

Kabir in the Guru Granth Sahib: An Explanatory Essay

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PART II

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@ Kabir Granthavali, hereafter 'KG'.

Guru Granth: hereafter 'GG' (SGGS).

Emphasis is ours. - Ed. SR

THE NUMBER OF *DOHAS* IN @Kabir Granthavali is 724 while that in the #Guru Granth is 243. Of these 243, slightly less than half (115) are common to both texts. This core of common *dohas* may best be described as expressing 'basic *nirguna bhakti*', in other words the commonplaces of liberal devotional religion directed to the God beyond all form: God's omnipotence, love of God to the exclusion of all else, the importance of prayer and remembering the Lord's name, the worthiness of saintly people, the meaninglessness of a life empty of devotion to God, the distinction between hypocritical outer display and genuine interior devotion, etc.

In the remaining 628 *dohas* of the KG, however, we find several important themes which are largely absent from the GG *dohas*. To begin with, there is the long section of 41 *dohas* entitled "*paracha kau anga*" (Chapter of the Mystical Experience) which is considered the heart of the KG. **In these *dohas*, Kabir describes, in radiant colors and with a powerful intensity, his moments of mystical experience.** The GG is content to include a few relatively easier *dohas* affirming the abolition of **the sense of duality** between God and the devotee. **By contrast, Kabir in the KG goes on at great length about the ecstatic experience itself, describing it in the vivid metaphorical language characteristic of all mystics:**

*Kabira tela ananta ka, manau ugi suraja sena
Pati sanga jagi sundari, kaugiga ditha teni* [KG 9.15]

Kabir, the radiance of the Infinite
was like the rising of a host of suns:
The wife woke up next to her husband
and marveled at the wonder!)¹

Or again:

*Kabira kavala prakasiya, ugya nirmala sura
Nisa andhiyari miti gal, bage anahada tura* [KG 936]

Kabir, the lotus has bloomed,
A pure sun has risen,
The night's darkness has vanished,
The trumpet of the Unstruck Sound fills the air.

Another theme, which seems to be de-emphasized in the GG, is that which constitutes the prominent first section of the KG *dohas*, the "*satagura mahima kau anga*" (Chapter of the Greatness of the Divine Guru). This long section of 34 *dohas* praises the divine guru and witnesses to his grace in kindling the mystical urge in the devotee:

*Satagura ki mahima ananta, ananta kiya upagara
Locana ananata ughariya, ananta dikhavandahara [KG 1.13]*

The greatness of the divine guru is infinite,
Infinite is his bounty:
He opened my eyes to the Infinite
and showed me Infinity.)

Elsewhere, the stress is on the great difficulty with which the divine guru is found, and the usefulness of all human gurus:

*Aisa koi na milai, hamakau lei pichani
Apana kari kirapa karai, lai utarai maidani [KG 5.5]*

Such a one cannot be found
Who will acknowledge us,
Show us his favour, take us as his own
And help us cross the open valley.

In the GG, there are few *dohas* which mention the divine guru, and even these can be read as referring to a human guru as well. There appears in this matter to be a clear difference between the mystic of the KG whose entire focus is on his relationship with the divine guru, and the GG's near silence on the question, no doubt a reflection of the Sikh Panth's solid tradition of human gurus.

A third important theme in the KG *dohas* is that of the difficulty of the way of devotion. An occasional *doha* in the GG may express the thought in passing, but in the KG it appears central:

*Bhagati duheli Rama ki, nahi kayara ka kama
sisa utarai hatha sau, so lesi Har nama [KG 14.18]*

The bhakti of Ram is hard to obtain:
It is not for cowards!
Sever your head with your own hands,
And then invoke Ram's name!

It is stressed again and again that very few who set out on the path of devotion ever reach their goal:

*Kabira bhathi prema ki, bahutaka baithe ai
sira sau pau soi piyai, natara piya na jai [KG14.34]*

Kabir, in that liquor shop of love,
Many have come to sit:
He who pawns his head can drink,
Otherwise there's nothing doing!

Above all, the way of devotion is a solitary one:

*Lalana ki obari nahi, hansana ki nahi pati
simhana ke lehada nahi, adhu na calai janati [KH 4.18]*

Rubies do not fill store-rooms,
Hansa birds do not fly in lines,
Lions are not found in flocks
and saints do not walk in troops!

