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# Pilgrimage Upside-Down: Kabir *Ulatbansi* Pilgrim

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Cultures in India, like cultures in other parts of the world, continue to surprise by their topsy-turvy existence in time, space and practices. The Nizamuddin Dargah in Delhi is one such example of composite cultures. To illustrate it further the Bhakti movements, a wave of the Nirgun/Sagun saint traditions in Indian medieval histories of literary cultures, is an appropriate example which represents a strong case of pilgrimages, alternative pilgrimages and pilgrims without pilgrimages. The poetry of the Alvars, Kabir, Malik Muhammad Jayasi, Tulsidas, Nanak, Raidas, Surdas, Mirabai, Dadu Dayal, Malukdas, Kamal, Sunderdas, Raskhan, Dhruvdas, Namdev, Lal Ded, Avvayyar and Akkamahadevi are great subversive traditions of change. These traditions of poetry, songs and music, challenge any fixed notion of the sacred and unbending idea of pilgrimage. Kabir, for example chose Maghar, a common town, which he preferred to Kashi, a holy town known for its sacredness, for spending last days of his life. In addition, Kabir's *ulatbansis*, literally meaning upside-down language in the tradition of Nath *pantha* and Buddhist *ultibani*, belong to the category of absurd poetry that convey meaning by nonsense verse to interrogate conventional structures of devotion, pilgrims and pilgrimages. *Ulatbansi* takes the reader to a pathless journey of restlessness, to recognising blind faith in familiarity and to arrive at probing the boundaries.

The absurdity in *ulatbansis* ridicules the farcical nature of the trail of pilgrimage. In Kabir's words: 'Hermit, that yogi is my guru/who can untie this song. /A tree stands without root,/without flowers bears fruit,/...praises sung without tongue, /...the true teacher reveals. / Seek the bird's, the fish's path. / Kabir says, both are hard...The being beyond boundaries/and beyond beyond.' (Hess and Singh, 2002: 154-5).

This poetic genre unfolds layers of contradictions contained in the order of behavioural society and institutional hierarchies, in a universe to which all belong equally. The poet critiques hegemony of rituals through *ulatbansi*, also known as *sanddhabhasha* which belongs neither to one's day nor to one's night.

**Key Words:** *Ulatbansi*, Bhakti Movements, *Nirgun/Sagun*, subversive Traditions, Pilgrimage upside-down, Pilgrim, absurd Poetry, *Bhakti/Mukti*, *Sanddhabhasha*.

## Pilgrimage Upside-Down

'*Aaj To Hajaari Hanso Paavan*'  
(Today the Swan is my special guest)  
Dharmadas

O swan don't abandon the lake,  
Even if the waters turn salty.  
Wandering from pond to puddle,  
no good will come of it.

The lake banks are old,  
but the water's fresh.  
For the sake of an old love,  
A swan sits here and picks at pebbles.'  
(Jain and Virmani, 2008:8)

The poetry of Kabir stands for a long tradition of improvised poetic performances which teach humanity

how to interpret and deal with the institutionalised oppressive patterns of social order that cultural institutions reflect in their practices, retaining the power of knowledge formation and embodiment of the belief systems. Kabir's songs are part of a tradition of community consciousness and continuous assimilation of disciples' creativity in the tradition of upside-down language.

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**Vinod Verma** was born in 1962 as a low caste in India, became a school drop-out and a child labourer, who later pursued English studies. Associated with the University of Delhi since 2001, he has co-edited the textbooks: *Individual & Society* and *Living Literatures*. He has researched and published regarding *dalit* writings, Bhakti literatures, pedagogy, literary theory and has simultaneously practiced and published/produced visual, performing and digital arts that include painting, theatre and films.

Although the period of bhakti poetic traditions in India has had a very diverse intellectual history, *ulatbansis* are basically community participatory poetic performances based on disciples and followers.

Ulatbansi is a compound word made of two words *ulat* and *bansi* or *bani*. Each word as one syllable respectively has meaning: *ulat* or upside-down and *bansi/bani* or speech/language; the complete word signifies a genre of subversive poetic tradition in several Indian vernacular oral literary cultures both in ancient and medieval history of India. Although *ulatbani* or *ulatbansi* has several layers of meaning in different sects or practices of faith, Kabir and his followers' practice of *ulatbansi* is traced in his body of poetic tradition as one of higher orders of mystic/subversive poetry that is part of his poetic category called '*shabada*' or Word. The other two of Kabir's poetic categories are: '*raimani*' or worldly poetry and '*sakhi*' or poetry that witnesses or observes. Kabir's '*shabada*' or Word that contains upside-down language, does interrogate the speech and its utopic significance engaged in the practice of dystopic significance.

