Introduction: Kabir, Bhakti and Traditions

Kabir

Kabir among Masses

Kabir, the fifteenth century saint poet of North India, is one of the best known and most revered names in Indian tradition. His poetry has been a part and parcel of people's life. It is lived and breathed, sung and recited, worshiped and celebrated, quoted and used as proverbs[1] in conversations and explanations, transcreated and extended by Indian masses, especially ordinary people (shudras and dalits). It is a living phenomenon continuously evolving through singers, preachers and lay followers from one region to another. It exists in different languages, dialects and forms travelling from region region to, inspiring, encouraging, guiding, goading, warning, awakening people and instilling confidence and energy in them. In fact, Kabir still continues to have relevance and presence among people. In his essay "Kabir and Contemporary Hindi Poetry", Kedarnath Singh comments on Kabir's relevance: "Kabir is a rare poet in the sense that he belongs as much to his own times as to ours" (pp. 113-14). Vinay Dharwadker compares him to W. B. Yeats in terms of his metaphorical immortality shown by W. H. Auden in his poem "In the Memory of W. B. Yeats":

> After nearly 200 years of scholarly research on his life and work, he appears to be a singer who has disappeared into his songs; he has ceased to be 'a person', and has become 'a climate of opinion' instead. In fact, in W. H. Auden's words memorializing W. B. Yeats in 1939, he is the type of poet whose death was 'kept from his poems'. (p. ix)

[1] Charlotte Vaudeville points out, "There is hardly an ethical or spiritual truth in Northern India that has not taken the form of a sakhi ascribed to Kabir. Many have a proverbial ring, so that it is not always possible to say whether some age-old proverb has been attributed to Kabir, or Kabir himself has quoted an old proverb to which he has given new or deeper signification — or whether simply a famous saying of Kabir has been turned into a proverb" (p. 53).

The fact that people of different faiths perceive and interpret Kabir differently attests to his strong presence and relevance among them:

> In Indian religious history, Kabir is unique: to the Hindus, he is a Vaisnava *bhakta*, to the Muslims a *pir*, to the Sikhs a *bhagat,* to the sectarian Kabirpanthis an *avatar* of the supreme Being; to modern patriots, Kabir is the champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, to the neo-vedantis a promoter of the Universal Religion or the Religion of Man, who steadfastly opposed the superstitious beliefs and empty ritualism of orthodox Hinduism as well as the dogmatic pride and bigotry of orthodox Islam. In modern, progressive circles today, Kabir is held in high esteem as a social reformer, a bold enemy of Brahmanical pride and caste distinctions, a revolutionary whose scathing attacks on caste prejudices, the principle of untouchability, and all forms of social discrimination are for ever famous and comforting to the enlightened Indian mind, like a breeze of fresh air. Kabir appears to modern India to be true symbol of nonconformity, of all that is free, noble, and challenging in the Indian tradition. Some contemporary Indian writers do not hesitate to compare him to Buddha Gautama, for the fearlessness of his character, the loftiness of his views, and his extraordinary hold on the common masses of India (Vaudeville, 1974, p. 3)

The views of the following prominent scholars of Kabir not only reflect Kabir's relevance and influence among people but also establish the fact that Kabir has been a poet of masses. John Farquhar (1920) points out a strong influence of Kabir's *vanis* among the masses of India: "His best utterances are probably the loftiest work in the Hindi Language and hundreds of his couplets have laid hold of the common heart of Hindustan" (p. 333). F. E. Keay (1931) notes that Kabir is as popular as Tulsi Das among Indian masses. Supporting the view of George Grierson, he says:

> There is probably no Indian author whose verses are more on the lips of the people of North India than those of Kabir, unless it be Tulsi Das. As Sir George Grierson truly says, 'The words of two men of the past can still be heard in every village of Hindustan. These are Tulsi Das, the abandoned child of a beggar Brahman tribe, and Kabir, a despised weaver of Benares' (p. 67)

Linda Hess (2000) also mentions the popularity of Kabir in North India: "Kabir's poems have been sung and recited throughout North India — by learned pandits and illiterate villagers, by wandering ascetics and classical musicians — for 500 years" (p. xi).

Dharwadker (2003) also notes Kabir to have been circulated among the masses of North India: “Kabir’s poems have circulated in several languages across north India for the past five or six centuries, and he is probably the most frequently quoted poet in the modern Hindu world” (p. ix). John Stratton Hawley (2005) mentions the different communities which have adopted Kabir: “The range of communities who have embraced Kabir is immense low-caste and high-caste, ascetics and householders, rickshaw drivers and CEOs, and famously the Muslims and Hindus who are said to have fought over the privilege of disposing of his bodily remains” (p. 275). Purushottam Agrawal (2007) foregrounds Kabir’s presence through the singers who have sung Kabir from the medieval period to the present:

> Kabir has been a very dear poet of singers. Unknown folk singers as well as prominent classical and popular singers have sung Kabir from the medieval period to the present. The Kabir-singing by Kumar Gandharva is already famous. He has developed the Malwi folk style of Kabir-singing into classical singing. Kabir has also been very popular among singers before and after Kumar. Kabir-singing by Lakshmi Shankar, Madhup Mudgal, Neela Bhagwat, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Abida Parveen has been very popular. On the other hand, Prahlad Singh Tipanya and Bhairu Singh Chauhan of Malwa, Bharati Brothers of Chhattisgarh and Heeralal Yadav of Banaras are such singers of Kabir, who have been singing Kabir with their own characteristics and in their regional styles. (p. 44)

In another work, Agrawal (2021) describes him a ‘millennial superstar’: “His songs continue to be sung in villages and towns, even as young singers and musicians in metropolitan cities find novel ways to present his words and interpret his songs. Kabir, one could argue, is a millennial superstar, as adored and revered as he was in his own lifetime” (p. 31).

On the basis of the above scholarly views, one can conclude that Kabir has continued to live in the memory of masses and appealed to them strongly.

Kabir's Life

Despite Kabir's popularity, we do not know much about his life. The life account of Kabir is mixed with legends and myths. It is difficult to disentangle the historical Kabir from them. However, Keay says: "Seeing that the legends are so unreliable, one might be disposed to pass them over altogether; but apart from the fact that in many cases they probably contain some grains of historical truth" (p. 9).

Another way to reach the historical Kabir is through his verses. However, it is also difficult to verify whether the verses found in the name of Kabir are actually composed by him as these verses were orally transmitted for about a century before they were written in the early 17th century. Hess (2002) also points to the same limitation: "The chief source for our understanding of Kabir is, of course, his poetry. But the many volumes published under his name and the innumerable songs sung with his signature line can hardly be assumed to be authentic" (p. 6). However, Agrawal (2021) suggests a significant integrated method to reach the historical Kabir: "Still, reading various legends alongside contemporary accounts and some of Kabir's own poems provides us with a broad outline of his life and personality. This outlines leaves enough space to exercise the 'fill in the blanks' option and a number of stories have been woven around the basic facts, such as they are" (p. 54) and "myths and legends, when read sensitively, help us grasp aspects of historical experience that are generally hidden from view" (p. 56).

According to the birth and death legends of Kabirpanth, a devotional sect based on Kabir's teachings, he is said to have been born in 1398 at Lahartara in Varanasi and died in 1518 at Maghar in Sant Kabir Nagar[2] in Uttar Pradesh[3]. Kabir was a Muslim *Julaha* (weaver

[2] Maghar was previously in Basti district.
[3] However, there is no consensus among the scholars. Some scholars such as Westcott (1907, p. viii) and Keay (1931, p. 27) place Kabir's birth in 1440 and accept the date of Kabir's death in 1518. Some scholars such as

caste). His parents were Neeru and Neema (Agrawal, 2009)[4]. Kabir married Loi[5]. Kamali and Kamal were his daughter and son[6]. Like his father, Kabir practiced weaving for livelihood. Hess (2000) writes: "He learned the family craft (later composing a number of poems with weaving metaphors)" (p. 3). Kabir and other saints have highlighted the significance and dignity of their professions practising *bhakti* simultaneously. Commenting on the simultaneous practice of both, Agrawal (2021) says: "An inner life of love with god and an outer life of householder responsibilities complemented each other in Bhakti morality. Kabir celebrates hard, honest work in his poetry" (p. 213).

Kabir's *Nirguna Bhakti*

Along with his work, Kabir also practised and popularized *Nirguna bhakti* based on God without attributes. He is called the real originator of the *Nirguna bhakti*[7]. Kabir's mysticism or *Nirguna bhakti* emphasizes on an inner personal experience or knowledge of God, who resides in each heart and rejects all forms of external devotion and worship:

> *Kasturi kundali basai mriga dhoondhai ban manhi*
> *Aisai ghati ghati ram hain duniya dekhai nanhi* (Das, p. 112)
> (The musk is in the navel of a dear, but he searches for it outside in the forest;
> So is Ram inside every human heart, but the world is not able to see.)

Hess points out: "Kabir frequently reminds us of a great light within everyone — usually understood as the presence of ultimate reality or God" (p. 374). Kabir addresses this ultimate reality as *Shabda* or Ram (God), the almighty, who is the centre of his *sadhana*

Dharwadker (2003, p. 2) and Winand Callewaert (1998, p. 407) accept the date of Kabir birth in 1398, but place Kabir's death in 1448. Most scholars seem to agree that Kabir survived in the 15th century.

[4] However, according to one of his birth legends, he was the son of a Brahmin widow. The Kabirpanthi version of the legend shows that he was not born of a woman womb, rather he had descended into the pond of Lahartara from sky. These legends suggest that Kabir was only brought by a Muslim *Julaha* couple Neeru and Neema who lived at Kabir Chaura in Varanasi.

[5] Vaudeville (1974) writes: "In spite of views held by a number of Kabir-panthis, there is hardly any doubt that Kabir was married" (p. 43).

[6] Kabirpanthis reject the fact that Kabir was married. They consider Loi, Kamal and Kamali to be his disciples.

[7] Krishna Sharma says: "He can rightly be called the originator of the medieval school of Nirguna-bhakti. Although the process of the popularisation of the Nirguna ideology had started long before Kabir through the Natha-pantha in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it was he who gave it the form which we know as the medieval school of Nirguna-bhakti" (p. 163).

(devotion). According to Kabir, one can experience Ram within only if one gets the *Sahaja* state[8]. In order to get this state, one needs to give up lust, pride, ego, greed, anger, hatred, jealousy and laziness. Kabir defines this state himself:

> *Sahaj sahaj sab kahe, sahaj na chinhe koya*
> *Jo tan vishaya taji, sahaj kahi je so*
> (People talk of sahaj, without ever knowing it;
> Only those who can rid themselves
> of the compulsive, additive habits of mind
> can actually realize sahaj) [Translated by Agrawal, p. 51]

After giving up these vices, one deserves to practice *bhakti* like Kabir[9]:

> *Kabira khada bazaar mein, liye lukathi haath*
> *Jo ghar phoonke aapana, chale hamare saath* (*Kabir Dohavali*, p. 26)
> (Kabir stands in the market with a burning stick;
> Whosoever burns his/her home can accompany him.)