A fourth characteristic of the KG *dohas* is a much more prominent use of terms and concepts borrowed from Tantric Yoga. The pioneering work of P.D. Barthval, H.P. Dwivedi and P. Chaturvedi has demonstrated an ultimate link between Kabir and the esoteric tradition of the Siddhas (Buddhist Tantrics) and the Nathas (Saivite Yogis).²

Charlotte Vaudeville has further suggested that Kabir's way represents "an original synthesis of Bhakti and medieval Yoga."³ An examination of the complex "moods and motivations" of this esoteric medieval yogic tradition, and of Kabir's particular uses of it, is beyond the scope of this essay. The point being made here is simply that the SGGS *dohas* make little reference to the practices or technical terminology of this esoteric tradition, whereas the KG has preserved many which are difficult to understand without some knowledge of it. For example, we may take the following *doha*:

*Mana laga unamanna sau, gagana pahauca jai
cad bihuna cadina, taha alakha Niranjana rai* [KG 9.8]

My mind has entered the *unmana* state,
The vault of heaven has been scaled:
Where moonlight shines without a moon,
There dwells the invisible king Niranjan!

Unmana refers to the state of supra-consciousness towards which yogis aspire and *gagana* to the highest of the *cakras*, or **astral nerve centers through which the *kundalini* power rises; the place "where moonlight shines without a moon"** is a common metaphor for the supra-conscious state, and "the invisible king Niranjan" is a personification of this same state (*nir-anjan* meaning "un-sullied", in other words beyond the impurity of all qualifications).⁴

Along with this use of yogic terminology, we also find in the KG many of those particularly obscure utterances of Kabir known as *ulatbamsi*: paradoxical statements of seemingly impossible reality, the purpose of which is to convey an experience which defies logic. For example:

*Angana beli akasa phala, anabyara ka dudha
asa siga ki dhanuhadi, ramai bajha ka puta* [KG 13.3]

In the courtyard is the creeper and in the sky its fruit,
It is like the milk of a calfless cow,
The bow is made of a hare's horn
And the barren woman's son plays

These utterances are very close in spirit to the *sandhya-bhasa* or in "intentional language" of the Buddhist Siddhas, and their presence in the KG points to the preservation in that tradition of an esoteric dimension of Kabir hardly to be found in the SGGS *dohas*.

Finally, despite the numerous utterances of Kabir which ridicule professional ascetics and deny that salvation requires cutting oneself off from society, there are in the KG a large number of *dohas* which reveal a strong ascetic streak. It is expressed, as asceticism usually is, in the form of tirades against women. Woman is characterized as "*kali nagini* (a black cobra), "*kunda naraka ka*" (the pit of hell), "*Juthani jagata ki*" (the refuse of the world),⁵ and **is seen as nothing but an impediment to spiritual enlightenment:**

*Nari nasavai tini guna, jau nara pasai, hoi
bhagati mukutinija gyanamai paisi na sakai koi* [KG 30.7]

Woman ruins everything
When she comes near a man:
Devotion, salvation and divine knowledge
No longer enter his soul.

This ascetic streak is totally absent from the SGGS *dohas*, there being only the mildest of the injunctions against sensuality and none of the deprecation of women. This absence must be related to the fact that the SGGS was compiled for a religious community of householders rather than solitary spiritual seekers.

The householder-saint of the Guru Granth Sahib:

If the KG emphasizes certain themes congenial to the “moods and motivations” of individualistic mystical religion, the SGGS appears by contrast to give special prominence to religious themes supportive of a sense of religious community and social morality. There is in general more exhortation to moral behavior and less expression of mystical transports of any sort. The KG contains many utterances such as the *dohas* of the “*paraca kau anga*” whose force derives from their nature as a lure of the spiritual seeker. By contrast, the most forceful utterances in the SGGS are the *dohas* in which men are urged to settle their accounts with God before death overtakes them and it is too late:

*Kabira Ramu na cetio, jara pahucio ai
lagi mandira duara te, aba kia kadhia jai* [SGGS: salok 132]

Kabir, they paid no heed to Ram,
But now old age has come:
When [fire] has reached the door of the temple,
What can be taken away?

This theme of urgency in the face of death is not absent from the KG, but it is not the persistent refrain that is in SGGS. Of the *dohas* which the KG and the SGGS share in common, more touch on this theme than on any other single theme. Charlotte Vaudeville has suggested that this sense of urgency should be seen in the context of the esoteric tradition and its ideal of the *jivan-mukta* (the person who attains spiritual liberation within his lifetime).⁶ Although some of the *dohas* of the KG can lend themselves to such an interpretation, most of the utterances about death found in the SGGS *dohas* seem to appeal to a different set of “moods and motivations.” In a *doha* like the following, the fear of death is invoked primarily to urge men to get right with a just God:

*Kabira talai tolai dinu gaia, biaju badhantau jai
na Hari bhajio na khatu phatio, kalu pahuco ai* [SGGS: salok 208]

Kabir, putting off paying, the day has passed,
the interest goes on mounting –
Man has not adored Hari or cleared his debts
and lo! Death has arrived!