Most of Kabir's songs also bear the stamp of his disciples who have adapted and performed them for the community they belong to. The word Dharamdas in the song above is one such example of a singer and composer of this tradition. The metaphors and riddles Kabir created are traditionally carried forward in performances of the Kabir sects. Swan is one such example. The swan as a bird signifies 'the world of the conflict of swan,' that is, which way to fly, what reality is - whether it exists or not at all, and how one makes one's own path without using a common scale of valuing and measuring the illusion of reality that is bound to produce a sense of deep ignorance of being. Should the swan, or in Hindi *hans*, which is 'derived from *hanta* meaning motion or movement', and 'destroyer of the darkness of ignorance and attachment' (Singh, 1985:803), fly along with the folk or decide to know that to know what to know may be a ritual of mind, so that it may be better to face it and see its hollowness or substance which is nothing but a projection of one's construction in a paradigm of measurement guided by greed? Then, what is reality of the journey of life for the swan that represents the deep link between humans, their beings and beyond?

Kabir is primarily a philosopher poet of disrupting the metaphysics of being proven by the epistemology of having. In Kabir's words, 'Who should we worship? My prayer beads scattered!' (Jain and Virmani,

2008:6). 'Scattered' is a powerful index of the release of hundreds of birds imprisoned by a seller or a priest. Most of the researches in neurobiology substantiate this claims that human beings with their '*brain as social organ*,' perceive the world as heterogeneous or diverse in content and form (Rock, 2015). That is:

*The knots on sugarcane are sweet.*

*The taste of each is different, o traveller'*

(Jain and Virmani, 2008:33).

But the traveller can be misguided by the concept of homogeneity as a political form of organising reality through a particular myth or ideology that often leads societies to undermine the very diverse and plural substance and nature of the universe(s) we are part of in the broadest sense of the meaning. Our experience of the immediate natural and social environment also informs us that we make sense of our existence and life in a given paradigm. Homogeneous frameworks, as ideologies of uniformity for absolutist power were used in the past, but in the global world there seems to be a revival of such trends in public spheres, essentially to capture state power by an all-inclusive emotional appeal of (political) survival by means of insular religious identity formation and by reinterpreting scriptures and rituals in their favour as indispensable for unity. Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore could see it in 1917 when emergence of nationalisms bred nations and such ideas associated with this giant monolithic machine. Hence, heterogeneity versus homogeneity are two concepts that have stood opposed to each other in human discourses, and a resolution of this conflict is the need of the hour in this new era of human history of globalisation, whether it is leading us to the expansion of our boundaries of awareness to further homogenisation like a mall, though being huge, tells no story, but each tree can have a story of its own. The process of heterogeneity is unique for each birth and it is a design without a template.

Once we come into existence, an incredible controlled explosion of the highly compressed information held by the fertilized egg begins; a cascade of events leading from a single cell to an entire living, functioning human being (Al-Chalabi *et al.*, 2006:43).

Human cultures are synthesised experiences of interactions and transactions that would take place through ideas of expansion, whether geographical territories of political rule or human territories of self-actualisation, or for adventure of being in the world and sharing experiences of languages, clothes, foods, religions and histories, to name a few. One interesting

aspect about these practices has been the mystical element of the paradox that most sufi cults maintain the idea that emptiness is fullness. Heterogeneity does not kill paradoxes and metaphors of fathomlessness. If Absurdity would measure Reality, then Reality would be like scattered beads. If homogenisation of human knowledge in terms of religion, caste, history, sexuality or race can be validated, then, what can possibly happen to the ‘cascade of events leading from a single cell to an entire living, functioning human being?’ Just as a cell acquires a human infant shape and being born into an environment divided into nature and nurture, the caretakers of nurture give the infant a name and an identity or make the newcomer a subject. This is a journey now quite different from the stage of being cell during its stay and acquiring a full shape in the foetus. Foetus as habitat is quite different from society as habitat. Is one, thus, an event of being pilgrim or a subject as an event being shaped by history? Foucault in one of his interviews entitled Truth and Power says:

