

# Women Kabir Singers: Women's Agency and Feminization of Kabir

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## Tracing Kabir-Singing by Women Singers through Oral Tradition

This chapter unearths vibrant traditions of Kabir-singing by women, a phenomenon which has been ignored by scholars. Women's Kabir-singing continues in parallel to that of men Kabir singers. However, there is no written evidence to establish how long women have been singing Kabir. In the oral tradition of Kabir, Kamali (non-Kabirpanthis believe that she was the daughter of Kabir and Kabirpanthis the disciple of Kabir) is believed to be the first preacher and singer of Kabir. Gopal Das, the Manager of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, suggests that Kamali is the first singer of Kabir. The following couplet attributed to Kamali is popular in Kabir's oral tradition and is also found in some manuscripts. It gives an evidence of Kamali's association with Kabir during his lifetime.

*Ghar Kabir ka shikhar par, jahan salehali gail  
Panv na tikai pipilika, khal ko lade bail* (Singh, p. 146)

(The dwelling of Kabir is on the peak; the way is very narrow and slippery.  
Where even an ant is not able to set her foot, the arrogant person is trying to reach there with a book-laden ox.)

During our interviews, Kabirpanthi preachers, followers, and singers told us that the tradition of women singing had been prevalent since the inception of Kabirpanth, but previously, the women singers were few in number.

There are two main traditions of Kabirpanth: *Naad* and *Bind*. The *Naad* tradition pioneered by Kashi Kabir Chaura based-Kabirpanth is a *virakt* (ascetic) tradition. It is headed by a celibate *Mahant*. However, there is no prohibition for women followers from being admitted into sects of the *Naad* tradition. In fact, it has admitted women followers since its establishment. The presence of women followers since its inception suggests that women

have been singing Kabir in the *Naad* tradition. At present, many of women followers of this tradition e.g. Gyansarovar Maharaj, Shanti Saheb, Bisarathi Devi, Sangeeta Vishwakarma, Ramdasi, Shakuntala Sharma, *Sadhvi* Kamala, Seva Das from Uttar Pradesh and Shraddha Mata, Bindu Devi, Sumila Devi from Bihar sing Kabir.

The *Bind* tradition is a householder tradition of Kabirpanth. It is headed by a householder *Mahant*. Dharmadas, a prominent follower of Kabir, laid the foundation of the *Bind* tradition in the early seventeenth century. Ameen, the wife of Dharmadas is regarded as the first follower and singer of Kabir in this tradition. Gopal Das and Arvind Das, a saint from Maghar Kabir *Math* pointed out that like her husband, she preached, sang and spread the message of Kabir. Since the *Bind* tradition is a householder tradition, women have always been associated with it. It also implies that women followers have been singing Kabir in this tradition as well. Majority of the present generation of women singers belong to this tradition.

If one tries to trace the singing tradition of Kabir by women through the memories of the present men and women singers, it goes back almost a century. There were women singers whom they saw and heard. According to Dulodasi, a woman singer from Bihar, there were women singers in Kabirpanth before her generation. She named Dukhani Dasi, Dulari Dasi etc. who sang Kabir to the accompaniment of the *Khajadi*. Ram Prasad Das from Gorakhpur told us about Ragini Dasi whom he had heard during his childhood. Some of the present women singers have inherited Kabir-singing from their mothers, who had, in turn, inherited it from their mothers. For example, the mother of Renu Bharati was an excellent Kabir singer. Renu Bharati's daughter now accompanies her during performances.

There are vibrant traditions of Kabir-singing prevalent among women singers in many parts of the country. Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan have a large number of women singers, and I have recorded numerous

performances by many of the women singers. In this chapter, I shall focus on the women singers of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

The number of women singers seems to be increasing by the day. With the easing of restrictions on women from stepping out of their homes, the number of women followers and singers has increased in religious sects<sup>261</sup>. Kabirpanth is not an exception to it. They now participate in *satsangs* in large numbers, and some of them take to singing verses of Kabir. Sonelal Das, a Kabirpanthi *Mahant*, gives the following reason for women singers coming up in large numbers in Bihar:

In the present day Bihar, the veil system has ended.... This is no longer in vogue. Now, they sing songs as they sing in marriage parties and on other occasions.... They sing without any restriction. Now, they have shed their shyness. Moreover, when they hear some *bhajans* of Kabir, Ramanand, and others somewhere, they memorize those songs and start singing them. They insist that they should be given an opportunity to sing *bhajans*. Whether they know tunes or not, whether they know stories or not, they will surely sing *bhajans*. They can sing good *bhajans*. If they are not given time to sing, they become annoyed.... They demand that they should be allowed to sing *bhajans* in public. They want to be noticed and heard by the people so that their reputation may spread and they may be invited by others to sing.

The above explanation shows that there is an increasing trend of Kabir-singing by women in Bihar. Women in large numbers participate in *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes and sing Kabir. They also receive encouragement from the Kabirpanth<sup>262</sup>. As a result, they seem more inclined to Kabir and Kabir-singing. We observed in the fair of Sonepur that all sects of

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<sup>261</sup> Renu Bharati sheds light on how women's freedom of stepping out of homes has given a fillip to Kabir-singing by women in Kabirpanth:

Previously, it was said in family that women would not practice *bhakti* and sing *bhajans*. They should be kept within the four walls of home. Women were not given opportunities to go out. They suffered from the tortures of family. The members of the family prevented them. But devotion is independent. It accepts no restriction. The women who used to be restricted are now liberating themselves from the shackles of patriarchy and are progressing in *bhakti*. They can now practice *bhakti*. They can progress in *bhakti*.

<sup>262</sup> Many women from Bihar have received encouragement from the *Acharya Gaddis* such as Bagicha Kabir *Math*, Mahadev Kabir *Math* and their branches. As the strength of the followers determines the actual influence of an *Acharya Gaddi*, Kabir-singing by women is also promoted in order to attract a large number of women followers in their folds and maintain their strong hold on the existing followers. The presence of a large number of women singers at these centres in order to sing and preach Kabir on Kabir Jayanti and other occasions sheds light on this fact.

the Kabirpanth invited women to sing in their respective *bhajan* programmes. Some sects announced or published the upcoming schedule of Kabir-singing by prominent women singers to attract more audiences and would-be-followers. When they arrived to perform, they were welcomed and given due respect by the respective *Mahants* themselves. The audiences also liked to listen to their songs and explanations and waited eagerly for them to perform. They were greatly impressed and influenced by their singing and *pravachan* (discourse). They held them in great reverence. Kabir-singing provides women singers agency and an influential position in Kabirpanth.

### **Categorising Women Kabir Singers**

On the basis of my fieldwork, I have identified mainly three categories of women singers in the Kabirpanth: *sadhvi* (women saint) singers, semi-professional singers, ordinary householder singers. The *sadhvis* who become Kabir singers are ascetics and have been anointed into Kabirpanth. Gyansarovar Maharaj, Seva Das, Shanti Das, Kshama Das, Radha Das, Draupadi Mata, Malati Devi etc. from Uttar Pradesh, and Amrit Das, Radhika Saheb, Asha Saheb, Rampari Das, Bindu Devi etc. from Bihar are such singers. Most *sadhvis* live at Kabir *Maths* headed by male *Mahants*. A few *sadhvis* e.g. Gyansarovar and Shanti Das head their own *Maths*. Separate *Maths* have also been established exclusively for women *saints* in some parts of India e.g. Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. *Sadhvis* generally use the title *Das*<sup>263</sup> or *Saheb*<sup>264</sup> after their names following the practice of male saints. They use the male title in order to assert their equality with male *Mahants*.

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<sup>263</sup> Servant or slave of God – *Bhakti* poets adopted the practice of using ‘Das’ after their names e.g. Kabirdas, Tulsidas, Raidas, Surdas etc. Kabir’s followers also use it with their names.

<sup>264</sup> Master – Kabirpanthis, now, use Saheb or Sahib after the name of Kabir to establish him as God. They also use this title after their names in order to assert their superiority as Kabir’s followers.



Figure 22: A group of *sadhvi* singers and preachers from Bihar

*Sadhvis* believe that they work for the welfare of *jiva* (human being or soul) through singing *padas* of Kabir. Singing Kabir is a mode of *sadhana* (devotion) for them. A few widows and divorcees have also adopted the life of a *sadhvi* and have taken to Kabir-singing<sup>265</sup>. Some of the *Mahants* also actively encourage their women followers to start

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<sup>265</sup> Shradha Mata, a Kabir singer from Bihar, points out that widows take to Kabir *bhakti* or Kabir-singing in order to escape from sufferings: “If the husband of a woman dies, she is oppressed by other members of the family and therefore, women decide to become saints to avoid any such sufferings. If she is tormented, she takes to *bhakti* with the thought that God is the only shelter for her. To be a saint is the only solution of her sufferings.” The mother of Renu Bharati had also become a saint for the same reason after the death of her husband. She started visiting and living at Kabir *Maths* which were the places of pilgrimages for her. Frieda Hauswirth writes that in the past, some of widows actually went on pilgrimages in order to avoid their sufferings: “To get away from dreariness of their lives, they frequently went on religious pilgrimages” (p. 77). For women, pilgrimages have been means of escaping from the drudgery and oppression of family. Jasbir Jain writes:

Apparently, going on a pilgrimage is one activity that offers escape from the tyranny and the closed space of family life. Leaving home is only one part of the action; the next question is where to go from there. In Tagore’s ‘*Stree Ka Patra*’, ... the woman finds the courage to express herself only when she leaves home and goes on a pilgrimage to Jagannath Puri.

Pilgrimages serve an important function in religious societies at more than one level. They allow the distancing from home, a certain contact with a community and independence and freedom within that; a contact with nature, a peaceful atmosphere away from the city humdrum and everyday pressures; and also a freedom from routine. Moreover, it is a legitimate, socially approved activity. Yet, it can be used as a means of escape, for expressing protest and seeking an alternative refuge. (pp. 159-160)

singing. The educated among the singers study the *Bijak* and other Kabirpanthi books to enrich their knowledge of Kabir and his *padas*. Along with the *padas* (songs) of Kabir, *sadhvis* cite many of his *sakhis* (couplets) in their *satsangs* and *pravachans*. Through their preaching and singing, they have earned great respect from their male peers and followers.



Figure 23: *Sadhvi* Amrit Das (at Maghar) and *sadhvi* Seva Das (at Chauri Chaura) performing Kabir

Majority of women singers belong to the semi-professional category. Renu Bharati, Dulo Dasi, Tara Dasi, Jaya Dasi, Saraswati Dasi, Bhola Dasi, Dukhani Dasi, Sheela Dasin, Urmila Dasi, Vimala Dasi, Radha Dasi, Pramila Dasi etc. from Bihar and Meera Dasi, Shakuntala Sharma, Ramdasi, Sumitra Devi, Vimala Devi, Jileba Devi, Bisarathi Devi, Sudama Upadhayay, Anuragi Dasin, Sursati Devi, Neelam Gupta, Binita Yadav, Sarita Yadav etc. from Uttar Pradesh are such singers. They, especially the singers from Bihar, use the title *Dasi* or *Dasin* after their names. The titles *Das*, *Dasi/Dasin*<sup>266</sup>, *Saheb* used by women singers serve to conceal their caste identity and experience a sense of community.

<sup>266</sup> Female version of Das.



Figure 24: Jaya Dasi and Tara Dasi from Bihar performing Kabir at Lahartara

In this category, some women come from the family tradition of Kabir-singing. Others who have been good at singing marriage songs or folk songs become Kabir singers upon receiving encouragement from *Mahants*, saints and others<sup>267</sup>. There are yet others who become singers out of their interest in music and Kabir. A few take it as a way of life in order to be free from onerous household activities. Some women also adopt Kabir-singing to earn their livelihood and support their families.

These women singers pursue Kabir-singing as their profession and devote themselves to Kabir's *bhakti*. They claim to find peace and happiness through singing Kabir. Renu Bharati says: "According to my experience in this field, the first reason is earnings, the second is *bhakti* and the third is the opportunity to step out of home". She further adds that

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<sup>267</sup> Some liberal male saints and *Mahants* have also played a significant role in encouraging and inspiring women to become Kabir singers and preachers. Vivekananda Saheb, a prominent saint from Halsi (Lakhisarai), Bihar, who died in 1980 inspired many women singers in about a dozen districts of Bihar. His strong influence is seen on the women singers of Lakhisarai, Shekhpura, Jamui and Munger<sup>267</sup>. Gambhir Das, a *Mahant* from Rajdari, Chanduali, who died two years back encouraged about two dozen women to become Kabir singers. Ramprasad Yadav, a prominent singer from Siwan, has also inspired about a dozen women singers. He is also the *Guru* of Bisarathi Devi. About half a dozen women disciples of Ramprasad Das, a prominent Kabir singer from Khajuri, Gorakhpur, have also been singing and preaching Kabir.

Kabir-singing has been an important means of employment for women. According to her, Kabirpanth is such a department in which a large number of women singers from Bihar have progressed more than in any other sphere: “A large number of women have progressed in Kabirpanth. They are progressing through *bhajans* and *pravachans*. Perhaps, you do not know that Kabirpanthi women in large numbers have progressed in Kabirpanth more than any other department or sphere.” Renu Bharati sees the path of progress in Kabir-singing for women followers.

Dulo Dasi says that women are becoming singers due to an increasingly popular trend of Kabir-singing. In another interview, she adds: “They are observing *bhakti* in it; they are living and making earnings in it. There is truth in it. They forget their sorrows in it. When they go to *satsangs* to sing, they forget all the tensions of their families.” She herself comments on her earnings in Kabirpanth: “I am very happy in Kabirpanth. Kabirpanth helps me earn clothes and other items needed for life. Singing becomes a source for earning money. Money is given without being asked as a farewell gift. I do not charge any fees for my performance. People give me money in happiness. They give farewell with money and clothes.” Tara Dasi and Jaya Dasi, both from Bihar, also tell how Kabir-singing is a source of earnings for them: “We are given money. We are given food. We are given farewell gifts. We are given some clothes wherever we go. We also get *seva* (gifts and money). By the grace of God, we have no lack of these things. We receive whatever God give us.”

The economic perspective has, no doubt, attracted women singers to take to Kabir-singing. It has also made them financially independent in family and society. They even support their families with their earnings, which are partially or completely dependent on them. The financial independence helps women singers break the Law of Manu<sup>268</sup>, which

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<sup>268</sup> Manu, in the mythology of India, is the first man and the legendary author of an important Sanskrit law code, the *Manu-smriti* (Laws of Manu).

prescribes: “A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in [her own] house. In childhood, a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s, and when her husband is dead, under her sons’. She should not have independence.” (V. 147-48, trans. Doniger, 1991, p. 116). Their earnings through Kabir-singing also stimulate their empowerment not only at home but also outside. In her essay “Impediments to Economic Freedom: Women’s Livelihood and Work Participation Trends in India”, Sanchari Roy Mukherjee’s observation about working women also suits the context of Kabir women singers: “Growing number of rural women are now entering the workforce either in the role of main earners or marginal earners, creating the basic conditions for the future economic empowerment of women” (p. 274). Subrata Bagchi’s observation given in her essay “Gender Violence, Women’s Agency and Resistance” can also be incorporated in order to understand the empowerment of women Kabir singers: “It is found that women’s advancements in many spheres have empowered them to participate in the public sphere and some women have access to the resources and opportunities alongside the male members of the society. All these have benefitted them and have generated some amount of social awareness with respect to ... employment (p. 337)



Figure 25: Dulo Dasi and Pramila Dasi, both from Bihar, performing Kabir at Harihar Mela, Sonapur

Through Kabir-singing, women singers are carving out space for themselves in the Kabirpanth. They are trying to break the stereotype that women are destined only to live within four walls of their homes and cannot perform in public gatherings. In “Exploring Gender and the Public Sphere in India”, Subrata Bagchi makes a significant general observation: “Women in India are increasingly moving towards equal participation in society’s public domain despite discrimination and patriarchal tendencies that deny gender equality” (p. 10).

During the course of my fieldwork, I found that some women singers such as Malati Devi from Uttar Pradesh, and Dulo Dasi and Renu Bharati from Bihar faced a lot of opposition from their families. Malati Devi had to divorce her husband before she took to Kabir-singing full time<sup>269</sup>. Dulo Dasi and Renu Bharati had to struggle hard against their in-

<sup>269</sup> The oppression of her husband drove her to Kabir and his *bhakti*. Later on, her husband tried to persuade her to live with him, but she chose to live her life independently preaching and singing Kabir: “My husband was a devil. How could he persuade me? There was not a harmonious relationship between him and me. He came to take me home many times, but I rejected saying that I could not live my life with him; I had to practice *bhakti*. What I chose has come true.”

laws and husbands respectively to continue their singing<sup>270</sup>. Dulo Dasi's marriage had almost reached a breaking point because of her insistence on singing. Renu Bharati had to use all kinds of stratagems in order to continue her singing. Often on the pretext of going to meet her mother who lived alone, she went out to perform Kabir.

Some women singers such as Shraddha Mata and Amrit Das argue that a woman's husband will live with her until her body remains, but God will be with her forever. Their *bhakti* and singing take them closer to Him. Jaya Dasi prefers Kabir's *bhajans* to the company of her husband. She feels that she has wasted her life in marriage and has sought deliverance through Kabir's *bhajans*. These singers clearly bring out the limitations of marital and familial relationships in spiritual attainment<sup>271</sup>.

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Malati Devi now lives her life as a saint. Adopting asceticism and the *bhakti* of Kabir, she freed herself from the torture of her husband. By calling her husband a devil, she really breaks the code of Manu that to a wife, the husband of is her God. A. K. Ramanujan (1989) rightly points out: "A married woman saint tends to get rid of her husband — by walking out on him" (p. 14). Malati Devi claims that Kabir (God) helps her in all her difficulties and problems:

I am not able to do anything. It is Kabir who does everything. It is Kabir who supports me.  
Whether any relative helps me or not, I have surrendered myself to Kabir.  
*Saup diya hain dor tumhare haatho mein,*  
*Jeet chahe har ho ab laaj tumhare haatho mein.*  
(I have handed over the thread of my life to you.  
Whether I win or lose, my prestige is in your hands.)

<sup>270</sup> Women's going out of home to perform in public gatherings is seen with uneasiness. The following view of Urmimala Sarkar Munsii is very significant in this context:

Considering the biological and the social role accorded to women as members of the society, their role is defined as natural vessel for childbearing and the nurturer of the child and the family. Any aberration in this process is viewed with uneasiness. Even when the society accepts the woman's space in the community rituals and traditional performances, there is a certain degree of disdain about the ultimate choice of a woman makes to become a performer, and her choice to exist in the public space, playing out non-domestic role. Society does not forgive her for negating or neglecting her 'principal' duty as a physical vessel for the perpetuation of the society and culture. (pp. 299-300)

<sup>271</sup> *Bhakti*, no doubt, has been liberating experiences for women. However, the patriarchal norms have also affected the realm of *bhakti*. In "Religion and Indian Women in Pre-Modern India: Reflections beyond the Stereotype", Radhika Seshan mentions a large number of women devotees who had bitter patriarchal experiences in Bhakti Movement: "Surprising number of bhakti poets are found, many of whom had bitter and debilitating domestic experiences" (p. 59). However, women devotees such as Akka Mahadevi, Andal and Meera challenged patriarchy and created their space in bhakti. Radhika Seshan makes a significant comment: "Rejection of the social norm was necessary for these women to have and assert their own identity" (p. 76). In *For the Love of God: Women Poet Saints of the Bhakti Movement*, Sandhya Mulchandani also observes: "Ironically, what most women sought was the freedom to worship because religion provided them solace, freedom and gave them the courage to speak against their oppression. It was only through their tenacity, unquestionable devotion, outstanding poetry, and stubborn insistence of spiritual equality that these women have now been reluctantly acknowledged" (p. 5).