Kabir's mysticism serves not only spiritual purpose but also social purpose. On many occasions, both intermingle or become an expressive voice of each other. Agrawal rightly says: "His Nirguna bhakti far from being religious is in fact the touchstone of his critique" (2021, p. 203) and "in reality, the provenance of Kabir's social criticism takes place from his spiritual anguish" (2009, p. 333). He further explains it: "His social criticism emerges from a proposal for participation in *bhava bhakti* (heartfelt *bhakti*) against the high-low status of birth on the basis of *varna*" (2009, p. 398).

Dealing with the social purpose, Kabir emerges as the greatest Indian iconoclastic saint. He attacks all discriminatory and false orthodox social and religious practices such as *varna*, caste, temple worship; hypocrisies and pretensions of Brahmin priests, *Mullahs* and *sadhus* and saints; *Veda*, *Quran* and other religious scriptures; animal sacrifice; violence and

[8] Hazari Prasad Dwivedi says: "According to Kabirdas, Sahaja State is the state where a *bhakta* (devotee) finds God easily" (1942/2014, p. 68).

[9] Kabir's *Nirguna bhakti* also emphasizes the adoption of a *Guru* who helps one get the *sahaja* state and experience God within. Hess describes the core of his *bhakti*: "He stresses direct contact with the teacher, indicating that the only authentic teaching is the word from the guru's mouth…. And he continually urges immediate understanding, a recognition which (like the apprehension of a vibrating word) is *sahaja*, spontaneous, simple" (p. 3).

exploitation of the poor and weak; ignorance of the Hindus and Muslims, which leads controversies over the issues of temple-mosque, God (Ram) and Allah; pride in scholasticism, arrogance and pride, lust and greed in human beings.

It must be noted that through his *sadhana*, Kabir not only questions, subverts and deconstructs orthodox social and religious formulations, traditions and problems, but also gives alternatives and solutions which not only combine theories but also their practical aspects. He tells others what he himself experimented and practiced. This aspect makes him a unique iconoclastic saint and profoundly attracts people towards him.

Kabir's Poetry

Hess (2015) rightly comments: "Kabir is a deep well of poetry and thought" (p. 392). He is often called the father of Hindi literature (Vaudeville, p. 3)[10]. The collection of his poetry is popularly known as the *Bijak* (first discovered in Bihar). However, his poetry is compiled in many other manuscripts such as *Adigrantha* (Panjab) and Dadupanthi (Rajasthan) *Granthavali* (which will be discussed below). Even, the *Bijak* is found in multiple recensions[11]. Almost each sect of the Kabirpanth, a devotional sectarian tradition based on Kabir's teachings, has its respective *Bijak* and claims its version to be the original one.

Kabir's verses in the *Bijak* are generally classified as *Sakhis*, *Padas/Shabdas* and *Ramainis*[12]. Kabir's *Sakhis* and *Padas* are more popular among masses and form the main

[10] However, he is also called illiterate on the basis of his following couplet, but it does not suggest whether Kabir was actually illiterate. It rather suggests that it was his own choice to compose his verses orally:

Masi kagad chhuvon nahi, kalam gahon nahin haath
Chariu jug ke mahatma mukhahi janai baat (Singh 1972/2007, p. 158)
(Ink or paper, I never touched, nor did I grasp a pen in my hand.
The greatness of the four ages I described by word of mouth.)

[11] Shukdev Singh (2007, pp. 194-96) has mentioned forty versions of the *Bijak*.

[12] Hawley (2012, pp. 268-69) provides the following interpretations of *Sakhis*, *Padas* and *Ramainis*.

1. [*D*]*ohas* (two-liners) or *sakhis* (witnessings), also *saloks* by the Sikhs — terse epigrammatic couplets that can be either recited or sung;
2. [*R*]*amainis* — rhymed lyrics in *caupai* [*chaupai*] meter that end in a couplet (*doha*); and

part of Kabir's oral and performative traditions. Hess (2000) also points out this fact: "Most of the Kabir material has been popularized through the song-form known as *sabda* or *pada*, and through the aphoristic *sakhi* that serves throughout North India as a vehicle for popular wisdom" (pp. xii-xiii).

Kabir's Language

The following couplet from the *Bijak* suggests that Kabir used the vernaculars spoken in eastern part of North India. However, it does not clarify which specific vernaculars he used:

> *Bol hamara purva ka, hamaka lakhai nahi koya*
> *Hamako to soyi lakhai, jo dhur poorab ka hoya* (Singh, p. 158)
> (My speech is of the East, none understands me;
> Only he or she understands me who is from the far East.)

Most scholars point out that Kabir's verses are generally found in a mix of different dialects and languages such as Avadhi, Braj, Bhojpuri, Khari Boli, Rajasthani and Punjabi[13]. Vaudeville says: "Being himself an Easterner, Kabir would naturally have mixed forms of his native dialects into his verses" (p. 67). His mixed language is often called *Sadhukkari Bhasha*/*Sandhya Bhasha*. Shyam Sundar Das calls the mix of different languages a *panchamel khichadi* (1928/2010, p. 45). However, Dharwadker (p. 45) modifies the observation of Shaym Sundar Das and adds that it is a consistent literary medium of Kabir:

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3. [*P*]*ads* (verses) or *sabdas* (words) — sung compositions whose length could vary from four verses to twelve or more. Each begins with a title verse that also serves as refrain.

[13] This mixed form of Kabir's language in his verses also reflects their transmission in different geographical areas. Parshuram Chaturvedi states that "by the end of the seventeenth century, its verbal texture had absorbed the grammar, syntax and semantics of half a dozen major languages and speech-varieties of north India: Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Braj Bhasha, Rajasthani, Khari Boli and Punjabi" (as cited in Dharwadker, pp. 42-43). Dharwadker suggests that Kabir's verses are found in divergent languages because of their transmissions in different regions and this multilingualism is a special characteristic of Kabir's poetry:

> The irreversible multilingualism of the Kabir text has specific characteristics. The corpus in its entirety, viewed across manuscript lines, appears in multiple scripts and contains a large number of languages. A particular poem may thus appear in variant forms in divergent manuscripts and manuscript-lines, with each such form articulated in a distinct language or speech-variety. In several instances, any one manuscript in a given line is composed quite consistently in a particular language or speech-variety belonging to the region in which it is produced. (pp. 43-44)

> The additional fact that each of the six main tongues in the aggregate Kabir text — Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Braj Bhasha, Rajasthani, Khadi Boli, and Punjabi — functions as a self-consistent literary medium across the various manuscript lines and modes of transmission suggests that Shyamasundaradas's influential description in 1928 of Kabir's language as a *panchamel khichadi*, a crude 'mishmash of five elements', was seriously misguided and misleading.

Kabir's Style

What makes Kabir a unique poet is his poetic style which combines extraordinary vigour and rugged terseness. In *A Sixteenth-Century Indian Mystic*, W. G. Orr writes: "For sheer vigour of thought and rugged terseness of style, no later bhakti writer can be brought into comparison with him" (p. 74). Kabir composes his poetry orally and composes what he observes and experiences inside and outside. Therefore, there are unique forcefulness, naturalness, openness, directness and at the same time obscurity (in his *Ulatbansi* verses)[14] in Kabir's style, which fascinate all readers and audiences. On the one hand, these elements make Kabir's style simple, crude, blunt and heart-tearing and on the other hand, they make it attractive, appealing and thought-provoking. One can always hear rhythmic sound and beauty in them. Vaudeville observes that "while Kabir is undoubtedly rude, crude, vulgar, and prosaic, he is at the same time eloquent, exciting, dazzling, and unforgettable" (as cited in Hess, 2000, p. 7).

Hess calls Kabir's style 'Rough Rhetoric'. Kabir neither makes any compromise nor cares for happiness and unhappiness of his readers and audiences. Vaudeville (1974) also comments: "Indifferent to tradition, and apparently unconcerned with the pleasure or displeasure of his audience, Kabir fearlessly voices his inner convictions. His blunt language and rough words, his bitter irony, bespeak ardent indignation, but also a desperate effort to awaken his dumb, sleepy fellow men, who remain unaware of their impending doom" (p. 69).

[14] *Ulatbansi vanis* are the paradoxical verses of Kabir.

Kabir's style becomes exclusively delicate and soft when he bears femininity in his devotional poetry. Kabir adopts the form of a woman[15] completely devoted to her husband in order to express his *bhakti* to God:

> *Main to tumhari dasi ho sajana, tum hamare bhartar*
> *Deen dayal daya kari aao, samarath sirjanhar* (Tiwari, 1961, p. 10)
> (My beloved, I am your slave and you are my husband;
> The Saviour of the poor, come to shower your blessings; the almighty Creator.)

Given these aspects of Kabir's style together, it is, what Hazari Prasad Dwivedi observes, "tender as flower, hard as diamond' (2014, p. 135) and, in Shyam Sundar Das's words, Kabir's poems "pierce the hearts of listeners, and remain there' (as cited in Vaudeville, p. 70).

'A Man Speaking to Men': The Subject of Kabir's Poetry

Kabir surpasses the poets of all ages, especially Indian poets, in composing poetry on the subjects: humanity, death/transitory nature of human life, false nature of human relations, detachment from *maya*, love as a devotion to God, *Guru bhakti*, wisdom and common sense, orthodox and discriminatory social and religious practices etc. However, the main subject of Kabir's poetry is people, especially common people. His verses address and resonate with common human experiences, emotions and sensibilities and form a natural relationship with people. Agrawal (2009) rightly says: "The power of the poems of Kabir has been that they address you (people) and make you their subject matter" (p. 399). The observation of William Wordsworth (1798/1991), the pioneer of the English romantic poetry, about a poet seem quite relevant in context of Kabir when he says that a poet is "a man speaking to men" (p. 245) and "is singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth

[15] To assume the form of a woman to offer *bhakti* to God by a male *sadhak* (devotee) or poet has been one of the main characteristics of medieval *bhakti* poetry. It begins with the Alvars (Tamil poet-saints) in South India between the sixth and tenth centuries. A. K. Ramanujan (2004, p. 291) suggests that in "taking on female personae", the Alvars were drawing on "classical precedents in *cancam* poetry, where male poets frequently write in female voices".

as our visible friend and hourly companion" (p. 249). Through his popular signature line or refrain '*Kahe/kahat Kabir suno bhai sadho'* in his most of verses, Kabir speaks and appeals to people and involve them in his verses as singers or listeners. It makes Kabir the most personal poet of all *bhakti* poets: "Kabir can be described as the most personal of all bhakti poets: not because he dwells on his private experience, exposes his own quivering heart, but because he gets very personal with us, the audience" (Hess, 2000, p. 9).