*One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history (Foucault, 1984:59).*

The notion of pilgrim as a subject and pilgrimage as history, stand face to face. Heterogeneity of voices, in Indian devotional or Bhakti poetry at the bottom of the abyss (with a bottom) of integrally connected powerful and epistemological systems of caste, religion, gender, invasion, conversion, colonisation and homogenisation, is the constituent property of Bhakti movements’ poets and seekers undertaking sacred journeys as travellers and pilgrims, with or without pilgrimage. Bhakti/Mukti or seeking liberation through devotion of interrogating designs of dehumanisation is an integral concept of the Bhakti movement and is inseparable by any means. In a low caste or dalit scholar’s words:

*Kabir’s voice of dissent against the existing reality, the glaring disparity between the rich and the poor, the discrimination by Brahmans and high caste Hindus towards the lower caste, especially the untouchables, and his emphasis on a direct relationship with God without the mediation of Brahmans and the mullahs i.e. clerics whom he ridicules as greedy and*

*ignorant had a profound impact (Kamar, 2010:126).*

The Bhakti movement or waves of changes caused by devotional literatures in vernacular languages and their folklore in the medieval cultural histories of India is engaged with the questions asked above. The period between 1000 CE and 1800 CE is one of political and social upheavals. It configures and reconfigures several contours of modern Indian languages and their literature which is the most fascinating aspect of this period.

*This era was marked by foreign invasions, cultural contacts, large scale migration, religious conversions, military conquest and changing patterns of socio-economic relations (Dev et al., 2005:xvi).*

A large number of languages incorporated, translated, adapted and transcreated stories of Indian epics like The *Ramayana* and The *Mahabharata*. The *Puranas* and also received the same treatment. This innovation and experimentation with classical and canonical languages, literatures and cultures gave rise to a numerous identities and differences to Bhakti literatures. Poets were pilgrims, their poetry took them on long journeys, and sacred and social came together on the map of pilgrimage drawn by various competing sects and schools spread across India.

This is a period of cultural encounters and synthesis in various literary traditions. The kind of creative energy which is exhibited during this phase, has an enormous impact on the times then and times to come. As political and geographical boundaries were shifting, literature played a vital role in shifting the human boundaries that needed a reconfiguration and a synthetic imagination. Namdev, a major Bhakti Marathi poet and tailor by caste, asks,

*What is this veil  
that keeps me  
from you?  
Greed  
ambition  
lust?’*

(Dev et al., 2005:95)

Mirabai, a woman Bhakti poet and married to the Raja of Medda state in Rajasthan, revolts against her own inheritance of upper caste. In one of her most famous songs says,

*I have nothing to do with  
relations or cousins...*

*People chide me  
for moving among saints  
let them...  
I have reared  
love's creeper  
with my tears'*

(Dev *et al.*, 2005:104).

For her, Bhakti is Sagun i.e. the content has a form that one relates to a sacred journey beyond caste and gender. Foucault has extensively analysed the relationship and nature between power/knowledge in most of his works, and Nirgun stands for formless content or essence without properties. Kabir's poetry decentres truths and frees them from chains of power/knowledge, caste hierarchy, religious hegemony, ritualistic mind, homogeneity of reality, delusions and hallucinations of status, dominance of Brahmanical or Islamic metaphysics, religiosity, and above all inventing an alternative pilgrimage which is Nirgun, and then, who dares to be a pilgrim of it. Foucault too, through power/knowledge, altogether redefines the networks of institutions creating discourses to promote certain ideas as truths that power is interested in. It seems to me that Kabir's poetry subverts the contemporary discourses of the power/knowledge relationship. Does one, then, require any preparation for this sacred journey? If so, then *ulatibani* or upside-down language is the *ulta* path of pathlessness of a *Nirgunia* or *Nirguria*, which, in folklore is one who has acquired identity of not having been blessed by any guru or teacher, yet he/she dances, composes music, thrilled by rhythms, sings, and above all has a *darshan* or a vision of liberating people from conventions of the core beliefs of slavery. In Kabir's words:

*I've seen  
the pious ones,  
the ritual-mongers –  
they bathe at dawn.  
They kill the true Self  
and worship rocks –  
they know nothing.  
I've seen  
many masters and teachers –  
they read their Book,  
their Qur'an.  
They teach many students  
their business tricks –  
that's all they know*

(Dev *et al.*, 2005:99).

