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Inspirations of Unity: Exploring Harmony through Bhagat Kabir and Baba Farid's Spiritual Poetry"

Dr. SUMAIRA SAFDAR[1], QUDSIA FIRDOUS[2], SIDRA MEHVISH[3], MUHAMMAD AYAZ RAFI[4], JUNAID ASGHAR[5], JUNAID ASGHAR[6]

1. **Assistant Professor. Department of History, Govt. Khadija Umar Associate College for Women Tench Bhata, Rawalpindi. sumairasafdar@hotmail.com**
2. **Senior lecturer, Department of Islamic Studies, Riphah International University, Islamabad Qudsia.firdous@riphah.edu.com**
3. **PhD Islamic Studies student, International Islamic University Islamabad.**

Sidra.mehvish@iiu.edu.pk

4. **PhD History Student, Department of History, Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan. Research Fellow, South Asian Institute, University of Heidelberg, Germany. iyazrafi2005@yahoo.co.uk**
5. **PhD Pakistan Studies student, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University, Faisalabad Junaid.augusta@gmail.com**

Abstract

The work, titled "Bhagat Kabir and Hazrat Baba Farid's Quest: Uniting Hearts and Minds Through Poetic Expression" explores the spiritual heritage and ageless poetry of Kabir and Baba Farid, two well-known saints. The article examines how their literary expressions have a significant influence on promoting harmony and unity among various groups. Both the 12th-century Sufi saint Baba Farid and the 15th-century Indian mystic poet Kabir used poetry as a means of sharing spiritual insights and universal truths. This piece highlights the virtues of love, compassion, and spiritual enlightenment by illuminating the recurring themes and messages in their poetry through a combination of literary study, historical background, and spiritual inquiry. Generations of people

were inspired by Kabir and Baba Farid's pursuit of truth and togetherness, despite their disparate religious upbringings.

Key Words: Spirituality, Sikhism, Islamic Mysticism, Sufi Poetry, Harmony

Like most of the poet- saints of the Adi Granth Kabir's thought firmly rooted in the teachings of the Sant tradition of northern India[1]; the Sants were a group of mystical poets who believed the one supreme God beyond any form and sectarian garb. They believed in the basic equality of human beings and thus rejected all social distinctions based upon the caste system. They shunned the outward symbols of religious life including images, formal religious exercises, pilgrimages and ritual bathing associated with the idea of pollution and purity. They also challenged the authority of the scriptures, the priests and the sacred languages, and expressed their beliefs not in the traditional Sanskrit, the language of the privileged few, but in the vernacular that enabled the common people access to and equal participation in religious discourse. Their emphasis upon the doctrine of one supreme reality immanent in everyone meant that spiritual experience, enlightenment and attainment of liberation lay within the reach of everyone.[2]

The only requirement for the individual was to offer his/her loving devotion not to an Avatm· (incarnation of a deity, usually Vishnu) but directly to the supreme God himself strictly through inward meditation on the divine Name. The distinctiveness of Kabir's thought lies in his reassertion of the Sant teachings in the light of his own personality and experience. Kabir claims to have had an enlightenment experience that came to him after he had passed through stages of spiritual crises and bewilderment.[3] He describes it metaphorically as follows: Kabir, the Satguru is the true Hero, who loosed off a single arrow. The moment it struck, I fell to the ground and a wound opened in my heart.[4] Here the archer is the True Guru (*Satguru*), the divine teacher within the human soul, and his arrow is the *shabad*, the inner Word through which he communicates with those who seek him out. The doctrine of the Word that Kabir employs to refer to the enlightenment experience or

[1] The Sants. Also see McLeod, Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion, pp.151-8
[2] Cole, Guru in Sikhism, p.13.
[3] Hedayetullah, Kabir, p. 200.
[4] Kabir, Salo/1 1 94, AG, p. 1374

the means of reaching it is central to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus as well.[5] In another hymn in the Gauri Raga, Kabir describes his spiritual awakening more clearly: 'Lo! My brethren, a storm of divine. knowledge has come; the screens of doubt have all been blown away, and even the ropes of Mammon (Maya) have not been left[6] In both cases, Kabir maintains that revelation comes at the divine initiative and it comes with suddenness which pierces every layer of delusion in the mind of the individual whose total life is then transformed for all times to come. This new life of spirituality is to be found in mystical union with the Divine. In his Prabhati hymn, Kabir elaborates on his understanding of the Supreme Being. For him God is universal and is present everywhere especially in the human heart. He condemns the sectarian notions of both Hindus and Muslims who try to keep God confined to their respective holy places:

> "If the mosque is the place where God (Allah) resides, then who owns the rest of the land? For Hindus, He lives in idols; there is no reality in both. O Allah and Ram, I live by your Name. Be merciful to me, O Lord. Refrain (Rahu). Hari ('Lord') lives in the South and Allah in the West. Search in the heart-inside your heart of hearts-that is His real abode. Brahmins fast twice a month twenty-four times and Qazis fast in the month of Ramadan. Neglecting the remaining eleven months, they search for treasure in one month. Why go and bathe at *jagannath* in Orissa? Why bow your heads in a mosque? With heart full of fraud, you chant prayers. What avails you to go on a pilgrimage (Hajj) to the Ka'aba? All these men and women of the world that you have created, O Lord, are in your form. Kabir is the child of Ram-Allah; everyone is my Guru, my Pir. Kabir Says: 'Listen, O men and women, seek only one shelter: Repeat his Name, O mortals. Only

[5] McLeod, Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion, pp. 191-4
[6] Kabir, Gauri 43, AG, p. 331

then shall you be assuredly saved.[7]

Kabir here emphatically states the oneness of the Divine, His omnipresence and in a typically mystical tone takes the human heart (Dil) to be the abode of God. Thus, the individual must find the truth in his/her own body and mind by repeating the divine Name with utmost inner sincerity of the heart, which is the only means of attaining liberation. Given this understanding of the Supreme Being it is not surprising that Kabir vigorously attacks the outward observances and sectarianism in both the Hindu tradition and Islam of his time. Hindus abstain from grains on Ekadasi (Gias in the original text), the eleventh day in each lunar fortnight, roughly twenty-four times a year. Muslims observe fast during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan, a sacred month heralding the revelation of the Qur'an in the Muslim tradition. By 'South' in the original text Kabir seems to have meant the Jagannath temple at Puri in Orissa, which is evident from rest of the hymn. The phrase 'Allah in the West' refers to Indian Muslims' attitude to their holy place in Mecca that is to the west of lndia. Accordingly, the Hindus visit the pilgrimage centre at Jagannath Puri in Orissa (in the south from Banaras) for ritual bathing to remove accumulated karma and Muslims trudge to Mecca to pay their homage to Ka'aba. Kabir condemns both Hindus and Muslims, especially the Brahmins and Qazis, as hypocrites for the way in which they divorce moral conduct and religious practice. He uses the formulaic phrase *Dil Mahi kapat*- with heart full of fraud'-to underline the phoniness in traditional religion. Further, Kabir recognizes the basic equality of human beings on the ground that 'they are created by the same God and are 'all in your form[8] Each person is somehow in God's image and is worthy of equal respect and dignity. Kabir may have intended to determine the historical tension existing between two major religious communities of India-Hindus and Muslims-who were making special religious claims. Kabir, however, declares his independence from the sectarian categories of the Hindu tradition and Islam by identifying himself to be a 'child' of one God. According to Kabir that God is known by different names, for example 'Allah and Ram'. In addition, he seems to have shown equivalent regard to the pious leaders of the two faiths-Gurus and Pirs. Throughout his works Kabir seems to have rejected the authority of the scriptures of both the Hindu tradition and Islam. He asserts that the Vedas and the Semitic texts (kateb, namely, the Torah, the Zabur ('Psalms), the Injil

[7] Kabir, Prabhati 2, AG, p. 1349
[8] Kabir, Prabhati 3, AG, pp. 1 349-50

(Gospel) and the Qur'an) are a pretence that cannot remove the wanderings of the heart.[9] At points he is unequivocal in his rejection of religious texts: “I have discarded the writings of Pandits and Mullahs. I have taken nothing out of them. If purity is in the heart, you can behold the Lord. Kabir has found Him searching the self again and again”[10]. Kabir here claims to have attained the enlightenment experience through self- realization. He is quite explicit that the source of his spiritual development is not some external authority, but his own personal mystic experience Kabir places much emphasis upon the inwardness as true religiosity and denounces all external observances as futile. He maintains that mere rituals and ceremonial worship are of no use in bringing about liberation,

