shukla did not accept Kabir as a poet, but later critics like Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Barthwal underlined the strength enshrined in his poetry.

The textual traditions

Kabir's works predominantly were preserved in oral tradition. There were so many different verses in his name that some thought that Kabir was a generic name and not the name of a single poet. However, there are two major traditions of his texts – Eastern tradition represented by manuscripts of Bijak – a collection and holy book of Kabir panth, whereas Western tradition texts comprise the manuscripts found in Rajasthan and other parts. Kabir Granthawali is the major representative of this tradition of the texts. Bijak in this context had been out of academic scene for a very long time as its manuscripts found were not that old. The academic tradition relied heavily on authentic and ancient manuscripts to decide the authenticity of poems found under the name of Kabir. Bijak couldn't fit the criteria as the common practice in Kabir panth was to copy the Bijak and wash off the old copy in a river. This is the reason that available copies of Bijak didn't date long back in time. In this context, Shyam Sundar Das's Granthawali became one of the major sources as the one of the manuscripts it was based on was from 1504.

Kabir Panth believes that Bijak is the most authentic work of Kabir though it was first published in 1950, although Charlotte Vaudeville who translated Kabir's poems into French in 1957 asserts that Bijak contains many corrupt verses with references to the beliefs of Kabir panth. This is the reason she chose to translate from Shyam Sundar Das's Granthawali rather than Bijak of Kabir.

The differences between the texts of these two traditions are not only within their source location but also of the language. The Eastern tradition texts are written in Bhojpuri with a touch of Awadhi, while the language of Western tradition texts

is mixed with Rajasthani and Panjabi, which Acharya Ramchandra Shukla called *Sadhukkadi* – an unpolished language of Sadhus. Today, it is difficult to precisely determine Kabir's language, as his poetry was recorded by various people who brought their own modifications, even though Kabir himself says in one of his couplets that his language is eastern, i.e. the language of northern India.

Besides all these manuscripts, there are numerous poems in his name, which are present in public sphere but could not be found in any authentic manuscripts. It is difficult to determine whether they are authored by Kabir or not, as India has a long oral tradition of knowledge and it does not seem prudent to reject any poem which is not contained in manuscripts, if it has the characteristic of the poet. Even if they are not by Kabir but appear close in character of his poems, this should be seen as influence and strength of his poetry that many wrote poems in his influence and gave it his name long after he was gone.

Kaliyuga in Kabir's poetry appears in various shapes and sizes. Kabir describes Kaliyuga as the moral inversion of his times, meanwhile, he uses Kaliyuga as a tool to emphasize and challenge many beliefs.

Remembering is the key

Kabir's poetry foregrounds remembrance (*sumiran*) as an ethical and existential practice rather than merely a ritual act. He describes remembering as the very essence of life, and besides this everything in the world is just a hassle to human life. Kabir uses the device of *Sumiran* not only as a way to salvation which is the way practiced by the tradition, rather, he employs it to reject the existing religious dogma. He uses this device to make people aware that there is no point to forfeit the life to sleep. Addressing his audience, Kabir's poetic voice assumes the role of ethical awakening. For him, resonating the tradition, the very idea of human life is to "awaken" from the sleep in which humans slumber. The time spent in the world in Kabir's poetry resonates with sleepwalking, and he is calling upon people to wake up and face the reality and time around themselves. Kabir does not necessarily see this world as *Maya*, but instead as a time where being awake will enable one to see and examine the time critically. Remembrance become a device for awakening oneself. The idea proposed by him holds that remembering is the key in Kaliyuga, resonating the tradition. While stressing the importance of remembrance in Kaliyuga, Kabir's poetry simultaneously resists the transformation of remembrance into another form of ritual practice. He very clearly asserts that *Sumiran* or remembrance should be held within and not found on praying beads. He voices satire that world is constantly rolling the prayer beads but does not roll away the inner malice. It is time to leave the beads and foster the change within.