Hess (2015) makes a similar observation about *Lila-behn* and Lila, the two singers from Madhya Pradesh:

On meeting them, chatting and spending time with, I see so clearly how they are negotiating quite oppressive patriarchal power equations within their families in order to go out and sing. They are resisting social attitudes that disapprove of women singing and playing instruments, and attitudes of discomfort when all of this gives women mobility and agency. It was poignantly pertinent too, that all the bhajans they sang that day when we visited were seeking the true Beloved. The songs directly juxtaposed the limited frameworks of family and husband against a transcendent reality. It seems to me that in aspiring to a transcendent experience they are negotiating real social and familial power relations, very much in this world. (pp. 393-94)

The third category is that of amateur women singers. They are mainly householders who sing Kabir in their spare time just as they sing songs on occasions like marriages and

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Women Kabir singers are really negotiating the patriarchy to make their space as Kabir singers and preachers in Kabirpanth and outside. Some of them defy it living in family and a few giving up their husbands and families to embrace the path of Kabir as singers and preachers. Mata Kamala Devi, a woman saint from Rajasthan, tells that there are around 400 Kabir women singers in Rajasthan. According to her, many married women have become Kabir singers and preachers on account of their family conflicts e.g. regular controversies and quarrels with husbands and other members of family. Some of them even give up their husbands and families and take to Kabir-singing full time:

In Rajasthan, if family problems arise, they leave their families and join Kabirpanth. They say, "You (husbands) should go your own way and we will go our own way." They are separated from their husbands and families and become saints. They declare, "We shall live like saints. We have nothing to do with each other. We are born alone and will die and depart alone. Therefore, to be in the company of each other is not necessary. We are not here to live forever... If you live with us properly, we will live with you otherwise we will live a saintly life." It happens in Rajasthan. Thus, there are many women who live as saints ... husbands and wives are separated from each other. When they are separated, most of the husbands remarry while women become saints. They say that they will now sing *bhajans*. The women do not remarry, rather they choose to become saints and singers in Kabirpanth.

These women break the Law of Manu, which makes them subservient to families and husbands. The observation of A. K. Ramanujan (1989) is quite relevant in this context:

In the bhakti movements, women take on the qualities that men traditionally have. They break rules of Manu that forbid them to do so. A respectable woman is not, for instance, allowed to live by herself or outdoors, or refuse sex to her husband – but women saints wander and travel alone, give up husband, children and family (p. 11).

Kamala Mata again addresses the difficulties and sufferings of the women of Rajasthan, which lead them to become preachers and singers of Kabir breaking the Law of Manu:

Women are surrounded by many worries. They are sad. They do not take food properly even one time a day. Some suffer at the hands of their husbands. They become mothers, but their sufferings do not end. Therefore, in order to protect themselves from sorrows, adversities and difficulties, they become a part of Kabirpanth with the belief that they will be able to sing *bhajans* and gain spiritual knowledge. They will sing *bhajans*... In Kabirpanth, they have promise of a good life. There are sorrows and pains in the world and so are there in the family. They want to live a good life. They start following Kabir in order to escape from any family tension.

*Ghar mein hua khatpat, sadhu hua chhatpat*

(A conflict occurs at home; one immediately becomes a saint.)

other ceremonies in their homes. Some of them have learned singing Kabir through the encouragement of their *Gurus*. They do not treat it as a profession but sing in order to express their devotion to Kabir and their *Gurus*. Renu Devi, Sumila Devi, Indu Devi, Kanchan Devi, Seeta Devi, Malo Devi, Radhika Devi, Badaam Devi, Parmeshwari Devi, Basmati Devi etc. from Bihar, and Usha Devi, Savita Devi, Dhanmatti Chaudhary, Gangotri Devi, Shanti Devi, Savitri Devi, Dayavati Devi, Sangeeta Vishwakarma, Munakka Devi etc. from Uttar Pradesh belong to this category. They visit the places associated with Kabir in groups on important occasions such as Kabir Jayanti. They often form their own singing groups in which one or two women are the lead singers and the others support as the chorus. They often sing in local public gatherings on Kabir. At times when they are not accompanied by their group, they start singing on their own and other women present on the occasion join them.



Figure 26: Ordinary householder women singers performing Kabir

One common element among the women singers of all the three categories is their *bhakti* to Kabir. They regard Kabir as God. All of them say that Kabir's *vanis* represent universal truths and give them peace. Many of them are influenced by his teachings on vegetarianism, removal of intoxication and reform of the self.

Women singers, especially of the first two categories, generally sing Kabir to the accompaniment of harmonium and *Khajadi*. Some play the instruments themselves and some are assisted by accompanists during performances. They generally sing Kabir in different local dialects of Hindi, but mainly in Bhojpuri. Most of them come from the lower castes of society. The women of the first two categories generally put on white sarees as the white colour represents the dress code of the Kabirpanth and distinguishes them from ordinary followers.

The singers (of first two categories) perform in two types of programmes in Kabirpanth: programmes associated with Kabir's centres and programmes held at the homes of Kabirpanthi followers. There is a tradition of giving them farewell gifts in both. At the end of every programme, they are given clothes, money and other gifts. This custom is probably the major factor in drawing a large number of women singers to Kabirpanth, especially in the semi-professional category. As has been the practice during all kinds of performances in North India, they too are showered with money by Kabirpanthi followers during their performances.

Apart from the programmes based on Kabir, they, especially singers of semi-professional category, also perform on the occasions of *griha pravesh* (house warming), marriage, childbirth and other auspicious occasions at homes of Kabirpanthi followers. Their performances at homes of Kabir's followers increase their influence and popularity even among the non-Kabirpanthi audiences present there.

### **Women Singers and the Transcreation of Kabir**

During Kabirpanthi programmes, women singers also sing *Daas Vanis* in addition to Kabir's songs containing his signature line '*Kahat Kabir suno bhai sadho*' [says Kabir, listen, o' seekers]. Kabir's verses with his signature line are called *Saar Vanis*. However, it is

difficult to determine which verses are Kabir's and which composed by others. Sometimes, other signature lines of Kabir e.g. 'Saheb Kabir gayile' [Sahib Kabir sings] are also found in the songs sung in the name of Kabir:

*Sahib kabir guru gayile nirgunwa re*  
*Khelavanwa tanvw maati ke* (Jaya Dasi)  
(Sahib Kabir sings the *nirguna* song.  
This toy-like human body is made of clay.)

*Daas vanis* are verses which have been composed by Kabirpanthi and even lay followers and singers in devotion to Kabir. For example, there is the tradition of singing *arji* (tribute) or *vinti* (entreaty) songs dedicated to Kabir as *Guru* (spiritual teacher) or *Sadguru/Satguru* (*Guru* of all *gurus*/true *Guru*). Three types of *arji* songs are generally sung: *arji* songs with Dharmadas's signature line or affiliation, songs with Rani Indramati's signature line (I shall discuss Rani Indramati below) and *arji* songs composed by singers themselves or other followers. Women singers generally begin their Kabir-singing with recitation of a few *dohas* (couplets) followed by an *arji* song. Below are the examples of three types of *arji* songs sung by Renu Bharati and Dulo Dasi:

*Dharmadas Guru ke karat arajiya*  
*Guru ke charan rahab din ratiya* (Renu Bharati)  
(Dharmadas submits a prayer to *Guru*.  
I will spend my days and nights at the feet of *Guru*.)

*Rani Indramati ho kaylin arajiya*  
*Guru ke charan balihariya na* (Dulo Dasi)  
(Queen Indramati submits prayer,  
Surrendering herself to the feet of *Guru*.)

*Main aayi sharan tumhare uddhar kijiye*  
*Doob rahi meri jivan naiya paar kijiye*  
*Guru paar kijiye* (Renu Bharati)  
(I have sought refuge with you, rescue me;  
The boat of my life is drowning, rescue it;  
*Guru*, rescue it.)

Since *arji songs* are in the form of prayers or entreaties offered to Kabir/*Guru*/*Sadguru* as God, through them women singers surrender themselves as devotees

to Kabir. Through many of *arji* songs, they also convey their sufferings and helplessness to Kabir and to urge him to remove the sorrows, pains and conflicts of their life. In a way, they also share their sufferings and emotions with not only women but also men audiences and attract their attention to them. They carve space for *bhakti* which, for women, is a path of equality, power and salvation.

In the Kabirpanthi programmes, a large number of songs (including *arji* songs) with the signature line of Dharmadas are sung. Peter Friedlander (2015, pp. 195-98) underlines the impact of Dharmadas and the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth on the oral traditions of Kabir's songs. He points out that Dharmadasi Kabirpanth has introduced 'whole new genres of songs' and 'many entirely new songs' into the oral traditions of Kabir. Such songs are also popular among women singers.

*Dharmadas gave birhuliya ho*  
*Abki beechhuri nahi sahib ji* (Amrit Das)

[Dharmadas sings a *birhuliya* (separation from one's beloved/dear one);  
This time I will not be separated from *Sahib*.]

Women singers also sing *Nirguna* or other devotional songs (embodying Kabir's spirit) composed by other Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi singers, writers and saints. The songs which convey Kabir's spirit and sensibility become a part of his performative world. Renu Bharati sang to us the following *nirguna* song composed by Bharat Sharma, a popular folk singer:

*Hariyar doliya ke lalka oharva*  
*Kaniha par leke chalal char go kaharwa*  
(The green palanquin is covered with a red cloth.  
It is being carried by four palanquin bearers.)

This song and many such others are now regularly performed as part of Kabir's repertoire.

Many women singers compose their own songs after Kabir, and sing them in public performances. They often compose their songs on themes like social reform, removal of evils like intoxication, detachment from *maya* (illusion), admonition of death, *bhakti* among others. Since many of Kabir's own verses address these themes, the compositions by women are also well received by audiences. Such compositions also give them an opportunity to convey their messages, aspirations (spiritual or worldly), and problems to audiences in their own way. Jaya Dasi sang to us a song based on the alcohol addiction in Bihar:

*Kahatin kabir suno ye bhai sadho*  
*Ye ho pad hain nirbani, piya mane na kahanwa*  
*Chhod deho darua ka piyanwa ho, piyawa mane na kahanwa*  
*Maan leho hamaro kahanwa ho, piyawa mane na kahanwa*

[Listen O' seekers, thus speaks Kabir  
This *pada* is *nirguna*; the dear husband does not listen.  
Give up drinking of wine, the dear husband does not listen.  
Listen to what I say; the dear husband does not listen.]

This song is composed by Jaya Dasi, a popular singer from Jamui, Bihar, but she uses the refrain "*Kahatin Kabir suno ye bhai sadho.*" This is quite common in the singing traditions of Kabir. Purushottam Agrawal (2009) names such verses *Uprachanaye* (extended compositions) of Kabir. They are not of Kabir, but convey his spirit and sensibility. Such compositions by women show how deeply they have imbibed Kabir's spirit. Women singers are not only spreading the existing body of Kabir's poetry but also contributing their creative additions to his performative corpus.

Some women singers even compose and sing Kabir songs after the tunes of popular Bollywood and Bhojpuri film-songs. Such songs help them reach audiences of all age groups, especially the younger generation:

*Sare samayiya bit gaya hava ke jhoke mein*  
*Aur jamuni tumko le jayega hai re dhoke mein* (Dulo Dasi)

(All the time is blown away like the gust of the wind;  
And the god of death will take you by deception.)

The above song suggesting the spirit of Kabir is patterned on the Bollywood song: ‘*Lal dupatta ud gaya re mera hava ke jhoke se*’ (My red scarf is blown away by the gust of the wind) from the Bollywood movie *Mujhse Shadi Karogi* (2004).

Many women singers, especially dalit singers, sing a number of songs criticizing Brahmanical hypocrisy, caste discrimination, *Saguna* tradition of worship, corruption which has entered the ranks of *Mahants* etc. For example, Renu Bharati’s song alerts people against the cleverness of the Brahmins who have made rituals for their own benefits and to keep lower castes under their control and dominance:

*Chet ke rahiya babu ji thagiya leta babhana*  
*Chet ke rahiya babu ji thagiya leta babhana*  
*Ho chet ke rahiya babu ji*  
*Hamar tohar babu marat kiriya karate babhana*  
*Aa babhana ke jo babu marta kiriya karata bhagana*  
*Chet ke rahiya babu ji thagiya leta babhana*  
*Daal mangat, chaval mangat aur mangat tokana*  
*Tayi par ghur ghur kare hardam karat rodana*  
*Chet ke rahiya babu ji thagiya leta babhana*  
*Aa chet ke rahiya babu ji thagiya leta babhana*  
*Chet ke rahiya babu ji*

[Friends, beware lest the Brahmin should cheat on you.  
Friends, beware lest the Brahmin should cheat on you.  
Oh friends, beware!  
When our fathers pass away, a Brahmin priest performs funeral rites.  
But, when the father of the Brahmin passes away, his maternal grandson performs the funeral rites.  
Friends, beware lest the Brahmin should cheat on you.  
He asks for pulse, rice and also even a pot for cooking food.  
Despite, he is not satisfied and keeps on asking for more.  
Friends, beware lest the Brahmin should cheat on you.  
Oh friends, beware lest the Brahmin should cheat on you.  
Oh friends, beware.]

Attacking Brahmanism, she says that Brahmins have entrapped and deceived the people of lower castes through their evil designs and practices:

When their fathers and grandfathers pass away, do they ever come to call us?  
When their babies are born, do they ever come to us for the naming ceremony? How stupid we are! When our babies are born, we get the naming ceremony performed by them. When our parents and grandparents die, we get

the funeral rites performed by them. When we build homes, we invite them to perform worship. All this fills their pockets with money. They are very wise and clever. When these ceremonies occur at their homes, their maternal grandsons will perform rituals. Thus, their own relatives will take all wealth and money. We are fools. Our foolishness is the result of lack of education. I present all this in that ambience, which influences people. It seems to people that she speaks the truth. I dare to speak the truth. I have no fear, shame and hesitation.... I go to perform at such places which are dominated by Brahmins and Bhumihars. There I sing such *bhajans*, they start writhing in anger. All the people (Kabirpanthi audiences) are with me. All the members sitting on the dais support me. If they (Brahmins and other upper castes) try to react, people (Kabirpanthis) will teach them a strict lesson. Therefore, they also accept me.... Even though they feel bad, they are helpless. How can they react?

*Sachchayi chhip nahi sakti banavat ke usoolo se*

*Khushabu aa nahi sakati kagaj ke phulo se*

(Truth cannot be hidden with artificial principles;

The flowers made of paper produce no fragrance.)

I express all truths; I expose all hypocrisies.

In fact, the truths that Renu Bharati is exposing are her own experiences of injustices and discriminations perpetrated by Brahmins and other higher caste-people against her caste and other lower castes.

Again, Gyansarovar Maharaj's song questions and criticizes Brahmins for creating and perpetuating the discriminatory four-fold *varna*:

*Sun pandit rayiya, baran kahan se nirmayiya,*

*Ham to aye ek desh se, char kahan thahrayiya*

[O dishonest *pundit*, listen; where has *varna* been made?

We all have come from the same country; why have you declared four categories.]

Indeed, through Kabir, women singers of the lower castes identify their own bitter experiences of disparities perpetrated on the basis of caste, *varna* etc. and want a society free from such discriminations.

Women singers often sing songs which refer to women's world – their relationships, clothes and objects of ornaments – and words such as *piya*, *balamu* (both are terms of endearment for husband), *nanadi* (sister-in-law), *naihar* (natal home), *gavana* (a post-marriage ceremony only after which the bride arrives at her husband's home), *chunri* (a piece

of cloth generally draped over the upper part of body) etc. frequently feature in their compositions. The following are the excerpts from a few such songs:

*Naiharwa ke rahna, naiharwa ke rahana*  
*Bina piya nik nahi, naiharwa ke rahana* (Bisarathi Devi)  
(To live in my parents' home, to live in my parents' home;  
Without the dear husband, it is not good to live in my parents' home.)

*Nirgun hain kabir ke vani, sun sayani nanadi*  
*Jahawan nav chale bin pani, sun sayani nanadi* (Dulo Dasi)  
(The sayings of Kabir are *nirguna*, listen o' clever sister-in-law;  
Where a boat floats without water, listen o' clever sister-in-law.)

*Gavana ke doliya hamar aa gayil*  
*Char go kahariya duar aa gayil* (Renu Bharati)  
(The palanquin for my *gavana* has arrived;  
Four palanquin bearers have arrived at my doorsteps.)

*Aisan sundar chunri mein lag gayil daag ab gurudevo swami*  
*Chunri ke dagiya deho chhodai ab gurudevo swami* (Sumila Devi)  
(Such a beautiful scarf has been stained with a blot, O' Master.  
Get the blot on the scarf removed, O' Master.)

*Bana da balamu ho, gada da balamu*  
*Hamara bhakti ras gahanwa gada da balamu* (Asha Dasin)  
(Get made o' dear husband, get fabricated o' dear husband;  
Get the ornament of devotion *rasa* made for me, o' dear husband.)

Such songs drawing on language associated with women bring Kabir closer to women's world and connect these singers as well as women audiences with Kabir. They have a feeling of closeness to him. We recorded such songs from many other singers e.g. Renu Bharati, Dulo Dasi, Sangeeta Vishwakarma, Usha Devi, Gyansarovar Maharaj, Seva Das, Dhanmatti Chaudhary, Malati Devi, Amrit Das, Tara Dasi, Saraswati Dasi etc.

*Mangal geets* (devotional song desiring happiness and welfare of all) which are sung especially on *Chauka Arti* (a major ritual in the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth) also heavily borrow from the language associated with the women's world. They are very popular among women singers, especially those of Bihar. *Mangal geets* are generally attributed to Kabir/*Guru/Sadguru*. These songs often show the union of a devotee with the *Guru* or transcendental reality.

*Surati ke doriya gagan bich lagal*  
*Lagi gayal guru se sneh re*  
*Man hari lehal guru rang rasiya*  
*Purva janam ke sneh re (Renu Bharati)*  
 [The string of the face is tied to the middle of the sky.  
 I have fallen in love with my *Guru*.  
 My heart is overpowered with the devotion to my *Guru*.  
 It is the love of the previous life.]

*Mangal* songs express women's sentiment for being united with God or *Satguru*, their spiritual husband who, they think, will liberate them from all worldly ties and will ensure their salvation. These songs, in way, express the limitation of life with their real husbands.

