

The Making of Kabīr's *Rasa*: A case study of North Indian *bhakti* intellectual history

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This paper examines the concept of *rasa* appeared in the Kabīrian poems out of early Rajasthani and Punjabi manuscripts. *Rasa* is one of the core concepts in Kabīr's poems. As for the *sākhīs*, a chapter (*aṅga*) was under the title of *rasa*. As for the *padas*, the concept occurred 187 times in 43 sets of early *padas* included in W.M. Callewaert's *The Millennium Kabir Vani*. Extant commentaries including those of M.P. Gupta, P. Singh, R. Sharma rendered the concept as devotional sentiments, leaving the wide range of other themes.

By examining the description of the attributes and generation of the Kabīrian *rasa*, comparing these with other crystalized intellectual traditions, this paper argues that the Kabīrian *rasa* alluded to three interconnected fields of pre-*bhakti* knowledge that are known to the poet's predecessors and contemporaries: 1) the alchemy (*rasāyana*), 2) the preparation of *mahuā* flower wine, 3) *haṭha yoga*. A number of Kabīrian poems described the *rasa* as rejuvenating, gold-making mystic liquid made by distillation, which resembles the production of *mahuā* flower wine. Both images were further incorporated into the body-centric yogic practices in the poems.

Though similar expressions are also found in Gorakhnāth's works, the *vaiṣṇava* imprints and *bhaktification* distinguished Kabīrian version from the predecessors. Firstly, *Rāma* was added to *rasa* and praised in place of earlier *śaiva* notions like *rasa bhairava*. This new sacred formula became one of the core concepts of *vaiṣṇava nirguṇi bhakti*. Secondly, the concept of *rasa* being a material liquid was gradually reworked into devotional practice or emotional attachment to the godhead. Literally drinkable *rasa* became a metaphor for 'the name of *Rāma/Hari*' or 'the taste of love/devotion'. This contributed to the common *vinaya* sentiment, blurring the division between *nirguṇa/saguṇa bhakti*.

In conclusion, the concept of *rasa* displays how the pre-*bhakti* intellectual heritage influenced and later been incorporated into the *bhakti* discourse, reflecting the intellectual change that featured the North Indian *bhakti* movement. Compared to the krishnaite tradition which was historically connected to South Indian figures and thoughts, the Kabīrian tradition was initially more deeply rooted in the intellectual and technological heritage of North India, but merged into the pan-India *bhakti* tradition at a later phase.

Key Words: Kabīr, *rasa*, *bhakti*, intellectual history

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