“If the union yogis seek (yoga, 'union' with the self) came from roaming about naked in the buff, every deer in the forest would achieve liberation. Why go naked or wear skins when you cannot see Ram in your own heart? Refrain. If by shaving your head you gain spiritual fulfillment why are not all the sheep saved? If by holding back your 'seed' (bind, 'sperm') you earn a place in paradise, brother, why cannot eunuchs achieve the supreme state of bliss? Kabir says: 'Listen, brother, who has ever won the spirit's prize\vithout the divine Name (Ram Namn)?[11] In the last verse Kabir recommends the spiritual discipline of meditation on the divine Name as the only means of release. Kabir shows his preference for the word 'Ram' to depict God. It should be noted that this 'Ram' is not the deity of popular Hindu mythology, incarnation of Vishnu and hero of the epic Ramayana. In a number of poems Kabir explicitly repudiates this anthropomorphic Ram. For Kabir, 'Ram' is primarily a sound, a mantra consisting of the long and short syllable 'Ra-ma'.[12] Kabir sarcastically condemns the hierarchical social values of the caste system under which human beings are in principle unequal, and the ideas of purity and pollution associated with the caste. He challenges the Brahmin as follows, “You do not know your caste when you are in the mother’s womb. All are born from Brahman 's seed (Brahman Hindu) . Say, O pandit, when did you become a Brahmin? Do not waste your life saying, 'I am a Brahmin.' Refrain. If you are a Brahmin born of a Brahmin woman, then why did you not come out some special way? How are you a Brahmin? How are we Shudras? How are we of blood? How are you of milk? Kabir says: 'He who meditates on

[9] Kabir, Tilang 1, AG, p. 727.
[10] Kabir, Bhairau 7, AG, p. 1 159
[11] Kabir, Gauri 4, AG, p. 324
[12] Hess and Singh, Bijak, p. 4.

Brahman is indeed a Brahmin in my opinion.[13] Milk, for all its white appearance seemingly symbolizes 'purity' whereas blood symbolizes 'impurity' or untouchability.[14] Kabir argues with merciless logic that Brahmin and Shudra are either both polluted or are both clean. He uses the common argument against untouchability that everyone is born in the same way from the same stuff, the Brahm Hindu ('seed of Brahman'). Shudras are therefore not polluted in relation to Brahmins. Kabir thus ridicules the absurdity of the claim made by Brahmins that they enjoy special status because of their birth in a particular caste. In his radical reinterpretation he points out that a true Brahmin is the one who meditates on God. For Kabir, the way of devotion is a solitary one. In the following Salok, he cautions the devotee not to take anyone along while following the saintly path to union because that would delay his/ her own spiritual progress:

Kabir, if you start off to join the Sadhu, take no companion with you.
And never retrace your steps, whatever may come in your way.[15]

The word sadhu may mean 'the saint' par excellence, one who is the Satguru, or it may be taken in the plural, meaning 'Saints' in general. Although Kabir implies that the way of devotion should be pursued with determination in spite of the difficulties it entails. He seems to be stressing individual salvation as the goal of spiritual endeavor. The Sikh Gurus, by contrast, place emphasis on collective emancipation as the goal for the seeker. In his Japji, for instance, Guru Nanak says, “They who have faithfully followed the divine Name have run their course, their labors done. Freed are they and others with them. Radiantly, Nanak, they go to glory.[16] It seems evident that individual salvation is not Guru Nanak's ideal. The stress here is on unselfish concern for the humanity as a whole (*Sab da Bhala*). In this context, Niharranjan Ray competently remarks: 'Neither the leaders of the Bhakti movement nor of the Nathapantha and the Sant synthesis attempted to do what Guru Nanak did, not in any systematic manner at any rate. These leaders seem to have been individuals working out their own problems towards achieving their personal religious and spiritual aims and aspirations[17] In a similar vein, Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia aptly notes, “The Bhakti movement could not play a revolutionary role on the sociological level owing, inter alia, to its individualistic mystique;

[13] Kabir, Gauri 7, AG, p. 324
[14] M 1 , Var Majh, 1 (6) , AG, p. 140
[15] Kabir, Salok 1 1 6, AG, p. 1370
[16] Hew McLeod, Sikhism (London: Penguin Books, 1997) p. 281.
[17] Niharranjan Ray, The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1975), p. 40.