Kabir's Dream and Reason in His Poetry

Kabir is the architect of humanity. His poetry dreams a world where everyone must have equal prestige and right: "He considers man the owner of equal prestige. For him, there was no value of superiority based on caste, dynasty, and ritual" (Dwivedi, p. 172). Agrawal (2009) provides a similar observation: "The poems of Kabir dream of such a perpetual world in which only humanity is important. In the dream of Kabir, there are neither Brahmans, nor Kshatriyas, nor Sayyads, nor Sheikhs nor Shudras, nor Vaishyas" (p. 40). Kabir perceives any identity on the basis of creed, caste and *varna* as one of the obstacles to humanity and therefore, he always rejects it:

> *Hindu main hoon nahin musalman bhi nahin*
> *Panchtatva ko pootala, gaibi khele mahin* (*Kabir Dohavali*, p. 43)
> (I am neither a Hindu nor a Muslim;
> An effigy of five elements, in which I play.)

Kabir prescribes the best way to be secular by adopting humanitarian values, which ensures the welfare of all:

> *Kabira khada bazaar mein, mange sabki khair*
> *Na kahu se dosti na kahu se bair* (*Kabir Dohavali*, p. 26)
> (Kabir stands in the market, wishing everyone well;
> He is not anyone's friend, not anyone's foe.)

Kabir speaks of equality of human beings on the basis of reason:

> *Ekai tvacha ek haad mal mutra, ek rudhir ek guda*
> *Ek boond se srishti racho hai, ko brahman ko suda* (Singh, 2007, p. 131)
> (Every human body is made of one skin and bone, one piss and shit, one blood, and one flesh.
> The whole universe is created out of one drop, then who is Brahmin and who is Shudra?)

The above verse suggests that Kabir's poetry privileges reason and brings human at the centre of his spiritual and social discourses. He rejects the claim of one's superiority on the basis of birth, caste, *varna* and religion. It is to be noted that even in Europe, during Renaissance and Enlightenment, reason was given prominence, but no emphasis was laid on the equality of people. Kabir is radical and revolutionary in the sense that he was the first to raise voice for human equality.

These characteristics of Kabir make him the first strong voice of Indian modernity. Agrawal (2021) rightly suggests: "'[M]odern' is indicative of a mind which is sceptical, wary of accepting irrational prejudices and unjust social structures as 'divine' design and judges a human being for their deeds, not their status at birth" (p. 104). Following Kabir, other *Nirgunis* also emphasized on reason. However, there is a basic difference between western concept of reason and that of *Nirguna* poets. In the west, reason displaces God, but with Indian *Nirguna* poets, it embraces God. Agrawal writes: "In the West, rationalists had to 'fight' god; in India, though, Nirgunis, the empirical, had god on their side" (p. 164). He further describes: "Kabir privileges human reason but does not reject intuition, mysticism and the idiom of mythology and miracles. His stinging social criticism emanated from his insight that his Ram permeated the whole universe. He saw the presence of divinity in each and every iota of existence, including in oneself. His identification with universal consciousness is quite categorical — 'I am in everything and everything is within me" (p. 164).

Kabir: A Universal Figure

The western audiences have also shown their enthusiasm and interest in Kabir because of the universality of his messages and teachings. Agrawal says: "His voice touches chords deep within not only Indians but also people from all corners of the world. Kabir has evolved into a universally popular 'brand' that represents irreverent interrogation and irrepressible moral courage" (p. 31). In fact, for global audiences, Kabir is what William Wordsworth observes that a poet is "the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs … the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" (p. 249).

The central figure in transmitting Kabir songs to the West was Rabindranath Tagore. Western audiences found the popular form of Kabir through the 100 *padas* of Kabir translated by Rabindranath Tagore. Vaudeville (1974) mentions the reception of Tagore's *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* in the west: "Tagore's version of this great medieval mystic was also for a long time the only one available to the western public; it was widely read in the west" (p. 19). Peter Friedlander (2015) rightly observes: "[T]ransition of Kabir songs from oral and manuscript traditions into written English translations in print meant that they then reached entirely new audiences who would previously have never imagined that they would listen to the songs of a fifteenth-century weaver from Varanasi singing about the nature of the divine." (p. 198). Robert Bly (1977), an American poet has retranslated 44 poems out of Tagore's *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* in more poetic manner. Robert Bly's version is also very popular in the west. Bly himself recites Kabir's verses.

Trevor Hall, an American folk singer, performs stage shows on Kabir. Linda Hess participates in the singing of Kabir, and recites and explains his verses and teachings before her students. Prahlad Tipanya and his team has been invited abroad to sing Kabir not only before the Indians living over there but also before foreign audiences. He has performed Kabir in London and America. Rabindranath Tagore, Robert Bly, Linda Hess, Shabnam Virmani (who has documented Kabir's singers of India) and Prahlad Tipanya have given the world the popular Kabir who is performed in gatherings.

The Reverberation of Kabir in Literature and Beyond

Friedlander notes the impact of Kabir on Rabindranath Thakur's *Gitanjali* for which he was awarded with the Nobel prize in 1913: "These verses are reminiscent of Tagore's translations of Kabir and both formed the centre of attention for audiences listening to him performing his works during his visit to London in 1912-13" (2015, p. 198). The traces and reverberations of Kabir are also found in W. B. Yeats, a modern English poet and dramatist:

> These remote echoes from the twentieth century are significant because they are symptoms of the ways in which Kabir's poetry has stayed alive for more than half a millennium. Yeats himself first encountered a sample of it in Rabindranath Tagore's translations, which were published in *Songs of Kabir* in 1915 with an Introduction by Evelyn Underhill. The brief fable of the *hamsa* in the twelfth song in that book must have resonated strongly with the Irish poet, for its symbolism of the soul as a swan or a bird on a journey beyond the human and natural realms seems to have influenced his conception of 'The Wild Swans at Coole' shortly afterwards. Tagore's translation was prosaic and speculative, but it conveyed enough of the idea — which the Kabir tradition had borrowed from older Indian and Persian traditions-to have an impact on Yeats. (Dharwadker, p. ix)

Dharwadker (2003, p. xi) also establishes the position of Kabir in World literature due to his universal appeal and further notes the universality of Kabir by pointing out the philosophical resonances and elements in his poetry, similar to those of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. Agrawal (2020, p. 180)'s comparison of Kabir with Immanuel Kant in the context of modernity, Kedarnath Singh (2002, pp. 109-10)'s

comparison of Kabir with Bertolt Brecht in terms of an equal approach to didacticism, and Keay (1931, p. 49)'s comparison of Kabir with Socrates in the context of challenging conventionalities, and many other missionaries' comparison with Martin Luther for their approaches to a religious reformation, also reflect the universal dimension of Kabir.

The above discussion establishes how relevant Kabir is not only in Indian context, but also in the universal context. Kabir's *vanis* and his contributions need to be continuously brought out before the world. My own study is a part of the same pursuit. No doubt, Kabir has always been an important area of research.

Kabir and Bhakti Movement

Etymologically the term 'bhakti' is derived from the Sanskrit verb root *bhaj*, which means "to divide, to share, to partake, to participate, and to belong to[16]. As a religious concept, *bhakti* is devotion to a personal or impersonal God[17]. It manifests in two forms: *Saguna bhakti* (devotion to forms of God with all attributes) and *Nirguna bhakti* (devotion to formless God)[18]. *Saguna bhakti* is the manifestation of devotion to a personal god or his incarnations. *Nirguna bhakti*, on the other hand, is devotion to the Almighty (impersonal God) Himself.

Bhakti as an emotional or devotional expression emerged for the first time among the Alvars and Nayanars of South India between the sixth and tenth centuries. Alvars were

[16] In *Bhakti and Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective,* Krishna Sharma analyses the meaning of the term '*bhakti*':

> The word bhakti is derived from *Bhaj* by adding the suffix *ktin*(*ti*). *Bhaj* can be used in any of the following meanings: to partake of, to engage in, to turn and resort to, to pursue. To declare for, to practice or cultivate, to prefer or choose, to serve and honour, to love and adore. The suffix *Ktin* is usually added to a verb to form an action or agent noun. This bhakti … can mean participation as well as recourse, experience as well as practice, reverence as well as love and adoration. (p. 40)

[17] Sharma rightly argues that in all academic works (historical or others), *bhakti* is defined as "devotion to a personal God", which is faulty because it is fit only for the *Saguna bhakti*, not for *Nirguna bhakti*. (pp. 1-38).

[18] It is a dual phenomenon which includes *sadhya*/subject (God or forms of God) and *sadhaka*/object (devotee or *bhakta*). It is based on the belief of mutual love between God and devotee. Through the path of *bhakti*, devotee wishes to be united with God or to ensure salvation.

devotees of Vishnu and Nayanars of Shiva. They composed devotional verses in praise of Vishnu and Shiva and performed them through song and dance. They preached and practised *bhakti* in the Tamil vernacular and travelled from place to place, singing hymns in praise of their gods (Shweta Uppal, p. 143).

The Alvar and Nayanar devotees belonged to diverse strata of society e.g. Shudras, Brahmins and untouchables[19]. However, there were more Shudras and Brahmins among them[20]. They practiced *bhakti* as a form of protest, especially against the discrimination on the basis of caste and *varna* perpetrated by orthodox Brahmins in the religious sphere. They also undermined the *Vedas* and other Hindu religious scriptures and the collections of verses of the prominent Alvars and Nayanars were themselves treated as the *Vedas*. However, the Alavars and Nayanars, especially Brahmin Alavars and Nayanars, practiced *bhakti* more as an opposition to Buddhism and Jainism. In her essay "From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance: The Bhakti of Tamil Alvars and Nayanars", Champakalakshmi notes:

> The *bhakti* hymns are dominated by three major themes. Foremost among them is the idea of devotion to a personal god…. The second is a protest against orthodox Vedic Brahmanism and the exclusiveness of the *brahmanas* in their access to divine grace and salvation, that is, an elitism in the religious sphere. The third is a vehement denunciation of the Jains and Buddhists as non-believers, heretics, and hence as 'heterodox'. (p. 55)

Commenting on the third theme, she further adds: "The third major theme in the bhakti is their opposition to the Jain and Buddhist religions. The Alvar hymns express a profound reaction to the Jain and Buddhist ideologies, a feature much more pronounced in the hymns of the Nayanars, some of whom give vent to their animosity in unequivocal terms"

[19] There were also women devotees among them.

[20] In his essay "Traditions of non-caste Hinduism: The Kabir Panth", David Lorenzen (1987a) notes, "The majority of the Nayanars and Alvars belong to either Brahman castes or middle to high castes such as Vellalars. Each movement has a single 'token' Untouchable: Nandan among the Nayanars and Tiruppan among the Alvars" (p. 274).