Women singers, especially of Bihar, also sing many songs attributed to four women with respect to Kabir: Khemsari, Mandodari, Indramati and Ameen (Khemsari, Mandodari and Indramati are mythological women while Ameen a historical woman). However, most of the songs are attributed to Indramati and these songs show her strong devotion to Kabir. I recorded these songs from Renu Bharati, Dulo Dasi, Dukhani Dasi, Sumila Devi, Tara Dasi, Jaya Dasi and others. Dukhani Dasi from Nalanda, Bihar sang to us the following song that is based on Kabir's incarnations and his interactions with Khemsari, Mandodari, Indramati and Ameen:

*Ayilan ho charo jugawa mein sahib*  
*Satjug mein sahib mathura padhare*  
*Khemsari nari ke chetayalan ho*  
*Ayilan ho charo jugawa mein sahib*  
*Treta mein sahib lankagarh padhare*  
*Are mandodari maiya ke chetayalan ho*  
*Ayilan ho charo jugawa mein sahib*  
*Dwapar mein sahib girnargarh mein padhare,*  
*Indramati maiya ke chetaylan ho,*  
*Ayilan ho charo jugawa mein sahib*  
*Kalijug mein sahib bandhavgarh mein padhare*  
*Ameen maiya ke chetaylan ho*  
*Ayilan ho charo jugawa mein sahib*  
*Dharmadas guru se karabo arajiya*  
*Guru ke charaniya laptayibo ho*  
*Ayilan ho charo jugawa mein sahib*

[Sahib incarnated in all the four eras.  
 In the *Satyuga*, he appeared in Mathura.  
 He enlightened Khemsari.  
 Sahib incarnated in all the four eras.  
 In the *Treta*, he arrived in Lanka.  
 He enlightened Mother Mandodari.  
 Sahib incarnated in all the four eras.  
 In the *Dwapar*, Kabir arrived in Girnargarh.  
 He enlightened Mother Indramati.  
 Sahib incarnated in all the four eras.  
 In the *Kaliyuga*, he appeared in Bandhavgarh.  
 He enlightened Mother Ameen.  
 Sahib incarnated in all the four eras.  
 I submit prayer to *Guru* Dharmadas.  
 I wish to hold the feet of *Guru*.  
 Kabir incarnated in all the four eras.]



Figure 27: Dukhani Dasi from Bihar performing a song based on Kabir's women disciples: Khemsari, Mandodari, Indramati and Ameen

In fact, the *Bind* tradition or Dharmadasi Kabirpanth has popularized a myth which connects Kabir respectively with these four women as his disciples. This myth describes Kabir to have taken incarnations in all the four Hindu eras: *Satyayuga*, *Tretayuga*, *Dwaparyuga* and *Kaliyuga*<sup>272</sup>. He was born as Sukrit in *Satyuga*, Munindra in *Tretayuga*,

<sup>272</sup> It is paradoxical that Kabir himself rejected the concept of incarnation, but the Kabirpanth has constructed the myth of his incarnations. However, the association with these women reflects a woman friendly image of Kabir among women followers. This myth dispels Kabir's misogynist image (some verses in the manuscripts of Kabir's poetry betray his misogynist attitude towards women) and enhances the respect of women and creates

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space in the Kabirpanth. Women followers have a positive perception about Kabir and reject the anti-women image of Kabir.

Women followers believe that Kabir is not a detractor of women. Had he been ill-disposed towards women, they argue, he would not have made women disciples. Gyansarovar Maharaj says: “Kabir had *sadhan Yoga* (means of *Yoga*). He made Kamali his disciple; he made Loi his disciple . . . he made Bavari Saheb his disciple.” Similar is the argument given by Renu Bharati: “There were many women e.g. Neema (his foster mother), Khemsari, Indramati, Ramdhaniya and Kamali in Kabir’s time. If Kabir had spoken so about women, he would not have given them his shelter; instead, he would have insulted them; he would not have taken them into his supervision at that time.”

The association of these women disciples in the oral tradition or in the legends popular in his name, makes the women followers believe that Kabir has not belittled women. They doubt the authenticity of anti-women verses of Kabir and think that it is a conspiracy against Kabir. Under the guise of Kabir, his opponents have written such verses: “Somewhere or the other, these things have been uttered by other men to denigrate Kabir” (Renu Bharati). *Sadhvi* Shanti Saheb also supports this view:

The saints who speak ill of women cannot be true saints. Under the guise of Kabir, others have written so. The words of Kabir can never be rejected. If they are rejected, they are not of Kabir. It is a conspiracy to defame Kabir. The knowledge that I have possessed today is only because of Kabir. Tell me if Kabir had denounced women, could I have reached here? I could not have obtained that knowledge.

Phulmati Devi from Varanasi also rejects these anti-women verses as being spurious but makes a slightly different argument: “Since Kabir was illiterate, he himself had not written anything. He had orally composed his verses. But later are the people who reduced them to writing, made many changes on their own and also introduced verses in the name of Kabir.”

The above views of the women followers manifest their strong devotion to Kabir and his *vanis* (compositions or words). However, we found this devotion as the result of their experiences of practicing and living Kabir’s message and preaching Kabir. They, in fact, cite the changes of their lives, as we see in case of Shanti Saheb, which they have undergone through Kabir *bhakti*. Since they live these experiences and changes in their everyday life, they find Kabir close to women.

The women followers credit Kabir for their spiritual uplift. Renu Bharati claims that Kabir has transformed her life. Dulo Dasi finds her life worthless without Kabir and Kabirpanth. Vimala Devi from Gorakhpur feels restless unless she listens to his *bhajans* (devotional songs). The Dalit women credit Kabir for improvement in their lives. Kabir’s *vanis* give them strength and confidence. They develop a sense of community through the Kabirpanth. Women born into Kabirpanthi families show a remarkable attachment to him and his *vanis*. Women singers who are influenced by Kabir’s *vanis* have found great career opportunities as singers in Kabirpanth. *Sadhvis* consider him a perfect ascetic. To them, he is the greatest of all saints and sages. Kabir’s *vanis* inspire them to lead an ascetic life. They have become preachers of Kabir and many of them sing his *vanis* also. A number of women who join Kabirpanth under the influence of their Kabirpanthi friends claim that they get peace from his *vanis*. The above account reveals that women follow Kabir for different reasons and inspirations. However, one thing common among them is the ability of Kabir to give them spiritual solace. Kabir has proved to be a way of life for them.

Women followers understand the spirit and relevance of Kabir. Many recite and expand his verses to prove his superiority and significance. Many tell his legends to do so. They consider Kabir God or *Sadguru*. According to them, he is the only true saint or person: “He is the only true person” (Sangeeta Vishwakarma) and “he is the *Satpurush* (the true person)” (Malati Devi).

Women claim that Kabir always supported and glorified women. They often cite one verse in support of this claim and to dismiss all the anti-women couplets and verses. Many women (such as Renu Bharati, Dulo Dasi, Shanti Das, and Amrit Das) who we interviewed cited this verse. Though this verse is a recent construct, they identify it as of Kabir:

*Ninda na karo nari ki, nari ratan ki khan*  
*Nari se nar hot hain dhruva prahlad saman*  
(Do not condemn women; women are mine of gems;  
It is women who bear men like Dhruva and Prahlad.)

On the basis of the above couplet, they also profess that women are greater than men. Naturally, motherhood makes women feel superior. They are proud of being progenitors of humans. They foreground the importance and greatness of motherhood. Sangeeta Vishwakarma from Sant Kabir Nagar says: “If there were no women, where would we see all this (creation)? All have come from women. A woman is the Lakshmi (Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity) of the home.” Dulo Dasi too remarks: “Kabir never spoke ill of women. If there had been no woman, from where would the world have come? You are also a son of someone. The saints

Karunamaya in *Dwaparyuga* and Kabir in *Kaliyuga*. As Sukrit, he appeared in Mathura and blessed Khemsari, a milkmaid. Through her *bhakti* of Kabir, Khemsari not only ensured her salvation but also paved the way to salvation for her husband and all other members of her family. As Munindra, he went to Lanka and blessed Mandodari, the wife of Ravana. Mandodari and Munindra (Kabir) attempted to convince the arrogant Ravana to adopt the *bhakti* of Kabir, but he refused. Kabir cursed him to be killed by Lord Ram. As Karunamaya, he went to Girnar Garh and blessed Queen Indramati, the wife of King Chandra Vijaya. He saved her from her premature death, and by his grace, she and her husband were taken to

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are also sons of some mothers. God is also a son of someone.” Renu Bharati claims that Kabir has established the greatness and superiority of women over men:

Many great persons have been born of women. Women are great. Kabir has also spoken about the greatness of women. All great men have been born of women. Therefore, women are worth worshipping. *Nari bhayala nar se mahanwa, jananwa jag mein naam kayile ba* [women are greater than men, and they have earned great reputation all over the world]. Kabir has pronounced that woman is greater than man. Therefore, woman is worth worshipping.

One can clearly see how the Indian women think about motherhood which they highlight to show their superiority over men and through which they portray Kabir friendly to them and use it as their defense against negative portrayals of women by patriarchy.

According to women followers, Kabir never discriminates against them. They believe that to Kabir, everyone is equal. He looks at the soul within everybody. For him, the soul is neither male nor female. Phulmati Devi substantiates: “His words are different. For him, no one is either male or female. We are just pure souls. All of us are souls. No one is either male or female.” Some women are also of the opinion that Kabir looks at all human beings as of one gender. Sangeeta Vishwakarma says: “For Kabir, men and women all are female persons.” She cites the following verse in support of her claim:

*Andaj omkar se sab jag bhaya pasar*

*Kahe kabir sab nari ram ki avichal purush bharta*

(The whole world has emanated from egg (ovary) and Omkar

All are wives of Ram who is their permanent husband, says Kabir.)

On the one hand, as per the view of Sangeeta Vishwakarma, all persons are women for Kabir and on the other hand, Gyansarovar Maharaj notes that all are men for him:

*Sab ghat purush katahu nahi nari*

*Akath katha jam drishti pasari*

(There is a male person in everyone, there is no female person anywhere;

Death’s gaze spreads — untellable story).

Gyansarovar Maharaj further explains that Kabir does not scorn women. He treats a woman as a man if she comes to seek his guidance. It is our worldly eyes which distinguish between men and women. When we see with the eye of heart, the soul of everyone is male.

It is noticeable that the views of Phulmati Devi, Sangeeta Vishwakarma and Gyansarovar Maharaj are contradictory, but portray a positive image of Kabir to women. Their views also show that Kabir treats both men and women equally. Thus, women construct a neutral or equal approach of Kabir on the question of gender. It also reflects that women expect an equal treatment from Kabir and other saints or *bhaktas*. To us, they demand an equal treatment to women in the real world as well.

One can clearly see that women singers bring out different images of Kabir beyond his misogynist image. Women construct their own version of Kabir. In this process, they substitute the misogynist Kabir with a women-friendly Kabir. In discounting Kabir’s anti-women verses, they clearly appear to be challenging oppressive patriarchal power equations. Furthermore, in promoting the myth of Kabir’s association with women such as Khemsari, Mandodari, Indramati, Kabirpanth too seeks to counter Kabir’s anti-women image and make him popular among women.

heaven. King Chandra Vijaya initially refused to become of the follower of Kabir when Queen Indramati asked him to do so. However, when Kal Niranjana (god of death) inflicted sorrows and difficulties on him, Kabir protected him and as a result, he also became his follower and was taken to the heaven. In the *Kaliyuga*, Kabir appeared in Banaras and blessed Ameen, the wife of Dharmadas (the founder of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth), who devoted her whole life in spreading Kabir's messages and teachings among people and was blessed with salvation<sup>273</sup>.

As the *bhakti* of Kabir practiced by the four women<sup>274</sup> paved the way to salvation for themselves and these women, especially Khemsari and Indramati, also ensured the salvation and welfare of their husbands, this myth has a strong impact on both women and men followers and is quite popular among the Kabirpanthi men and women of Bihar, Chhattisgarh etc. It attracts women to Kabirpanth and strengthens their faith in Kabir. We discovered that

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<sup>273</sup> Apart from the oral tradition, this myth has found place in almost all important books on Kabir and Kabirpanth written in the *Bind* tradition, including *Anurag Sagar* (n. d.) and *Kabir Mansur* (1887). This myth is also now proliferating and getting popular among the followers of the *Naad* tradition. Arvind Das, *Sadhvi Gyansarovar Maharaj* and many other followers of the *Naad* tradition testify to this phenomenon. We found them highlighting this myth in their conversations about Kabir with us. However, during the interviews with Kabirpanthi followers, I noted some minor variations in the myth. Upon compilation, I found these variations were individualistic (but minor variations in individual retellings do not change the over-all scheme of the myth). I observed that women disciples mixed their experiences of struggles for bhakti in their retellings. Following are two such examples: one of Renu Bharati and the other of Sumila Devi. Renu Bharati, a popular singer from Bihar, states that she was a Ramanandi follower, but under the supervision of Karunamaya, she became his disciple. However, Indramati has not been mentioned to be a Ramanandi follower in the myth of Karunamaya discussed in the books. Before becoming an exclusive Kabir singer, Renu Bharati often used to perform in Ramanandi programmes. However, she gave up performing in Ramanandi programmes when because of being jealous of her popularity, an upper caste person poisoned her. Her description of Indramati as a Ramanandi follower seems to be the consequence of the same incident.

Sumila Dasi, a Kabir singer from Bihar, states that the King used to forbid her from showing any adoration and dedication to Kabir (Karunamaya) and others, but she remained steadfast in her devotion. However, in the myth of Karunamaya discussed or described in the books, Chandravijaya does not prevent Indramati from observing *bhakti*, rather he himself refused to practice the *bhakti* of Kabir and become his follower when Indramati asks him to do so. It is interesting to note that Sumila Dasi was also prevented from performing on daises in public gatherings by her husband. Perhaps, therefore, she relates her own experience to that of Queen Indramati.

<sup>274</sup> Besides these four women, the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth believes that Kabir had also blessed many other women. *Kabir Mansur* relates an incident to Ameen in which she is quoted as saying to Dharmadas: "Kabir Sahib blessed many women e.g. Indramati (the wife of King Chandra Vijaya), Mandodari (the wife of King Ravana), Manikavati (the wife of King Veer Singh), Leelavati Puranti (the wife of King Yogadhar) etc. . . . [He] blessed Meera, Khemsari (a milkmaid), and countless other women and consequently, all went to the heaven as swans" (Parmanand, 2018, p. 329).

having a strong faith in this myth, male followers in the Dharmadasi tradition encourage their women to pursue Kabir's *bhakti*<sup>275</sup>.

Owing to the association of Kabir with the mythological and historical women disciples, women singers and audiences find Kabir close to them. The songs attributed to Khemsari, Mandodari, Indramati and Ameen in the repertoires of women singers not only reflect the intimacy of these singers to the women disciples of Kabir but they also inspire women singers and audiences to practice the *bhakti* of Kabir. In fact, women singers feminize Kabir through these songs and their commentaries and explanations.

During the course of my fieldwork, I found that Meera is also intimately associated with women singers<sup>276</sup>. Almost all of them sing Meera. While singing *bhajans* of Meera, they particularly emphasize the difficulties and challenges that Meera as a woman had to face from her family and society. The revolutionary spirit and *bhakti* of Meera give strength and inspiration to them. Like Meera, they also adopt the path of spirituality to deal with their problems and pains. In *Women Writing in India*, Sushie Tharu and K. Lalita rightly point out: "Even within the mainstream popular tradition, the intensity of Mira's devotion and her courage in resisting every pressure to deviate from her chosen way of life can be a source of strength to women who regard her as an intimate and personal support in their suffering and pain" (p. 91). In fact, women singers also take the initiative of Meera, which John Stratton

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<sup>275</sup> The *Mahants*, saints and singers (especially of Dharmadasi tradition) popularize this myth in their *satsangs* and *pravachans* (spiritual discussions and discourses). It prepares an atmosphere conducive for women in the Kabirpanth. Most importantly, the four women disciples of Kabir, especially Khemsari and Indramati, are associated with the popular Kabirpanthi ritual "*Chauka Arti*". Khemsari is said to be the first person to have organized *Chauka Arti* ritual at Mathura (Uttar Pradesh) under the supervision of Kabir (Sonelal Das). The origin of this ritual being associated with a woman, it creates space and respect for the women followers among the male followers and makes Kabirpanth compatible for them.

<sup>276</sup> I observed that comparing themselves to Meera, women singers felt elated and proud. Along with Kabir, Meera is certainly their spiritual guide who helps them challenge patriarchy and social attitudes which try to prevent them from Kabir-singing which they believe to be a mode of *bhakti* for them. Although unlike Meera, Kabir women singers do not belong to higher castes, they have similar spiritual aspirations and difficulties. Along with Kabir, Meera makes them more assertive in choosing a better path of life through *bhakti* which has always been a source of agency and freedom for women.

Hawley describes: “She is celebrated as the kind of person who shattered complacencies wherever she went, particularly by making it clear that the world’s conception of a woman’s place is not always a place one wants to be” (2008, p. 133).

Women singers also contextualize Sati Anasuya, Savitri, Draupadi, Shabari etc. in their performances and explanations. Through the examples of these figures, they connect women audiences with Kabir and prepare a way for women’s *bhakti*. During performance, they foreground women’s sensibility by introducing Meera and other such women. Moreover, many women singers seem to have experiences similar to those of Meera, Indramati etc. and many want to live like them. During my interaction with them, I found that they regularly invoked Kabir, Meera, Indramati etc. in their conversations. Most importantly, when they introduce women’s difficulties and sufferings (caused by patriarchy) through their songs and preaching in the public gatherings, male audiences, especially Kabirpanthis, seem to have a sympathetic attitude to them.

It is interesting to note that women singers perform not only for the Kabirpanth, but also for other *Saguna* and *Nirguna* sects. These singers are so popular that they are invited by different non-Kabirpanthi sects to perform. Bisarathi Devi, Ramdasi and Shakuntala Sharma from Uttar Pradesh are often invited to perform by *Saguna* sects. Saraswati Dasi from Patna, Bihar and Dulo Dasi told us that in non-Kabirpanthi sectarian programmes, they sing songs mostly related to the respective sects, but they also sing some songs based on Kabir and *Guru*. Dulodasi always begins with an *arji* song dedicated to Kabir. These singers give their own reasons for performing in other sectarian traditions. Some say that it is their profession and that is why they sing in all the sectarian traditions. Saraswati Dasi and Tara Dasi give the following reasons respectively:

*Sab jag rahiye, sab jag basiye, rahiye ek thanv*  
(Live everywhere, stay everywhere, but always keep in touch with your own place.)

*Sab sang rasana, sab sang basana, lena guru ka naam*  
*Han han han kahte jana rah jana apane thanv*  
(Live with all and have fun with all and recite the name of *Guru*,  
Give your agreement with yes to all, but remain attached to your own panth.)

These singers have become popular and are much sought after by other sects, and in the process, they are also blurring the boundaries between *Saguna* and *Nirguna* sects. Performances in these sects also increase their influence, respect and status among non-Kabirpanthi people.

On the other hand, they also perform a few songs based on *Saguna* deities e.g. Shiva, Parvati, and Ganga etc. in Kabirpanthi programmes. We have recorded a few such songs from some semi-professional singers and some groups of ordinary householder women of Uttar Pradesh even in Kabirpanthi programmes. We observed that they (especially householder women) did not differentiate between Kabir and other Hindu deities. A group of women singers from Balrampur sang the following song:

*Jay bhole bhandari baba*  
*Kevan tapsya ganga ji ne kina*  
*Apne jatha mein baba tune jagah dina*  
[Acclaim the glory of the kind Lord Shiva  
Which type of devotion did the Ganga practice?  
You kept her into your hair.]

