

## **Conclusion: Contemporary Relevance of Kabir**

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Kabir is a part and parcel of people's life. Kabir's relevance for people continues. His spiritual and social messages continue to appeal to people, encourage, inspire, guide, goad, and warn them, and elevate their life with a feeling of dignity and respect. Their strong association with Kabir is reflected through Kabir's centres and their traditions and practices, men and women singers of Kabir and audiences, *Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb* of Maghar (represented by Kabir's shrines).

Through the practices and traditions of Kabir centres, Kabir has served people both spiritually and socially. These traditions and practices present two different images of Kabir: 1. the iconoclastic Kabir, and 2. the ritualistic Kabir. However, both images of Kabir cultivate a spiritual awakening among people and provide them moral strength, confidence and a hope of salvation through Kabir *bhakti*, and they have an anti-Brahmanical spirit or appeal which attracts dalits and shudras towards Kabir and Kabirpanth.

Rituals are an inseparable phenomenon of a religious sect. Kabirpanth is not an exception to it. However, what distinguishes Kabirpanthi rituals are the elements of dissent and protest which they carry. Kabirpanthi rituals, no doubt, run counter to the iconoclastic spirit of Kabir, but they are used as a form of protest of lower-caste people against the Brahmanical practices, principles and beliefs. Like David Lorenzen's, my study too refutes the theory propounded by Louis Dumont in *Homo hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (1972) and Michael Moffatt in *An Untouchable Community in South India* (1979), which suggests that untouchables (dalits) completely replicate the hegemonic Brahmanical practices and beliefs as a model and do not question and challenge them. This theory comes closer to the concepts of 'dominant ideology' and 'hegemony' that are found among Marxist thinkers, from Karl Marx himself to Antonio Gramsci. However, Gramsci

and many other Marxist thinkers show the possibility of a violent form of dissent against dominant ideologies and hegemony of the ruling classes in favour of the proletariat class.

Lorenzen (2014) notes:

Marx argued that the ideas of the ruling class are the dominant ideas of each epoch, and Gramsci extended this to emphasize the acceptance of the power of the ruling classes that they ruled. Nonetheless, most Marxist thinkers of voluntaristic Leninist sympathies, including Gramsci, allowed for the possibility of effective dissent against dominant ideologies and hegemony, though they often claimed that this would require a violent revolution. (2014, p. 174)

Instead of a violent form of dissent, *Chauka Arti*, *Bijak Path* etc. practiced by Kabirpanthi dalits and shudras pose an anti-Brahmanical spirit ideologically and symbolically (as we saw in the second chapter)<sup>352</sup>. Kabirpanthi rituals are purposefully linked with Kabir challenging the hegemonic practices and beliefs, which consolidate Brahmanical authority over the people of lower castes and make them victims of discrimination, subjugation and exploitation. Kabirpanthi rituals and other practices take Kabirpanth to be a “religion of social liberation”<sup>353</sup> which gives fillip to spiritual uplift and social consciousness in its followers.

Performing these rituals at *Maths* on the occasions of Kabir based-programmes and at the homes of many followers on the occasions of marriage, birth, death, house warming etc., Kabirpanthi *Mahants* and saints have substituted Brahmin priests and undermined their position. It is significant in the sense that they have ended the access of Brahmin priests to the homes of these Kabirpanthi followers on those occasions which perpetuate the hegemonic

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<sup>352</sup> However, I also observed a desire of the violent form of dissent in some Kabirpanthis during my interviews with them. I also noted the same kind of desire in some of the followers of Ravidasiya sect at Sirgovardhanpur in Banaras during my fieldwork between 2017 and 2018, but this violent form is not easy to be materialized because “the economic, political and ideological dominance of wealthier and more powerful groups puts strong limits on the amount of dissent that can be tolerated short of a violent revolution” (Lorenzen, 2014, p. 174).