the stress here was on individualistic salvation in the world hereafter realizable through the mystical union with God. on the other hand, Sikhism enlarged the conception of salvation by investing it with collectivistic, societal dimension.[18] Kabir's emphasis on solitariness is seen in his views on mendacity as a means of acquiring merit in spiritual life. He says, “Kabir, it is pleasant to beg (*Madhukan*), you receive grains of many kinds. None has a claim over you, and you enjoy a great country, a great kingdom.[19] Madhukari literally means ' honey-making' and it refers to the normal way for a mendicant to sustain oneself, by collecting uncooked food grains from a number of households. Vaudeville writes that the praise of mendicancy as a way to freedom both material and spiritual is already found in Nath-Panthi literature. She quotes the following verse from the Gorakh-bani: Mendicancy is my cow of plenty, and the whole world is my field. By the Guru's grace, I obtain alms, and when the end comes, no burden (of karma) on my head.[20] Kabir seems to have been influenced by the Nath-Panthi tradition with regard to his emphasis on the practice of living off alms. Prabhakar Machwe maintains: 'Though Kabir was a weaver and weaving was his parental occupation, his heart was not in his profession, neither as a craft nor as a means of earnings[21] Perhaps Kabir renounced the family craft at some stage in his life and reverted to Madhukari to sustain himself and his family. This seems to be implied in the following autobiographical hymn from the Gujari Raga:

> “Kabir's mother sobs and weeps in secret: 'How will these children live, O God (Raghurai, "Ram")?' Kabir has given up setting the loom and weaving: On his body he has written the Name of Ram! Refrain. 'As long as I went on threading my shuttle, so long the thread of Ram's Love kept snapping! I am slow-witted and a weaver by caste-but I have earned the profit *Bani Bhagat Kabir ji Ki* 93 of divine Name. ‘Says Kabir: 'Listen, O mother: He who is the Lord (Raghurat) of the three worlds provides me and them.”[22]

The hymn clearly describes the sorrow of Kabir's mother because her son had given up his

[18] J asbir Singh Ahluwalia, The Sovereignty of the Sikh Doctrine (New Delhi: Bahri Publicaitons, 1983) , p. 39
[19] Kabir, Salok 168, AG, p. 1373
[20] Vaudeville, Kabir, p. 305., Doha, 108
[21] Prabhakar Machwe, Kabir (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademy, 1968) , p. 13
[22] Kabir, Gujari 2, AG, p. 524

weaving to devote all his time to meditating on the divine Name. Kabir seems to have withdrawn himself from various concerns of the wellbeing of his family.[23] In contrast with Kabir, the Sikh Gurus are strongly opposed to begging. They consider it degrading and denounce those self-styled leaders who live off alms. For instance, Guru Nanak proclaims:

"They who call themselves Gurus and Pirs but go about begging for alms never fall at their feet to show them reverence. They who eat what they earn through their own labour and who give some of what they have in charity; says Nanak: 'They alone know the true way of spiritual life".[24] Guru Nanak asserts that the true way of spiritual life requires that one should live on what one has labored to receive through honest means and that one should share with others the fruit of one's exertion. Thus, there is no place for mendacity in the Sikh view of life. This is the most significant stance that sets Guru Nanak and his successors apart from the Sants of North India.

Finally, the theme of the love of the Divine and the anguish of separation (Biraha) pervades the compositions of Kabir in the Adi Granth. Vaudeville writes: 'In Kabir's poetry and in the Sant tradition generally, the notion of viraha (or Biraha), a tormenting desire of the soul for the absent Beloved, bears a resemblance to the Sufi notion of *Ishq*.[25] Kabir describes the painful longing of the soul who has not yet obtained the beatific vision of the divine Beloved as follows, "Once the snake of Biraha is in the body, no mantra can control it. He who is separated from Ram will not survive. But if he does, he will go mad.[26] To dislodge a venomous snake from its hole, to bring it under control or to cure a snake-bite, yogis use appropriate mantras, that is, magic spells Kabir employs the symbol of the snake to describe the lovelorn condition of the devotee that resembles that of a man under the influence of a deadly poison. Kabir thus stresses the laboriousness of the path of love that involves long periods spent in the torment of separation. He maintains that very few reach their goal and successfully experience the union with the divine.