*Ulatbansis* or *ulatbanis* may be translated as upside-down language or upside-down oral compositions in the Bhakti literature

*that reveals through bafflement, riddling and absurdity, where wisdom hides in laughter at the impossible, where truth hides in paradox*  
(Ali and Ram, 2008:62),

But, it needs further elaboration. Kabir has always been an enigma so far as his life history is concerned, but his relevance has always crossed the limits of time. He belongs to many and none at the same time. That is, he himself is *ulti bani*. He is owned by brahmins, dalits, muslims, secularists, communalists, academics, professors, democracies, parliaments, temples, mosques, the poor and the rich. His poetry does not own them at all.

*You bury yourself in tomes and tracts,  
drone on whoever tunes in  
You never searched the palace within,  
if you die jabbering, who cares?'*

(Jain and Virmani, 2008:73).

His poetry makes the unrepresentable presentable. Kant's aesthetics of sublime deals with the problem of unrepresentability that Lyotard synthesizes in his essay *Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?* to describe how one has to be post-modern first to be modern. In Lyotard's words - taste, therefore, testifies that between the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present an object corresponding to the concept, an undetermined agreement, without rules, giving rise to a judgment which Kant calls reflective, which may be experienced as pleasure. The sublime is a different sentiment. It takes place on the contrary, when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match, and according to the sublime relation between the presentable and the conceivable, it is possible, within this relation to distinguish two modes (to use the musician's language)

What Kabir presents is not profitable. Therefore, his image cannot be hung among gods as often Indian Hindus do. His *ulatbansis* cannot easily become a centre of debate. That is why, the largest following of Kabir tradition is among erstwhile untouchables which are now called *dalits*. Caste-bound by religion in itself is *ulati bani*:

*You found a stone, made an idol to worship  
If that god had power, wouldn't it destroy you?'*  
*says Kabir*

(Ali and Ram, 2008:30).

Among many Kabir academic scholars, Purushotam Agarwal questions the colonial modernity, and theorises the Bhakti period as *deshaj* or indigenous modernity. Still, he wants to keep modernity there (Agarwal, 2013:27). These trends have come up as part of Indian higher education pedagogy on Bhakti poets, and their writings in academia are being handled by a teaching community interested in modernity of colonial/commercial/indigenous baggage and research methods more inclined towards academic-centred professional mobility, print culture and reconfiguration of their own social status and political acknowledgement of new iconography in redefining power and in milder words, socio-political contours of modern states. Dalit critic Dharm Veer has produced a critique of these readings of Kabir by means of brahmanical academia. In his series of books entitled *Kabir Ke Aalochak* or *Critics on Kabir*, he deconstructs such readings from a *dalit* perspective to show how Kabir's poetry and tradition of dissent and protest against an upper-castist mind-set has been appropriated by the same experts who practice caste and ritualistic paradigm and present Kabir without the context of the Indian caste system, hand-in-glove with religiosity based on dividing practices.

Opposed to academics writing about culture of the twentieth century Indian discourses on any Bhakti literature, the whole project of these *banis* or oral compositions from bottom up of brahmanical hegemony, owe altogether a very different association with these faith systems of varied epistemologies. Kabir's poetry addresses community and their social cognition of reality in the language of having owned the world or being a slave of it, and as a consequence of it, their selves and behavioural aspects make key poetic texts and contexts in his poetic tradition till the present date.

Kabir often addresses his audience as *saints* and *knowledgeable people*. Performances based on Kabir tradition even today use words like *santo* or *gayanio* or *sadho* or *sadh*, as a subversive strategy of scene to scene transition or fading out but open and informed dissolution by the singer that the whole paradigm of cognitive surveillance of subjects becomes subverted and exposed to interrogation. Such words refer to the irony of knowledge systems that offer freedom by enslaving the minds of the seekers. His language often termed Word or Voice, or *Shabad* in Hindi, as a form of experienced narrative, closer to experiences in Dalit narratives, has a medicinal quality to heal listeners' social anxieties and traumas. In one of his songs, he speaks:

*It's just as well, my pitcher shattered –  
I'm free of all that hauling water!  
The burden on my head is gone'*

(Jain and Virmani 2008:26).

In another example,

*Guru in the heavens, seeker in my heart.  
Awareness meets the Word, they are never apart*  
(Jain and Virmani, :48).