कर सेती माला जपै, हिरदे बहे डंड़ूल
पग ते पाला मैं गिल्या, भाजण लागी सूल

*The hand keeps on rolling the beads, the heart is filled with greed and turmoil
The feet are melting away, the end is near it stings the heart.*

[Das Shyamsundar 1874, Bhesh ko anag, 1]

While Kabir agrees that remembrance is the only way ahead to break out of the birth and rebirth cycle, he also uses this concept to expose and ridicule the practices of the time he lives in. Remembrance serves a dual purpose, – besides remembering the name of one's *God*, it also recalls the very world which is caught up in the practices of slapping sandal paste on forehead and spending time on prayer beads. Kabir points out that Kaliyuga is here, but he also wants to make sure that in the endeavours of surpassing the Kaliyuga we would not create a dogmatic Kaliyuga within ourselves.

Kaliyuga is here

Indian philosophical tradition had been discussing Kaliyuga as time where everything moral decays. Instead of abstract lamenting of the decay in values, Kabir's Kaliyuga is rather expressed with imagery of contemporary realities. For Kabir, Kaliyuga comes as a greedy money lender who lends money but keeps the borrower's mind chained and continues registering it in his ledger. This imagery proposed by Kabir not only describes Kaliyuga but also makes his audiences look at the social realities of his time where there are traps sprung by money lender and piling of compound interest.

कलि का स्वामी लोभिया, मनसा धरी बधाई
देहीं पैसा ब्याज काऊँ, लेखा करताँ जाई

*The king of Kaliyuga is Greed itself, says Kabir –
it keeps your mind chained*

*Not a single paisa will it lend without interest,
and right then it begins writing the ledger of debt.*

[Das Shyamsundar 1874, Chaanak ko ang doha, 7]

In Kabir's poetry, Kaliyuga functions as a framework for rendering social realities visible. Thereby, he rejects the idea that whatever is happening with one is not the result of karma amassed during his previous life, but rather a grim reality of the time which is seen as a metaphor of Kaliyuga. In Kaliyuga, the agencies of Dharma are not believed, people rush to brahmins as if they would help them to get closer to the One. His verses challenge the notion that suffering is merely the result of past-life karma. He calls the brahmins slack butchers who have no

mercy in their hearts. Kabir's time falls within the period when sacrificing animals was a part of the ritual in *Shakt* tradition (it is practiced to this day). On the other hand, there is *Vaishnav* tradition, which holds that one had to be initiated by taking *Diksha* or should listen to the *Katha*, sermon, to help themselves in the scorching Kaliyuga. His poetry critiques both ritual sacrifice and mediated religious authority, as he believes that no agency is required to meet the One. Everyone needs to find its own path instead of trusting the brahmins, as they are phony in Kaliyuga.

संतों पांडे निपुण कसाई

.....

गाय बधै सो तुरक कहावै, यह क्या इनसे छोटे।

कहैं कबीर सुनो भाई साधो, कलि में बाम्हन खोटे॥

Sanits! These brahmins are expert butchers

...

If you kill a cow, you are called a Muslim,

But are these brahmins any less than them?

Listen, people! Says Kabir in Kaliyuga, these brahmins are phony.

[Hess and Singh 1983, Shabd, 11]

The text diverges from earlier Puranic interpretations of Kaliyuga, as Kabir does not attribute all the problems to Kaliyuga. For him, Kaliyuga is a device which he has borrowed from the Puranic tradition. The Puranic tradition blames everything to Kaliyuga, and consequently reenforces the notion that people are losing their moral values. Humanity is getting corrupted, human values are in decay. While all this is happening the tradition believes that it is a cosmic cycle where everyone is doing their part. The life ends and one goes to rebirth. The cycle keeps on moving. In this cycle we should realize this world as *maya*. This notion turns the attention away from the realities of time. We believe that one will attain salvation hereafter. Kabir rejects the idea of this "hereafter", and formulates the problem of the institutions, drawing the attention of his audience to this aspect. Furthermore, he does not invariably blame Kaliyuga for this. For him, the time is very real and grounded as the world in front of him. He observes that people who have a few disciples around them call themselves *Mahnat*, head of an Ashram. Similarly, he notes that people are rushing to take a dip in the Ganga, the holy river, believing that immersing will wash away their sins. He is against this ritualism and does not believe that a dip in a river can wash off sins of a human. Kabir does not mention Kaliyuga at this point, as he already has the ears of the audience and can voice the thoughts he wanted to express. He sees that the woman who has drowned her family's values is on her way to take a dip in the Ganga. He warns her that she should meet a true guru to show her the path, or

else her liberation is going to perish. Kabir here talks about the very reality of time that one who have not uphold the values of family thinks that following a ritual of taking a dip in Ganga will wash away the sins.

