

## Original Article

# An Overview of Socio-Religious Conditions in Kabir's Time

Dr. Ritu Varshney

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Amity University Mumbai

**Abstract**

*The fifteenth century, encompassing the core of Kabir's life, was a time of profound social turbulence and disorder. It was a turbulent time. Society was divided into the names of caste, creed, and class. Despair, distrust, and depression were its hallmarks. Religion was the root cause of division. Due to political instability, violence became rampant across the country. Small rulers and landowners acted with unchecked power, committing numerous atrocities without restraint.*

*Although the Muslim rulers had governed India for a century, they showed little affection for the land or its inhabitants. A deep mutual suspicion and resentment existed between the rulers and the people, creating a divide. The fear of forced conversion to Islam drove Hindus to cling tightly to their traditional social and religious practices, sometimes with an intensity that felt foreign to them. This was the first time they had confronted such an organized religious sect, which they perceived as a significant threat.*

*During Kabir's time, two parallel religious movements emerged in India: the Bhakti movement in Hinduism and the Sufi movement in Islam. These movements, which later reached their zenith in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, played a pivotal role in reforming Indian society.*

*The Bhakti movement, which emphasized personal devotion to God over ritualistic practices, was gaining momentum. Saints like Ramananda, Kabir, and others sought to break down barriers of caste and religion, advocating for a direct connection with the divine. Sufism, a mystical Islamic tradition, emphasized love, tolerance, and the oneness of humanity. It resonated with the ideas of many Bhakti poets. Kabir emerged as a powerful critic of the socio-religious conditions of his time. He rejected caste-based discrimination, ritualism, and dogmatism in both Hinduism and Islam. Kabir's teachings sought to bridge the gap between Hindus and Muslims, advocating for a universal, inclusive spirituality.*

**Keywords:** Kabir, Bhakti Movement, Sufi Movement, Socio- Religious conditions

**Address for correspondence:** Dr. Ritu Varshney, Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Amity University Mumbai

Email: [rituvarshney77@gmail.com](mailto:rituvarshney77@gmail.com)

**Submitted:** 20 Sep 2024 **Revised:** 29 Sep 2024 **Accepted:** 15 Oct 2024 **Published:** 30 Nov 2024

**INTRODUCTION:**


It is really ironic that Islam, meaning compassion for all, came to India at the point of the sword. The zealots forced their faith on the natives without converting their hearts and minds. The converted Hindus adopted the new faith like holding a banner in hand while joining a procession. They continued to worship their own gods and goddesses. They were half Hindu and half Muslim. Kabir's family too seems to belong to this class.<sup>1</sup>

Chaos reigned after Muhammad Bin Tughlaq (1325–1351) abandoned the Muslim dominion in India. creating extreme poverty and suffering among the populace as a result of its poor

governance and fervent religious intolerance. He departed from a nation beset by starvation, disease, and uprising.

Timur's invasion of India in 1398 saw him defeat thousands of innocent men, women, and children, resulting in the loss of most of the country's riches. The picturesque city of Delhi was left in ruins, Meerut was pillaged, and the Muslim conqueror's route to northern India was marked by chaos and ruin.

India never experienced the noble aspects of Islam. The remarkable character of the Prophet of Arabia remained unknown to them, leaving one to imagine their perception of the faith.

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	DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14626846">10.5281/zenodo.14626846</a>

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**How to cite this article:**

Varshney, D. R. (2024). An Overview of Socio-Religious Conditions in Kabir's Time. Royal International Global Journal of Advance and Applied Research, 1(5), 11–15. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14626846>

The destruction of their temples and the violations of their sacred traditions by the invaders from the northwest did not diminish the Hindus' faith in their religion. In many cases, this was a time of significant religious turmoil.<sup>2</sup>

In Kabir's era, the priestly class had gained considerable power and started to interfere in government matters. Sikander Lodhi was a contemporary of Kabir, and during his reign from 1489 to 1517, there was a notable increase in the persecution of Hindus. Throughout this time, Ulema held significant influence over political issues. It required immense determination to disregard their advice and take actions that contradicted the teachings of the Orthodox Church. The impact of the priestly order on the state's interests was undeniably negative.