Quoting one of his songs from live tradition of Bhakti singing unravels the multi-layered tradition of Kabir's *ulatbansi* – participatory, collective, interrogative, musical, performative, alternative, simple, disruptive, shocking and healing.

*Yeh Ulat Ved Ki Baani*  
(Wisdom of the upside-down Vedas)  
Ganga Das

*The world became a loaf of bread.  
The foolish crow flew off with it.  
On the branch of disputation,  
he sat and ate it!*

*This is the wisdom of  
The upside down Vedas –  
figure it out, wise ones!*

*In the sky, a well of nectar –  
a parrot without a beak drinks deep.*

This song's title is a typical example of *ulatbansi* by Kabir and nirgun poets (Jain and Virmani, :17).

*Wisdom of Upside-Down Veda* or *ulatbansi* destroys the logical mind that seeks reasoning to justify ways of injustice to one's fellow beings and nature. Therefore, it has the power to disrupt the ontological design being justified by false epistemology. What we further notice is that this *ulatbansi*, demands a review of our understanding of the singular idea of upside-down language. *Ulatbansis* are further constituted of phrases such as *ulata kunva*, *ulata ban*, *ulta sadhana* and *ulti Ganga*. These terms have their own existence in this tradition of *sandhabhasa*. Thus, in yogic literature of various mysterious schools like *hatyoga*, *ulta* or upside down is suggestive of subverting the order of personal salvation or egoism of sacredness.

*This 'absurd' or paradoxical use of language is sometimes referred to as sandhabhasa: the 'twilight language', the language that mediates, like twilight, between light and darkness. It is not merely an allegorical style; its absurd*

*enigmatic quality may be a deliberate attempt to allude to the transcendental nature of mystical experience. Indeed such 'non-use' of language is found even in the early Vedic literature; and the Sahejiya Sidhas and the Nath-Panthis, both with elaborate influence on Kabir, use this approach extensively* (Kumar, 1983:211).

*Ulta kunva* or upside-down well will be a ceaseless source of water or life (Veer Bharti 1985:803-4). Therefore, one does not require a pitcher to fill it with water but the pilgrimage has arrived to the pilgrim. Similarly, *ulta ban* meaning 'an arrow directed to himself by the hunter, is a secret that only a brave man can know' (Singh, 1985:142). *Ulta sadhana* or upside-down spiritual practices violate the norms of sexuality or challenge what normal is in sexuality or religion through yogic practices. '*Ulti Ganga* or absurdity of Ganga river is that it sucks the water of the sea whom it meets, instead, of adding water, and the moon eats the Sun' (Das 2010:154). Then, I think the word *ulta* in Hindi is closer to the term deconstruction or like the *dalit* critic Dharam Veer (2002) proposes, an *ulti* reading or a deconstructive reading of existing academic books on Kabir (including classics like *Kabir* by Hajari Prashad Diwedi). He launches a kind of full project, aiming to deconstruct twentieth century brahmanical approaches on Kabir's interpretation by a *dalit* view of reality.

Hajari Prashad Diwedi (1987:79-90) has written a detailed chapter on *yogic metaphors and ulatbansis* in his pioneer book, *Kabir*. His interpretation, although it discourages one to entangle with *ulatbansis*, has some deeper insights regarding how to read them from the point of view of Indian philosophy. Then, why have *ulatbansis* or *ulatbani* acquired such a status of a poetic genre that has been described as something beyond comprehension? Does subversive poetry remain untouchable? See the following example:

*First of all, I was born,  
then my elder brother.  
With pomp and show,  
my father was born,  
last of all, my mother!*

*First of all the curd was set,  
Then the cow was milked.  
The calf still plays in the womb,  
but she's off to sell the butter!*

(Ali and Ram, 2008:38).

Do we see any mystery in the above stanzas? They are *ulatbansis*, discarding the language of knowing a room

by its walls. Walls, ceilings and floors are linguistic logic, controlling the unbound, that we call room. Kabir would say this: 'In the sky, a well of nectar - a parrot without a beak drinks deep.' (Jain and Virmani, 2008:8). The temple hangs upside-down in the sky and pilgrims look for path. Pilgrimage is like zero, infinitive and unbounded but

*The child in the womb speaks.  
Born the child is silent.  
Kabir says, listen seekers,  
the fools don't get it!*

(Ali and Ram, 2008:38).

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