(p. 60). It suggests that their movements had the limited nature of egalitarianism. They served a Brahmanical intention more against Buddhism and Jainism[21].

Towards the 11th century onwards, a philosophical Vaishnava form of Alvar *bhakti* also emerged through the four Brahmin *Acharyas*: Ramanuja (*Shri Sampradaya*), Nimbarkacharya (*Sankadi Sampradaya*), Madhavacharya (*Brahma Sampradaya*) and Vishnuswami (*Rudra Sampradaya*)/Vallabhacharya (*Pustimarga*). In fact, it needed a strong philosophical base in order to deal with the challenge of the *Advait* philosophy of Shankaracharya, which focused on *Nirguna Brahman* and rejected any dualism. Sharma writes: "At an intellectual level, Sankara's concentration on the concept of the Nirguna Brahman had posed a challenge to all such sects the identities of which depended on the worship of personal deities. The sectarian theologies required a new philosophical orientation to meet that challenge. The Vaishnava interpretations of Vedanta offered by Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka and Vallabha represent an endeavour in that direction" (p. xv).

However, unlike Alvars and Nayanars, these *Acharyas* were the strong supporters of caste and *varna*. In their philosophical concept of *bhakti*, there was hardly any space for the people of lower castes. Ramanuja did consider shudras eligible for *bhakti,* but prescribed *Prapatti* (total surrender to lord Vishnu), a passive form of *bhakti* for lower castes. P. D. Barthwal notes: "The great southern Acharyas grudged even the right of devotion to the

[21] Their protest against Buddhism and Jainism was also driven by economic and political perspectives. Citing Champakalakshmi's work, Lorenzen (1987a) observes that these movements "reflect the efforts on the part of the Brahmans, allied with local kings, to reduce the influence of Jainism and Buddhism" (p. 274). He further adds:

> For the kings, a greater popularisation of caste Hinduism implied strengthening their social control through the caste system and the centralisation of worship in the great temples of the region. It also provided them with better leverage over the commercial communities which tended to support Buddhist and Jain institutions. For the Brahmans the economic and socio-political advantages of these movements are obvious, but the movements also required them to partly share their religious perquisites and status with other social groups. They also had to substantially modify the nature of the religion they purveyed, principally by the propagation of a *relatively bhakti* which they preached directly in Tamil rather than in Sanskrit. (p. 274)

Sudra. They wanted to keep them in complete ignorance. Ramanuja prescribed for them the *prapatti marga*, which means complete dependence on God; his path for the high caste being bhakti, by which he means intense meditation on God with a view to the realization of His knowledge. Of this sort of bhakti, the Sudra was considered unworthy" (2005, pp. 262-63).

During the same period, North India was marked by different religious and sectarian practices such as the traditions of Siddhas, Naths, *Sadhus*, Yogis, Brahmins, *Shaktas* etc. Among them, the Brahmanical tradition was more dominant. The Naths and Siddhas had also their strong influence on the ordinary people[22], especially of low castes by attracting them through miracles and hard physical and yogic exercises and through their strong rebellion against Brahmanism and its formulations. They were mostly shudras. They believed in monotheism and rejected Brahmanism, idol-worship, *varna* system and caste distinction (Shukla, pp. 7- 66; Dwivedi, p. 46; Vaudeville, pp. 88-96).

During this complexity of the religious and sectarian traditions in 12th century, North India was attacked by Turkish Muslim Sultan Muhammad Ghori. He laid the foundation of Delhi Sultanate by defeating Prithviraj Chauhan[23]. The establishment of the Islamic Empire in North India caused a number of political, social and cultural changes.

North India certainly suffered from the political conflicts caused by the Islamic rule. However, Sufis[24], the Muslim spiritual seekers, showed another face of Islam which was

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[22] These groups became particularly popular among "low" castes (Uppal, p. 110).

[23] However, the arrival of Islam was not new in India. Arab Muslim traders had often been coming to the coasts of Kerala and Gujarat for the trade purposes. Some of them had settled there. They had mixed with the local people, married the local women, and adopted the local cultures, customs and rituals. "Arab Muslim traders who settled along the Malabar coast (Kerala) adopted the local language, Malayalam. They also adopted local customs such as matriliny … and matrilocal residence" (Uppal, p. 151). A few Muslim families are said to have settled in Uttar Pradesh even before the conquest of Muhammad Ghori: "S. M. Ikram tells us that there is a local tradition in certain old centres in the heart of Uttar Pradesh (probably Banaras) that Muslim families had settled there long before the conquest of the areas by Muhammad Ghori (1192 A. D.)" (as cited in Hedayetullah, 2009, p. 4).

[24] Sufism began in India with a prominent Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti and was popularized by Baba Farid, Nizamuddin Aulia and various other prominent Sufi saints and their disciples throughout India.

congenial to the indigenous people, especially Naths, Siddhas and other people of lower castes. It initiated a process of dialogue with them in order to understand each other. The interaction between them developed Hindavi, a common language for an exchange of ideas. Muhammad Hedayetullah (2009) points out: "The eagerness of the Sufis to establish close relation with the Hindus in order to understand their religious life and thought, also to let them understand the teachings of the Sufis facilitated the evolution of a common medium for the exchange of ideas. Thus was born the Hindi or Hindustani language in North India (p. 58).

This eagerness was mutual. The native Siddhas and Nath yogis were attracted towards the Sufi doctrine of *wahdat-ul-wajud* (union with God or monism as reality). It was similar to their monotheism. Raziuddin Aquil (2012) notes: "The propagation of the belief in Sufi circles that an individual soul could achieve union with God, formalized in the doctrine of non-Muslim mystical traditions such as the Nath Yogis" (p. 220). Vaudeville notes that due to their similar principles, the Naths and Sufis came in contact with each other easily[25]:

> The very nonconformism of the Nath Yogis, their strong opposition to caste distinctions and their contempt for the rules of ritual purity must have made social contacts with Muslims particularly easy for them. Besides, the Naths were basically monotheists and their conception of the all-pervading Godhead as Parama-siva or the invisible Satguru made them acceptable to Muslims than to the average *smarta* Hindu. (p. 88)

The Sufi shrines and *khanquahs* also became meeting points for both the communities (Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, p. 323; Uppal, p. 155). Such interactions started preparing a common religious path for both the Hindus and Muslims. However, under the influence of

[25] The common people did not distinguish between the Jogis and Sufis and probably this also brought Sufis close to the ordinary masses: "But on the whole, during the period of the Delhi Sultanate, Sufis and Jogis seem to have coexisted in relative peace, each group confidently regarding the other as inferior and somewhat misguided variety of its own kind, and both enjoying the veneration and confidence of simple folk, who apparently hardly distinguished between them. The fact that the Mahants of the Jogi maths or *akhadas*, and famous Jogis in general, are also called pirs, reflects the confusion at work in the mind of the illiterate masses between the two varieties of holy men and wonder-workers" (Vaudeville, p. 95).

prominent Sufis and Islam's emphasis on social equality[26], many Hindus continued embracing Islam. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi notes that a large number of people of those castes on which *Varnashrama Dharma* had not a stronghold gradually began to embrace Islam (p. 139). It forced the *Smart* Brahmins to embrace the indigenous people regardless of caste and *Varna* in the fold of *Varnashrama Dharma*. They tried to form a uniform set of rules and regulations in social and religious spheres, which might be acceptable to all the non-Muslim Indians. Dwivedi writes: "The Smarta pandits took on this difficult business. Throughout the country, a search for the spiritual texts began to be undertaken. The aim was that there should be extracted from the texts, the sort of doctrine that would be esteemed by all" (2005, pp. 272-73). However, this doctrine could not be successful.

These upheavals gave a fillip to the spread of Bhakti Movement in North India[27]. Bhakti Movement is said to have emerged as reaction to the Islamic cruelties (Shukla, pp. 60-

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[26] Barthwal writes that the contact with Islam brought a kind of awakening among the people of lower castes against the discrimination perpetrated by Brahmins and they were attracted to the Islamic principle of social equality:

> Having remained in this condition for centuries together, they have begun to view it as a mother-of-course-thing. But the contact with Mohammadanism awakened them to the reality of their position. In Islam there was no caste system. Among the Moslems, high or low in the sense in which it was in Hinduism. Being Mohammedans they were all equal. Anyone entering the Mohammdan fold could consider himself socially equal to any other Mohammdan. But it was not so in Hinduism. To every right thinking man, the whole situation rose in a great interrogation: what justification is there for such invidious distinctions to be allowed to remain in the Hindu society? (2005, pp. 256-57)

[27] The Vaishnava *Acharyas* also used to visit North India in order to spread Vaishnava *bhakti*. P. D. Barthwal writes: "Contemporaneously with Ramanuja, who is said to have flourished in the twelfth century, Nimbarka, himself an inhabitant of South India, preached the Vaishnava bhakti in Brindabana, near Mathura, in North India" (2005, p. 258). So, Vishnu and Shiva were also worshipped in North India, but due to the orthodox Brahmanical dominance in North India, it could not take the form of a devotional expression as that of Alvars and Nayanars :

> During the same period, in north India deities such as Vishnu and Shiva were worshipped in temples, often built with the support of rulers. However, historians have not found evidence of anything resembling the compositions of the Alvars and Nayanars till the fourteenth century. How do we account for this difference?
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> Some historians point out that in north India this was the period when several Rajput states emerged. In most of these states, Brahmanas occupied positions of importance, performing a range of secular and ritual functions. There seems to have been little or no attempt to challenge their position directly. (Uppal, p. 148)

The Muslim conquest weakened the dominance of the Brahmin and Rajput alliance in North India:

> A new element in this situation was the coming of the Turks which culminated in the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate (thirteenth century). This undermined the power of many of the Rajput states and the Brahmanas who were associated with these kingdoms. This was

62), but this claim has been questioned (Dwivedi, 1956, p. 45). However, Islam certainly played the role of a catalyst and cultivated a congenial milieu for the spread of *bhakti* by fuelling the anti-Brahmin spirit which was already present in the Indian tradition. Vaudeville (1974) notes:

> Even when the influence of Islam does not appear to have been direct, it certainly acted as a catalyst, helping to release and bring to the fore deep undercurrents which were already present in the lower strata of Indian society, as they reflected the culture of the masses and their religious aspirations. Those popular movements, generally anti-Brahmanical in character, found their natural expression in the emerging vernaculars of Northern and Central India, which they powerfully contributed to develop. (p. 118)

The indigenous movements which had anti-Brahmin spirits were mostly *Nirguna* and were open to both Hindus and Muslims. However, *Saguna* movements also simultaneously received a fillip. Most of these movements were led by Brahmin leaders[28] and had an anti-Islamic spirit. In his *Muslim civilization in India,* S. M. Ikram comments: "The religious schools and movements which arose in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are generally characterized as variants of bhakti, or devotional religion, and the influence of Islam has been seen as a determining factor" (p. 125). He further describes *Saguna* and *Nirguna* as two different attitudes to Islam:

> The religious movements of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are an awareness of two very different attitudes which Hindu religious leaders had toward Islam. One group accepted what was congenial to it in the new spiritual system; the other group adopted a few elements from the spiritual structure of the dominant race in order to strengthen Hinduism and make it

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> accompanied by marked changes in the realm of culture and religion. The coming of the Sufis … was a significant part of these developments. (Uppal, 148)
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> Probably, this weakening of the Brahmanical dominance is also one of the factors which prepared ground for the spread of Bhakti Movement in North India.