Non-Muslims were subjected to severe disabilities by the state. Conversions by force were the norm. Technically known as the Zimmis, the non-Muslims were required to pay a poll tax known as Jaziya to have their lives and property protected. They were required to pay it in lieu of military service; it was a form of commutation money. According to the sacred law, they were required to be humble and obedient. Even if they wanted to join the army, they were prohibited from doing so. There are documented cases of men who were killed for performing their religious rites, and even the smallest amount of publicity was prohibited. Some Muslim rulers prohibited the construction of new temples because they were so bigoted.<sup>3</sup>

The ruling class was encouraged to live in luxury by the Islamic state. Muslims held the highest positions in the state, and promotion to honorific ranks was typically decided by the royal whim rather than by ability. Great vices resulted from easy riches acquisition and court celebration involvement. Muslims began to lose their youthful vitality and manliness at the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Superstition and ignorance started to take root in Muslim society as wealth expanded, weakening the influence of Islam. In his *Fatu-hat-Firuz-Shahi*, Firuz Tughlaq mentions a number of heretical cults that he arbitrarily repressed and placed their leaders in jail or executed. Women's freedom was curtailed as they were prohibited from visiting the tombs of holy men outside the city. Firuz further demonstrated his strictness by imposing heavy fines on women who disobeyed this order.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of Muslim rule on Hindus was varied. Hindus experienced Muslim authority differently; they were concerned about and bitter about the limitations placed upon them. Most of them lived in poverty, despair, and struggle, making just enough money to feed themselves and their families. They were overtaxed and had no intention of accumulating a fortune. Subject classes had to pay taxes and had a low standard of living. Hindus never had the chance to completely realize their political

potential because they were denied access to prominent positions and lived in an atmosphere of mistrust and shame. Hinduism began to deteriorate when governmental power was lost. The people who were created among their means were seen as the government's deadliest foes.<sup>6</sup>

Not only the effect of Islam led the society towards destruction, but also the Hindu social system itself had some lacking. The division based on caste was a curse of the Hindu society. It was divided into four castes- *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *Shudra*. Among them, Brahmins were considered to be superior. Religion had become the exclusive monopoly of the Brahmins during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They had all the political, social, religious, and economic privileges. They were exempted from all the taxes. The burden of taxation fell upon the poor Shudras, who were considered to be the servants of the Brahmins. They were deprived of all their rights. They did not have the right to reading and writing of the Vedas. Thus, the caste system was a blot on the Hindu society. Having outlived its utility, it had become a noose around the neck of those who belonged to low castes. The tag of 'untouchable' attached to the Shudras tells tales of their social exploitation and personal sufferings. The temple doors were closed to them. Totally dejected, they seem to have lost all hope of redemption. Kabir's age also saw the emergence of several religious sects. Each sect worshipped its own God with a zeal bordering on fanaticism and looked down on the other.

Thus, society at the time of Kabir had fanatic Hindus, and fanatic Muslims, with a sprinkling of half Hindus and half Muslims. Equally ignorant of the spirit of religion, they were devoid of the spirit of mutual understanding. They looked upon each other as opponents. The Muslim rulers cherished a sacred wish to establish Islam as the only religion, hence favored Muslims. This lent a political hue to the division. The alliance born of the nexus of the priests and politicians added fuel to the fire. The rulers turned despotic and let loose a reign of terror.<sup>7</sup>

The chaotic conditions prevailing in Kabir's age were the cause as well as the consequences of such divisions. They lay at the root of individual distress and social conflicts. To hope for peace from such a society was, to quote Dr. Ram Kumar Verma, to expect "a flower to exhale fragrance even when its petals have been plucked apart and scattered far and wide."<sup>8</sup>

Insecure and apprehensive, both Hindus and Muslims stuck to their religious and social forms and rituals for security: the former was afraid of being uprooted and the latter anxious to plant themselves. Rituals replaced religion. The heads of two creeds, *Mullah* and *Pandey*, instead of weaning them from such folly, made them sink deeper into it. "The public mind was so trained by these rituals and conventions that the truth just could not reflect itself upon it."<sup>9</sup>

Confusion and chaos had become the order of the day. There was darkness all around. However, it was the darkness before the advent of the dawn.