This orientation suggests that in the Sikh Panth, as in most organized religions, the fear of judgment received more stress than the positive lure of the divine. Agehananda Bharati has commented about the utterances of mystics that they are generally “of an a-social, even anti-social, autocratic, self-indulgent kind, marginally or artificially related to moral and social considerations.”⁷ This may be a good characterization of the KG themes discussed earlier, but certainly does not describe the “moods and motivations” expressed in SGGS

dohas like the one just quoted. The theme of getting right with God before it's too late, so prominent in the SGGS, is certainly informed above all by "moral and social considerations."

This is true likewise of the second theme which is given prominence in the *dohas* of the SGGS: the value of associating with righteous and saintly people and the dangers of keeping bad company. Good company, usually understood to mean the company of saints and their followers, is extolled as an inspiration to proper devotional conduct:

Kabira santa ki gaila na chodiai, maragi laga jau
pekhata hi punita hoi, bhatata japiai nau [SGGS: salok 130]

Do not leave the way of the saints,
Follow in their path:
Just seeing them, man is purified,
Meeting them, he invokes the Name.

The concept of bad company is usually epitomized in the dreaded figure of the meat-eating, liquor-drinking, Devi-worshipping Sakta, a sign of the influence of Vaisnava ideals and biases on both Kabir and the Sikh Panth. The exhortations to stay away from such bad moral influences are very strong:

Kabira sakata sangu na kijiai, durahi jaii bhagi
basanu karo parasiali, tau kachu lagai dagu [SGGS: salok 131]

Do not associate with Saktas,
flee from them:
By touching a blackened vessel,
one is sure to get stained!

Thus we see that the *dohas* of Kabir included and preserved in SGGS tradition tend to be those which encourage the "moods and motivations" appropriate to a solid, moral, God-fearing religious community of householders. Utterances pointing to the ecstasies of mystical experience are not totally absent, but are strikingly few in comparison with those found in the KG. Kabir in SGGS *dohas* is the householder-saint who preached a way of devotion not incompatible with ordinary life in this world, the blunt spokesman for a liberal and common-sense religion of inner sincerity and outer morality. This is Kabir the religious poet of the common people, readily understood and quoted for proverbial religious wisdom throughout northern India. What our exploratory examination of the KG *dohas* has revealed is another, more esoteric Kabir, heir to the solitary spiritual quest of the Siddhas and the nathas, and an explorer of the depths of mystical experience. The absence of this aspect of Kabir in the *dohas* of SGGS underlines the difference in orientation between a solitary God-intoxicated mystic and an organized religious movement. What to the mystic is of central importance may be sufficiently asocial and amoral to be slightly disturbing to the religious organizer. Even as preliminary and limited an exploration as the present one suggests the possibility that Guru Amar Das and Guru Arjan may have "edited out" the mystic and emphasized the teacher and preacher. Only painstaking research of the type suggested at the beginning of this essay will confirm to what extent this was actually the case. **Further comparative study of SGGS and the wider Kabir corpus will certainly enable scholars of Sikhism as an organized religion. It will also result, I am sure, in a greater appreciation of Kabir as a unique religious genius irreducible to any school or panth, a great mystic who may well have uttered the following doha from the KG:**

Kabira dekha ika agama, mahima kahi na jai

teja Punjab parsā dhani, nainani raha samai [KG 9.12]

Kabir has seen the One, the Inaccessible,
whose glory is ineffable:
That luminous Being, that Spouse who is the Touchstone
is now enclosed in my eyes!



- End of Part II
(concluded)

References

1. The translations from the KG quoted here are adapted from those done by Vaudeville in her Kabir volume; her able wording has been kept except where a few changes seemed warranted.
2. P.D. Barthwal, *The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*, Banaras: Indian Book Shop, 1936; H.P. Dvivedi, Kabir, revised ed., Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1971; P. Chaturvedi, *Kabir-Sahitya ki Parakh*, Allahabad, 1981.
3. Vaudeville, "Kabir and Interior Religion," *History of Religions*, III, 2 (1964), p. 106.
4. For a discussion of several of the important terms of Tantric Yoga and their use by Kabir, see Vaudeville, tr. *Kabir Granthavali (Doha)*, Pondicherry: Institut Francais d'Indologie, 1957, pp. xiv-xxiv.
5. KH 30.2, 30.16 and 30.20
6. Vaudeville, *Kabir*, p. 148.
7. Agehananda Bharati, *The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext in Modern Mysticism*, Santa Barbara, Calif: Ross-Erikson, 1976, p. 87.