<sup>353</sup> “Religion of social liberation” theory was used by Richard M. Eaton (2005) and other scholars in the context of conversion of Hindus into Islam. However, Eaton found it a fiasco as according to him, the attraction of social equality in Islam did not bring any significant change in the social status of indigenous people of lower castes, who converted into Islam (p. 109).

privileges of Brahmin priests and serve their economic interest. At the same time, they have also subverted the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses, which is performed on some of these occasions. On the other hand, they have strengthened the image of Kabir as God immeasurably for people and connected him more strongly with their religious and social situations and experiences.

It is more significant in the context of dalit followers. They have *Mahants* and saints as priests who do not discriminate against them, rather teach them a better way of life through Kabir and instil confidence in them. Like Brahmin priests, they do not avoid meeting and going to homes of dalit followers. These Kabirpanthi *Mahants* and saints have alleviated their religious and social pains at least in the panth, which they have to suffer from untouchability and other types of discriminations and injustices perpetrated by Brahmins and the people of other higher castes.

The ceremonies and occasions (Kabir Jayanti, Kabir Nirvana Divas, Guru Purnima, Death Anniversaries of prominent *Mahants*, *Sant Sammelans*, Yearly Fairs, etc.), which are celebrated at Kabir *Maths* are significant as they have a transformative impact on followers who come from diverse lower castes. On the one hand, they bring lay followers, saints and *Mahants* together, fill them with happiness, energy and self-confidence through the spirit of Kabir, and strengthen their bond with the *Acharya Gaddis/Maths* and one another, and on the other hand, they inspire participants to tend to suspend their social, economic and religious differences among one another. They cultivate in them a feeling of the community in which everyone is equal.

Kabir *Maths* still preserve and nurture the medieval traditions of *Satsangs*, *Pravchans* and *Bhandaras* which are of a paramount importance. *Satsangs* and *pravachans* are active forms of conveying Kabir's *vanis* and social and spiritual messages and teachings among the

masses. Through *satsangs*, *pravachans* and *bhandaras*, they cultivate not only a spiritual awakening but also a social awakening among followers. I perceive these traditions as a form of dissent and protest as well. Here, discriminations perpetrated on the basis of caste, *varna*, untouchability and economic status etc. are exposed and criticized and a message of human equality is propagated. Those followers who have suffered from the bitter experiences of discrimination feel attached to Kabir and Kabir *Maths* and receive strength and inspiration to raise a voice of protest against them.

Kabirpanthi *bhandaras* have also cultivated democratic values among people as during these *bhandaras*, dalits and shudras take meals with a feeling of human equality and just with one identity as the followers of Kabir. Again, eating meals together is a rejection of the Brahmanical attitude that dalits and shudras cannot take food together with the people of higher castes. This really gives a feeling of oneness to the people of lower castes.

Thus, Kabir centres are places of both religious and social awakening. They will continue to be the places where the messages of human equality are disseminated and disparities perpetrated on the basis of caste, *varna* and creed are discouraged and questioned. However, there are also a few *Mahants* and saints<sup>354</sup> who consider themselves to be superior to other Kabirpanthis, especially lay Kabirpanthis. They want to have a position similar to

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<sup>354</sup> Recently, political interests of some Kabirpanthi *Mahants* and saints have also been reflected. A couple of *sadhus* from Lahartara Dharmadasi *Math* shared their support to BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) on Facebook; Govind Das, the *Mahant* of Lahartara branch of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, can often be seen at the meetings and campaigns of BJP in Banaras. Govind Das who once was close to Vivekdas has been driven to BJP on account of his controversy with him over the issue of the seat of the *Mahant* of this branch. Govind Das received a lot of help from it. BJP supported Govind Das on account of the fact that Vivekdas is a supporter of Congress Party (centrist ideology) and criticises the ideology of BJP. Maghar Kabir *Math* too has been the supporter of BJP for more than half a dozen years and has received a lot of grants for its development. The leaders of BJP have shown more interests in Maghar for their political benefits. However, not only the BJP but other political parties have also used it to seek votes from Hindus (Kabirpanthis) and Muslims. No doubt, the development of Maghar *Math* and Lahartara branch of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* has recently received a fillip from the support of BJP, but the ideologies of Kabir and BJP are apparently far apart. It is to be noted that Kabir culture at *Maths*, which consists of Kabir, his teachings and messages, a strong network of followers from diverse lower castes continue to dominate and challenge any interference in itself. Therefore, I see this political involvement only as a way of seeking monetary assistance (profit) from BJP for the development of *Math* or as a way of keeping their rivals (*Mahants* and *sadhus*) in check.