The poetry and message of Kabir transcend the boundaries of time and space, offering profound insights into the human condition and the pursuit of spiritual truth. Through his simple yet profound verses, Kabir captured the essence of existence, emphasizing the universality of the divine and the interconnectedness of all beings. His message of love, compassion, and inner devotion

[23] Jodh Singh, Kabir (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1 97 1), pp. l l-15.
[24] M1, Var Sarang, 1 (22), AG, p. 1245
[25] Vaudeville, Kabir, p. 1 46.
[26] Kabir, Salok 76, AG, p. 1368

continues to resonate with people from diverse backgrounds, inspiring seekers of truth and fostering unity amidst diversity. As we reflect on Kabir's poetry and its enduring relevance, we are reminded of the timeless wisdom embedded within his words. Kabir's teachings invite us to look beyond the surface of religious dogma and embrace the essence of spirituality – a journey of self-discovery, compassion, and divine realization. His poetry serves as a beacon of light in times of darkness, guiding us towards a deeper understanding of ourselves and our place in the universe. Ultimately, "Kabir's Quest: Uniting Hearts and Minds Through Poetic Expression" celebrates the transformative power of Kabir's poetry, reminding us of the boundless potential for growth and enlightenment that lies within each of us. As we continue on our own spiritual journeys, may we draw inspiration from Kabir's timeless verses and strive to embody the universal truths they convey – love, compassion, and the eternal quest for truth.

Shaikh Farid-u'd-din Masud Ganj-i-Shakar, widely known as Baba Farid, is one of the most primitive Sufis who belonged to the land of the Punjab. Much of the matter concerning his life comes from hagiography. Siyar-u 'l-Auliya (1351-88), one of the initial such documents says that Shaikh Farid was born in 569 AH/1173 CE at Khotwal in the district of Multan[27]. It is said that his grandfather, Qazi Shuaib migrated to the Punjab in the middle of the 12th century under the stress of the Ghuzz invasions. After a diminutive stay at Lahore and Kasur, the family of Qadi Shuaib settled down at Khotwal, where he was appointed the Qazi ('Muslim Jurist') by the Sultan, the Ghaznavid ruler of Lahore[28]. One of Shuaib's three sons, named Jamal-u'd-din Sulaiaman, was raised at Khotwal where Lehndi (‘western’) Punjabi was the language. He married a Punjabi girl, Qarsum Bibi, who was the daughter of Shaikh Wajih-u'd-din Khajendi of Khotwal[29]. Shaikh Farid was the second son of the three sons born to them. Nizami has given a genealogical table which traces the descent of Baba Farid from Caliph Umar, which indicates that he belonged to the Sunni tradition of lslam[30]. He is believed to have been greatly influenced by his mother, an exceedingly pious woman, who prayed at lengthy vigils and who generated that

[27] According to another text Fawa'id-u'l-Fu 'ad, written in 1308-22 CE, Shaikh Farid was born in 5 71AH/ 1 1 75CE.
[28] KA. Nizami, The Life and Time of Shaikh Farid-u'd-din Ganj-i-Shakar (Delhi: ldarah-i-Adabiyat-i-Delhi, 1955), p. 1 1
[29] Ganda Singh, 'Baba Farid-A Real Saint' in Attar Singh, ed., Socio•Cultural lmpact of lslam (Chandigarh: Punjab University, 1976) l6.
[30] Nizami, Life and Time, p. 1 2.

spark of celestial love in him which dominated his whole being, and moulded his thinking and action'[31]. Shaikh Farid received his early education of Qur'an at Khotwal and then shifted to Multan which was a famous center of Muslim learning and piety. He undertakes further studies in Islamic jurisprudence. It is believed that Shaikh Farid had memorized the complete text of Qur'an and used to rehearse it once in twenty-four hours[32]. It is said that while in Multan he met with a visiting Muslim saint, Khwaja Qutb-u'd-din Bakhtiyar Kaki, the spiritual successor (khalifa) of Shaikh Muin-u'd-din Chisti who established the Chisti order of Sufism in India. Meanwhile, Shaikh Farid became his disciple and adopted the Chisti order Tradition has recorded that Shaikh Farid performed extremely difficult ascetic practices as a part of his mystical discipline. Under the guidance of his master, he is said to have gone through the chillah-i-makus, dangling upside down in a deep well and saying the prescribed prayers and reminiscences for forty nights[33]. Nizami has cited Shattari's statement recorded in the Gulzar-i- Abaras follows: "All the Shaikhs of India are unanimous in declaring that no saint has excelled Ganji-i-Shakar in his devotions and penitences"[34]. Baba Farid's whole life is depicted in traditional sources as one long story of prayers, "vigils and fasts. It is said that his constant fasting was miraculously rewarded-even pebbles turned into sugar when he swallowed them, hence his surname Ganj-i-Shakar, 'sugar treasure."[35]. It shows the extreme importance Farid placed on fasting as indispensable for spiritual progress. However, G.S. Talib states that Baba Farid was called Ganj-i-Shakar because he received the blessing from his master, who praised the sweetness of his character and remarked: 'Thou shalt be sweet like sugar'[36]. After the death of Khawaja Qutb-u'd-din Bakhtiyar Kaki (1235 CE), Shaikh Farid became the head of the Chisti order. He made the distinctive contribution of giving an 'all-India status to the Chistiya tradition and spread its ideology in the entire India[37]. After a while it turned into a dominant movement for the Islamization of the