चली कुलबोरनी गंगा नहाय।

.....

कहत कबीर हेतु करु गुरु से, नहिं तोर मुक्ती जाइ नसाय।।

The one who have drowned the family honour

is on her way to take a dip in Ganga

Says Kabir, meet a Guru or your salvation is set to perish

[Kabir 1922, Kabir Saheb Ki Shabdawali, Part-1]

Time here becomes the world around Kabir, where he observes that the cleric is screaming like a rooster from the top of a mosque as if Allah were deaf, where people observe fasting all day and butcher a cow in the night. This is the world where a yogi colours his cloths but not his inner self, brahmins fight with others but do not grasp the very essence of being. The world around Kabir is full of these absurd realities, he uses time to put theses absurdities forward. He does not attribute these to Kaliyuga only to make people believe in destiny, he presents these observations as they are to his audience. Amid all this, his verses repeatedly advance to foreground the absurdities of ritualistic society.

The faithful wife

Puranic tradition of Indian philosophy discusses the concept that Kaliyuga is the time to be characterised by predominant emphasis on materialism. The morality of society will be slipping away. Men and women will act according to their wishes; fidelity will weaken thus resulting a decay in society. Other Bhakti tradition poets also underline this as an attribute to Kaliyuga. Tulsi Das evolves the character of Rama in Manas as a faithful husband. He is depicted as *Maryada Purushottam*, the best of men, who holds the values above everything. Kabir sees this as a marker of his times, as well, but he changes this into a metaphor to express one's devotion to the One. In his poetry, the discourse of moral decline is transformed into a metaphor for devotional fidelity. Temporal decline becomes the condition through which mystical union is articulated. This is the juncture where Kabir uses the simile of a woman who is longing for her husband, one who is sad, as the husband is not with her, while the husband becomes a simile for Kabir's Ram. Kabir says that Ram is within him and he is longing to meet him, Kabir cannot meet him, using a simile of a fish who is thirsty although living in water. On the one hand, Kabir calls women *Maya*, fire of the hell, whereas on the other hand, he himself speaks from a woman's position to tell us about his agony and pain. Kabir is resonating the tradition where

women become metaphor for *Maya* [Hawley 2005] but simultaneously this time also becomes an agent for him to transcend the tradition and speak as a woman, since he can see that there is no better way to express his longing than in a female voice. The tradition pulls him in one direction, but the sensitivity of a poet pulls him in another. His poetry reflects the tension between the inherited patriarchal symbolism and the embodied devotional subjectivity. The time wherein Kabir resides, the Kaliyuga, where all the morality is decaying, becomes the showcase of his inner struggle, the fight between *Samskara* and *Samvedana*, sensitivity [Agrawal 2000]. Kaliyuga no longer remains a Purani concept, which one can only lament, or hope that the society would return to its moral high ground. Rather, with Kabir it becomes an arena where the realities of time are at play, and where Kabir, the poet, also comes to us with all his inner struggles and his dialogue with time. In all this chaos of Kaliyuga, Kabir's verses ultimately place in the foreground fidelity and singular devotion amid social fragmentation. This can be seen as the One omnipresent, but it is also deeply rooted in Kabir's times, where Kabir tells his audience that one needs to be faithful.