Brahmin priests. Nevertheless, unlike Brahmin priests, they speak and work for the spiritual and social welfare of lower caste people and give instructions in their personal and familial problems and difficulties.

In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, there are vibrant oral and performative traditions in the name of Kabir, through which too, Kabir becomes a part of people's life. Kabir's teachings and messages (truths associated with life) conveyed in the form of songs move people profoundly. In fact, Kabir-singing delivers messages and teachings of Kabir to people in their idiom.

Kabir's oral and performative traditions continue to be more popular among people (singers and audiences) of lower classes (shudras and dalits) including the majority of poor, illiterate and uneducated people. For them, these traditions act as ways of actively addressing, communicating, unveiling and deconstructing religious (spiritual), cultural and social knowledge of Indian society from one generation to another through Kabir. They help *shudras* and *dalits* know and understand the realities of their lives. Through these traditions, they come to know the fact more actively that injustices and discriminations on the basis of caste, *varna* etc. have been perpetrated against them in every walk of life. They tell them that it is not their fate. Reformation is possible through the *bhakti* of Kabir. In fact, these traditions make them spiritually, culturally and socially learned and aware instilling in them a feeling of dignity, respect, confidence, and personhood, which the caste-ridden structures of mainstream society have not accorded them. In a way, Kabir-singing gives a fillip to what Lorenzen (2014) calls 'conscious raising' (in both Kabir singers and audiences). 'Conscious raising' is a necessary prerequisite for any successful effort at social uplift.

In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, men Kabir-singing is now found in two forms: traditional and innovative. Both forms are surviving together. Through the innovations (transcreations)

concerning style, tune, and rhythm and composition of new *padas*, Kabir's performative corpus gets enriched, enlarged and updated. In fact, these innovations have also proved very effective in disseminating Kabir's messages and teachings among audiences including the youth. Most importantly, young singers with these innovations have taken Kabir among non-Kabirpanthi audiences beyond Kabir centres. Kabir really needs to be continuously sung and spread among the non-Kabirpanthi audiences so that they may get different inspirations which Kabir's *vanis* provide.

In the name of Kabir, *Saar Vanis* and *Daas Vanis* are being sung. *Daas Vanis* are explicit transcreations by singers and other followers of Kabir while *Saar Vanis* are a mix of both Kabir's actual *vanis* and the similar *vanis* ending with Kabir's signature line composed by others. It raises a significant question that when there are already many verses (*Saar Vanis*) in the name of Kabir in the written and oral traditions, why do singers compose and perform *Daas Vanis* and the *Saar Vanis* ending in Kabir's signature line?<sup>355</sup> In fact, oral tradition is a living phenomenon. It continues evolving according to time, place and interests, social, religious and economic circumstances of the singers and audiences. Kabir's oral world is not an exception to it. This evolution continues to extend Kabir's relevance for people as well.

I argue that *Daas Vanis* and *Saar Vanis* (composed by others) are expressions or translations in verses, of Kabir's influence on people. Men Kabir singers and audiences have a constant awareness of what Kabir has done for them spiritually and socially. This

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<sup>355</sup> It also reflects that Kabir's voice is an aggregate of the voices of a number of people, in the words of Vinay Dharwadker, a product of 'a community of poets'. It presents an example of intertextuality. It also gives an example of negative capability (a concept given by John Keats) where verses composed by others expressing Kabir's spirit are being treated as of Kabir. These verses present Kabir best as a poet who is a man speaking to men in the idiom of William Wordsworth. Kabir's spirit reflected through these compositions acts as a formula or model or *langue* (a term coined by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, which suggests the grammar of a language) and these compositions themselves are like *paroles* (concrete instances of the use of *langue*).

awareness develops in them a strong devotion to Kabir and inspires them to compose verses in order to express this devotion to him.