[31] KA. Nizami, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, vol. 2 (London: Lusac and Co., 1 965), p. 796.
[32] Nizami, Life and Time, p. 1 6.
[33] Ibid., p. 26.
[34] Ibid., p. 24
[35] Annemarie Schimmel, MysticalDimensions of Islam (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1 975) , p. 347
[36] G.S. Talib, Baba Shaikh Farid Shakar Ganj (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1974) , p. 4.
[37] K.A. Nizami, Foreword to Harnam Singh Shan, ed., So Said Sheikh Farid (Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1 974) , p. V

masses. It is commonly assumed that the Chisti tradition surpassed the other Sufi traditions, for example the Qadiri, the Suhrawardi and the Naqshbandi, in reputation and influence in India. One of the main reasons for its popularity lies in the fact that baba Farid used the local dialect, Multani Punjabi (Lehja), to reach out to the masses. The two major languages of lslam, the Arabic of the Qur'an and Persian were unknown to the commoners."[38] Shaikh Farid chooses the river Sutluj at Ajodhan and established his khanqah to promulgate his mission. There he remained from 1236 to 1265[39]. His home is famous with the name Pakpattan, 'the ferry of the pure'. A number of Punjabi tribes claim to adopt Islam on the hand of Baba Farid[40].

Annemarie Schimmel states that 'Farid-u'd-din Ganj-i-Shakar used Old Punjabi for his mystical songs[41]. These songs were traditionally sung as a part of religious music in Sufi gatherings. They influenced entire population no matter men or the women, who used to sing these simple verses while doing their daily corse at homes[42]. Thus Shaikh Farid's poetry in the local Multani Punjabi went so popular and transferred from generation to generation. Guru Nanak when visited to Pakpattan he heard about these compositions from Shaikh Ibrahim, who was 12th in descent from baba Farid. In this context, W.H. Mcleod maintains that there is little doubt that Guru Nanakmust at some time have met Sheikh Ibrahim, the contemporary incumbent of the Sufi line descending from Sheikh Farid'. That Guru Nanak knew the works of Shaikh Farid is quite obvious from the fact that he made comments on some of his poetry. The addition of Shaikh Farid's works in the Adi Granth does emphasize the high spiritual reputation and accomplishment that the Sufi poet may have enjoyed previously in his own lifetime.

In conclusion, a deep legacy of harmony, compassion, and spiritual enlightenment is revealed by examining Bhagat Kabir and Hazrat Baba Farid's quest via poetry expression. Both Baba Farid and Kabir, while coming from distinct theological backgrounds, crossed sectarian barriers with their ageless poetry by presenting universal truths that speak to people of all ages. Kabir and Baba Farid united disparate communities under the banner of shared humanity by emphasizing the value of love,

[38] Annemarie Schimmel, As Through a Veil-Mystical Poetry in Islam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 136.
[39] SAA Rizvi, A History ofSuf'tSm in India, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlai, 1978), p. 140.
[40] Ganda Singh, Baba Farid, p.15.
[41] Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions, p. 384.
[42] Ibid., p. 348.

compassion, and the quest of spiritual truth via their poetry. Their artistic search for unification shines as a ray of hope and inspiration in a world where religious, cultural, and ideological divides frequently occur. When we consider Hazrat Baba Farid and Bhagat Kabir's lasting impact, we are reminded.

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