कबीर कलिजुग आई करि, किये बहुतज मीत। जिन दिल बंधी एक सँ ते सुख सोवे
नचींता॥

*The age of Kaliyuga is here, and people have many friends / lovers
The one whose heart is connected to one sleep peacefully*

[Das Shyamsundar 1874, Nihakarmi pativrat ko ang Doha, 13]

Songs to death

In Indian philosophical traditions, death is not perceived as the culmination; it is the gateway to rebirth. The cycle keeps on turning and the human life tries its best to get out of the cycle and attain *Moksha*, the salvation. Death becomes the reality no one can escape, and the biggest surprise of human life. Traditional understanding has been using death as wakeup call to let everyone know that nothing in life is permanent, and hence, substantial. In Kabir's poetry, death comes in two forms. He uses death to make his audience aware that all the glamour, the colours one sees will not last forever, and at the end one will go empty-handed like a gambler from the casino table. Death depicts the vainness of any pride fostered by a person. Here his poetry initially resonates with classical traditions of detachment. For Kabir, the world becomes a market to which there is no return for anyone. In saying this, Kabir is also profoundly rejecting the idea of rebirth or the chance to return to this world once again. His poetry subtly destabilizes the cyclical notions of return and rebirth. He uses the same vocabulary, but between the lines he tells his audience that death will take away everything.

कबीर नौबत आपणी, दिन दस लहू बजाय। ए पुर पटन ए गली बहुरि न देखे आई

Beat this drum of yours for only ten or twelve days (i.e., this human life is extremely short). This city these streets and lanes – once you leave, will never return to see them again. [Das Shyamsunadr, 1874 Chitavani ko ang doha, 1]

Death becomes a reality, as Kabir strives to tell people that if one does not have the word of *Hari* or Ram, the death will hunt them down. While drawing upon established philosophical motifs, the poetry simultaneously transforms death into a visual and affective metaphor. In this metaphor, Kabir becomes a woman who is calling for her husband to take her to his country. Kabir in this simile had been waiting for him and now is the time that Kabir should go to his place. Suddenly it is clear that death is transformed into a chance to be as one with one's husband. The grim notion around the death is that Yam, the god of death, will put the life in chains and take it away, is transformed into the festivity of a wedding. Death is reconfigured as a moment of ecstatic union rather than existential closure.

अब मोहि ले चलु ननद के बीर अपने देसा
इन पंचन मिली लूटी हूँ, संग संग, अहि विदेसा

Now take me to your home my beloved husband!

*in this foreign land, these 'Five' [vices] have gathered together,
and completely robbed me* [Dwivedi Hazari Prasad 1942]

Thus, death is not solely rendered as an ultimate truth in Kabir's poetry. Rather, it creates an occasion where time is not simply ending but marks a new beginning in form of meeting the metaphorical husband. For Kabir, death marks a joyous occasion, where he sets off on his journey to meet the One. This is the first time where it can be observed that death can be created in a visual shape of a woman who is all set to embark on her journey with her *Sindhora*³, vermilion pot, to meet her husband. The imagery of *sati* becomes a metaphor for ecstatic spiritual union. *Sati* is all set to go on the pyre with her husband, and Kabir tells us that here the time is to be one with the Husband and there is no space for the fickleness of mind. The loop of time reaches its point but does not embark upon another loop according to Kabir, he sees this as a transcendental embarkment upon the goal of human life – to meet the Ram.

³ *Sindhora* सिंधोरा is a box where married Hindu women keep the *Sindur*, a red powder like vermilion. This marks the married life, in many rituals besides wedding, women carry it with them.

डगमग छाड़ि दै मन बौरा।

अब तौ जरें बरें बनि आवै, लीन्हों हाथ सिंधौरा
होइ निसंक मगन है नाचौ, लोभ मोह भ्रम छाड़ौ

O mind! Drop this fickleness of yours!

Now is the time to be burnt, taking the vermilion pot in hands

Leave all the worry and dance! Leave greed, attachments and delusion

[Das Shyamsundar 1874, Pad, 21]

In Kabir's poetry, the spiritual journey is so firmly rooted in his time that he chooses the metaphor of *Sati*⁴, a practice of his times to turn the eyes of the audience to their very time while he is talking about spiritual journey. Time plays a dual role here; on the one hand, it marks the spiritual journey, whilst on the other hand it is a kaleidoscope of the time which is happening now and is very real in its essence.