Through these transcreations, men singers are also conveying their own aspirations and sensibilities in the idiom of Kabir. Connecting or punctuating these compositions with Kabir and his couplets or using the signature line of Kabir towards the end of these compositions give them more validity and acceptability. Moreover, these compositions also become a part of Kabir's performative corpus enriching and extending it.

Many new songs (*Daas Vanis*) as tributes to Kabir have also been composed. Through these songs, they are celebrating Kabir's spirit, Kabir's life, legends and myths, and significance of the places associated with him. Some of these songs are far different from what Kabir said. However, they themselves are like commentaries on how Kabir lived and what he said and did. In a way, through these songs, they recall and celebrate what Kabir did and what he is still doing to them and why he is close to them.

In the repertoire of Kabir songs in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Kabir's social and religious criticisms continue. In fact, Kabir-singing creates a space where singers criticize religious and social injustices and inequalities. Shudras and dalits attack orthodox Brahmanical and Islamic creeds/tenets and practices in their own ways through their songs and commentaries. However, their attack is more on Brahmanical tenets than those on Islamic ones as they find the Brahmanical creeds such as caste, *varna* and temple-worship etc. are directly related to their everyday social and religious life.

In her study, Linda Hess categorizes the songs of the Malwa repertoire into spiritual and social (socio-political) songs. This scheme of categorization can also be extended to songs in the repertoire of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. My study has revealed that Kabir's *padas* concerning death, *bhakti*, self-improvement, detachment from *maya* and other spiritual

themes are as important and influential as Kabir's radical songs against the hypocrisies, artificialities, and cruelties of the Brahmanical and Islamic traditions. Lorenzen (1987b) perceives the social ideology of Kabir transmitted in Kabirpanth and outside as "liberating movements" of *bhakti* tradition, an idiom proposed by Jayant Lele (1981). However, I also find the religious or spiritual ideology of Kabir as "liberating movements" or as what Nancy M. Martin (2002) calls "liberation spirituality" expressing 'a critique of social and religious hierarchies' and inspiring subalterns to have a life of dignity and self-respect. Subaltern singers and audiences find themselves transformed through Kabir songs of the former category too. Kabir's spiritual songs also prepare them to identify their strength and weakness and equally connect them with Kabir and Kabir *bhakti*. Dalit singers claim that if they are awakened and united, their opponents (Brahmins and other upper castes) can never misguide and oppress them in the future. They can reform the people of their communities by the messages (spiritual teachings) of Kabir, which, according to them, make them more aware and better than the people of upper castes. It clearly reflects what spiritual songs of Kabir are doing to them. Vivekdas, the *Acharya (Mahant)* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, puts it with clarity: "In reality, this spiritual awakening gives birth to the spirit of independence" (2009, p. 244).

Thus, Kabir-singing as a spiritual and social practice is a way of life. As a collaborative (interactive) phenomenon of singers, audiences and their religious and social contexts, it serves them in accomplishing two cardinal functions: *Jagana* (to make themselves aware) and *Jagaana* (to make others aware). In fact, Kabir-singing continues to cultivate a spiritual and social awakening among both singers and audiences. Therefore, his verses have not only been sung since his time, but has also been a constant source of inspiration, dignity, energy, courage and confidence for people, especially for dalits and shudras. These aspects have also attracted women to take to Kabir-singing.

Mine is the first study which has unearthed vibrant oral and performative traditions among women in parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Tracing the history of women singers through the oral tradition, I discovered two popular names of women singers and preachers: Kamali and Ameen Mata. After these two women, we have no record of any other woman singer or preacher up to the 19th century. However, it is said that the wives of the *Mahants* of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth have been preaching Kabir's messages and teachings. I argue that the main reason of this absence is that Kabir-singing by women singers has been simply ignored by scholars. My study has attempted to fill this gap and has unearthed vibrant traditions of women singing in the 20th century.