[28] Commenting on the Brahmanical hegemony from Alvars and Nayanars to the *Saguna* movements of the North India, Lorenzen (1987a) says:

> Although some of these movements may have possessed decidedly radical factions and 'moments' (Lee 1981:1-10), in most respects they still belong within the orbit of caste Hinduism and have never held much appeal for Shudras and Untouchables. With the partial exception of the Virashaivas, all these movements remained under the hegemonic influence of the Brahmans and other upper caste groups. (p. 275)

> better able to withstand Islam. Both reacted to Islam, but one was sympathetic while the other was hostile.
>
> The two trends are similar to the growth of the tolerant, cosmopolitan Brahmo Samaj and the militant Arya Samaj, when Hinduism was confronted with Christianity in the nineteenth century. Kabir, Guru Nanak, Dadu, and other founders of syncretic sects are included in the first group, while the movement in Bengal, associated with Chaitanya, mirrors the latter tendency. (p. 126)

In North India, *Saguna bhakti* first begins with Ramananda and *Nirguna bhakti* with Kabir[29]. The religious and sectarian traditions have always credited Ramananda to have brought *bhakti* to the North India from South India and Kabir to have spread it in North India. The following verse is cited regarding the origin and spread of *bhakti*:

> *Bhakti dravid upaji laye ramanand*
> *Prakat kiya Kabir ne sapt deep nav khand* (Dwivedi, 2014, p. 116)
> (*Bhakti* emanated in South India, Ramananda brought it to North India;
> Kabir spread it in seven continents and nine world-divisions.)

It is said that Ramananda was associated with the *Shri Sampradaya* of Ramanujacharya. He had to leave the sect because of his liberal attitude towards the shudras (Wilson, pp. 31-32)[30]. Then, he came to Banaras and promoted Vaishnava *Saguna bhakti* here. However, he chose a different path of Vaishnava *bhakti* from that of Ramanujacharya. In place of Lord Vishnu, he adopted the *Saguna* form of Lord Ram. Secondly, unlike the South Vaishnava *Acharyas*, he is credited to have opened the path of *bhakti* to the shudras, untouchables, and women also. The tradition counts Kabir (Julaha), Ravidas (Chamar) Dhanna (Jat), Sena (Nai), Pipa (Rajput), Padamavati and Sursari (Two women)

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[29] The contact of the Sufis with the Naths and Siddhas had already prepared the background for the *Nirguna Bhakti*. In his *Sur Sahitya*, Hazari Prasad Dwivedi writes:

> That stream of India, which had been secretly flowing against the doctrines of the ritualistic *Varnashrama Dharma*, suddenly got awakened with great force due to the contact with a similar religious tradition. The religious practices of Niranjan, Nath etc. had already been inclined towards the *Nirguna* Brahman. The contact of these two streams resulted in a new religious tradition. Kabir and Dudu were the practitioners of the same tradition. (p. 47)

[30] The link of Ramananda with the *Shri Sampraday* is also established in another way. It is said that Ramananda belonged to Prayag and studied in Banaras. He took *diksha* of Vaishnava *bhakti* from Raghavananda, who was a prominent *Acharya* associated with the *Shri Sampradaya* and lived in Banaras (Shukla, p. 116; Barthwal, 2005, p. 263).

Narhariyananda, Sursurananda, Sukhananda, Bhavananda and Anantananda from upper castes as his disciples.

The disciples from the diverse strata of the society show an inclusive form of Ramananda's *bhakti*. However, this inclusiveness is limited to the religious sphere only. Shukla writes: "Supporting the *Varnashrama Dharma* for the society, he accepts the system of different duties. He accepted the equal right of all only in the sphere of *bhakti*" (p. 119). Barthwal also finds Ramananda's inclinination more towards *Varnashrama Dharma*:

> Ramananda too, had been brought up in orthodox training, which did not allow him to go far enough to meet the aspirations of the awakened Sudras. He had taken the robes of renunciation in accordance with the strict rules of *Asrama* or the life stages of a Hindu and was a Sanyasin of the three-staffed order (Tridnadi). No doubt, he unstintingly scattered devotional knowledge to all alike through his discourses, still he was not prepared to make a greater departure from the past. In his *Anand Bhashya*, in the chapter of Sudras, he did not recognize the right of a Sudra to read the Vedas, and in matter of social concern, he could not be expected to cast off the sense of superiority of a Hindu over a Muhammadan and of one belonging to the regenerate classes (*dwijas*) over a Sudra. It was left to Kabir, a Moslem disciple of Ramananda, in whom the new thought found its full expression. (2005, p. 264)

The above couplet which gives credit to Ramananda for bringing *bhakti* to North India speaks more about Kabir and his contribution to *bhakti*. Many scholars claim that Kabir was influenced by Ramananda's *bhakti*. Agrawal (2009) notes that Kabir's *bhakti* seems to have taken its birth from the inspiration of Ramananda: "*Kavyokt bhakti*, a transformation of the doctrine of *bhakti* into poetic sensibility first emanated in North India in the *vanis* of Kabir through the inspiration of Ramananda" (p. 345).

However, Kabir did not follow Ramananda or others blindly. He experimented with a variety of religious and sectarian traditions of his time in order to develop his own concept of *bhakti*[31], which could serve the whole humanity. Kabir saw three major challenges to

[31] Since Varanasi was the centre of several religious practices, Kabir had become well acquainted with all of them through his minute, subtle and panoramic observation, and his participation in *satsangs* and debates. His

humanity: Controversies between Hindus and Muslims, especially on religious level in the name of Ram and Rahim, temple and mosque etc., the orthodox social and religious prejudices and superstitions of the Hindus and Muslims, and Brahmanical discrimination against the shudras and dalits in both religious and social spheres.

In his experiment, he found the Ram of Ramananda with certain limitations. Being the *Saguna* Ram of Ramananda, he was confined in temples and was not accessible to shudras and dalits on the level of the masses. This path was also closed for Muslims who worshipped God only in mosques. Kabir chose the *Nirguna* form of Ram who was not the Ram of Ayodhya, but the Almighty who resides all time in the hearts of all creatures[32].

Kabir's Ram was closer to the Allah of the Muslims and the *Nirguna Brahman* of the Naths and Siddhas, but was different in the sense that He was confined neither to mosque of Muslims nor ostentatious physical exercises of Naths and Siddhas. Kabir is radical in the sense that by choosing the *Nirguna* form of Ram (Ultimate Reality), he demolished Brahmanical, Islamic and other confinements of God e.g. temples, idol worship, mosques and ostentatious religious practices associated with them.

> *Kankar patthar jod kar masjid leyi banaya*
> *Ta chadi mullah baang de kya bahira hua khudaya* (*Bijak*, 2011, p. 8)
> (Mosque is built of brick and stone;
> A Mullah from the top of the mosque addresses loudly for prayer as if God were deaf.)

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verses have the references of Brahmanism, Islam, Naths, Siddhas, Yogis, Shaktas, Smarta, Sufism, Vaishnavism and Shaivism etc. On the one hand, Kabir criticized the negative aspects of these practices, and on the other hand, he formed his unique path of *bhakti* by critically taking positive elements of these practices. Dwivedi observes:

> Kabir Das stood on such a meeting point, a point from where in one direction Hinduism emerges and in the other direction Muslimness emerges, where in one direction knowledge emerges and in the other direction lack of education, where in one direction the path of yoga emerges and in other direction, the path of bhakti, from where on one side *nirgun* reality emerges and in other direction *sagun* religious practices. He stood on that excellent crossroads. He was able to look in both the directions and he saw closely the faults and virtues of the paths growing in mutually opposite directions. This was the God-given good fortune of Kabir Das. He made good use of it. (2005, p. 282)

[32] I argue that Kabir also chose the name 'Ram' under the inspiration of the Naths' practice of *sumiran* of the *Nirguna* Absolute.

Pahan puje hari milai to main puju pahar
Tate to chaki bhali peesa khaye sansar (*Kabir Dohavali*, p. 22)
(If one meets God through the worship of a stone, I will worship a mountain;
A grind mill is better than a stone statue because it provides for the whole world.)

Kabir also found that Hindus, Muslims and Jogis confined God to the names suiting their religions and consider only them true[33]:

Jogi gorakh, gorakh karai, hindu ram, ram uchcharai
Musalman kahai ek khudai, kabir ko swanmi ghati ghati rahyo samai (Das, 2010, p. 198)
(Jogis keep on uttering Gorakh and Gorakh, Hindus pronounce the name of Ram;
Muslims keep on calling Allah, but Lord of Kabir resides in every heart.)

Kabir's rejection and criticism (of the orthodox Hindu and Muslim ways to reach God) accompanied by appropriate reasons enlightened people, especially dalits and shudras and ordinary Muslims (who desired for a path of peace) with the spiritual as well as social truths. Kabir's path became more accessible to the people of lower castes (dalits and shudras) as they found Kabir speaking for their sake against their social and religious injustices[34].

Unlike Ramananda, Kabir himself belonged to a low Muslim caste and therefore understood the sensibilities and needs of these people in a better way. Kabir questioned and challenged *varna* and caste system not only in religious sphere but also in the social sphere. Kabir's rejection of caste suits both the purposes at the same time as they are always connected with each other in Kabir's sensibility. The following verse testifies to the same fact:

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[33] A) Kabir found this ignorance of Hindus and Muslims to be the main reason of controversies between them:
Hindu kahe mohi ram piyara, turk kahe rahimana
Apas mein dou lari mooye, marm na kahoo jana (Sngh, pp. 108-109)
[Hindus say Ram is their beloved while Turks (Muslims) say Rahimana (Rahim or Allah);
Both kill each other, but neither of them understands the true essence (of God).]
B) Vaudeville writes: "To Kabir … all names are equal … Kabir a Muslim Julaha equates Ram with Khuda and Rahim" (pp. 109-10).

[34] Vaudeville (p. 110) regards Kabir along with Lal Ded and Namadeva as the first voices of the ordinary masses: "The Saiva Lalla, the Vaishnava Namadeva, and Muslim Julaha Kabir stand together at the head of the great spiritual family of the Sants of Northern India; they are, in fact, the first voices of that large, ignorant, depressed, and despised masses of men who had no access to Brahmanical 'knowledge', who were mostly not admitted into Hindu temples, for whom theological arguments and sectarian differences remained meaningless."