It is here and now

Both sematic and hematic traditions see life as not the final or real time. The life becomes a waiting period for the final or judgment day. Indian philosophic traditions view this as an endless loop of life and death, making the time motion circular in contrast to a linear one. Indian tradition believes that this human life is very fortunate, and it has been granted to one because of the good karma accrued in previous lives. This human life is a window whereby one can use their consciousness and once for all break out of the life and death cycle. The human life here becomes a chance to attain *Moksha*, the salvation. In both cases, the human life is a journey, a device or tool to attain something bigger and noble. The human life is not to be seen as an objective or reality. This is the paradox that only time and space we see and feel through our senses becomes unreal or a preparation for something beyond, which one has not seen or felt yet. Time shifts shape from something real and earthly to something abstract, a hereafter. The poetry destabilizes notions of deferred salvation and privileges immediacy over metaphysical postponement. For Kabir, spiritual realization must occur within lived experience rather than in a deferred afterlife. When Kabir is rejecting the idea, he is also interrogating the deterministic interpretations of karma. One of the Kaliyuga's traits discussed in the tradition is that in Kaliyuga one must pay for their sins in their lifetime. Kaliyuga is used as a scarecrow to make people embark upon the path of morality and live their human lives in compliance with essential values. Kabir is against the idea of using Kaliyuga as a scarecrow or telling his audience that *Moksha* or salvation will come afterwards as a reward of one's good

⁴ *Sati* सती was a historical custom in north India. In this custom, Hindu widow immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This was abolished in 1829 by a British law with efforts of social reformers like Raja Mohan Rai.

actions. Kabir's renunciation of this concept also stands with the human experience that everything we see around us is real, and some abstract time, a hereafter, does not exist. He persistently asserts that the tradition is telling people what is written in books and scriptures, while he imparts what he has seen with his own eyes. His poetry repeatedly privileges lived experience over scriptural abstraction. The poetry of Kabir puts out human experience as the truth and not what the books and scriptures might say. Kabir, here by doing so, relocates the human experience to the centre of spiritual realization. One does not require a book or scriptures to start the journey – Kabir here somewhat echoes the words of Buddha that one must be their own light. Kabir is telling his audience – if you do not become free now then there is no hereafter:

*Friend! hope for the Guest while you are alive.
 Jump into experience while you are alive!
 Think... and think... while you are alive.
 What you call "salvation"
 belongs to the time before death.
 If you don't break your ropes while you're alive,
 do you think ghosts will do it after?
 The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic
 just because the body is rotten –
 that is all fantasy.
 What is found now is found then.
 If you find nothing now,
 you will simply end up in the City of Death.*

[Bly, Robert 2004]

Conclusion

The idea of time in Kabir's poetry cannot be reduced merely to the inherited framework of cyclical cosmology found in the Puranic and Bhakti traditions. While Kabir draws from the established discourse of Kaliyuga as an age of decline, he simultaneously destabilizes and reinterprets that discourse. Kabir's poetry marks a significant shift in the understanding of temporality in Hindi literature of early modern period. Instead of merely lamenting moral decay, he uses the language of Kaliyuga to expose the contradictions of his society and to challenge the structures that sustain them. The critique of Brahmins, ritual practices, false asceticism, and performative religiosity becomes the reality of his time. Kabir transforms time into a deeply personal and affective experience.

Most importantly, his poetry resists the postponement of truth to an abstract afterlife. Against both cyclical and linear notions of salvation that defer fulfilment

to another birth or another world, Kabir insists on the immediacy of realization. Salvation must occur within lived time, within the present body, and within human consciousness itself. This insistence on the “here and now” gives Kabir’s poetry its radical force and enduring relevance.

Thus, Kabir’s engagement with time is not merely theological or philosophical; it is poetic, existential, and transformative. By collapsing cosmology into ethics and metaphysics into lived experience, Kabir reshapes the meaning of Kaliyuga and offers a vision of human life rooted in awareness, resistance, and inner awakening.

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