There are mainly three categories of women singers in the Kabirpanth: *sadhvi* (women saint) singers, semi-professional householder singers, ordinary householder singers. The number of women singers has multiplied in Kabirpanth in recent years. Kabir-singing by women, which initially started as a result of their strong devotion to Kabir received further fillip with rise in women's consciousness particularly the aspects concerning women's equality, power, agency, freedom, economic independence and voice of protest against discriminations based on gender, caste and *varna*.

Women's Kabir-singing in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar share most of the characteristics of men-Kabir singing. However, it has its own uniqueness in many aspects concerning their struggles for creating space as Kabir singers, their transcreations of Kabir and some other approaches.

Unlike men singers, most of the women singers have to struggle against oppressive patriarchal norms and regulations within family and society. They have to negotiate the conflict between their domestic responsibilities and spiritual practices of singing and preaching Kabir. However, living in family, and contesting and challenging patriarchal

values, they fulfil their aspiration of establishing themselves as Kabir singers and preachers. A few women singers challenge their husbands and families, even rejecting them, in order to practice *bhakti* and live a life of freedom, power and agency through singing and preaching Kabir. They subvert their traditional roles only as mother and wife sanctioned to them by society<sup>356</sup>.

These women singers have also negotiated with the patriarchal attitude in Kabirpanth, which initially tried to prevent their advancement or did not give them as much importance and space as to male singers and preachers. In fact, orthodox and jealous saints feel frightened by the advancement of women singers and preachers. The sitting of women singers and preachers on dais for performances gives them (women singers) respect and equality with these male saints. They remain no longer their subordinates. It creates a sense of unease among those saints.

Through their singing and preaching, *sadhvi* singers have also created a safe and respectable space at the *Maths* headed by male *Mahants*. In fact, *sadhvi* singers do not want to be seen as a sex object but as great Kabir singers and preachers. They even surpass male *Mahants* and *sadhus* with their spiritual wisdom and knowledge.

Women singers now receive more importance and respect in Kabirpanth. The prior announcement or publication of the upcoming schedule of Kabir-singing by prominent women singers at Sonapur and other places in Bihar signifies their strong position and status in Kabirpanth. The performances by the women singers at all the Kabirpanthi camps of the Sonapur *Mela* also suggest their demand and impact among audiences. The respect, welcome and encouragement of the women singers by *Mahants* themselves accord them a status of

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<sup>356</sup> A) *Sadhvi* women also deconstruct the institution of marriage and perceive it as the main reason of women's slavery, subjection and oppression imposed by patriarchy.

B) Kabir-singing has also made women singers financially strong and independent in family and outside society and has broken stereotype that 'women must be kept dependent'.

*Gurus* or holy figures for Kabirpanthi followers. The demand and wait for their performances by the audiences, especially by women audiences, defines their space in Kabirpanth.

Performing Kabir at the homes of the Kabirpanthi followers on the occasions of *griha pravesh* (house warming), marriage, childbirth and on other auspicious occasions has also raised the social status and acceptability of dalit women singers. Through Kabir's songs and teachings, and other songs on the themes of the criticism of caste and *varna*, their voice for dignity and freedom are heard by Kabirpanthis of different other castes and classes. I argue that dalit women singers try to subvert the identity of what Ruth Manorama describes about dalit women as 'thrice discriminated'<sup>357</sup> meaning that they are discriminated against on the basis of class, caste, and gender. These singers also try to rise above the stereotypes 'dalits among the dalits' or 'downtrodden among the downtrodden'.

Kabir-singing by women singers has appealed to audiences profoundly. Women audiences find themselves closer to women singers and are more easily connected with them as they found them echoing their own sensibilities. They have found in these singers and preachers their female *Gurus* and holy figures. They are much influenced by their singing and preaching. I discovered that many women became disciples of Renu Bharati, Dulo Das, Gyansarovar Maharaj etc. after listening to their singing and preaching.