Ekai tvacha ek haad mal mutra, ek rudhir ek guda
Ek boond se srishti racho hai, ko brahman ko suda

Dalits and shudras also found Kabir close to them because he propagated his *bhakti* in their languages without any hesitation and ambivalence. In order to practice *bhakti*, they did not need to know Sanskrit, which was the monopoly of the Brahmins. Kabir demolished the sovereignty of Sanskrit: "*Sanskrit koop-jal Kabira, bhasha bahata neer* [Sanskrit is a well while vernaculars are flowing water][35]" (Dwivedi, 2015, p. 32).

Kabir differs from most of those religious practitioners of his time, who propagated *bhakti* in Hindi vernaculars as he did not embellish his language with the poetical conventions, but with a unique vigour of bare spiritual and religious realities which he experienced and observed inside and outside. His propagating *bhakti* not only in the daily languages of ordinary people but also putting forward his ideas in the metaphors, symbols and examples taken from everyday ordinary life made *bhakti* accessible even to laymen.

Shudras and dalits received from Kabir for the first time not only the knowledge of *bhakti* (which was the right of only the people of upper castes) but also an inspiration to live life full of respect, prestige and dignity. In fact, Kabir's *bhakti* proposes to establish a true form of humanity in which everyone regardless of caste, *varna* and religion is equal.

Kabir considers love the true essence of humanity[36]. One can always hear a voice of love in his both spiritual and social verses[37]. This love is not only for God but also for all human beings and even for other living creatures:

Bakari pati khaat hai taki kadhi khaal
Jo bakari ko khat hai tako kaun havaal (Vivekdas, 2015, p. 42)

[35] This famous verse of Kabir informs us that the medieval era was an era of the development of vernaculars, which gained in importance equal to Sanskrit.
[36] His *bhakti* always attempted to ensure the welfare of humanity not only through social purgation (as we saw above) but also through the purgation of each human being from the bestial human instincts e.g. lust, greed, pride and arrogance, jealousy and an excessive attachment to the worldly things.
[37] Dwivedi rightly comments: "The base of Kabir's *bhakti* is love" (2005, p. 282).

(Goat eats grass and its skin is stripped off.
What will happen to the person who eats the meat of goat?)

In fact, love is at root of his criticism. Whatever creates an obstacle to love turns into the object of Kabir's criticism. The following is one of the most popular verses which highlight the same fact:

Pothi padhi-padhi jag mua, pandit bhaya na koya
Dhai aakhar prem ka, padhe so pandit hoya (*Bijak,* 2011, p. 9)
(Reading book after book, the whole died and none ever became 'learned;
He who can decipher just a syllable of 'Love' is true Pandit!) (Translated by Vaudeville, p. 50)

Kabir does not give priority to bookish knowledge that divides and entrap people, but the knowledge that promotes love among human beings. He warns people against falling into the traps of the religious scriptures of Hindus and Muslims, which not only discriminate against them but also keep God away from their reach or approach[38]:

Ved, quran sab jhoot hai, usame dekha pol
Anubhav ki hain baat kabira, ghat-parda dekha khol (*Kabir Dohavali*, p. 40)
(The *Veda* and *Quran* are all false; they are replete with drawbacks;
Kabir says it is a matter of experience, one needs to peep into one's heart.)

To sum up, Kabir democratised *bhakti* and made it a phenomenon of the masses regardless of caste, *varna*, religion and race, encouraging, awaking and instilling them in confidence and energy to not only practice *bhakti* but also fight against the social and religious injustices. In fact, Kabir commenced a social movement in the robe of *Nirguna bhakti*.

[38] Dwivedi rightly points out:

> He condemned bookish learning that teaches one only to carry a load of knowledge to be useless. It makes a man stupid and deprives him of God's love. This love is everything not the Vedas, not the scriptures, not the Koran, not prayer [jap], not garlands, not painted images, not temples, not mosques, not avatars, not prophets [*nabi*], not teachers [*pir*], not messengers [*paigmber*]. This love is beyond the reach of all life cycle rites. Whatever stands in its path should be avoided. Love is the end and love is the means, not vows, not Muharram [= the month for mourning the death of Hussain], not puja, not prayer [*namaz*], not hajj, not pilgrimage [*tirtha*]. (2005, pp. 282-3)

Kabir's *bhakti* and his contribution are as much relevant today as then. There is a huge possibility of the welfare of humanity in Kabir's verses. He awoke the people of his time; awakes the people of our time and will continue awaking the people of future generations. It is the reason that he has been an integral part of ordinary masses.

Kabir and His Traditions

a) Oral (Performative) and Textual Traditions

Kabir composed his verses orally[39]. His verses were transmitted orally for about a century before they were reduced to writing and since then they have been transmitted both in the written and oral traditions. Dharwadker (2003, pp. 33-41) mentions twenty-five major manuscripts of Kabir's poetry between 1570 and 1824, and fifteen print versions (which 'represent and supplement them') from 1868 to 2000. These manuscripts and print versions from 1570 to 2000 demonstrate the continuous mode of the written tradition of Kabir's poetry.

There are three main early manuscripts of his poetry: *Adi Granth* or *Guru Granth Sahib* (1604) of the Sikhs, *Panchavani* (1614) of the Dadupanth, and *Bijak* (1805) of the Kabirpanth. The *Adi Granth* contains 228 *padas (*songs or poems*)* of Kabir[40]. The earliest source for the *Adi Granth* was the *Goindval Pothis* (1570-72) which included fifty *padas* of Kabir. The *Panchavani* from Rajasthan consists of 370 *padas* of Kabir. However, fifteen of these verses have been found in an earlier manuscript, *Fatehpur Manuscript* or *Pad Surdasji Ka* (1582). The *Fatehpur Manuscript* belongs to the *Saguna* tradition, which shows that no firm boundary existed between *Saguna* and *Nirguna* sects during that period. Kabir's *vanis*

[39] While most saint-poets during this period composed their verses orally, Kabir has been a special case since he was believed to be illiterate. The following verse has been cited by scholars in support of their claim:

Masi kagad chhuvon nahi, kalam gahon nahin haath
Chariu jug ke mahatma mukhahi janai baat

[40] According to Winand Callewaert (2005, p. 146), there are 220 *padas* of Kabir in the *Adi Granth*.

collected by the Sikhpanth and Dadupanth (not directly associated with him) shows that his verses had already travelled and become popular in Rajasthan and Punjab in the 16th-17th centuries.

The *Bijak* is regarded as the most sacred text of Kabirpanth. The earliest manuscript of the *Bijak* was discovered in Bihar. Dharwadker (2003, p. 39) relates this manuscript to the Phatuha Kabir *Math*. Singh (2007, p. 25) who edited the first scholarly edition of the *Bijak* mentions 113 *padas* in the Phatuha *Bijak*.

These manuscripts vary from one another in terms of verses. Callewaert (2000, p. 11) points out: "Of the 50 padas in the *Goindval Pothis*, two are not found in the *Adi Granth*." He counted 89 *padas* of *Adi Granth* which are not there in any other manuscripts written between 1570 and 1681. Kabir's verses and songs in *Bijak* are often different from those of the *Adi Granth* and *Panchavani*: "The *Bijak* contains few dohas and padas common to the other main compilations so that it should be considered as a separate tradition as the 'Eastern recension' of Kabir's sayings" (Vaudeville, 1974, p. 58).

Given the differences and variations among the early manuscripts, one can conclude that the written tradition of Kabir was already influenced and *contaminated* by oral traditions prevailing in that particular region from which the manuscript came. Strand (2018, p. 145) rightly observes: "The extant Kabirian texts incorporated into different collections … reflect this orality based diversity." Agrawal (2007, p. 44) also notes that "the truth is that Kabir's *vanis* were certainly available in the oral tradition before they were written down in *Bijak* or *Granthavalis*." Callewaert (2000, p. 2) too is of a similar opinion: "I argue that with certainty we can only say that the version of Kabir's sayings found in the 17th century manuscripts is the version commonly used and sung by singers then" and "the first attested written

documents with Kabir's sayings are dated 1572, written no doubt-within the ongoing oral tradition."

It is important to note that since Kabir's verses were collected in the sectarian traditions, they must have been recited and sung by the people associated with the sects: "The sects that were writing down these texts were also singing them" (Hess, 2015, p. 76).

Almost all sects of the Kabirpanth have compiled their repertoire of popular verses sung in the name of Kabir. This shows that texts of Kabir's poetry are intertwined with the oral tradition. Ramanujan's observations about the relationship between textuality and orality in Indian tradition are quite relevant in the context of Kabir: "In all cultures, and especially in the Indian, the oral and written are deeply intermeshed.… A work may be composed orally but transmitted in writing.… Or it may be composed in writing … but the text kept alive by … reciters who know it by heart and chant it aloud" (2004, p. 541).

To this observation, we may add that a text may be composed and transmitted orally for several generations before it is written down and then transmitted both orally and in writing. Dharwadker (2003, pp. 46-47) also underlines the same fact about Kabir's poetry: "Kabir's poetry displays an active interdependence among the oral, musical and written models of transmission in the constitution of poetry."

It must be noted that in case of Kabir, although the oral and written traditions are deeply interlinked, the written is just a small part of the oral which remains largely unmapped. Agrawal (2009) shows that most of the popular verses such as '*Moko kahan dhoondhe re bande*', '*Jhini jhini chadariya*', '*Santo sahaj samadhi bhali*', and '*Jag se nata chhootal ho*' etc. sung in the name of Kabir are not found in any of the major manuscripts. It is difficult to determine whether Kabir himself or somebody else in his name composed such verses, especially those which conclude with Kabir's refrain "*Kahat Kabir suno bhai sadho*"

or "*Das/Sahib Kabir gave yahi nirgunwa"* or with his name in one of the last two lines, but in people's memory and consciousness they remain firmly etched as Kabir's compositions.

During the course of my study, I discovered that singers (whether literate or illiterate) compose songs in the idiom of Kabir turning him into a genre and thus becoming co-authors of the new verses. They add Kabir's refrain to their own compositions and also sometimes to the compositions of other singers and saints. Consequently, oral performative traditions of Kabir have been continuously changing and evolving. Hess also observes the early evolution of such verses: "It wasn't long until Kabir's name was tacked on to whole poems he never composed – whether the source was a song floating around in local tradition or something the performer made up, feeling that the content was suitable to Kabir or that the attribution honoured Kabir" (2015, p. 75). Friedlander too states that new songs have been added to Kabir: "[O]ral traditions of Kabir songs have been continuously changing for centuries and new songs have been constantly added to the corpus of Kabir songs expressing Kabir's ideas in new ways for new generations" (2015, p. 190).

Even now, many new compositions in his name are being sung. Such verses which do not conclude with Kabir's signature line or his name, but embody his sensibility and spirit are also passed off as being Kabir's.

