

THE OTHER HALF OF KABIR'S DOHA



Tabish Khair

Now that the world has proved porous
How will we ever separate
The dagger from the skull?

Who having gathered up the broken
Pieces of a voice will speak
In his own voice or her own voice
Or the voice of his mother?

Who will follow you now, Kabir,
From the marketplace of deceits
Through the song of protest
To that hut where a king of kings
Came without his crown?

Who will turn the seas to ink,
All the forest trees to quill,
And still fail to inscribe earth?
Who will whittle the world to songs
And keep wisdom from words?

Who will be willing to be torn
Between two final truths
And turn flower?

And yet when I think of this world
Which has turned porous, I recall
The time when I voiced a line from your dohas, Kabir,
Struggling to set it free from the prison of a book,
And heard my grandfather's wordless cook
Casually complete your couplet.

NOTE: This poem, while seeking to answer some "post-colonial/modern" thinkers, uses the legend of Kabir, the medieval poet-singer-sage of North India. Kabir was brought up in a poor Muslim family, and wrote songs lambasting and celebrating aspects of both Islam and Hinduism. He also aimed his satire at the mercantile classes as well as at highbrow scholars of religious and philosophical texts. Akbar, arguably one of India's two greatest emperors, probably visited him disguised as a common man. When Kabir died, his body is said to have changed into flowers so that the Hindus could cremate one half and the Muslims the other half.