Male audiences also feel attracted to them as they find them different from men singers and have a feeling of a new flavour in their performances. Side by side, they also perceive them as holy figures as they are influenced by their singing and preaching. Therefore, women singers, especially in Bihar, are in a high demand which has stimulated women's singing in Kabirpanth. The presence of the prominent women singers at most of the major programmes in Bihar attests to their significant acceptance in Kabirpanth.

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<sup>357</sup> (Cited in Eva-Maria Hardtmann, 2009, p. 217)

Composing and performing their own verses in public gatherings, they are drawing the attention of people to their own difficulties and problems, needs, wishes and aspirations (spiritual and/or worldly). These compositions speak for equality, power and liberation not only from family violence and subjection but also from the cycle of rebirth (salvation). In the name of Kabir, their compositions also influence audiences and find acceptance, space and respect among them. It attests to the fact that women have successfully created their space in Kabirpanth and outside (they are also being invited to perform in other *Saguna* and *Nirguna* sects) as Kabir singers and preachers.

Women singers' transcreations are associated more with their own world. Their repertoire includes mostly the songs drawing metaphors, symbols and language from women's world, and commentaries, explanations and narratives from women's point of view. These songs, commentaries, explanations and narratives feminize Kabir and bring Kabir close to women showing him as a benevolent and benign figure, kindly disposed towards women and breaking the anti-women image of Kabir, which is reflected through some of his verses found in the manuscripts. Kabir is an intimate experience of their lives, which they live and breathe every moment, and which provides them power, agency and liberation. The development of the woman friendly image of Kabir in Kabirpanth and outside is the greatest contribution of women singers to the oral and performative traditions of Kabir. On the other hand, the increasing influence of women singers among Kabirpanthi followers has also led or forced Kabirpanth to reinvent a woman friendly image of Kabir. Associating Kabir with the four women disciples Khemsari, Mandodari, Indramati and Ameen through the myth of the incarnations of Kabir in all the four Hindu epochs suggests the same fact.

Through these singers, Meera, Shabari, Seeta, Parvati and other mythological and historical women and their struggles for *bhakti* and other rights have also become a part of Kabir's world and have enlarged, democratized and feminized Kabir's spirit. In fact, due to

women singers, Kabir has adopted a female form in two ways: one through the *padas* in which Kabir himself has spoken in a female voice and the other through the transcreations of women singers. In the latter, he appears a more active feminine voice and even starts criticizing gender discrimination and demand equal right, respect and dignity for all women. In fact, Kabir questions patriarchy at every level through these women singers — a phenomenon which he could not do himself in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Women singers have successfully attracted the attention of people to the significant representation of female voice and role in Kabir's oral and performative traditions. My study has strongly suggested that women singers live and breathe Kabir in their own ways. Without exploring their life histories and experiences about Kabir, our understanding of Kabir's oral and performative tradition will remain incomplete and so is our knowledge of Kabir. My exploration has brought out that their personal histories with Kabir are their journeys of adopting, experiencing, living, singing and preaching Kabir. At the same time, they are also the journeys of their carving space in Kabirpanth and outside by negotiating with oppressive patriarchal attitudes in family and society, which discourage their singing. Kabir has become more radical on the questions of gender, caste and *varna* through women singers.

Kabir has been a strong presence among the Muslims of Maghar. From Kabir's time to the late twentieth century, the economic status of the Muslims of Maghar had been low. Most of them were associated with weaving clothes, which Kabir himself had practised. Weaving clothes might have brought them close to Kabir when he approached Maghar. On the other hand, Nawab Bijali Khan (the leader of the Muslims of the time) himself was a devout devotee of Kabir and so, naturally, other Muslims of Maghar also became Kabir's followers. Thus, there developed a strong tradition of Muslims' faith in Kabir at Maghar and it still continues.