However, some dalit women singers such as Usha Devi and Jileba Devi from Uttar Pradesh are firmly opposed to songs attributed to *Saguna* deities. They identify *Saguna* with the orthodox Brahmanical tradition, which, they believe, has been oppressive to dalits. They deride and denounce Brahmanism. Having adopted vegetarianism and other practices propagated by Kabirpanth, they consider themselves superior to the people of upper castes. Kabir gives them self-confidence and a feeling of self-respect.

## Space and Respect of Women Singers in Kabirpanth

Women singers are now getting as much respect as male singers in Kabirpanth. They perform in public gatherings competing with men singers and are being well received by audiences<sup>277</sup>. The popular women singers even dominate the programmes in which both men and women singers perform. The following view of Harisharan Das Shastri suggest that women singers are actively engaged in spreading Kabir's messages and teachings through singing and preaching:

I wander over all the corners of India. I have seen many women saints especially in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Their huge number makes me elated. If there are about 50 male saints spreading Kabir's teachings, there can also be found about 75 *sadhvis* disseminating Kabir's teachings. This is the ratio there between both. As it has been region associated with Meera, her impact can obviously be seen on them. As for Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, their number has been comparatively few, but there are still many. Here there are the women who sing *bhajans* of Kabir. Some also write books on Kabir. A large number of such women have joined Kabirpanth. I have seen that Saint Abhilash Das from Allahabad has established many *Maths* at many places in Gujarat, Bihar, Rajasthan and Punjab. From this point of view, they are playing a significant role in spreading Kabir's *vanis* and messages.

Kabir-singing by women, especially in Bihar, is being encouraged by *Mahants*. They give them due respect. Encouragement and respect by *Mahants* creates a conducive atmosphere for them in Kabirpanth. They have a feeling of self-respect and self-dignity. For

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<sup>277</sup> The influence of women singers can be evaluated through their audiences who perceive them as female *Gurus* and listen to them with great interests. Audiences, especially women audiences are more attracted to them and feel more easily connected with them. Deep Narayan Das, the *Mahant* of Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math* (where large number of women singers gather to perform *bhajans*), also adds:

Women have more interests in *bhajans* and *satsangs*. They specifically sing *bhajans* e.g. *sohar*, *mangal* etc. Their interests have increased more in singing and preaching because when they sing, there is a huge crowd of women audiences at their performances. They are encouraged and show more interest and zeal in singing and preaching when they find a huge crowd gathering at their performances. It increases their courage and opens up their minds. They sing songs well and audiences also offer them 10-100 rupees. They have earnings through their performances. Therefore, they sing in a proper manner to the accompaniment of the musical instruments e.g. *harmonium*, *naal* and organ (keyboard instrument) etc. They have a sweet voice. People prefer to listen to them. All men and women listen to them. Their demand is increasing more than men singers are. There are more crowds, especially of women audiences to listen to their *bhajans*.

her Kabir-singing and preaching, Dulo Dasi has become so popular that she is respected across the sectarian traditions. She expresses her gratitude to Kabirpanth for the respect given to her:

I had not thought that I would become a *Dasin*. I would become a singer. I just thought to sing and play. I decided to go to these programmes and saw that Kabir programmes were organized. I also did not think whether saints would give me respect or not. Now see, I sit on dais. I sit on dais at Varanasi, Haridwar etc. They make me sit on the dais where it is held. They give me a lot of respect. I sit on dais on the occasion of the major programmes associated with Kabir Saheb.



Figure 28: Audiences at the performance of Dulo Dasi at Maghar Kabir *Math*

I found that all the *Mahants* of Bihar want Renu Bharati perform in their programmes. Her presence at most of the major Kabirpanthi reflects her significant and respectable position in Kabirpanth. The *Mahants* and saints address her name with great respect to invite her for performance. The ordinary audiences also love her. Renu Bharati herself says:

Wherever I go to perform, old people address me as mother. Elder people address me as mother. I feel great when they call me mother or sister. Though I have no real brother and sister, I feel as if I had a strong relationship with

them for ages. It is all the grace of Kabir. If I had not known or sung Kabir, I would not have received such relations. It is all blessings of Kabir showered on me. All the saints, *Mahants* and *Acharyas* love me very much. I feel as if they wanted me to live at their *Maths* (for singing and preaching every day). When I go to perform at Public City in Bihar, I am given a lot of respect by the ordinary people, prominent saints and respectable officers holding important positions. I was awarded and respected by DM (District Magistrate) and SP (Superintendent of Police) at Rosera Kabir *Math* headed by Deep Narayan Das. I felt that they gave respect to an ordinary woman like me only because of Kabir... Sometimes, some are jealous of me. When they hear my programmes, they realize their mistake. They come to me and apologize touching my feet.

Kabirpanthi followers who organize the programmes of *satsangs* honour women Kabir singers like holy figures. Generally, women followers wash their feet and adorn them (married singers) with bangles. Great honour and respect accorded to them by the followers of the Kabirpanth deepens their attachment to Kabir and Kabirpanth. Renu Bharati says that she has no siblings but Kabir has given her a new family:

When I go to a *satsang*, many become my brothers, sisters, and fathers. There, when the people give me clothes, touch my feet, give *khoicha* (money and gift), put new bangles on my hands, put *sindoor* (vermilion) on my forehead, do all for me and give me farewell, I feel that this is the house of my mother. This place has become the house of my mother and I have my brothers and sisters here.

Most women singers not only sing Kabir but also preach and interpret his message. They glorify Kabir and explain the meanings of the songs in public performances. They also tell stories of Kabir. The people, especially women, love them and hold them in great reverence.

Kabir lives through singers and listeners. To know their personal histories is to know Kabir himself and his impact as well as his relevance. It is interesting to explore and study how women singers live and breathe Kabir. This study, here, focuses on the personal histories of Renu Bharati, Gyansarovar Maharaj and Bisarathi Devi.

## **Renu Bharati**

On 11 November 2019, Sonapur Harihar Kshetra *Mela* resonated with Kabir-singing by women singers. One of the most extraordinary women Kabir singers whose performances I recorded there was Renu Bharati. Her name and the schedule of her performance were repeatedly announced in advance by *Mahant* Sonelal Saheb so that a large number of audiences might assemble. There were already thousands of men and women audiences there. They were happy to listen to her name and were curious to listen to her Kabir-singing. They waited for her as if she were no less than a *Mahant* for them. She finally approached. She wore a white sari. All the audiences present there held her in great reverence as if she were a holy figure for them. She started singing Kabir and all the people were mesmerized by her powerful and melodious voice and influential commentary. She continued her performance for hours and both men and women wanted to listen to her more. When she ended her performance, I interacted with her. The next day on 12 November 2019, she was invited to about a dozen other Kabirpanthi camps to perform Kabir-singing. She was really treated as a superstar at all the Kabirpanthi camps.



Figure 29: Renu Bharati performing Kabir at Harihar Mela, Sonapur

On 28 January 2020, I visited Renu Bharati at her present residence in Patna, interviewed her and recorded her performances. Subsequently, I recorded her performances at different places of Bihar where she was invited to perform.

Renu Bharati was born on 17 February 1971 at Kusheshwar Sthan, Darbhanga in Bihar. She presently lives in Patna. She is a dalit and belongs to the Dusadh caste. Renu Bharati has been a Kabirpanthi since her childhood. The family of her maternal grandfather is Kabirpanthi. It has its own Kabir *Math*. Her maternal grandfather, uncles and her mother were Kabir singers. After the death of her father in 1988, her mother became a Kabirpanthi *sanyasi*. Renu Bharati learnt the *samskar* of singing *bhajans* from her mother and the Kabirpanthi environment of her maternal grandfather's family. Her maternal uncle, Pandit Moti Ram became her spiritual *Guru*. In the beginning, she used to sing Kabir's *bhajans* at home as well as the Kabir *Math*.

During her college days, Renu Bharati became more interested in singing folk songs and songs based on Krishna, Radha, Shiva, Durga and Hindu deities than Kabir. When she went to her husband's home after marriage in 1985, her husband and in-laws objected to her singing<sup>278</sup>. She had to find ways to continue her singing. Often on the pretext of going to meet her mother who lived alone, she performed in a few programmes of *bhajans* and *satsangs*. However, she suffered from the conflict of sin and guilt of disobeying her husband and telling a lie:

It was not that I went out disobeying him. I used to try to seek his consent and if he allowed, I went out. However, I used to go out without his permission when it was urgent. When I fixed the schedule of a programme, it was necessary for me to go there. At that time, if I had not gone there, their

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<sup>278</sup> Many women Kabir singers have to undergo such an unfavourable experience. Dulo Dasi had to be detached from her singing when she was married. Her husband and mother-in-law objected to her singing and going to Kabirpanthi programmes. However, she remained firm and argued with them. Consequently, her relation with her husband became bitter. The situation even went on the verge of divorce. Only after the intervention of her brother, her husband and mother-in-law agreed to allow her singing in Kabirpanth.

My mother-in-law was against my singing. My husband was also against me for some days. Then my own brother scolded him and warned that such behaviour must not be done with his sister. He has got his sister married to him in his family for happiness not for pains. If he wants to marry somebody else, he can marry but his sister will continue singing and playing instruments and practicing *bhakti*. She does not dance on dais. She practices *bhakti* and she will continue it. Only then, they agreed. They now support me.

Dulo Dasi reveals the fact that many semi-professional householder singers whose families are non-Kabirpanthi have to struggle to find a way to sing Kabir:

I also suffered for some days. All women who come out of home to sing, have to suffer for some days. Their husbands do not want that their wives should go to other persons to sing. They should not go to other women as well. They will talk ill of them. They will comment on them. Therefore, husbands do not let their wives go. However, they want to go. They wish to go to good places, but husbands doubt. They doubt.... Therefore, all have problems. Later on, everything gradually becomes normal. They also accompany them.

The above view of Dulo Dasi reflects a sense of insecurity of a husband regarding her wife's infidelity to him. The observation of Jasbir Jain regarding the suspect of a husband helps understand the context of Kabirpanthi women: "Male insecurity on sexual rejection and the blow it strikes to his ego and sense of superiority lead him to suspect all men around her" (p. 153). These women have to struggle with their families and husbands. A. K. Ramanujan (2004) rightly comments: "Woman saint's struggle is with family and family-values. She struggles not with her own temptations, but with husband and priest, and with her wifely and maternal roles" (p. 277).

Moreover, it is also patriarchal mindset of Indian society, which wants to keep women shut within their traditional roles as mother and wife. In fact, Indian society still treats women according to the oppressive patriarchal norms and codes which suggest that Hindu women must be kept within the four walls of home. In "Women, Hinduism and the Public Sphere in Modern India", Chhanda Chakraborty and Subrata Bagchi say: "An understanding of the social construction of gender suggests that at the centre of social life in India is the family and the Hindu women's lifeworlds were strongly tethered to family norms and regulations. Traditionally too women were supposed to remain within the private space of 'family'. The outside world was an alien space for them" (p. 125). In "A Century of Negotiations: The Changing Sphere of Woman Dancer in India", Urmimala Sarkar Munsri also adds: "The ideal space for the woman is considered to be within the domestic conjugal structure of a family" (p. 299).

prestige would have been destroyed and so would my prestige have been. My mother used to become an important medium for me to go out. After my performance, I used to meet my mother and return. I used to confess my lie in *satsang*. I had a feeling of guilt and sin and therefore, I used to confess it before audiences.

In 1992, her husband got a job with the Bank of Baroda and was posted at Begusarai. Renu Bharati also moved with him. Renu Bharati's mother, often accompanied by other saints, would visit her home. Under the influence of his mother-in-law, Renu Bharati's husband became Kabirpanthi and started supporting his wife. Her mother's visits stimulated an interest in *bhajans* among the women living in her neighbourhood. They thronged at her home. Her mother and other saints sang Kabir and other *Nirguna bhajans*. They would ask Renu Bharati to learn these *bhajans*, but she declined.

One day her mother visited her with a Ramanandi saint who sang the following *Nirguna bhajan* which had a profound influence on her:

*Pasaral hatiya usari gayil ye sakhiya*  
*Sauda kuchh kariyo na bhel*  
*Mai baap delkhin sona ke gahanwa*  
*Marahi ke beriya chheen lele*  
[The wide local market is over, o' friend.  
We could not buy anything.  
Mother-father gave us the ornaments of gold;  
Took them away at the time of death.]

The above *bhajan* conveys the message that human life is subject to death. Human beings spend life in collecting money and wealth, but death takes everything away from them. This *bhajan* also exposes hypocrisy and selfishness of relatives showing no sympathy towards the dead ones who were dear to them when alive.

Renu Bharati told us that this *bhajan* had a profound impact on her and inclined her towards *Nirguna bhajans*. Later on, she learnt some more *Nirguna bhajans* from the same Ramanandi saint-singer and started singing Kabir. By the by, people came to know that she was a good singer. They invited her to sing *bhajans*. However, she was hesitant because she

knew that her in-laws were against her singing. She had to sing for a long time with her face covered so that her in-laws might not come to know of her public performances. She was rebuked and prevented when they came to know that she had sung in public spaces. According to Frieda Hauswirth (2016), veil keeps women segregated from society, restricting their independence, and regulating their dress. However, Renu Bharati did not detach herself from her social space, and after a long struggle, she freed herself from her veil. Her calibre was identified and accepted by her family and society. The following general observation of Debi Chatterjee suits the achievement of Renu Bharati: “The Dalit woman’s voice for dignity and freedom is beginning to be heard in the public sphere” (p. 34).

Initially, Renu Bharati did not sing Kabir exclusively. She sang Kabir only when she was invited by Kabirpanthis. In 2005, an incident happened which completely changed her life and turned her into an exclusive Kabir singer. During a Ramanandi programme at Ara, Bihar, someone from the upper caste gave her poison by deception. Her throat was badly affected and she lost her voice for two years. She lost all hope of recovery and survival. Her *Guru* and other saints as well as singers tried to comfort her by saying that she would get well soon. Some of them also sang *bhajans* to encourage her. She wept when she heard others singing.

During the process of recovery, the realization dawned upon her that this had happened to her because she was singing *Saguna bhajans* and other folk songs more than Kabir songs. She resolved that if she recovered fully, she would sing only Kabir. She felt that only Kabir was true and others were false. Once recovered, she dedicated herself to Kabir:

When I was going to sing songs in other sects and other programmes, they did not lay a lasting impression on my mind, but when I went to sing Kabir, his *bhajans* resonated in my mind and my heart for a long time. I can give up everything for Kabir. Kabir has saved me from *Saguna* path of *bhakti* and *bhajans*. Today I am singing Kabir with a lot of comfort and also following him. I worshipped Sita, Ram and Shiva, but now I feel hesitant in worshipping

them. They seem alien to me. I find them alien, whom I considered my own. Now, I feel that Kabir is mine.

However, she had to initially suffer from the patriarchal attitude in Kabirpanth as well. On couple of occasions, she was prevented from performing on *dais* occupied by conservative male *Mahants* and *sadhus* who considered women inferior<sup>279</sup>. In fact, they felt threatened by the popularity of women singers. However, Renu Bharati bitterly criticized those saints (who discriminated) on all the occasions. She had to face these discriminatory experiences at Kolkata, Bihar, Maharashtra (Nasik) and Uttar Pradesh. At Nasik, she was asked to sing on the ground, not on the dais. She strongly opposed saying that she would not sing there; she would sing on the dais. She further mentions the incidence of Kutta Ghat, Bhagalpur in Bihar. The saints of the *Math* did not allow the women singers to perform on the dais. They asked them to come down from the dais and perform on the ground. She opposed them strongly:

I will not sing. I am not sitting here to sing on the ground. It will not happen. Is the dais for only men, not for women? From where have great men come? The respect that is being given to men singers and preachers must also be given to the women singers. Only then, the women singers will perform here. We will not sing *bhajans* here. If they want to listen to *bhajans*, they can listen through cassettes. Such persons discourage the spirit of women. Such persons do not encourage women singers.

During one of her visits at Lahartara in Varanasi, Renu Bharati found that on the dais of Ardhnam Swami, only male singers and preachers performed; women singers and preachers were not invited to perform. She went on the dais and taking the mike forcibly from a saint, she began to speak there: “Many great persons have come. All claim the dais

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<sup>279</sup> Gyansarovar Maharaj (she will be studied below in detail) also shares her experience that the male saints do not let her perform on the dais: “Saints do not let me perform easily at Kabir Chaura *Math*. They fear that she will criticize them and will reduce their importance”. At Maghar Mahotsava 2020, Gyansarovar Maharaj was let to sing only one *bhajan*. Since she is an overt critic of Brahmanism and corrupt saints, she often suffers from such discriminations. I found restlessness among the saints of Maghar during her presence there. I also found at Maghar that Malati Devi was scolded and prevented from performing *bhajans* at Kabir *Samadhi*. Asha Dasi could not dare to ask the *Mahant* and other saints of Dharmadasi Lahartara Kabir *Math* to give her an opportunity to perform: “I sing songs. I perform *Khas vanis* (main *vanis* of Kabir), but here I have no access or support. I liked the song which the woman singer sang at night. I also wanted to sing a song based on the biography of Saheb. Since I did not have any access there, I suppressed my soul (wish).”

only for men. Who made this dais? If there is so much hatred to women, from where have they come? Are you born of men? You are also born of women. When I began to speak all this, I was given sufficient time to perform.” Renu Bharati exposes that “it happens at many places. I create such an ambience through my *vanis* and thoughts. They have to give me opportunities to perform.” Renu Bharati further exposes that they feel threatened by women’s progress in Kabirpanth as singers and preachers:

All the *Shastras*/books from Kabirpanth to Ramanandi sect have been patriarchal.... The composition of all the *Shastras* and leadership have been in the hands of men. If women want to go ahead, they (men) will, somehow or the other, be left behind. They do not want women to break the four walls of home and to come forward and hold the responsibility of the leadership lest they should be shallow. Therefore, they do not promote and encourage women. They want to prevent them. Saints and *Mahants* do so.

Through all her struggles for singing, Renu Bharati has become a renowned Kabir singer, one of the most respected and popular ones<sup>280</sup>. No major Kabir program in Bihar takes place without her. She has performed at Calcutta, Kashmir, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh in India and also at some places in Nepal. Her performances attract large audiences. Both men and women are her admirers and listen to her *bhajans* and interpretations avidly. She feels a profound attachment to Kabir and his *vanis*:

I have searched for Kabir from within. I have known Kabir. I have lived Kabir. I have lived only Kabir. I explored Kabir and have coloured myself in the colour of Kabir. I do not see anything in the world except Kabir. Wherever I see, I see Kabir only. Kabir is God. The *padas* (verses) of Kabir are based on life. No *vanis* that Kabir has spoken are hollow. His *vanis* are tied to music and based on human life. Therefore, people see truth in his *vanis* and follow

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<sup>280</sup> Renu Bharati has now become a strong voice of Kabir in Kabirpanth, especially in Bihar. Now, she is not discriminated: “Undoubtedly, they do discriminate against other women singers. In my case, they now know that she has great prestige. If they do with me, I will create nuisance. Therefore, they do not discriminate against me. They have knowledge about me and therefore, they do not do so?” Renu Bharati advises all the women singers to have a resolute attitude to evade discriminations against them.

them. Other *bhajans* except those of Kabir that we hear and see are artificial and hollow, but the *vanis* of Kabir are the primary words and they are composed of the pearl and diamond of life. Therefore, they influence people. We take interest in reading and listening to the events and incidents, which are associated with our own lives. We like them. When we listen to the *vanis* of Kabir, we feel that these are our stories; these are our own biographies, these are our own events; and these are our own thoughts. Our Kabir was a great soul who enlightened us with such *vanis*. His *vanis* are associated with us and therefore, people like them. They are not hollow, artificial and external.