It was at this point of the time that, like a sudden flash of lightning, something new dawned in the dark sky. It was the Bhakti movement.<sup>10</sup> This *Nirgun Bhakti Dhara* was brought from the South by Ramananda and it was left to Kabir to carry it to the masses.

If the *Sagun* mode of devotion softened the drudgery of the outer rituals with inner love, that of *Nirgun* rejected the rituals. The former sought the support of the scriptures; the latter relied on the experience. The former worshipped God as an entity apart from the self (as an idol in the temple); the latter found Him pervading within the self. The *Nirgun* mode suited Kabir's temperament and the needs of his age better than the *Sagun*. Kabir adopted both and eventually dropped both of them. With such a beacon light, Kabir began his crusade against the forces of darkness.

One of the key features of the Bhakti movement was its focus on progressive social reform. The leaders of the Bhakti movement which included saints, poets, musicians, social reformers, and radical thinkers, questioned many regressive social practices of their times, including the hierarchical caste system, widely prevalent class divisions, and religious antagonisms. They promoted a syncretic God of love to unite Indian society, which was then divided by religious, caste, regional, and class fault lines. It is, thus, undeniable that the Bhakti movement left a lasting impact on the social, cultural, political, and religious life of Indian society.

Kabir's advent on the scene was like a messenger of light. He carried this light of love, knowledge, and freedom to suffering humanity. Firmly believing in the equality of all before God, he infused a new hope in the hearts of the downtrodden. He exhorted people to see that all divisions were delusions because the same spirit rolls in all the objects, and there is just one God.<sup>11</sup>

People believe that Kabir was the first to openly declare Hindu-Muslim unity, which was attained by assuming that both perspectives were part of a higher religious reality. His teachings ultimately succeeded in dismantling the barriers of Hindu social exclusivism and caste discrimination as well as Islamic theological dogmatism. Kabir created a vital relationship between the two points of view.<sup>12</sup>

Although India during Kabir's time was marked by misrule and chaos, it also witnessed vibrant religious activity and a significant literary awakening in vernacular languages. A notable aspect of the period's religious evolution was the rise of several devotees, often referred to as saints or mystics. Kabir was among these prominent figures. These medieval saints shared some distinctive common traits: they were non-sectarian, meaning they were

either not affiliated with or did not lead any specific religious sect.

These saints had no intention of founding a distinct religious sect. They were unbound by any specific creed and rejected blind adherence to sacred scriptures. Their spiritual enlightenment stemmed from personal effort, independent thinking, and self-culture. They shunned rituals, ceremonies, and rigid dogmas, often vehemently criticizing idolatry. Rejecting polytheism, they upheld belief in a singular God and, more significantly, recognized the unity of this divine presence across various religious traditions—whether invoked as Krishna, Rama, Shiva, Allah, or others.

They emphasized Bhakti (love or devotion) as the sole path to salvation, offering a profound psychological analysis and an expansive interpretation of this concept. Their teachings on Bhakti represent their most enduring contribution to Indian religious thought. For them, Bhakti signified a wholehearted, uninterrupted, and intense devotion to God, devoid of any selfish motives, which gradually deepened into an all-consuming love.

This divine love was often compared to human relationships, categorized by analogies such as the loyalty of a servant to a master, a mother's love for her child, and a lover's intense love for his beloved. The source of eternal bliss and the Supreme Beloved was imagined to be Brahma, the Supreme God or ultimate reality, also known as Ram, Hari, Krishna, or by other names and abstract concepts.