The above discussion suggests that Kabir continues to be popular in the oral tradition and his oral and written worlds evolve interacting, overlapping, nurturing and influencing each other. In a documentary film *Chalo Hamara Desh* (*Come to My Country: Journeys with Sacred and Secular Kabir*), based on Kabir produced by Shabnam Virmani, Linda Hess aptly describes the process of the evolution of Kabir's texts:

> Kabir is a great poet of the fifteenth century north India, who composed in Hindi language and probably, was illiterate and never wrote anything down and yet there are thousands of verses written in his name. How it happened

> was that other people wrote them down. In India, they form a part of literature, but more than that, they are oral, performative, musical, living utterances. And, his language changes. When he gets to Gujarat, his Hindi sounds Gujarati. When he gets to Rajasthan, he sounds Rajasthani. So, Kabir speaks all these languages. He changes colours, he changes musical styles. He takes on the colours of the earth from which his lovers (followers) spring. To put it a little bit poetically, one significant characteristic of oral traditions is that it is just out of control; it is boundless. One will find new verses, new Kabirs, new *padas* wherever one goes. Words change; order changes. The same song sung by a singer will change somewhat three days later (in his another performance)! I say, no! This is the way you gave it to me…. It is very exciting; it is very much alive. (0:15:0-0:16:14)

b) Kabirpanth

Kabirpanth is a religious organization formed after the name and teachings of Kabir comprising followers mainly from Hindu intermediate (shudra) and untouchable castes (*Harijans*). However, it is not a homogenous organization. There are various sects of the Kabirpanth with different headquarters, principles and doctrines. In the Kabirpanthi tradition, Suratigopal, Jagudas, Bhagwan Das/Bhagodas/Bhagudas and Dharmadas[41] are regarded as the four main disciples of Kabir. They are said to have established the first four distinct sects of the Kabirpanth. David N. Lorenzen describes:

> According to Kabir-panthi tradition, four of the principal disciples of Kabir founded four distinct branches (*sakha*) of the panth. Surat Gopal (or Sruti Gopal) founded the Kabir Chaura *sakha* centred at Banaras; Dharmadas the Chhattisgarh *sakha* centred in eastern Madhya Pradesh; Jagudas (or Jagodas) the Sakha centred at Bidupur (Muzaffarpur District, Bihar) … and Bhagodas (also Bhagudas or Bhagavan Gusain), the Bhagatahi *sakha* centred at Dhanauti (Chhapra District, Bihar). (2011, p. 272)

In his *History of Kabirpanth*, Purendu Ranjan also points out:

> Kabirpanth was initiated by Kabir's immediate disciples. In this connection, the names of four disciples are mentioned respectfully: Bhagodas, Jagudas, Surati Gopal and Dharmadas. After the death of Kabir Bhagodas and

[41] After Kabir, Dharmadas is the most popular name in Kabirpanth. He played the major role in the spread and development of the Kabirpanth in various parts of the country.

> Jagudas[42] took the lead in spreading the teachings of Kabir in Mithila and its surrounding areas. Surati Gopal and Dharmadas founded Kabirpanthi maths at Kashi and Bandogarh in present day Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh (earlier Madhya Pradesh) respectively. (2008, p. 10)

Each headquarters represents a distinct sect. Together Kashi Kabir Chaura sect, Jagudasi sect, Bhagu Dasi sect, Bhagudasi sect and Dharmadasi sect form Kabirpanth. Later some more Kabirpanthi sects emerged. Some of them are splinter sects, especially of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. In Kabirpanthi tradition, there are now identified twelve sects. According to the Dharmadasi tradition, these sects are Narayandasji Ka Panth, Yagodasji Ka Panth, Surat Gopal Panth, Moolniranjjan Ka Panth, Taksari Panth, Bhagwandasji Ka Panth, Satyanami Panth, Kamali Panth, Ram Kabir Panth, Premdham Ki Vani, Jeeva Panth, Garibdas Panth (*Kabir Mansur*, p. 304)[43]. However, there have also been such autonomous sects which have emerged out of the inspiration from Kabir's personality, thoughts and *vanis*. They are also spreading and popularizing Kabir in their ways. During my fieldwork, I found Jai Gurudev, Radha Swami, Manav Uthan Seva Samiti, Sahib Bandagi Panth (also called Bhrigumata Panth) etc.

Of all sects, Kashi Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth and Dharmadasi Kabirpanth are more prominent sects. They have their branches in all the parts of the country and other countries such as Trinidad, Mauritius, British Gayana, South Africa, Fiji, Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Bhutan, and Nepal etc. However, the Dharmadasi tradition has the largest expansion (Kedarnath Dwivedi, p. 209).

Kabirpanth's Earliest Establishment

The followers of the Kabir Chaura sect claim that Surati Gopal first laid the foundation of the Kabirpanth after the death of Kabir. They regard Surati Gopal as its first

[42] Ranjan mentions that Jagudas deputed his trusted disciples to look after the *Maths* founded by him in Bihar and himself left for Cuttack in Orissa. At Cuttack, he founded another *Math* where he stayed till his death. However, the headquarters of the Jagudasi math at Cuttack was later shifted to Bidupur.

[43] The Dharmadasi Kabirpanth does not include itself in these twelve sects, as it does not consider these twelve the real Kabirpanthi sects. Other Kabirpanthi sects also count twelve sects. However, the number of all the sects is never homogenous.

Mahant after Kabir. They often cite a legend in order to support their view: Suratigopal was the greatest scholar from South India. He had defeated all the known Indian scholars of his time. He used to travel with the *Vedas*, *Shastras* and other religious scriptures to have *shastrath* (debate) with other prominent scholars. Having defeated all, he went to his mother and said that he was the greatest scholar in the whole country. His mother thought that he had become a victim of pride. She asked him if he had met Kabir of Banaras. He replied in the negative. She asked him to go and defeat Kabir of Banaras in a debate. He left for Banaras with his book-laden ox. When he reached Kabir Chaura, he felt thirsty. He saw some women fetching water from a well near Kabir's house. One of them was Kamali, a disciple of Kabir. He asked Kamali for water to drink. Having quenched his thirst, he asked her about the dwelling of Kabir and said that he had come there to have a *shastrath* (debate) with him. At this, she responded to him by the way of the following couplet:

> *Kabir ka ghar shikhar par jahan salehali gail*
> *Panv na tike pipilika khal ko lade bail*
> (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.)

He was surprised to hear an ordinary woman speak in verse. He met Kabir and challenged him for a *shastrath*. Kabir replied that he (Surati Gopal) was a great scholar while he was an ordinary person. Therefore, he (Surati Gopal) was already a winner. However, he asked Kabir to give him a proof of his defeat in writing. Kabir said that he was illiterate and Surati Gopal should write this himself. Surati Gopal wrote on a sheet of paper that Sursati Gopal won and Kabir was defeated. Being happy, he returned home and told his mother about his victory over Kabir. The mother did not believe him and asked him to show her the proof. When he showed the sheet of the paper to his mother, he was confounded to find just the opposite of what he had written. He felt that perhaps, this happened by mistake. He came to Varanasi to take the proof again. Once again, he wrote on a piece of paper that Surati

Gopal had won and Kabir was defeated. When he ensured that he had written correctly, he went home. On his return, he again found just the opposite of what he had written. He understood that Kabir was not an ordinary saint, but someone great. He regretted and returned to Kabir Chaura and became his disciple. After the death of Kabir, he laid the foundation of the Kabir Chaura *Math* and became its first *Mahant*.

However, the followers of the Dharmadasi sect claim that Kabirpanth was first established at Bandhavgarh (Bandogarh) by Dharmadas after he was enlightened by Kabir. They claim that Kabir first met Dharmadas at Varanasi and then at Mathura. Dharmadas had gone to Mathura on a pilgrimage. There, Kabir enlightened him with his teachings and subsequently, he became his follower. According to them, Kabir himself directed Dharmadas to found the panth. As a result, Dharmadas laid the foundation of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth which is also called the *Vanshavali Parampara* or *Vansha Bayalis* or *Vansha Gaddi*[44].

Dharmadasi followers consider Dharmadas to be a contemporary of Kabir. However, according to scholars, Dharmadas lived about 100 or so years after the death of Kabir. Lorenzen points out that "some Kabir Chaura spokesmen, following scholar Kedarnath Dwivedi, have asserted that Dharmadas was not a contemporary of Kabir but lived at least a century later" (as cited in Hess, p. 319). Agrawal (2009) writes: "Dharmadas founded Kabirpanth in the beginning of the seventeenth century" (p. 27).

After its establishment in the early seventeenth century, it began to extend its base in different parts of North India. It has constructed a corpus of myths and rituals, which distinguishes Kabirpanth from other religious sects. These myths and rituals also attract common masses in its fold.

[44]Kabir is believed to have prophesied that forty-two generations of Dharmadas's descendants would hold the office of the *Mahant* for this tradition. The present *Mahant* of this tradition is Prakash Muni Naam Saheb, who is its fifteenth *Mahant*.

Literature Review

Kabir has been extensively studied by both the Indian and foreign scholars. He became a prominent subject of study for the western scholars from the 18th century onwards. They took a profound interest in Kabir because of his pervasive popularity among the Hindus and Muslims of the time. An Italian scholar Capuchin Padre Marco Della Tomba who came to Betia, Bihar in 1758 saw Kabir's strong influence among the people. He wrote: "I saw a sect or a kind of religion called *Cabiristi*, descended from a certain Cabir, a man considered as a great saint who had performed many miracles: it is said he was the spiritual Master of Alexander the Great. On this sect, we would have to say much, as they are in great credit and number" (as cited in Vaudeville, 1974, p. 5).

Tomba heralded a tradition of study of Kabir by foreign scholars. Many other foreign scholars were attracted to Kabir for his strong presence among Indian people including Muslims. They were J. B. Gilchrist, W. Price Garcin De Tassy, General Harriot, Angelo De Gubernatis, George Grierson, H. H. Wilson, M. Monier-Williams, R. W. Frazer, William Crooke, Westcott, W.W. Hunter, Colonel John Malcolm, Macnicol, and M. A. Macauliffe, E. Trumpp, J. N. Farquhar, F. E. Keay. These scholars had the first experience of Kabir through Kabirpanth and the popularity of his *vanis* among the common Indian people. Vaudeville (1974) notes:

> Kabir's great voice and remarkable hold on the Indian masses did not pass unnoticed by Western scholars who, from the end of the eighteenth century, applied themselves to the Indian traditions and literature. Their attention seems to have been first attracted by the existence of a well-developed sect bearing his name, that of the Kabirpanthis, who claim to be followers of the *panth*, the spiritual 'path' shown by Kabir himself. (p. 4)

The first book on Kabir is *Kabir and Kabirpanth* (1907) written by Reverend W. H. Westcott. This book makes us familiar with Kabir's life, legends about Kabir, Kabirpanth and

its practices of the time. As far as the Indian tradition of study on Kabir is concerned, Kabir had become the part of sectarian writing after about 100 years of his death. Anant Das wrote *Kabir Parchai* (1588-1600) and Nabhadas included Kabir in *Bhaktamal* (1585-1620). The sectarian tradition had also started collecting his verses. The scholarly Indian writing on Kabir begins with Ayodhya Singh Upadhyay's *Kabir Vachanavali* (1917) and Shyam Sundar Das's *Kabir Granthavali* (1928), who compiled Kabir's verses and wrote a critical introduction on Kabir's life and teachings. However, the first pioneering critical study on Kabir came in 1942 as *Kabir* by Hazari Prasad Dwivedi. The two other significant critical studies on Kabir came as *Kabir* (1974) by a French scholar Charlotte Vaudeville and *Akath Kahani Premi Ki: Kabir ki Kavita aur Unka Samay* (2009) by Purushottam Agrawal. These three major studies provide us an assessment of Kabir's life and history, personality, poetry, *sadhana* and contribution to the Indian society and *bhakti* tradition in detail.