Renu Bharati performs Kabir *bhajans* to the accompaniment of a harmonium. She has a huge collection of *bhajans*. She told me that she had more than 86 notebooks/diaries replete with *bhajans*. For my interest, I took one of the diaries of Renu Bharati and found it containing various types of *padas*. Many *bhajans* were her own compositions and many were composed by other singers and followers. Such compositions are also enriching Kabir's performative traditions. In her diaries, I found many *arji* songs. She says that besides *Nirguna* songs of Kabir, she likes to sing *arji* (prayer songs) dedicated to Kabir, *Guru* and *Sadguru*. Through *arji* songs, she conveys her sufferings to Kabir to end them: "I also sing *arji* (prayer) songs of Kabir in the beginning. I am very much inclined to *arji* songs. *Arji* songs help me convey my sufferings to Kabir and to urge him to remove the sorrows and difficulties of my life."

Renu Bharati is deeply moved and transported to another world while singing *Nirguna bhajans* of Kabir. I witnessed it on one occasion when she was singing the following *verse* of Kabir. It is based on the repudiation of *maya* (wealth or illusion) and false nature of human relationship and suggests that one should adopt a spiritual life:

*Nar tu kahe ko maya jori*  
*Kori kori maya jori kini lakh karori*  
*Jab kharchan ke bari aayi rah gaya haath sikori*  
*Re nar tu kahe ke maya jori*  
*Hathi laye, ghodha laye, laye oonth batori*  
*Ant samay kuchh kam na ayihan, rah gaye kath ki ghodhi*  
*Re nar tu kahe ke maya jori*  
*Jab utaral tu Ganga paar kapadwa lena chhori*

*Bhrata, putra vimukh hoke baithe phook diye jaise hori*  
*Re nar tu kahe ke maya jori*  
*Nar tu kahe ke maya jori*  
*Denge doot din dukh bhari, hath pair sab tori*  
*Kahin kabir suno bhai sadho narakwa mein dinha chhori*  
*Re nar tu kahe ko maya jori*  
*Narak mein denge bori*  
*Re nar tu kahe ke maya jori*

[Man, why have you amassed wealth?  
Bit by bit you have amassed hundreds of millions of wealth.  
When the time came to spend it, your fist remained closed.  
O man, why have you amassed wealth?  
You have brought elephants, horses and camels.  
At the time of death, no one will serve you and only a wooden horse (bier) will be left with you.  
O man, why have you amassed wealth?  
When you reach the bank of the Ganga, your clothes will be disrobed.  
With their faces to the opposite direction, your brother and son will burn you to the ashes like Hori.  
O man, why have you amassed wealth?  
Man, why have you amassed wealth?  
The messengers of God will torment you and will break your hands and legs.  
Says Kabir, o seekers, listen, they will leave you into the hell.  
O man, why have you amassed wealth?  
They will leave you into the hell.  
O man, why have you amassed wealth?]

After the performance was over, she shared her experience with us thus: “While singing such words of Kabir, I feel as if the earth had sunk down....”

Renu Bharati sings many verses based on the rejection of caste and class distinction, Brahmanism, *saguna* practices of worship, illusion, hallucination, greed, lust etc. The following song based on the rejection of worship in temple is very popular among women of villages. I also recorded this song from Rameshwar Das, a Kabir singer from Bihar.

*Ghar hi mein tirtha ramayib, mandirwa mein ki kare jayiba*  
*Saas more gauri, sasur more mahadev ji*  
*Swami ke ishwar banayib, mandirwa mein ki kare jayiba*  
[I will worship at my home; for what will I go to temple?  
My mother-in-law is the Gauri and my father-in-law is the Mahadev for me.  
I will regard my husband as God, for what will I go to temple?]

Renu Bharati says that such songs are very much liked by women. They treat them as the words of Kabir:

Such *bhajans* influence our women a lot. Leaving other sects, they become followers of Kabir. They worship and know Kabir. Kabir says:

*Saar shabda gurudev ka tame anant apaar*  
*Take munijana, pandita, ved na pave paar*  
(The essence of words of Kabir is precious beyond limit.  
Even the saints, pundits and the *Vedas* fail to comprehend.)

The *vanis* of our Kabir are *Saar vanis*. They are more precious than diamond and pearl. It is difficult to measure their cost. Whoever knows that the things of the world (*Saguna*) are illusory, but these things (Kabir's *vanis*) are real and these are the essence of our life, can make the boat of his or her life cross the world and explore a way of living life in them? He or she is human. He or she is a great person.



Figure 30: Audiences at the performance of Renu Bharati at Sonepur Harihar Mela

Renu Bharati sings the following song especially for the audiences of Bihar. It is her own composition. The song is a mix of Hindi, Magahi and Maithili. On the one hand, it attacks *Saguna* worship, non-vegetarianism, hallucination and meaningless rituals and on the other hand, it advocates *Guru bhakti* which makes life better. In *Nirguna* sectarian traditions, there is a strong emphasis on *Guru bhakti*. The Kabirpanth is an example of this. Renu Bharati chooses to sing such songs in order to influence the masses: “This creates a great

ambience among the people of villages at that time. Many things related to villages need to be presented in songs. *Bhajans* need to be sung in the languages or dialects of the people". From her statement, one can infer that singers choose and perform songs according to the taste and need of audiences:

*Man maya ke lagal bazaar  
Dharam ki baat nahi bujhe gawar  
Kena ke paiba bhajan sajani ge  
Dinawa bitalo tuhar mangni ge  
Abhiyo sadhu aur sangat mein ave  
Jeevan apan safal tu banawe  
Jaldi se kar le jatan sajani ge  
Dinwa bitalo tuhar mangni ge  
Bhoot bharam ke tu man se bhagave  
Sadguru ji ke tu charan mein ave  
Kichhu tu kar le jatan akhani mein  
Dinwa bitalo tuhar mangni ge  
Jhote ke pooja tu path karayi chhe  
Bhola baba ke tu khoob manayi chhe  
Yahi se bhayala din door sajani ge  
Dinwa bitalo tuhar mangni ge  
Kanthi pehane mein tuhara laaj lagayi chhe  
Machhali khaye mein bada man lagayi chhe  
Chhor de maans machhali akhani ge  
Dinwa bitalo tuhar mangni ge  
Renu Bharati ke arji ko mane  
Sadguru charan mein arji ko mane  
Guru bhakti mein bhakti ko tu jane  
Abahu tu soch sajani akhani ge  
Dinwa bitalo tuhar mangni ge*

[The market of illusions is spreading.  
A stupid person does not understand the meaning of religion (*bhakti*).  
How will you practice *bhajan*?  
You have spent your time in vain.  
Come to *satsangs* from now onwards.  
Make your life successful.  
Make some efforts soon.  
You have spent your life in vain.  
Keep away the hallucination of ghosts from your mind.  
Come to the supervision of *Sadguru*.  
Do make some attempts soon.  
You have spent your time in vain.  
You worship and recite falsehood.  
You are completely dedicated to the worship of Lord Shiva.  
That is why you are living a miserable life.

You have spent your time in vain.  
You are ashamed of wearing a *kanthi* (rosary).  
You are very interested in eating fish and meat.  
Give up eating fish and meat immediately.  
Obey the entreaty of Renu Bharati.  
Obey the entreaty to go to the shelter of *Sadguru*.  
Know the true *bhakti* by devoting yourself to *Guru*.  
You should do it from now on.  
You have spent your time in vain.]

While singing and explaining Kabir, she often introduces the contexts of Draupadi, Meera etc. as narratives to inspire women audience to follow Kabir and improve life. Renu Bharati compares her life to that of Meera. She says that the life of Meera gives her energy. Even the people address her as Meera when they invite her to sing *bhajans*. She often sings the following song of Meera<sup>281</sup> at Kabir programmes. Through this song, she aspires to transcend the barrier of the worldly relationship and to live a spiritual life like a saint:

*Mahal atariya kothariya mein rahke*  
*Ub gayile jiyara hamar ba piya*  
*Sadhu sang rahe ke vichar ba piya*  
[Living in the palace,  
I am fed up with, dear husband.  
Now, I wish to live with saints.]

Renu Bharati has become an inspiration for many women singers. She has taken Kabir-singing to a great height in Bihar. She has been associated with the *Akhil Bharati Kabir Vichar Manch* in Patna for ten years. She is the National President of the Women Cell of the *Akhil Bharati Kabir Manch*. This *Manch* spreads the messages and *vanis* of Kabir. It is active in various regions of Bihar. The committee of the *Manch* selected her as a representative voice of women due to her pervasive popularity as a Kabir singer. She makes women aware

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<sup>281</sup> Whenever she went to sing in public gatherings by making the excuse of meeting her mother, she necessarily sang this song there.

by the medium of the verses and message of Kabir. She advocates the rights of women and shows them a better path of life through the *bhakti* of Kabir<sup>282</sup>:

My role is to lead the women who are ignorant. I enlighten them by telling who Kabir is and how we should observe the *bhakti* of Kabir. How should we derive inspiration from him in our life? What is society? What is family? How can we practice *bhakti* living in the family? How can we protect women from the exploitation perpetrated by society? Through the medium of the *Manch*, the message of Kabir is spread.

The *Kabir Vichar Manch* has heightened the popularity of Renu Bharati as a Kabir singer in entire Bihar. She has inspired and changed the lives of thousands of men and women through singing and preaching Kabir. Now, they perceive her as a *Guru*, a female image of Kabir. I too find her to be a strong voice of Kabir.

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<sup>282</sup> I have found many other women singers such as Gyansarovar Maharaj and Amrit Dasin raising significant feminist questions in public gatherings. Amrit Dasin often uses public gatherings and daises to speak for women's rights, especially in the domain of *bhakti*. I think it to be a voice for the women's rights in the real world as well: "You (men) practice *bhakti* going outside. They (women) do not have the right to do *bhakti*. Why is it so? Is *bhakti* made only for men? Are women not the progenies of God? Have they not come from the land of God? Brothers, do not do so. You earn sin by doing so because they are also the *Jivas* (souls) of God."

Women singers also bring the discourses of common women's sufferings in public gatherings and demand the right for women to practice *bhakti*. For example, the following story narrated by Amrit Das shows how a woman devotee argues that her husband cannot take her to the path of salvation:

There was a woman. Her husband forbade her to do *bhakti*. That woman was associated with the Kabirpanth. The husband was a non-vegetarian. He said that she had to live at home and she would not go out to practice *bhakti*. She replied that he could not give the pleasure (of *bhakti*) she needed. He promised that he would give her all the pleasures. She agreed to stay, but asked him if he could save her from death and he could prevent her from dying. He replied that he could not do so, but he would not let her practice *bhakti*.... Due to her husband, she could not continue *bhakti*. She prayed to God that she was now entangled in pains but she was still in love with Him. When the time of her death approached, she called her husband and pleaded with him to protect her. He said that he had no way to save her life. Therefore, I give the message to the world that God should not give a woman such a husband who prevents her from practising *bhakti*. I also instruct women that they should never leave the path of *bhakti* of God, rather they should sing *bhajans* of God because the welfare of *jiva* lies in singing *bhajans* of God (Kabir). They (women) should break patriarchy. They should translate their wishes into realities.

During my interview sessions with the women singers, many of them also raised the discriminations which they had faced in their education. Asha Dasi says: "I am not much educated. Previously, the girls were not allowed to go out of home." Tara Dasi also says: "I have three brothers and four sisters, but my father gave all the facilities to the sons and educated them. The daughters were made to make dung fuels and collect grass for the pet animals. We were not free from the household activities. My father had buffalos and we were kept busy with collecting fodder for them. He asked us to manage the works of the family. The sisters were not educated." In the context of education, these women were treated according to the principle of Manu who "refrains completely from any mention even of the need for education of women" (Subrata Bagchi, p. 34)

## Gyansarovar Maharaj

Gyansarovar Maharaj is an extraordinary *sadhvi* singer and preacher of Kabir. I first met her on 28 January 2017 at Maghar Kabir *Math* on the occasion of Kabir Nirvana Divas (the death anniversary of Kabir). She was invited to give a discourse on Kabir. She wore a white sari and a white *tilak* of sandalwood on her forehead. All the audiences present there were profoundly moved by her influential singing and preaching. They held her in great reverence and were replete with appreciation for her. After her performance was over, I interviewed her. Subsequently, I recorded her performance and interviewed her between 2017 and 2020.



Figure 31: Gyansarovar Maharaj performing Kabir at Maghar

Gyansarovar Maharaj was born at Parsia in Uttar Pradesh. Her childhood name was Chandravata Das. She is about sixty years old. She is a dalit and belongs to the Dusadh caste. She is popular as Meera among the Kabirpanthi and other sectarian followers for her powerful voice and oratory.

When Gyansarovar Maharaj was three years old, her mother passed away. Her mother's sister who was a Kabirpanthi saint raised her. She had her own Kabir *Math*. She inculcated the *samskar* of Kabir *bhakti* and asceticism in Gyansarovar Maharaj at an early age. Talking about her early upbringing, she continued:

I have had a pure mind like a white sheet of paper since childhood. I have been dedicated to Kabir since then. My aunt was a saint. She adopted me. I have been associated with Kabirpanth since childhood. I did not adopt any other panth apart from the Kabirpanth. I preach that there will be no welfare without *Sadguru* (Kabir). There can be the welfare of all through adopting Kabir. The essence of all panths is the panth of Kabir Saheb.

Living with her aunt, she completed high school. She was not allowed to pursue higher studies. Her aunt believed that if she studied more, she would deviate from the path of asceticism<sup>283</sup>. She was brought up in an ascetic environment. She was dressed up like a saint. The students used to make fun of her dress in her school days. However, she was dear to the saints and followers who lived at or visited the *Math* of her aunt and also to the saints and followers who visited her *Math* on the occasion of Kabir programmes. They showered affection on her.

Right since her childhood, Gyansarovar Maharaj was raised like a boy. She was taught to use the masculine language. Even today, she does not consider herself to be a woman saint. Her name Gyansarovar Maharaj also shows a masculine name. She says that she should be addressed as Maharaj' or 'Saheb' or 'Maharaj ji' or 'Saheb ji'. She clearly asserts her equality with a male *Mahant*.

During one of my interview sessions with her at Maghar, Sant Kabir Nagar, one male saint came and addressed her as *Mata Ji* (mother). She strongly objected to her being addressed as *Mata Ji* (mother). A heated argument ensued between them:

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<sup>283</sup> On the contrary, I discovered that male *sadhus* and saints are encouraged to pursue their higher studies.

Saint: *Mata ji*, are you here?

G: You should not address me as *Mata ji*. You should address me as a *sadhu*. You have not met a *Sadguru*. You have not met a true *Guru*. He (your *Guru*) has also entangled you in '*Dai- Mai*'.

Saint: Now, if I address you as Sister, this is also a similar thing.

G: No, '*Saheb*' or '*Maharaj*' is the right word.

Saint: Ok

G: '*Saheb ji*,' you should say only '*Saheb*'.

Saint: There are many male saints who feel bad. They say that he addresses a woman saint as *Saheb*. She is a woman. A male saint is addressed as *Saheb*. They say so.

G: Listen, she may be a woman. Are you listening to me? There are women in your world, but in our world when she is a *tyagi*, she is not a woman, but a great man. Therefore, address me as *Saheb*.

This argument reflects that Gyansarovar Maharaj uses '*Saheb*' in order to assert her equality with male saints and in order to reject the sexual advances of men so that she may preserve her asceticism<sup>284</sup>.

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<sup>284</sup> Some of the ascetic women Kabir singers who live at *Maths*, sometimes have to suffer from the sexual advances of those saints who want to seduce and exploit them. Meena Khandewal rightly points out: "Sannyasins see themselves as facing a myriad of problems in rununciant life specifically because of their femaleness" (p. 181) A. K. Ramanujan (1989) also says: "Women saints did have to contend with the problem of sexual advances from the male around them" (p. 13).

*Sadhvi* Kabir singers fight against these conflicts and struggles to practice the *bhakti* of Kabir. Bindu Dasin from Bihar and Gyansarovar Maharaj from Uttar Pradesh and many other *sannyasins* have to suffer from such experiences. Bindu Dasin exposes: "After coming to the path of *bhakti*, I have to do a lot of struggles. There are many who want to exploit me. It is society; I say to them, 'If I become your slave (mistress), my life will be worthless. You want that I should behave according to your words. This is the struggle I have to do. Addressing them as brothers, I say that I will not live with them. I will live with God.'" Following her mother, Renu Bharati also wanted to give up her family to adopt an ascetic life, but when she found a lustful atmosphere outside, she changed her decision. Gyansarovar Maharaj says that she does not meet any male follower in the night. She does not allow anyone to stay at her *Math* just after the sunset and keeps herself shut in her room. She prefers to travel along with her female disciples. She says:

I have always been living alone since childhood. There has been no one in my company till now. I have been in love with *Sadguru* and have not fallen into worldly affairs. I have never been under the subjection of anyone. Therefore, I receive less contribution and support. At sunset, the gate of my *Math* is closed. Nobody is allowed to meet me. I do not meet anyone in the night.

*Sadhvi* Shanti Saheb from UP says, "More women want to become *sadhvis*, but the society in which they have to live after leaving their own society, is also full of corrupt people. Corrupt people live there. Even there, they may have to live under others."

The independent women saints who head their own *Maths* bitterly criticize lustful saints and their corruption and deviation in asceticism. Gyansarovar Maharaj and Shanti Saheb are leading examples. They fearlessly scold and criticize lusty and immoral male saints. A. K. Ramanujan rightly observes: "In the next phase, the woman saint further defies social norms and taboos. For instance, she rebukes men for their sexual advances and teaches them a lesson when they treat her as a 'sex object.'" (pp. 274-75). After establishing

During her childhood, Gyansarovar Maharaj had an opportunity to listen to *satsangs*, *bhajans* and *pravachans* which were regularly held at the *Math* of her aunt. The environment of *bhakti* and *bhajans* at the *Math* stimulated her interest in singing and preaching Kabir. The *Mahants* and saints also encouraged her to sing. At the age of five, she started singing *bhajans* to the accompaniment of a *Khajadi* and by the age of eighteen, she became a famous Kabir singer.

When she was eighteen, her aunt passed away. She was made the *Mahant* of her aunt's *Math*. As a *Mahant*, she was named Gyansarovar Maharaj by Amrit Das, the 22nd *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*. 'Gyansarovar' means the tank of knowledge. Amrit Das conferred this title on her on account of her asceticism and spiritual knowledge.

After becoming the *Mahant*, she found herself even more intimate with Kabir: "I never thought of anyone apart from Kabir. I did not look at anyone apart from Kabir Sahib." A few months after she had become the *Mahant*, she was given a gift of five-*bigha* land at Chakiya, Chauri Chaura (Gorakhpur) by a headman of her own caste, who was her disciple. She developed it into a Kabir *Math* after a lot of protest from the upper castes of the headman's village.