The saints taught that God does not reside in temples but in the hearts of humans, viewing the physical body as His sacred dwelling. They asserted that the realization of this truth through personal love and devotion toward God is the very essence of religious life.<sup>13</sup>

These saints profoundly impacted society, bringing about significant social transformations. Their influence led to a shift in the rigid structure of the caste system, which had been an integral and unyielding part of Hindu society. A growing number of Hindus began to question its validity, and its rigidity started to erode. Similarly, idol worship faced widespread criticism, prompting many to abandon the practice altogether.

The reformist messages of these saints also improved the treatment of lower classes within Hindu society, fostering greater respect and dignity for them. Furthermore, their teachings bridged the gap between Hindus and Muslims, promoting mutual understanding and bringing the two communities closer. In this way, these saints became catalysts for both social and religious reform, reshaping societal norms and encouraging harmony.<sup>14</sup>

During Kabir's time, two parallel religious movements emerged in India: the Bhakti movement in Hinduism and the Sufi movement in Islam. These movements, which later reached their zenith in the

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, played a pivotal role in reforming society.

The roots of the Bhakti movement can be traced to ancient texts like the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Bhagavata Purana. On the other hand, Sufi saints began settling in India as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Among them, Shaikh Muinuddin Chisti, the founder of the Chisti order of Sufis in India was particularly influential. Arriving in India around 1192, shortly after the fall of Prithvi Raj Chauhan, he initially resided in Lahore and Delhi before finally settling in Ajmer, where he passed away in 1235-36.

The most significant achievement of these two movements lay in their capacity to liberate society from rigid dogmas, excessive rituals, caste-based discrimination, and communal animosity. Instead of promoting division, the Bhakti and Sufi traditions mutually exchanged each other's ideas. Both movements were fundamentally egalitarian, advocating a straightforward and inclusive spirituality expressed in the language of ordinary people. They neither sought political favor nor engaged with political developments, concentrating solely on the spiritual and social betterment of society.

In Northern India, the Bhakti school of thought gained widespread acceptance, providing solace to the deeply troubled Hindu soul of the time. People found aesthetic, moral, and spiritual nourishment in the personalities and teachings of Ram and Krishna. This connection offered them spiritual upliftment and ecstatic joy, allowing them to transcend the harsh realities of their environment. For many, this devotion not only helped them forget the horrors of their surroundings but also brought genuine and lasting peace to their hearts.

Poets of exceptional talent and a cosmopolitan perspective composed hymns extolling Lord Krishna and Ram in the vernacular languages. Their sweet and immortal songs not only celebrated divine love and devotion but also resonated deeply with people across social and cultural boundaries, making their works timeless treasures of spiritual and literary heritage.<sup>15</sup>

Many of these spiritual singers were contemporaries of Kabir. Kabir was deeply influenced by these saints. These devoted souls expressed their fervent love for the divine, as pure and flowing as the waters of the Ganges and the Yamuna. Their heartfelt songs resonated with people from all walks of life, who eagerly embraced and sang the praises of the Lord.

The school of Bhakti abolished strict caste divisions. Despite his low social status as a member of the untouchable caste, Ravidas was revered for his deep, selfless love for God and his spiritual wisdom. His hymns and teachings focused on equality, love, and devotion, resonated widely and led to his

recognition as a saint, not just by people from his own community but by all.<sup>16</sup>

Sufism was free from fanaticism. It seems that Kabir was also influenced by Sufism, which was a parallel stream that influenced the religious life of people in North India. Shaikh Nizamuddin Aulia (1238-1325), one of the greatest Sufis of the Chisti order in India, had a great impact on the hearts of his disciples. The idea of universal love is manifested in his sayings: "O Muslims! I swear by God, that He holds dear those who love Him for the sake of human beings, and also those who love human beings for the sake of God. This is the only way to love and adore God."<sup>17</sup> The Sufis came to believe in the divine essence present in every soul. They also viewed serving human beings as an integral aspect of their spiritual practice.