Kabir's legends associated with Maghar [his coming from Banaras in order to end the prejudice 'dying at Maghar takes one to hell or ensures one's rebirth as a donkey', his ending the 12 year-long drought at Maghar, his making the Ami river flow near Maghar and his body turning into flowers at the time of death through his spiritual powers] have developed the image of Kabir as a prominent Sufi saint among the Muslims of Maghar. Identifying Kabir as a *Wali* or *Fakir* or *Bujurg* or *Pir* or *Baba* and addressing him as Baba Kabiruddinshah by the Muslims of Maghar testify to this fact and their faith in Kabir. Their beliefs that 'Kabir came to Maghar for their welfare; misfortune does not come to Maghar due to Kabir's presence or no riot or controversy occurs' bring them close to Kabir. Praying to Kabir for the fulfilment of their wishes, getting jobs and freeing from their everyday problems reflect their strong faith and attachment to Kabir.

Their faith in Kabir has always been nurtured by Kabir *Mazar* which is a living tradition of Muslims' faith in Kabir. Offering *fatiha* by the Muslims in large numbers on the occasion of Shab-e-Barat testifies to the fact that the Muslims of Maghar continues to have their faith in Kabir. Kabir has become the part of their everyday cultural, social and religious life.

Regular visits of Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers (including Muslims from different places), and different programmes associated with Kabir and Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* also increase their acceptability of Kabir as almost the whole Maghar is overshadowed with Kabir culture on the occasions of these programmes. However, very few orthodox Muslims (the followers of Deobandi or Wahhabi Movement)<sup>358</sup> of Maghar have a disapproving attitude towards Kabir's criticism of Islam, but the majority of Muslims justify that Kabir has attacked the evils of Islam. Kabir's impartial and neutral approach of criticism of both the

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<sup>358</sup> Deobandi or Wahhabi Muslims even reject the whole tradition of Sufism. For example, Gulam Kibriya Ansari, a resident of Maghar, says that Sufis have no moral character and their own children are spoilt. However, this phenomenon is very new to Maghar.

religions makes the Muslims accept Kabir as one of their own. Such an acceptability of Kabir by the Muslims of Maghar strengthens their bond with Kabir.

Kabir has been at the epicentre of the relationship between the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar. He plays the most significant role of a link between them, influences and transforms the social, cultural, religious, and everyday life of Maghar. Their common traditional beliefs “the arrival of Kabir developed their unity; communal harmony in Maghar is the contribution of Kabir and Kabir wanted them to live together” have been the foundation of a shared or syncretic culture between them. This shared culture is seen at their spiritual, social, cultural and economic levels.

Their mutual participation in religious festivals, joys and pains of each other testifies to the fact of their shared culture. This shared culture has been strengthened and deepened by the adjacent geographical location of the Hindus and Muslims, Kabir *Nirvana Sthali*, *Khichadi Mela* and *ghats* of the Ami river. Due to these factors, the lives of Hindus and Muslims are deeply intertwined or intermeshed into each other. It appears that co-existence of both has been their fate or destiny which is also reflected by the coexistence of the *Mazar* and *Samadhi* of Kabir.

Influencing the psyche of both the Hindus and Muslims, the side by side existence of Kabir’s shrines develops a feeling of *Ganga-Jamuna Tehzeeb* between them. Finding no discrimination between both the monuments enriches their affection to Kabir and affects their mutual relationship. In fact, the relationship between these monuments represents the actual relationship of the Hindus and Muslims socially, geographically and ideologically.

Using Kabir to resolve controversies between them and the belief that ‘they preserve their unity because they want that the land of Kabir should not be spoiled and polluted with communalism’ reflects Kabir’s strong impact on Maghar. Following Kabir’s messages, the

sensible and elder Hindus and Muslims have always made significant attempts to keep the environment of Maghar sound and harmonious. The formations of 'Peace Committee' and 'Aman Committee' also suggest how both the Hindus and Muslims have always wanted to preserve the peaceful heritage of Kabir. One can easily see their attitude of tolerance to each other in every aspect of life. Respecting and participating in each other's festivals, programmes and ceremonies speak the same truth.

Both the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar also welcome the ceremonies and programmes associated with Kabir as their own. The wait for the Maghar Mahotsava or *Khichadi Mela* by both the communities reflects how it brings both together in an interactive space. Maghar Mahotsava develops a sense of unity between them as Kabir is highlighted as a propagator of unity during the Mahotsava. Through this, they also learn Kabir's *vanis* and thoughts.