As a *Mahant*, Gyansarovar Maharaj started travelling around the country singing *bhajans* and preaching Kabir. She has travelled to all the important places and *Maths* associated with Kabir situated in various parts of the country.

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themselves as prominent Kabir singers and preachers, the *sadhvi* singers living at the *Maths* headed by the male *Mahants* also come forward to voice against their oppression. Renu Devi from Bihar is its example.

Unlike Gyansarovar Maharaj and Shanti Saheb, most of the semi-professional married women singers avoid criticising *Mahants* and saints from dais. However, during my interactions and interviews with them, I found them bitterly criticizing the *Mahants* and saints, especially those saints and *Mahants* who deviated from the path of asceticism. For example, Renu Bharati says: "Although they are the followers of Kabir, they have married ten times and kept ten girls and claim that they are the *Mahants*. They have a lot of money and have luxuries. What will happen to them if they are always in the company of women?"

Gyansarovar Maharaj has performed Kabir all over India. However, she is more popular in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. She performs Kabir in different styles: *ghazal*, *qawwali*, *sohar*, *kajali*, *Holi (phalguni)* etc. She sings Kabir to the accompaniment of the harmonium, *Khajadi* and other instruments. All her performances are interspersed with profound commentaries which attract audiences.

Gyansarovar Maharaj is a radical saint singer. Kabir's criticism of Brahmanism, caste distinction, *varna* system and hypocrite saints appeals to her. In her *bhajans* and *satsangs*, she regularly preaches against orthodox Brahmanical formulations, hollowness of male saints and all sorts of discriminations and injustices against women and poor people.

Once Gyansarovar Maharaj was invited to sing and preach in a Ramanandi programme at Ayodhya. When her turn came to sing and preach, she started criticizing hypocrite saints, priests and Brahmins fearlessly. Other Kabirpanthi preachers present there tried to stop her in order to avoid any controversy, but she remained firm and responded by saying that Kabir was ill treated by the Brahmin priests when he came to Ayodhya. Kabir taught them a good lesson by exposing their hypocrisy and hollowness. She continued with her *bhajan* and commentary:

*Ka karba ho badka banke pujari  
Rishi muni ke ravan nati pandit mein bada bhari  
Jiyara mari ahaar karat hain rakshas mein adhikari  
Ka karba ho badka banke pujari  
Shabari hain khatkin ke ladki kaam krodh ke jari  
Taakar jooth ram ji khayina, rishi log munhwa nihari  
Ka karba ho badka banke pujari  
Meera hain natvar ke ladki uttam rajkumari  
Shri Ravidas ke charan khatari lekar kanchan thari  
Sundari hain kshuddar ki ladki brahm aacharan mein bhari  
Jalwa pavaar baba arpan kayina jagwa sufal kayini sari  
Ka karba ho badka banke pujari  
Hanuman ji jangal ka banchar  
Unka jooth sab log khayilan nich ooch brahmchhari  
Ka karba ho badka banke pujari  
Kahin kabir pukar kahatu hain sun ke vipra dukhari*

*Arth vichar kuch boojhat naahi, maar maar pukari  
Ka karba ho badka banke pujari*

[Being a great priest, what will you do?  
Ravana was the maternal grandson of a saint and was a great scholar as well.  
He killed creatures to eat and was the king of the monsters.  
Being a great priest, what will you do?  
Shabari, the daughter of a Khatik, removed her lust and anger.  
Lord Ram ate her tasted plum and the saints remained looking at his mouth.  
Being a great priest, what will you do?  
Meera, the daughter of Natvar (Ratan Singh), was a superior princess.  
Sundari, the daughter of a Shudra, had an exalted celibate conduct.  
She made her life successful by giving water to Baba (*Guru*).  
Being a great priest, what will you do?  
Hanuman was a monkey of the jungle.  
All people — the lower, the upper and the celibates — took his tasted food.  
Being a great priest, what will you do?  
Having heard the sad priest, Kabir addresses him and says.  
He does not contemplate over it, but is only crying repeatedly to kill.  
Being a great priest, what will you do?]

Gyansarovar Maharaj performs this *bhajan* in almost every *satsang* and *bhajan* programme. The *bhajan* establishes the importance and superiority of devotion practised by women devotees. It also challenges and questions priests and Brahmins who claim to be superior to others and practice discrimination based on untouchability. This *bhajan* also reflects her own experience of such discriminations against her family and others. Her village Parsia has been populated and dominated by a large number of Brahmins. She has evidenced the Brahmanical discrimination against her people<sup>285</sup>. Therefore, during her performance, she always attacks Brahmanism.

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<sup>285</sup> The caste discrimination has been a very painful and severe experience for dalit women. D. Chatterjee argues: “The lives of Dalit women reflect the stories of everyday struggle for survival against not only the Dalit patriarchy, but also against the repression of upper caste men” (p. 33). Chatterjee further adds, “The lived experiences of Dalit women reveal that their endless sufferings are enhanced by what Ruth Manorama thinks about them as ‘thrice discriminated’, meaning that Dalit women are discriminated against on the basis of class, caste, and gender.” In “Women, Hinduism and Public Sphere in Modern India”, C. Chakraborty and S. Bagchi also suggest: “Strong caste prejudices deny them equality, freedom and citizenship rights. Dalit women are affected by poverty, unemployment and caste violence in both the private and public domains” (p. 138).

Through singing and preaching Kabir’s *vanis* and teachings, dalit women Kabir singers contest and challenge the discriminations perpetrated on the basis of caste and *varna*. Renu Bharati, Usha Devi and Gyansarovar Maharaj are a few leading examples. The observation of A. K. Ramanujan can be incorporated to show the challenges undertaken by Gyansarovar Maharaj and Renu Bharati: “Like the untouchable and low-caste saint, the woman often defies caste hierarchy. She usually teaches a lesson to an upper-caste man, a priest, an elder, or even a senior saint by some miracle or piece of wisdom” (pp. 274-75). These women singers have

Gyansarovar Maharaj argues that Manu destroyed the integrity of India by making the four *varnas*. In one of her *bhajans*, she questions Manu and his formation of *varna* system which divides Indian people into four categories: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. They are said to have been born from the four different parts of the body of Lord Brahma. The Brahmins are born from his mouth, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his thigh or waist and Shudras from his feet. The *bhajan* raises a fundamental question that if they are born from the mouth, arms, waist and feet, why do they not take birth from these parts respectively now? Why are they born of women? No discrimination should be practised on the basis of caste, *varna* and gender.

*Manu ji varna banaya char  
 Hey jis din manu ji varna banaya  
 Kyon na nyare mulk basaya  
 Jis din manu ji varna banaya  
 Ye nyare mulk basaya kyon nahi  
 Ek chuk badi bhari pad gaye  
 Lohe lohe ke bartan mein kanchan pani daar  
 Manu ji varna banaya char  
 Gora babhan, lal kshatriya, peela vaishya banate kyon na  
 Kshudra banate kale rang ka pichhe pair lagate kyon na  
 Charo varna nari se nikala, kahane mein sarmaye manu ji  
 Varna banaya char, manu ji  
 Jo ham janati babhan rahal to brahm faad ke ate kyon na  
 Ye kshatriya kahta bhooja se paida, ye bhooja faad ke ate kyon na  
 Vaishya kahta kamar se paida, kamar faad ke ate kyon na  
 Kshudra kahte pair se paida, pair faad ke ate kyon na  
 Charo varna bhag dware nikala, kahane mein sharmate manu ji  
 Varna banaya char manu ji  
 Vaishya vahi sada vash kariye, nahi to vaishya kahalaye na  
 Kshudra kahiye sada shuddha rahiye nahi ta kshudra kahlaye na  
 Brahman vahi jo brahm ko jane nicha oocha kuchh mane na  
 Kshatriya kahiye chhaya rakho, na rakhe vo kshatriya na  
 Chhutchhat ki bhed lagake bharat diya bigad  
 Manu ji varna banaya char  
 Babhan hoye brahm ko jane nich oochh kuchh mane na*

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risen above the problems of low birth through Kabir-singing and preaching and made their space in the Kabirpanth and society. Eleanor Zelliott mentions such a rise in Soyarabai, a dalit woman devotee from Maharashtra, who lived in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Zelliott describes Soyarabi as a fourteenth-century mystic who was “an untouchable woman who seems to have risen above the problems of low birth to sing immersion in the divine” (p. 275). It shows that the practice of *bhakti* has been a liberating experience for dalit women.

*Layi karma kiye hitkari  
Jati pati ka bhed lagake bharat diya bigad manu ji  
Bharat diya bigad manu ji  
Manglanand kahat sabha mein satyaguru diya vichar  
Manu ji varna banaya char  
Ye mangalanand kahat sabha mein ab koi karo vichar  
Manu ji varna banaya char, manu ji*

[Manu made four *varnas*.  
When Manu made *varnas*, why did he not form a good nation?  
Just one mistake caused an irreparable loss.  
Taking gold water in an iron pot, Manu made four *varnas*.  
Why did he not make white Brahman, red Kshatriya, and yellow Vaishya?  
Why did he not make Shudra of black colour and install legs on his back.  
The four *varnas* came from a woman; why did he feel ashamed of saying this?  
Manu made four *varnas*.  
When we know that they are Brahmins, why do they not come out of brahma (head)?  
The Kshatriyas say that they have come from arms, why are they not born from arms?  
The Vaishyas say that they have come from the waist, why are they not born of waist?  
The Shudras say that they are born of the feet; why do they not come from feet?  
The four *varnas* have come from woman; why did he feel ashamed of saying this?  
Manu made the four *varnas*.  
A Vaishya is he who controls over his lust otherwise he is not a true Vaishya.  
A Shudra is he who is always pure otherwise he is not a Shudra.  
A Brahmin is he who knows Brahma and does not discriminate between upper and lower people.  
A Kshatriya is he who protects others otherwise he is not a Kshatriya.  
Manu has destroyed India by spreading discrimination based on untouchability.  
Manu made four *varnas*.  
A Brahmin is he who knows the brahm (true knowledge of God) and does not discriminate.  
He does a deed of welfare.  
Manu destroyed India by creating discrimination on the basis of caste and class.  
Manu destroyed India.  
Manglanand says in a meeting that *Sadguru* (Kabir) has given a thought.  
Manu made four *varnas*.  
Manglanand says in the meeting that one should contemplate on this.  
Manu made four *varnas*.]

Gyansarovar Maharaj comes down heavily on the immoral, lusty and arrogant saints.

She often sings the following verse<sup>286</sup> to warn the saints and even householders. It presents the qualities of a true saint. The *bhajan* suggests that a saint should live like a mendicant. He should not fall into the snare of a worldly life:

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<sup>286</sup> It is also called a *vairagi bhajan* of Kabir which indicates a feeling of asceticism and death. I have recorded this *bhajan* from many men and women singers, especially saint singers of Uttar Pradesh.

*Preet lagana na chahiye*  
*Mujhe preet lagana na chahiye*  
*Main pankshi jane vale, mujhe preet lagana na chahiye*<sup>287</sup>  
*Rukhi sukhi preet hamari, dhoke na chali ana*  
*Rukhi sukhi preet hamari, dhoke na chali ana*  
*Aaj yaha kal vahan roj bhikh mang ke khana*  
*Mujhe preet lagana na chahiye*  
*Main pankshi jane vale mujhe preet lagana na chahiye*  
*Do angur ka cheer nigoti liya fakiri bana*  
*Liya fakiri bana*  
*Moh maya mat failao, main fakir mastana*  
*Mujhe preet lagana na chahiye*  
*Main pankshi jane vala mujhe preet lagana na chahiye*  
*Jo chaho so kar dhar lina, pichhe Ram dosh na dena*  
*Kal kavan koi jana*  
*Mujhe preet lagana na chahiye*  
*Kal kaun koi jana*  
*Mujhe preet lagana na chahiye*  
*Kahe kabir suno bhai sadho*  
*Mujhe shikhar chad jana*  
*Prem bhav se karo vidayi, ye mujhako antim jana*  
*Mujhe preet lagana nahi chahiye*  
*Main pankshi jane vale, mujhe preet lagana na chahiye*

[I should not fall in love.  
 I should not fall in love.  
 I am a bird to depart; I should not fall in love.  
 Poverty is my love; no one should be deceived.  
 Poverty is my love; no one should be deceived.  
 Here today and there tomorrow, I live on begging.  
 I should not fall in love.  
 I am a bird to depart; I should not fall in love.  
 I have adopted the appearance of an ascetic mendicant draped with a small loincloth;  
 Adopted the appearance of an ascetic mendicant.  
 Do not spread lust and illusion; I am a carefree ascetic mendicant.  
 I should not fall in love.  
 I am a bird to depart; I should not fall in love.  
 Do and keep whatever you please; later, do not blame Ram (God)  
 Who knows what will happen tomorrow?  
 I should not fall in love.  
 Who knows what will happen tomorrow?  
 I should not fall in love.  
 Listen, o seekers, says Kabir.

<sup>287</sup> I found few variations in other renditions of this song. For example, the following opening line of one version is different from that of Gyansarovar Maharaj:

*Main pankshi jane vale Mujhse preet lagana nahi chahiye*  
 (I am a bird to depart; no one should fall in love with me.)

In fact, such variations based on words, syntax, order of lines and order of stanzas etc. are common in oral and performative traditions.

I have to climb up the top.  
Send me off with affection; I have to depart forever.  
I should not fall in love.  
I am a bird to depart; I should not fall in love.]

Gyansarovar Maharaj was recently invited to sing and preach at Bhagalpur, Bihar. There she found the male preachers boasting of their knowledge in their *satsangs* and *pravachans*. Gyansarovar Maharaj was the only woman saint among them. When her turn came, she sang the following *bhajan* which is a scathing criticism of hypocrite and arrogant saints and *Mahants*. It had a profound impact on the audiences. Subsequently, many of them became her disciples.

*Satguru shabad gahe la koi shoora*  
*Tan man tyago pith na lage karo naukari poora*  
*Laaj sharam tere saheb rakhe himmat dhariyo jaroora*  
*Asha trishna kanak kamini moh jahar ka kooda*  
*Shoorua ho ta ran mein jhujhe bhagal kagad kooda*  
*Satguru shabda gahe la koi shoora*  
*Ta gorakhnath aur bharthari mal jata mein dhoora*  
*Vo bhi kaal ke munh mein pad gaye, bhayilan mati dhoora*  
*Satguru shabad gahe la koi shoora*  
*Bade bade jogi, bade bade tyagi bhayil nasha mein choora*  
*Bade bade gyani, bade bade tapsvi bhayil nasha mein choora*  
*Bhayil nasha mein choora*  
*Saar shabd ka bhed kaal ke pahuncha hazoora*  
*Satguru shabad gahe la koi shura*  
*Kahin kabir bahu sant pant hain koi jhootha koi phoora*  
*Koi jhootha koi phoora*  
*Sab piran mein pir auliya khoj leve khasam kabira*  
*Satguru shabad gahe la koi shoora*

[Only a brave devotee can understand the words of *Sadguru*.  
Sacrifice your body and heart, but do not lose heart; do your duty holistically.  
Do have patience; your *sahib* will protect your honour.  
Expectation, desire, lust and attachment are garbage of poison.  
The brave struggle in the battlefield, and the coward run away as pieces of paper.  
Only a brave person can understand the words of *Sadguru*  
Gorakhnath and Bharthari with their plait were put into dust.  
They also passed away and turned into dust.  
Only a brave devotee can understand the words of *Sadguru*.  
Great sages and saints are full of pride and arrogance  
Great scholars and *tapsvis* (spiritual practitioners) are full of pride and arrogance.  
They do not know the meanings of root words; they also remain the victims of death.

A brave devotee utters the words of *Sadguru*.  
There are many false and hollow saints and sects, says Kabir.  
*Aulia*, the *pir* of *pirs*, search for Beloved (God), says Kabir.  
Only a brave devotee can understand the words of *Sadguru*.]

During my interviews and interactions with Gyansarovar Maharaj, I also found her an aggressive critic of discrimination, exploitation and injustice against women. She bitterly criticizes the institution of marriage. She believes it to be a source of women's slavery imposed by patriarchy. Her decision to remain an unmarried saint seems to be the result of this belief:

I never wanted to marry. I am strongly opposed to the institution of marriage. When I prepared to become a saint, I had no worry or concern. I oppose men (those who exploit women) because they (men) do whatever they want: they beat and torment women; they also divorce them; they keep their sisters-in-law as their mistresses and also turn to some other women. I come across several women who weep. Seeing them, I feel that women's world is full of a lot of sufferings. I suggest to women that they should not marry. I preach that to marry is to go to hell. I suggest to them that they should serve the country and remain free. They should keep themselves busy with the practice of devotion.

There are very few women saint singers who openly criticize Brahmanism, caste distinction and corruption in the ranks of *Mahants* and saints. Unlike Gyansarovar Maharaj, most of the women singers and preachers do not openly speak against them in order to avoid any controversy. However, they are favourite themes of Gyansarovar Maharaj'. She performs and preaches Kabir fearlessly:

All preachers and singers do not speak such *vanis* due to fear that the Brahmins and Kshatriyas will be annoyed. I am never afraid of anyone. I utter more such *vanis* where they are present in large numbers. Why should I hide the words of Kabir? *Mahants* request me not to speak. They know that Gyansarovar Saheb is going to sit on the dais. She will not listen to any scholars and *Acharyas*. I will utter bare truths even if people are annoyed. This does not matter to me. Being angry, what will they do against me? Why should I hide the *vanis* which Kabir Saheb has uttered. Our Saheb too used to challenge orthodox pandits.

During my fieldwork at Maghar on the occasion of Maghar Mahotsava 2020, I recorded her singing and preaching in which she criticized Brahmins and Muslims in front of

them for spreading and perpetuating prejudices, superstitions and other religious and social evils. Her defiance of hegemonic structures and practices propagated by the mainstream society is the result of her unwavering and unflinching *bhakti* in Kabir. She says that it is not she, but Kabir who speaks through her. She is just a medium: “The *Sadguru* has given me enlightenment. I receive visitation from Him and only then, I am able to answer anyone. The *Sadguru* appears in me. I do not speak myself. He speaks through me.... It is *Saheb* who speaks.

Due to her radical nature, jealous *Mahants* and saints even try to prevent her from singing and preaching:

Male saints discriminate against women a lot. If the dais is given to Gyansarovar Maharaj, she will teach a lesson to all. They plan to prevent Gyansarovar Maharaj from sitting on the dais. On the one hand, I reject caste distinction and bitterly criticize false saints on the other hand. When I start uttering, I utter endlessly. Many prominent *Mahants* and *Acharyas* came to my *Math* to investigate why she speaks so. When they knew the truth, they considered me to be a perfect saint.

She regards Kabir as God and firmly believes that Kabir helps her in everything. The social aspects of Kabir’s *vanis* influence her profoundly. She also actively transmits this aspect of Kabir wherever she goes to sing and preach. Because of this quality of hers, she is regarded as a *Guru* not only in Kabirpanth but also in other sects<sup>288</sup>:

I perceive Kabir as an incarnation of God. He had incarnated to do the welfare of people. He preached truth. I regard him as *Sadguru*.... We would go to the heaven if we sing his *bhajans*. These are my words. I trust Kabir Saheb. He has helped me a lot. I welcomed whatever came to my life. I have obtained awareness only from Kabir. Those who have known the *vanis* of Kabir have overcome differences. They do not practice any difference. We (Kabirpanthis) eat together. We do not feel any difference among people. I also go to the gatherings of Buddhists and Vaishnavas. It is the grace of *Sadguru* that all regard me as a *Guru*....

