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RELG 213 – Hinduism

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Response Paper 6 – Film Review

“Had-Anhad (Bounded Boundless): Journeys with Ram and Kabir”, explores various ideas and beliefs surrounding the Indian saint Kabir and his thoughts on religion and society. The film organically engages Indians on a number of topics, from Indian-Pakistani relations to the origin and nature of Kabir. The film-maker travels to several locations, including Ayodhya, the site of the Barbri Mosque destruction, and Pakistan. This discourse will focus on primarily on two interactions in this film, the first in the beginning, where we engage residents of Ayodhya, and the second in the end, where we meet Fariduddin Ayaz and pick his brain (or so to speak).

One of the most important scenes in the film was the dialogue between the woman behind the camera (who we will call the narrator) and the men who were selling DVD’s of the destruction of the Barbri Mosque in Ayodhya. As the narrator questions the Hindu men about the event, she seems to takes a somewhat patronizing tone that is not well received. She asks, “the mayhem and riots that broke out, was that good?” In addition to several other similar questions, this one carries a tone not unlike a parent addressing her immature child about some misbehavior. She continually asks “is that good?” as if the entire event could be boiled down to simply good or bad. Notwithstanding, even though the men become clearly irritated by her line of questioning, they are forced to ask themselves why the event took place. To go beyond the rhetoric and slogans and analyze the event on a personal level. When asked if destroying the temple was good, one of the men responds with a question of his own, saying “aren’t there disputes between Shias and Sunnis? Between Catholics and Protestants?” He seems to be saying that religious conflict is as essentially inevitable, and that the narrator’s line of questioning is unfair to Hindus. The narrator asks “but Kabir Das says, ‘In each body, Ram resides!’ Then why does he need this temple?” This question does not only touch on the Hindu-Muslim conflict at hand but on internal conflicts that are not unknown to parts of the Kabir Panth: how does one reconcile the anti-establishment ideology taught by Kabir with the organization and expansion of his followers?

Returning to the aforementioned question, “why does [Kabir] need this temple?”, a man replies “but both sides should think like that. Why only Ram? Isn’t Allah residing in each body too?” That is to say it is the nature of the Muslims that forces the Hindu hand. This sort of vilification of the “other” occurs several times during the discourse. One man, speaking of Muslims, says “they are attackers! Robbers. They came to this country, tried to destroy our culture!” Here we see hints of Hindutva propaganda in the form of its most efficacious vehicle: revisionist history. Hindu scholarship indicated that the destruction of temples was more a political show of power than an attempt to at religious or cultural persecution. Furthermore, Mughal leaders such as Akbar the Great patronized and celebrated Hindu religion and culture. However, the divisive rhetoric of Hindutva politicians fails to acknowledge the true nature of Hindu–Muslim relations.

We also see how the propagation of stereotypes serves a similar purpose in this scene and again later in the film after the scene of the event at the the India-Pakistan border. As the people in the car reacted to the demonstration, one of them says “the Muslim community, everything they do, they do in jerks! Everything is opposite! Their religion is totally opposite to ours!”. Another says “their nature is full of arrogance! I say, we should do away with them once and for all!” Again we see an accentuation of differences and a total disregard for similarities.

In a fleeting moment of objective clarity, on man says “at the bottom of it – its just a clash of egos...that’s what it is!” A little later he says “these things are not forgotten!”. When the narrator asks “is it our ego that doesn’t let us forget?” the man responds “yes. Why forget? Why forget our faith.” The man momentarily admits that the Hindu ego enters into the conflict. One may say this is simply verbal slip in the heat of the moment, however it is, more likely, a subconscious realization that was inadvertently verbalized. He immediately corrects himself by saying “its faith! It’s their ego and our faith!” Although these ideas are explored throughout the film, there is much more dialogue about the nature of Kabir himself.

A good portion of the film is dedicated to engaging with and listening to the music of Fariduddin Ayaz, a Qawwal singer from Karachi. He is an ardent Bhakti (devotion) practitioner who truly revers Kabir. He is a rotund, charismatic figure who at all times, is either singing or reclined and eating. From our first introduction, he speaks with passion and authority on Kabir, saying:

“My Kabir, who is very near to me, here he is! My father. He stuffed me with his wisdom, music and other things. I have read Kabir in great depth. Not only read him, but I have met Kabir, I’ve seen Kabir, I know Kabir, where he’s found. What he’s like. I know that secret. Kabir is my subject, he is my topic. I’m not willing to bargain anyone on Kabir. I won’t compromise on Kabir.”

Ayaz’s reverence for Kabir is a characteristically Bhakti trait. Much like the saguna (with features) Bhakti saints Surdas, Mirabai, and Tulsidas, Ayaz feels a deep personal, and in this case, paternal, connection to Kabir. He praises Kabir as his guru, the source of all of his wisdom and understanding. But unlike the saguna Bhakti saints and some other devotees of Kabir, he does not view Kabir as a deity. In fact, he says that in order to understand Kabir “first consider Kabir as a human being, then you might reach him…if you treat Kabir as a supernatural thing you’ll never attain him.” Earlier in the film, we see the opposite of this idea expressed as the narrator surveys the various hagiographies of Kabir. One idea, believed by the Dharamdasi Kabir Panth in Chhattisgarh, was that Kabir was born in a blaze of light on a lotus in Lehertara Lake. Ayaz, ever the pragmatist, does not subscribe to such ideas. For him, in order to truly know and understand Kabir, he must be viewed as a person who was incredibly enlightened. According to Ayaz, Kabir laughed, and wept, and went hungry, and even used the toilet!

The narrator asks Ayaz if he finds Kabir’s voice to be different from those of the other peots he sings, to which Ayaz replies:

“Nothing is different! Guru Nanak, Ghulam Farid, Bulle Shah, Sultan Bahu, they’re all members of one family! Their ways of expression may have been distinct. Kabir is like a naked sword! Kabir made no compromise. What he saw he said. The truth that he saw, he said…The others have made a few compromises. Some talked of mosques, tried to save their sanctity…Kabir tore everything down!”

This seems to be one characteristically “Kabir” trait: the strong, highly critical voice. We find, in Kabir’s poetry, a certain irreverence for the structures imposed by organized religion, and Ayaz celebrates this about his guru.

At the very end of the film, Ayaz tells a fable about the flies and the moths. In short, the moth king asks the flies to go out in search of light and they go and quickly return. They then learn that in returning they have missed the point. That “the one who finds the light surrenders to it. Becomes one with it. But those in search of success [come] back. Those who [want] a certificate.” He then says to the narrator, “just now you’re doing the job of earning a certificate.” This most salient interaction goes back to a topic we discussed at the start of this discourse. The people interviewed for this film sense a disconnect between themselves, their core beliefs, and the filmmaker’s motives. They know, and address on more than one occasion, a slight distaste for the purely academic treatment of Kabir. In an earlier scene, Ayaz advises the filmmaker not to make a project of Kabir. Here we find one of the most important questions that arises from the film: can an academic treatment of spiritual and emotional topics ever truly capture their essence?