The Sufi singers freely interacted with Hindu Bhaktas and connected with followers of other faiths. Sufi saints were individuals of profound spiritual devotion, living ascetic lives and emphasizing self-discipline as a means to prepare for the intuitive experience of God. They cultivated a deep, ecstatic love for God and upheld the belief in God's immanence, encapsulated in the idea that "All is in God." A significant concept in Sufism is the doctrine of *fana*—the annihilation of the self—representing the dissolution of human attributes through union with God. Sufi saints believed in the soul as a distinct spiritual entity, separate from the body but connected to the universal soul. However, orthodox Islamic authorities often deemed these beliefs heretical, leading many Sufi preachers to sacrifice their lives for their faith, despite considering themselves devout Muslims.<sup>18</sup>

The Sufi saints were indeed devout followers of Islam who adhered to the core principles of Shariat (Islamic law) but emphasized a deeper, more mystical understanding of faith. For Sufis, the external practices of Islam—such as prayer, fasting, and following the legal dictates of Shariat—were seen as important, but they also believed that true spiritual enlightenment and union with God could only be achieved through an inner, experiential journey.<sup>19</sup> Orthodox Muslims emphasize external conduct and adherence to religious rituals, often relying on strict observance and blind obedience. In contrast, Sufis prioritize inner purity, believing that love is the sole path to attaining closeness to God.<sup>20</sup>

Sufi saints established their unique ethical principles through their actions, teachings, and way of life. They sought to reconcile the rigidity of orthodoxy with a religion rooted in faith and devotion. Speaking in the language of the common people, they fostered linguistic integration and cultural harmony. Many Sufi saints were also educators, emphasizing the importance of knowledge and often serving as scholars and teachers. Their love, compassion, sincerity, piety, charity, and dedication to social

service endeared them to the masses. Additionally, they influenced rulers, officials, and nobles, leveraging their position to promote the welfare of the people.

During Kabir's time, Sufi teachings had permeated much of Northern India, deeply embedding themselves in the region's composite culture. This widespread influence of Sufi mysticism inevitably shaped Kabir's own religious beliefs and expressions. Many of his sayings reflect traces of Sufi thought and imagery, suggesting that his ideas were, to some extent, influenced by this spiritual tradition.

The fact that people of different faiths equally claim his legacy highlights the universal and transcendent nature of Kabir's influence. Many people view Kabir as a Sufi Muslim because his ideas are somewhat comparable to those expressed by Sufi saints. On the other hand, some view Kabir as a Vaishnavite, while Sikh holy books also reference him. Kabir criticized traditional religions of all kinds, whether Islam or Hinduism. During his lifetime, orthodox forces from both Islam and Hinduism disliked Kabir. He advocated for a direct relationship with God through love and devotion. His ideas cannot easily be confined to one religion or sect. Many, especially modern scholars, have applauded Kabir's influence in encouraging unity between Muslims and Hindus.

As noted earlier, many myths and legends have emerged about Kabir's life. A popular one about his death is revealing. It is said that Hindus and Muslims fought for the right over his dead body. Eventually, the body is believed to have turned into flower petals which were equally shared by Hindus and Muslims who laid them to rest according to their respective customs. This myth highlights how Kabir came to be perceived, as a figure who belonged equally to both Islam and Hinduism. Further, as noted earlier, Sikhism has also embraced Kabir with great enthusiasm with their holy book *Adi Granth* comprising more than five hundred sayings of Kabir. These show the truly inclusive and transcendental nature of Kabir's ideas.

## CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that the process of integration of popular beliefs and superstitions belonging to both Hinduism and Islam must have been fairly well-advanced in Kabir's time. Whereas Kabir rejects all such beliefs and superstition en bloc, he keeps exalting the Perfect Guru. Kabir's Bani reflects the Yogic ideal of saintliness and its concept of salvation. He no longer accepts Hindu and Muslim views of gods, deities, or modes of worship. According to him, a true saint alone could approach the Supreme Reality.

Through his life and teachings, Kabir became a voice for reform, emphasizing the oneness of humanity and the futility of external rituals in the

pursuit of divine truth. His contributions continue to resonate, offering a path toward spiritual and social harmony.

## Acknowledgments

I am Dr. Ritu Varshney thankful to Prof. Dr. Deepak Hawaldar, HOI Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Amity University Mumbai for granting permission to carry out the work.

## Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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