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<sup>288</sup> Besides Kabirpanth, Gyansarovar Maharaj is also invited to sing and preach in other sects. On most occasions, she presents Kabir’s messages and his *vanis* in those sects. She even studies the books of other sects in order to be familiar with their principles and point out similarities and differences from Kabirpanth. She receives a lot of respect non-Kabirpanthi *Mahants*, saints and followers as well.

She believes that Kabirpanth stands for humanitarianism. According to her, Kabirpanth unites people. It spreads love while other sects practice discrimination:

Kabir was the best saint. Kabirpanth is the highest sect of all. Kabir has developed a panth of love to unite people. There is no such a panth which unites all others. Other panths spread many types of discriminations. They claim that theirs are the best panths. There may be any kind of panths, but there must be love among them. People should be united with one another. People should live with affection. It is there in our panth. People come to me by the grace of *Sadguru*. I also give them respect. I equally respect all whether they are Kabirpanthis or Vaishnavas.

She shows her special regards to Kabir's *vanis* and feels a strong attachment to them. This attachment inspires her to serve society. In fact, being inspired by Kabir, she also fights against social evils.

I like the *vanis* of Kabir very much. His *vanis* preach the welfare of the entire world. His *vanis* are very valuable. They are about the betterment of society. They remove enmity in society. They reject discrimination on the basis of caste. I have also given a lot of contribution to this area. People are profoundly influenced by the *vanis* of Kabir. He went to saints and warned them. Having transformed their hearts, he liberated them from falsities. Kabir has not told any lie. He has spoken truth. He has done a lot of work for the welfare of the society. He has developed unity among people. According to him, there should be love and affection among people. People should share sorrows and pains of one another. We should help one another. We should think about others' welfare. Those who are being oppressed should be treated with mercy and sympathy. Those who are fortunate and have been blessed by Kabir ... reject caste distinction and other Brahmanical hypocritical constructs.

Gyansarovar Maharaj admires Kabir's greatness through her *bhajans*, *satsangs* and *pravchans*. She sings the following *sohar geet*<sup>289</sup> almost in every programme based on Kabir to glorify him:

*Kashipuri mein guru parakat bhayina jagawa mein shor bhaiyila ho*  
*Lalna jari gayila jotiya apaar ta log dekhe awal ho*  
*Nanak guru chal dihal sange lagal gorakh ho*  
*Ho lalna mili gayina guru ravidas ta bhedwa batave na ho*  
*Teeno jane mili chalna jahan guru prakat ho*  
*Ho lalna dekhali rupwa addabhut naina lobhayin ho*

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<sup>289</sup> (i) *Sohar geets* attributed to Kabir are very popular among singers, especially among women singers.  
(ii) This *sohar* based on the birth of Kabir presents Kabir's connection with Sant Ravidas, Guru Nanak and Gorakhnath. In the oral tradition, the people believe that they all were contemporary to one another.

*Teeno jane bhayil mat mast ta shishya dharan kar lehal ho  
 Ho lalna deshwa mein kayil jayi bhraman bharam mitayib ho  
 Madhuri vachaniya guru bolal teeno jane manle na ho  
 Ho lalna deshwa mein kayil jayi bhraman bharam metayib ho  
 Charo guru mili chalan na jahan base lodi na ho  
 Lalana bauri sahib ke samujhai achar guru thapar na*

[The *Guru* was born in Kashi and its news was spread in the world.  
 O son, a perpetual light appeared and people came to see it.  
 Nanak along with Gorakhnath left for that site.  
 O son, they met *Guru* Ravidas who revealed the mystery of the birth to them.  
 All of the three went to the place where the *Guru* was born.  
 O son, seeing a wonderful appearance of the *Guru*, their eyes were charmed.  
 Being overwhelmed, the three became the disciples of the *Guru*.  
 They decided to wander in the country and remove the hallucinations and  
 superstitions of the people.  
 The *Guru* utters sweet *vanis* which are obeyed by the three.  
 We would travel in the country and remove the hallucinations and superstitions of  
 people.  
 The four *Gurus* went to the place where Emperor Lodi (Sikandar Lodi) resided.  
 O son, Bauri Saheb<sup>290</sup> is being made understand by *Guru* Thapar.]

Gyansarovar Maharaj spends most of his time in spreading Kabir's message among ordinary masses. She has been a representative and dominating voice of Kabir in the rank of women *Mahants*. She has a radical image among Kabirpanthi *Mahants*, saints and followers. Following Kabir, she is serving humanity as a singer, preacher and *Mahant*. I see a female image of Kabir in her and find her close to Kabir's spirit and sensibility. She has a number of followers and it testifies to her popularity and strong influence as a *Guru* and singer among them.

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<sup>290</sup> Gyansarovar Maharaj tells that Bauri Saheb was a disciple of Kabir. There is also an autonomous panth in her name. It is the Bavaripanth. The saints like Paltu Saheb, Bhikha Saheb, Madan Saheb, Jagjivan Saheb etc. were from this tradition. According to Gyansarovar Maharaj, Kabir met and blessed her: “

He (Kabir) said to Bauri Saheb. You will do welfare of *jiva*. Many noble saints will be your disciples. They will be genuine saints. You will get an exalted sainthood. There are many pure women saints. People do not want to tell the truth. Saints are ashamed of telling. Women are such great saints. Their histories have been written. It is true that many saints like Paltu Saheb, Bheekha Saheb, Madan Saheb, Jagjivan Saheb etc. have come from there.

## Bisarathi Devi

Bisarathi Devi belongs to the category of ordinary householder women Kabir singers. She is an illiterate extraordinary woman Kabir singer. She lives at Jagdishpur in Deoria, Uttar Pradesh. She is 55 years old. She is a dalit and belongs to the Chamar (Harijan) caste. I first met Bisarathi Devi at Maghar Kabir *Math* in 2017 during the Maghar Kabir *Khichadi Mela*. She sang *Nirguna bhajans* of Kabir in her group consisting of both the men and women of her own village and a few of her neighbouring villages. There were also many other Kabirpanthi groups from other places around her. All were attracted to her Kabir-singing on account of her sweet and melodious voice and profound *bhajans* based on the themes of death, transitoriness of human life, practising *bhakti*, reform of life, attack on non-vegetarianism and alcoholism, and human senses etc. One *bhajan* was followed by another *bhajan*. A few women supported her as chorus. In between, more women from other groups also gathered there either to listen to her or to support her as chorus. Now and again, her style and tone of singing *bhajans* based on death used to make the ambience of the place serious and grave while her *Chutney bhajans* (they will be discussed below) light-hearted and effervescent. Her capacity to sing *bhajans* passionately engaged the audiences in her performance. I interviewed her and recorded her performance there and later at her village.



Figure 32: Bisarathi Devi (second from the left) performing Kabir at Maghar

Bisarathi Devi has been in Kabirpanth for 40 years. She initially had no faith in Kabir and Kabirpanth. She used to be a non-vegetarian. She became a follower of Kabir through the *Guru* of her husband Kalpu Das. Kalpu Das used to live in Mumbai and work in a factory. There, he met Ramprasad Yadav, a prominent Kabir singer from Bihar, who also worked in the same factory. Ramprasad Yadav often used to sing Kabir *nirguna bhajans* and give *satsangs* and *pravachans* among his colleagues. Kalpu Das was profoundly influenced by his Kabir-singing and became his disciple. He also started learning Kabir-singing from Ramprasad Yadav and gradually became an influential Kabir singer. He often used to accompany Ramprasad Yadav in order to perform *bhajans* and *satsangs* at different places in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar<sup>291</sup>.

Once Ramprasad Yadav went to the village of Kalpudas at Jadgishpur in Deoria. He was given a warm welcome at his home. He stayed there for about a week and made many new followers. In the meanwhile, one day he asked Bisarathi Devi (who was, then, the

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<sup>291</sup> Ramprasad Yadav has made many disciples at these places.

mother of a baby) to become a Kabirpanthi. She became extremely angry with him and started abusing him since she had no faith in Kabir and Kabirpanth. Her husband slapped her for this misbehaviour. She could not tolerate her insult and decided to leave her husband's home. She took the baby and left for her natal home. On the way to her parents' home, she came across her mother-in-law, who had gone to collect fodder for the pet animals. She stopped her and asked why she was weeping and where she was going. Bisarathi Devi told her about the incident. Her mother-in-law persuaded her not to go to her parents' home and brought her back.

In the evening, Ramprasad Yadav again called Bisarathi Devi and enlightened her with the following teaching: "You get a lot of taste in eating babies of animals. You kill and cook them with different spices. You eat them with great pleasure. Now, tell me if you can kill your own son and cook him as you cook the babies of animals." His statement shook her from within. She was shocked. She came to realize the truth that she had committed many sins by eating non-vegetarians meals. She finally took *diksha* from Ramprasad Yadav. She vowed never to take a non-vegetarian meal. She decided to propagate the message of vegetarianism in order to reform the lives of the people of her own community and other lower communities.



Figure 33: Bisarathi Devi (on the left side)) along with Munakka Devi performing Kabir at Deoria

Bisarathi Devi was already a good folk singer. She used to sing marriage songs and songs sung on the occasions of other family ceremonies. However, in order to spread Kabir's *vanis*, teachings and messages, she started learning Kabir-singing passionately from her husband and *Guru*. She gradually became a popular Kabir singer too. Her *Guru* gave her opportunities to perform Kabir *bhajans* at many places, especially at the homes of his followers in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Calcutta, and Mumbai etc. She often performed with her husband. Kalpu Das used to sing to the accompaniment of a *vairagi* (*Khajadi*) and she to the accompaniment of a *tambura* and *jhaal*. They would sing for hours without a break. They attracted and influenced huge gatherings. However, Bisarathi Devi was more popular among the local Kabirpanthi men and women of her village and neighbouring villages.

Her husband died about three decades ago. Since then, she has been performing Kabir alone. The local Kabirpanthis often invite her to sing in Kabir programmes, marriage, death ritual, and in other ceremonies. However, she now rarely sings to the accompaniment of musical instruments. She does not perform like a semi-professional singer. Many women

among audiences support her as chorus. Along with the local Kabirpanthi men and women followers, she regularly visits Kabir centres in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar on the occasions of different Kabir programmes e.g. Kabir Jayanti, Guru Purnima, and Maghar *Khichadi Mela*. She always performs Kabir *bhajans* among them wherever they stay at *Maths*. Other Kabirpanthis also start gathering around her to listen to her *bhajans*.

She claims that *bhajans* of Kabir are her wealth. Her aim is to spread this wealth to reform people. According to her, *bhajans* of Kabir change the life of people. For her, Kabir is God and is a source of reformation of self and society:

These *bhajans* are mine. They are my wealth. They are dear to me. They are my wealth. I have to distribute it. As I know some *bhajans*, I distribute them among others so that they can also learn Kabir's teachings. They can liberate themselves from evils. They should not indulge in evils. When they are free from evils, they will obtain spiritual knowledge.

Although Bisarathi Devi is not educated, she sings many *bhajans* from the *Kabir Bijak* and other popular collections of Kabir *bhajans*. When I asked her how she learnt them. She told me that when her husband recited the verses from these collections, she used to memorize them. It is to be noted that even illiterate singers also sing songs of the manuscripts having learnt them from literate singers. Hess (2015) also observes:

A few of the singers I met were not literate, so we might be tempted to say they were operating in primarily oral realm. But this was not at all the same as in the fifteenth century! Through they didn't read and write down Kabir texts for their own use, they listened to cassettes, watched videos, and heard performances by singers who did write and read. So the material they were getting was heavily influenced by the whole history of media that we are reviewing here. (pp. 77-78)

Bisarathi Devi claims that she has *anant bhajans* (a large number of *bhajans*) in her memory. While performing *bhajans*, generally, she does not make commentaries on them. It is significant to observe that when she voluntarily performs *bhajans* among people, they flow unhindered and her memory does not fail. However, during my interviews with her, when I

asked her to sing specific *bhajans* (which she had already sung), she forgot few lines of some *bhajans*. She also added the lines of one *bhajan* to others'. Some words or phrases were changed. The orders of lines were changed. In her study, Linda Hess has also discussed this fluid nature of Kabir *bhajans*. I have observed that such fluidity is more common among illiterate Kabir singers.

Bisarathi Devi chooses to sing mostly *Nirguna bhajans* of Kabir and other *Nirguna bhajans* based on the themes of the need of *bhakti* in life, reform of life, admonition of death, human senses, non-vegetarianism etc. She appreciates Kabirpanth for its strong emphasis on the prohibition of alcoholism and non-vegetarianism. Her following *bhajan* is a harsh criticism on non-vegetarianism and sacrifice of animals at temples:

*Dekha narke ka jatiya kahal re batiya mane nahi*  
*Murga kati ho balidan ta devi ke chadhaval*  
*Vu murga ho gayina bhoot ta dukhawa sab de tunha*  
*Dekha narke ka jatiya kahal re batiya mane nahi*  
[See, the caste indulged in the hell does not obey what is said.  
It beheads the cock and offers it to goddess.  
That cock becomes a ghost and oppresses you.  
See, the caste indulged in the hell does not obey what is said.]

She always criticizes especially the dalits who are addicted to the consumption of these things as she acknowledges what Mary C. Grey in her *A Cry for Dignity: Religion, Violence and Struggle of Dalit Women in India* says: “A great problem for women... is the extent to which men are victims to alcoholism and drugs — which of course increases women’s vulnerability to violence” (p. 38). She also claims that the consumption of non-vegetarianism and alcoholism is one of the reasons of the backwardness and subjection of her own community. I have also found that not only dalit women singers but also shudra women singers, especially coming from a low economic status also raise this issue regarding the sufferings of women. The consumption of alcoholism and drugs has really been a cause of torture and violence against ordinary women folks especially in villages. Through Kabir-

singing (accompanied by their commentaries), these women singers are reforming not only their own families but also others’.

The following *bhajan* which is popular among many other singers, especially in Uttar Pradesh expresses a grim tone of death. Human body has been compared with a cage and soul with a parrot, cuckoo and swan<sup>292</sup>:

*Baba hamaro bagiya lagavala ghan mahua ghan aam ye Ram  
Amawa ke dariya bolele koyilariya, mor bute rahalo na jala ye Ram  
Jao jao koyilari baba ji ke deshwa, hamaro sanesha lehale jahiya ho Ram  
Hamare sanesha hamare piya ji se kahiya, le jahiha gavana karayi ye Ram  
Hare hare basawa ka dolwa banawale, upara se lalka ohaar ye Ram  
Chari jane milake dolwa uthavale, le jala awaghat ghat ye Ram  
Chari kone ho char khambhwa gadhwale, bichwa mein chitawa sajave ye Ram  
Panch jane ho parikarma ke kayile, mukhwa agni lagave ye Ram  
Udal udal ye hansa ayina aadhe lokwa, ghumi ghumi pijada ke nirekhe ye Ram  
Taune pijadwa ati ho sukh kayini, taune pijadwa mein agiya lagal ye Ram  
Kahi kabir suna ho bhai sadho  
Abaki gauna bahuri nahi awna, pachhe se pachhtana ho Ram*

[Oh Ram, my *baba* planted a dense garden of mango and manhua trees.  
A cuckoo chirps sitting on a branch of the mango tree; Oh Ram, I am unable to control over myself.  
O cuckoo, go to the country of the *Baba* and also take my message, Oh Ram!  
Oh Ram, convey the message to my husband; ask him to take me.  
Oh Ram, he makes a palanquin of green bamboos and covers it with a red cloth.  
Oh Ram, the four persons lift the palanquin together and take it to the site of cremation.  
Oh Ram, four poles are installed on the four corners and the pyre is decked in the middle of that.  
Oh Ram, the five people circumambulate it and set fire to it.  
Oh Ram, the swan has flown to half of the world; he looks at the cage repeatedly turning his neck back.  
Oh Ram, the cage in which he took many pleasures is now set to the fire.  
O seekers, listen, says Kabir.  
Oh Ram, this time, you will not return, you will have to repent afterwards.]

The following *bhajan* is also a portrayal of death. The soul has been compared with a bird and human body with a home which will certainly be destroyed one day and therefore, people should not be sad at one’s death:

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<sup>292</sup> In many *bhajans* of Kabir, human being or human soul is portrayed as a bird e.g. parrot, cuckoo, swan and peacock.

*Kankad chun chun mahal banavani*  
*Logawa kahela gharwa mera ye Ram*  
*Nahi ghar tera nahi ho ghar mera*  
*Chidiya rain basera ye Ram*  
[People make homes with chosen bricks.  
They claim that they are owners of homes.  
The home is neither yours nor mine.  
It is a night shelter for birds.]

The next song exposes the false nature of all human relations and suggests that one is born alone and dies alone. Many other women singers also sing such songs which convey the same message. I observe a feeling of detachment from all human relations among these singers:

*Nahi havan mata nahi re havan pita, doodhwa piyavale se nata ye Ram*  
*Nahi havan bhayi nahi havan bahina, eke kokhiya se ayile ke nata ye Ram*  
*Udh na chala ye hansa amar yahi lok se, yihawan tumhara koi nahi*  
[No one is either mother or father, oh Ram, the only relationship is that he has been milked.  
No one is either brother or sister, oh Ram, the only relationship is that they have come from same stomach.  
O swan, fly to the immortal world, here no one is yours.]

Finding human relations false, women singers not only devote themselves to the path of *bhakti* but also inspire others, especially women audiences to adopt this path. The next is a *Chetavani bhajan* (warning *bhajan*)<sup>293</sup> of Kabir. It warned people to embrace a spiritual life before death lest they should regret only:

*Samayiya beet jayi, umar beet jayi*  
*Man pachhtahiya ho samayiya beet jayi*  
[Time will pass; one's age will pass.  
Heart will repent if time passes.]

I have recorded many songs based on the same theme from many other women singers of all categories. Their songs suggest that the main purpose of *bhakti* is salvation. Through such songs, these singers show a strong inclination towards spirituality. They also want to ensure their salvation through their *bhakti* to Kabir. In fact, attaining

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<sup>293</sup> Many warning *bhajans* of Kabir are sung in the oral traditions.

liberation/salvation is considered to be the ultimate aim of Indian *bhakti* tradition. For this, each individual has to devote himself or herself to the practice of *bhakti*. However, women, especially married women, have often been debarred from practising *bhakti* and obtaining the highest spiritual attainment as salvation. They have been prescribed another way for this salvation by Manu, which, in fact, does not liberate them, but keeps them chained to the slavery of patriarchy. In *Purdah: The Status of Indian Women from Ancient Times to the Twentieth Century*, Frieda Hauswirth points out:

Manu deprives woman of her power and dignity as priestess and worshipper. He lays it down that no religious fast or ceremony or sacrifice shall concern woman by herself, as apart from man; she must reach heaven henceforth through service to her husband. she is to have no more direct dealings with godhead; her husband is to be her supreme guru (teacher) in all things; she is never to falter in only through implicit obedience to his wishes or commands—be they good or evil, be the husband “debauched or devoid of all virtues”. “If a wife obeys her husband, she will for this alone be exalted in heaven” In fact, woman is to regard and worship her husband “as her god”. (p. 28)

L. T. Teskey rightly says: “Hindu tradition equally traps real women and girls within the roles of wife and mother” (p. 118). The religious practices which they perform at home are not for their own salvation, but generally for the welfare of husbands and families. Mary McGee (1991, pp. 71-88) observes that the religious practices associated with Hindu women do seem to be oriented toward the household. The vows and fasts so important in women’s religious practices are not unlike the austerities performed by renunciators, but householder women perform these fasts primarily for the sake of family members rather than for spiritual liberation.