The Hindus and Muslims, especially of Maghar, continue to watch the one month-long *Khichadi Mela* together. Since both participate in it, this fair becomes a strong medium of interaction between them throughout the month.

On the occasions of these programmes and even otherwise, the regular flow of Kabirpanthis and other admirers and followers of Kabir from different states of India also creates a transforming effect upon the psyche of people of Maghar. Seeing their profound attachment to Kabir and Maghar, the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar are more inclined to following Kabir. Their respect by outsiders for being the citizens of Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* encourages them to preserve the rapport of Maghar.

Can both the Hindus and Muslims preserve the peaceful heritage of Maghar in the future? Can they save it from the instigations of their orthodox political or religious leaders or followers? The controversies such as burning *tazia* and throwing stones at the statues of

goddess Lakshmi pose a serious threat to their *Ganga-Jamuna Tahezeeb*. However, Kabir has always controlled the religious fanaticism of both the Hindus and Muslims. The pervasive impact of Kabir on Maghar and its environment compel them to harmonize with all the citizens of Maghar. The following view of Maulana Abdulla Ansari (the Mullah of a mosque in Maghar) sheds light on how Kabir's presence dominates any religious fanaticism at Maghar:

We organized a conference in 2014. We invited prominent Brahmin scholars. We also invited prominent Muslim scholars such as Maulana Ashrad Saheb and Maulana Mahmood Madani Saheb. On this dais which belongs to Kabir Das, the discourse started that Maghar is the land of Kabir Das: "Here there is humanity and it is not good to say anything. As we (Muslims) pass some comments on them (Hindus), they (Hindus) will pass some counter comments on us. We do not want speak anything at all from here." They just preached the message that they (the people of Maghar) should preserve this holy land of Sant Kabir Nagar formed after Kabir. Here no discrimination should be spread. Our Madani Saheb spoke a few words to the people: "In our *Hadis*, it has been written that the Muslims never have enmity with others." The pundits (Brahmins) who had come from Banaras said: "The same thing has also been written in the *Gita*."

I argue that Maghar is a boat steered by Kabir. This boat is moving taking both the Hindus and Muslims together. Under the supervision of Kabir's messages and instructions, both the Hindus and Muslims co-operate with each other for the course of its smooth flow knowing that any lack of harmony will drown both. The storms of politics and outsider militants have recently tried to sabotage this boat. However, the strong heritage of their unity developed through Kabir and their mutual desire to maintain this unity have always protected the boat.

Thus, Maghar provides a model of a syncretic Hindu-Muslim relationship. Such a model is an immediate need in other parts of the country in the increasing heat of communalism agitated by orthodox religious leaders, political parties and media. However, the question remains — will Hindus and Muslims of other places apply this model inspired by Kabir for a friendly and healthy co-existence?

## **Limitation and Scope**

Kabir's is an endless world spreading, evolving and prevailing in different regions of India. Though I have focused on Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, many parts of these two regions are still left. Other scholars may take to these regions for study so that we may have a comprehensive understanding of Kabir in these two regions. Similar studies can be undertaken in other regions as well.

This is the first study to discover Kabir's oral and performative traditions popular among women singers. However, women singers from other regions also need to be studied in order to comprehensively understand Kabir's relevance for women and their world.

In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, in case of men and women singers, I focused, especially on the Kabirpanthi singers. Kabir's influence needs to be explored even among non-Kabirpanthi singers, audiences, and ordinary masses in the present context.

I have focused on Maghar in order to study Kabir's presence among Muslims. However, Kabir needs to be studied in other regions as well in order to understand Kabir's influence among them. Even in the context of Maghar, I could not interview Muslim women. Although I tried to interview some Muslim women, they refused. However, in comparison to Muslim men, more Muslim women visit Kabir's shrines. Interviews with them can really result in some more significant insights in relation to Muslims' connection with Kabir at Maghar.