Women Kabir singers try to break this trap to make their own way to spiritual world coming out of their homes. Preaching and singing devotional *bhajans* are the most important means for them to practice *bhakti* of Kabir or God. They provide women preachers as well as singers agency, mobility and a significant position among other followers and practitioners. In *Women in Orchre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation*, Meena Khandewal’s

observation is quite relevant in this context: “Rejecting the role of the good and virtuous wife whose life is devoted to husband and family, these women assert their agency” (p. 5).

Women Kabir singers search for their spiritual husband in the form of *Guru* or God. They claim that their real husband and other relatives cannot help them achieve it. They even believe that human relations including husband are just a hindrance to their spiritual path and are based on selfishness. For them, their relationship with God is only true. This belief inspires them to devote themselves to such spiritual practices which they consider to be a way of their liberation. In the following song, Bisarathi Devi wants to be united with *Guru* or God:

*Naihar ke logawa hamake ekahu na bhavela*  
*Kahiya le rahi ham kunvar ye Ram*  
*Tare bade dharati ho upar asmanwa*  
*Tehi biche madawa chhavayi ye Ram*  
*Bharal maduaa hamare naihare ka logawa*  
*Satguru avela akela ye Ram*  
*Yahi madawa bhitra guru se hoyiha gathbandhan*  
*Hansha ke ho jala biyah ye Ram*

[I do not like anyone of my native home.  
How long should I remain unmarried?  
Below is the earth and above is the sky.  
Between them is made a canopy.  
The members of my native home are under the canopy.  
Oh Ram, *Satguru* comes alone.  
Under the same canopy, I shall be married to the *Guru*.  
Oh Ram, the *Hamsa* will be married.]

Here, the term ‘*Naihar*’ refers to the physical world in contrast to the spiritual world which undermines all human relations including husband. Like Bisarathi Devi, Renu Bharati, Dulo Dasi and many other women singers also sing such verses<sup>294</sup> in which they wish to be united with the spiritual husband. Dulo Dasi’s following *Nirguna* song of Kabir suggests that the home of God is their (women’s) real in-laws’ home. This *bhajan* further reveals that

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<sup>294</sup> It is to be noted that these verses borrow a lot of metaphors and symbols from women’s world, which easily connect them with Kabir.

every person will die one day and no relatives can protect her and therefore, she must devote oneself in the liberating spiritual practices in order to meet God (spiritual husband) forever:

*Gavan ke beriya ho  
Jaybu piya ke nagariya gavan ke beriya  
Jaybu sasurari ta doli chad jaybu  
Jaybu sasurari ta fir nahi aybu  
Gavan ke beriya*

[At the time of *gavana*,  
At the time of *gavana*, you will go to the city of the husband.  
You will go to the house of the husband in a palanquin.  
Once you go the house of the husband, you will not return.  
At the time of *gavana*.]

Through the aspiration of the reunion with God, they subvert the principle of Manu who prescribes that for a woman, her husband is God.

Early women devotees such as Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded and Meera etc. in *bhakti* tradition had also emphasized on their reunion with God and showed human relations unreal. In the article “Mirabai and his Contribution to Bhakti Movement”, S. M. Pandey and Norman Zide discuss how Meera perceives human relations: “The world, for her, is transitory. She says again and again that all one’s associations with family and friends are unreal” (p. 71). Sandhya Mulchandani discusses how Akka Mahadevi (p. 23), Andal (p. 63), Meera (p. 143) etc. rejected their own families and adopted God as their husbands. Unlike Akka Mahadevi, Andal and Meera, Bisarathi Devi and many other women Kabir singers, especially married singers, have not actually left their families and husbands, but they also have a hankering after the same spiritual experiences which really liberate women from patriarchy. Bisarathi Devi is a widow, but she wants to meet her spiritual husband who always enlightens her: “I have to search for him. I speak everything through his light. This light does not come from the son or husband or daughter-in-law or grandson, rather it comes from the *Guru* (Kabir/God). It continues enlightening me.”

Bisarathi Devi also sings many songs attributed to *Guru* and shows her strong devotion to *Guru*. I have found most of ordinary householder singers singing songs attributed to *Guru/Satguru*. In fact, the *Guru* occupies a special place in their life. He is God for them, who shows them the path of salvation and liberation from the net (*yonis*) of *Chaurasi* (cycle of birth). His blessings are believed to remove problems and difficulties from their lives.

In their 40s or 50s, ordinary people come to realize that they must adopt a *Guru* in life<sup>295</sup>. *Guru* is important for not only spiritual purpose but also social purpose. In the context of Kabirpanth, during his *satsangs* and *pravachans*, the *Guru* often makes a critique of Brahmanism, *varna*, caste distinction, *Saguna* worship at temple, untouchability and other social discriminatory practices and injustices. This critique encourages and inspires followers and gives them a feeling of self-respect and self-confidence. In Kabirpanth, *Mahant* or *Guru* is perceived as an embodiment of Kabir. It suggests the significance of *Mahant* or *Guru* for the followers.

The following *Guru* songs of Bisarathi Devi show how a devotee is searching for her *Guru*. The latter song is one of the most popular *Guru bhajans* across Uttar Pradesh and Bihar:

*Guru ji ke dhoodhat ho bital din rati*  
*Bital din rati, bital din rati*  
(Days and nights passed in searching for the *Guru*.  
Days and nights passed, days and nights passed.)

*Kab hoi Guru ka darshan ho andeshwa lagi rahi*  
(When will I have the *darshan* of the *Guru*? The doubt is still lingering.)

Here I cite the following two *Guru* songs sung by Sangeeta Vishwakarma, another ordinary householder singer from Sant Kabir Nagar, to show the impact of *Guru* on the ordinary masses. The first *bhajan* reflects that no one is like *Guru* in the world and the second

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<sup>295</sup> I argue that this practice undermines and replaces the concept of the Brahmanical *Vanprastha Ashrama*, which prescribes that one should leave one's family after one's 50 years age and live in forests.

*bhajan* suggests the need of *Guru* in life. One should attach oneself to *Guru* who can protect one from the pains and sufferings of death. These *bhajans* also criticize human vices such as arrogance, pride, lust, greed, lie, jealousy and attachment to *maya* and warn human beings to give up them. The second *bhajan* also portrays the punishment given to one after death for one's bad deeds and vices:

*Kahin Kabir suno bhai sadho kar santan ke satha*  
*Sumiran bandagi kar saheb ka kalwa nahi ahiha matha*  
*Satguru ke samanwa jagawa mein koi nahi data*  
 [O seekers, listen and join the company of the saints, says Kabir.  
 Offer meditation and *bandagi* to Saheb; the death will not come to you  
 There is no benefactor like *Guru*.]

*Satguru piyawa se jod la snehiya*  
*Chhoda yi kapat abhimanwa ho*  
*Mai ke garbhawa mein bhakti ke bhoolala*  
*Yihan kayila garva abhimanwa ho*  
*Yoh gumaniya tuharo kamawo na ahiha*  
*Jab Yam leke chali pranwa ho*  
*Ek te andhiyari Ram duje diyo na batiyo ho*  
*Bahiya pakadi le chalih kehu sangwo na sathiya ho*  
*Dharmaraj jab lekha mangiha tab kevan deba javabwa ho*  
*Bhadh ke makasiya ke agiya mein chhod diha bhugta din ratiya ho*  
*Kahal Kabir suno bhai sadho*  
*Nahi chhuti avana javanwa ho*

[Do love *Satguru*, the husband.  
 Surrender your cleverness and pride.  
 You forgot *bhakti* in the womb of your mother.  
 Here, you show pride and arrogance.  
 Your pride and arrogance will not save you when Yama (the god of death) will take your life away.  
 On the one hand, there is a dark night and there is no lamp and light on the other hand.  
 Yama will take you with your arms, no friend of yours will save you.  
 Dharmaraj (God) will ask for the account of your deeds, then no one will answer.  
 He will drop you into the fire with your arms tied and there you have to tolerate the pain days and nights.  
 O seekers, listen, says Kabir.  
 You will not be free from the circle of life and death.]

Bisarathi Devi performs many *chutney bhajans*<sup>296</sup> which are very popular among both male and female audiences. These are called entertaining devotional *bhajans*. They make atmosphere of public gatherings pleasant and entertaining. They instil a new life into Kabir-singing, and attract more audiences towards performance of singers. These *bhajans* are sung at a fast pace. They may come with or without Kabir's signature line. These *bhajans* contain many symbols from women's world. They are also based on the themes of reform of life, *bhakti*, detachment from *maya*, admonition of death and social criticism etc. The following *chutney bhajan*<sup>297</sup> compares the human senses to human relations and suggests that human beings should restrain their senses:

*Geer gayili jhoolaniya rahal baki  
Panch pachees<sup>298</sup> ka jhoolani hamari  
Are teen gun lagalba pati  
Geer gayili jhoolaniya rahal baki  
Saas more khoje nanad more khoje  
Are devara na khoje rahal papi  
Geer gayali jhoolaniya rahal baki  
Are kahe kabir, suno bhai sadho  
Dunahu ke bichwa dihal tati  
Geer gayali jhoolaniya rahal baki*

[The precious nose ring has fallen.  
My nose ring is made of five senses and twenty-five substances.  
It is adorned with a layer of three virtues.  
The precious nose ring has fallen.  
My mother-in-law and sister-in law search for it.  
My brother-in-law who was sinful does not search for it.  
The nose ring which was very precious has fallen.  
O seekers, listen, says Kabir.

<sup>296</sup> Many other women singers of Uttar Pradesh also sing *chutney bhajans*.

<sup>297</sup> I have cited most of the excerpts of *chutney bhajans* in this section.

<sup>298</sup> Hess describes the meaning of "5-25":

In Kabir lore, we frequently hear the numbers five and twenty-five, signifying the functions and characteristics of physical existence. "Five" is explained either as the five elements of material nature (earth, air, fire, water, space) or as the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell). Each of these five is linked to five *prakrityan* (natural substances or processes), their combinations giving rise to twenty-five categories of body-mind experience. Most of us are not the drivers, but are driven by, by these natural processes. So "5-25" in Kabir stands for forces linked to our body-mind systems that keep us bound and unconscious. Sometimes they are imaged as animals, like the snakes of the heading above, or the five *mrigala* (male deer) and twenty-five *mrigali* (female deer) of other *bhajans*. Sometimes just the numbers five and twenty-five signify the problematic conditions for material existence. (p. 151)

There was a wall of wood between both.  
The precious nose ring has fallen.]

In many *bhajans* of Kabir, the term *chunri* frequently comes. It is compared to *bhakti*, human body, shroud etc. In the following two *bhajans*, human body has been shown as a *chunri*. They suggest that a human being must embrace *bhakti* as soon as possible. These verses also remind us of one of the most popular *bhajans* of Kabir “*jhini jhini bini chadariya*”:

*Yehi phagun mein rangayib ham chunri*  
*Yehi phagun mein rangayib ham chunri*  
[I will get my scarf coloured in this *phalguna*.  
I will get my scarf coloured in this *phalguna*.]

*Bhayalu saaf na, maili kayalu chunri*  
*Galat sahi ka dhyan na dhayalu,*  
*Amrit mein vish milavalu*  
[You have not cleaned yourself, you have spoiled your scarf.  
You do not differentiate between right and wrong,  
You have mixed poison with nectar.]

The next *chutney bhajan* sheds light on the transitoriness of human life which has been compared to a parrot.

*Farar ho jahiha, farar ho jahiha, farar ho jahiha*  
*Aisan suganwa farar ho jahiha*  
[Will run away, will run away, will run away  
Such a parrot will run away.]

Among human relations, from the perspective of a wife, her relationship with the *nanad* (the sister of her husband) is considered to be conflictual and tense. In the next *bhajan*, *nanad* has been portrayed as *maya* which is an evil force and should be controlled and discarded:

*Nanad hamse jhagara, nanad hamse jhagara*  
*Nanad hamse jhagara roj karele*  
[The sister-in-law quarrels with me; the sister-in-law quarrels with me.  
The sister-in-law quarrels with me every day.]

The following *chutney* song criticizes and exposes the superstitions, hypocrisies, and false practices of witch doctors and Brahmin priests and warns people not to fall into their traps.

*Bharamwa ka bhatka*  
*Chhod de re manwa bharamwa ka bhatka*  
*Dharati ke doodh lava devin ke chatka ho*  
*Devin ke chatka*  
*Chhod de re manwa bharamwa ke bhatka*  
*Sokha sokhayi kayila paisa leke sarka*  
*Chhod de re manwa bharamwa ke bhatka*  
*Pandit panditayi kayina pothi patra patka ho*  
*Pothi patra patka*  
*Aan ke nigar batave apne kahe marta ho*  
*Chhod de re manwa bharamwa ke bhatka*

[Deviation in hallucination,  
O heart, give up the deviation in hallucination.  
Milk and *lawa* (fox nuts) for earth, and sacrifice of animals for goddess;  
Sacrifice of animals for goddess,  
O heart, give up the deviation in hallucination.  
The witch doctor shows his magic and runs away with money.  
O heart, give up the deviation in hallucination.  
Pandit shows his pedantry and throws his books and scriptures.  
Throws his books and scriptures.  
He tells others ways to escape from death, then, why does he die?  
O heart, give up the deviation in hallucination.]

Bisarathi Devi is also invited to other sectarian traditions. She is very popular in her neighbouring regions and is known as a *bhaktin*: “People invite me to Shivacharcha. They address me as *bhagtiniya* and ask me to come and sing a few *bhajans*.” During an interview session at her village, she sang a couple of songs attributed to Bhavani Mata (goddess Durga): the following are the extracts of those songs:

*Jangali bhavaniya ho jangal mein dalani dera*  
*Jangali bhavaniya ho jangal mein dalani dera*  
*Hathi leli, ghoda leli, bheda albela*  
*Jangali bhavaniya jangal mein dale dera*  
[The wandering Bhavani has taken shelter in the jungle.  
The wandering Bhavani has taken shelter in the jungle.  
She has an elephant, a horse and a unique sheep.  
The wandering Bhavani has taken shelter in the jungle.]

*Mayiya dalani jhaluaa nibiya mein*  
*Kahanwa se avela suga athiti*  
*Mayiya dalani jhaluaa nibiya mein*  
[Mother swings from a Neem tree.  
From where the guest parrot comes?  
Mother swings from a Neem tree.]

*Kevan mayiya gor hayi kevan mayiya kaliya, kevan re mayiya na*  
*He kevan re mayiya na hayi angiya ka patar ho*  
*Kevan ye mayiya na*  
[Which mother is white? Which mother is black? Which Mother —?  
Oh, which mother? Which mother has a thin body?  
Oh, which mother?]

While she was singing these songs, a few neighbouring women also accompanied her with great interests. It reflects the popularity of Goddess worship among them. M. C. Grey has discussed the tradition of Goddess worship among dalit women: “Dalit women do not only sing of the Mother goddesses, but also include and sometimes re-shape those from the Hindu pantheon. One woman remarked that even neo-Buddhists have no problem worshipping Hindu goddesses” (p. 78).

However, Bisarathi Devi claims that she performs in other sects, but remains attached to Kabir: “I am devoted to only one and I remain devoted to him (Kabir)”. Kabir-singing for Bisarathi Devi is a form of devotion to Kabir. Through this devotion, she has changed and has been changing lives of hundreds of people: “The purpose of my singing is to educate people with Kabir’s teachings. They should give up the wrong path and choose the right path”. Her singing also gives her opportunities to criticize social and religious discriminations and injustices. In fact, in comparison to *sadhvi* and semi-professional singers, it is easier for householder women singers to criticize social and religious injustices and discriminations. Since the settings of their performances are informal, they express their critiques unhesitatingly. Bisarathi Devi strongly believes that Kabir-singing must be directed towards

criticism of discriminatory religious and social practices and evils for a sound humanity and society.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, there have been vibrant oral and performative traditions of Kabir among women singers of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, especially in the context of the 20th century. There are three types of women singers: *sadhvi* singers, semi-professional singers and ordinary householder singers. They have been singing, preaching and popularizing Kabir, a practice that is parallel to that of men singers.

Kabir-singing acts as a source of social prestige and economic support for them. They find Kabir's world as their spiritual home where they feel free from the anxieties, difficulties and problems of everyday life, and where they are listened to, honoured and appreciated. In fact, their singing gives them a larger scope for the expression of the self than the limited one which they usually have in their families.

The women singers holding the title *Dasin* or *Dasi* (slave) are, in fact, not the slaves of family and society, but of a transcendent reality which provides them mobility, agency and a respectable status among Kabirpanthis and even non-Kabirpanthis.

Despite the initial resistance from family and society, they have established themselves as Kabir singers through their persistence, firm determination and struggle. Their struggles for Kabir-singing have strengthened their bond with Kabir. They have successfully negotiated with oppressive patriarchal power relations in family and society through their Kabir-singing and preaching.

Women singers, especially dalit women singers, are also challenging discrimination perpetrated on the basis of caste, *varna* and untouchability. Their voices for dignity, justice and respect are being heard in Kabirpanth and outside.

Women singers have extended Kabir's oral and performing traditions in their own ways. Their *arji/vinti* songs, Meera songs, Indramati songs, Kabir songs and Dharmadas songs (especially those songs which draw their contents heavily from the women's world) etc. have brought Kabir close to women.

Women singers have also contributed to the corpus of Kabir's poetry by composing verses through their experience, knowledge, and spirituality based on Kabir. These songs draw on symbols, metaphors etc. from the women's world. Through such songs and their commentaries, these women singers have feminized Kabir constructing a woman friendly image of Kabir and bringing him close to women and their world. For them, Kabir has never been anti-women<sup>299</sup>. Each woman singer has an intense personal relationship with Kabir. Through this relationship and their Kabir-singing, they have rejected and subverted the patriarchal prejudice (which traps women within the four walls of home and prevents them practicing *bhakti* as a path to salvation) that "woman is an impediment to the spiritual attainment of man". For women singers, Kabir-singing is really a liberating experience.

Women singers are now playing a key role in inspiring people, especially women followers to reform and elevate their lives through Kabir *bhakti*. Perceiving them as their female *Gurus* or holy figures and following their words in order to change their life spiritually and socially shows their strong impact on audiences. Like women followers, men followers have started following them after listening to their singing and commentaries. Their having a sympathetic attitude (which indicates that they will never perpetrate injustice and discrimination against women) to women singers and other women followers against the

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<sup>299</sup> The anti-woman image of Kabir has been a major concern for scholars in the academic world.

patriarchal injustices shows one aspect of the real success of their singing. Like women audiences, their wait for performance of women singers reflects what Kabir-singing by women is doing to them. Women singers now have a high demand and respect among people.