Reviewing the previous studies on Kabir suggests that most of them are of textual and historical nature. These studies have been carried out on Kabir's various aspects — his life and chronology, his personality and contribution, influences of other religious and sectarian traditions on his *sadhana* and teaching, his relation to his *Guru* Ramanand and other religious teachers and poets. Much light has been shed on his compositions principally those found in the Sikh *Adi Grantha,* the Dadupanthi *Kabir Granthavali,* and the Kabirpanthi *Kabir Bijak.* Critical collections and translations of his verses have also been carried out. Legends about Kabir, Kabirpanth and its various dynamics have also been studied. On the basis of the works undertaken on Kabir, some common themes can be underlined.

Dates of Kabir's Origin and Death

Kabir's dates have been controversial among scholars. They are unanimous that Kabir was born in Varanasi and died at Maghar, but there is no unanimity among them on the dates

of Kabir's birth and death. A number of attempts have been made to discover the exact historical dates of Kabir's birth and death, but no one appears to be successful due to a dearth of evidence. However, the oral tradition has always seen Kabir as the contemporary of Ramananda and Sikandar Lodi (1458-1517).

Traditionally, it is believed that Kabir was born or appeared at Lahartara in Varanasi in 1398 and passed away at Maghar in Sant Kabir Nagar in in 1518. Dharmveer (1997/2015) also determines Kabir's dates between 1398 and 1518. Shyam Sundar Das (2010), the editor of the first scholarly *Kabir Granthavali* supports the traditional dates. However, according to him, the year of Kabir's birth is 1399. Farquhar (1920), Westcott (1907/1986) and F. E. Keay (1931) hold that Kabir survived between 1440 and 1518. Purshuram Chaturvedi (1972) opines that Kabir was born in 1368 and died in 1448. P. D. Barthwal (1930/1950) places him between 1370 and 1448. Vaudeville (1974) claims that Kabir survived in the fifteenth century. According to Dharwadker (2007), Kabir was born in or about 1398 and died around 1448. Callewaert (1998) also supports the same dates. Agrawal (2009) points out that Kabir lived in the 15th-16th century. Hess (2015) says that he was born in Varanasi of the fifteenth century.

Through the above views about Kabir's dates, we can say that it does not seem possible to know the exact dates of Kabir. It can safely be said that he might have lived in Bananas during 15th-16th century.

Kabir: A Hindu or Muslim

Kabir's identity as a Hindu or Muslim has also been a matter of controversy among scholars. According to a popular legend, he was born of a Brahmin widow and was brought up by Neeru and Neema, a Muslim weaver (*Julaha*) couple. However, Kabirpanthis reject that he was born of a Brahmin widow and consider him to have incarnated as a divine figure.

They also reject that Kabir was a Muslim. Through this approach, Kabirpanthis try to liberate Kabir from his low caste or Muslim identity as a *Julaha* and show Kabir superior to Brahmins. On the other hand, in his verses, Kabir often addresses himself as a *Julaha* (Muslim weaver).

> Tu Brahman main Kasi ka Julaha, Chinhi na mor giyana (Das, p. 176)
> (You are a Brahmin and I am a Julaha of Kashi, you did not recognise my knowledge.)

The sources which were written around a century after his death identify him as a Muslim weaver. Anant Das who wrote *Kabir Parchai* about in 1600 regards Kabir as a *Julaha* or a Muslim. The following extracts of the first and third *padas* of *Kabir Parchai* clearly show that Kabir was a Muslim *Julaha*:

> *Kasi basai julaha ek*
> *Hari bhagtan ki pagadi tek* (Lorenzen, 1992, p. 129)
> (There was a *Julaha* living in Kashi,
> Who followed the customs of the devotees of Hari.)
> *Musalman hamari jati*
> *Mala paaun kaisi bhanti* (Lorenzen, 1992, p. 130)
> (I belong to a Muslim caste,
> How can I obtain these prayer beads?)

Abul Fazl who wrote *Ain-i-Akbari* in 1598 first refers to Kabir as not only a Julaha but also a *Muwahid* (a believer in the union with God): "The statement that Kabir was a Julaha and Muwahid is confirmed by Abdul Fazl" (Westcott, p. 22). *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* written by Muhasin Fani of Kashmir, probably in the mid-seventeenth century shows Kabir a weaver by birth: "Kabir, a weaver by birth, celebrated among those Hindus who profess their belief in the unity of God, was a Vairagi… (as cited in Vaudeville, 1974, pp. 34-35). In *Khazinat-ul-Asafiya* (1868), Mufti Ghulam Sarwar, an Indian Muslim, mentions Kabir as a 'Sufi' and even as a disciple of Sheikh Taki (see Barthwal, p. 49).

In 1712, Priyadas wrote a commentary entitled 'Bhaktirasbodhini' on *Bhaktamal* in 1712, in which he calls Kabir a Turk (Muslim). Priyadas's narrative presents Kabir as Muslim born, but converted to Vaishnava *bhakti* through the influence of Ramananda: "In a long development, the commentary introduces the legendary biography of Kabir. The most remarkable episode concerns the way Kabir, though a Turk (i.e. Muslim) managed to become Ramanand's disciple" (as cited in Vaudeville, 1974, p. 31). Vaudeville brings out an important fact on Kabir's being a Hindu or Muslim: "Up to the time of Priyadas, at the beginning of the eighteenth century that Kabir was born a Muhammedan was apparently never questioned. It is only in late commentaries and in popular biographies composed by Kabirpanthis that Kabir himself is represented as the son of a Brahmin virgin-widow" (p. 32). Agrawal (2009) notes that Kabir's identity as being a Muslim was not questioned until the nineteenth century. It was only in Kabirpanth that his identity as a Muslim was rejected.

It is commonly accepted by modern scholars that Kabir has been brought up in a Muslim family. However, whether Kabir was a Hindu or Muslim has remained a matter of controversy among these scholars. We have two poles of the modern scholars on the question whether Kabir was a Hindu or Muslim. These two poles are respectively represented by John Malcom and H. H. Wilson. Other scholars seem to have followed either of them. Malcolm (1812) first shows that Kabir was a Muslim by birth and was associated with a Sufi order: "The celebrated Muhammedan Kabir, who was a professed Sufi, and who inculcated the doctrine of the equality of the relation of all created beings to their Creator" (pp. 143-44). Wilson (1846) gives the traditional account of Kabir's life and notes: "The Musselmans, it is said, claim him as one of their persuasion, but his conversancy with the Hindu Sastras, and evidently limited knowledge of the Mohammedan authorities in matters of religion, render such a supposition perfectly unwarrantable" (p. 47). Wilson has regarded Kabir as a Hindu. Most of the later scholars support either the claim of Malcolm or that of Wilson.

Like Malcom, in the first edition of his famous *Histoire de la literature hindouie et hindoustanie*, Garcin de Tarcy admits that 'Kabir was born a Muhammedan' (as cited in Vaudeville, 1974, p. 10). Westcott supports Malcolm's view: "We are inclined to accept both of the theories advanced by Malcolm and to believe that not only Kabir was a Muhammedan by birth but also that he was associated with the Sufi order; and that the great object of his life was to break down the barriers that separated Hindus and Muslims" (p. 19). Mentioning the image of Kabir, which he included in his book, he further adds:

> It is not impossible that Kabir should have been both a Muhammadan and a Sufi. The picture of Kabir which forms the front piece of this volume and which is more likely to have been painted by a Hindu than by a Muhammadan represents him as having Muhammdan features, and his grave at Maghar has always been in the keeping of Muhammdans. That a Muhammdan should have been the Father of Hindi literature may indeed be a cause of surprise, but it must not be forgotten that Hindus also have gained distinction of writers of Persian poetry. Kabir, moreover, was a man of no ordinary ability and determination, and the purpose of his life was to get his message accepted by those who were best reached through the Hindi language. (p. 25)

In the Introduction to the scholarly collection *Kabir Granthavali,* S. S. Das (2010) makes a critical appraisal of Kabir's origins, personality, and spiritual message. Like Wilson, he also gives the traditional account of Kabir's life mostly based on Kabirpanthi sectarian literature. He claims that though he was brought up in a Muslim family, he was not a Muslim. He finds Hindu blood in him: "That Kabir was so engrossed in Hindu thoughts in spite of having been brought up in a Muslim family signals towards the Brahmin blood or at least Hindu blood flowing in his body" (p. 19). Vaudeville (1974) suggests that Shyam Sundar Das was hinduizing Kabir and his attempt was marked by the rising Hindu patriotism of the time.

Shukla (1929) also considers Kabir Hindu and describes the legend which says that Kabir was born of a Brahmin widow. Dwivedi (1942) and Vaudeville (1974) say that Kabir was only brought up in the *Julaha* family and connected him with the Nathpanthi origin. Barthwal (1950) establishes him as a Muslim born. Agrawal (2013) and Hess (2015) also

show that he was a Muslim weaver. Agrawal considers Neeru and Neema to be the real parents of Kabir.

Kabir and Ramananda

Kabir is often associated with Ramananda as one of his main disciples. There are many popular legends in Kabirpanth, which indicate Kabir's association with Ramananda[45]. However, regarding this association, there appears two different groups of the scholars: one that is in favour of the relationship and the other which holds that any link is not historically possible between both.

Das (1928), Shukla (1929), Dwivedi (1942), Lorenzen (1991), Agrawal (2009) etc. show that Kabir was the disciple of Ramananda. Dwivedi says that it is Ramananda who gave Kabir Ram and his *bhakti*. He further adds that "Kabir holistically embraced the profound *bhakti* based on the prominent preaching of Ramananda, but he gave it an entirely new form according to his *samskar*, interest, and learning" (p. 85).

The second group includes mostly the western scholars such as F. E. Keay, Charlotte Vaudeville, John Stratton Hawley etc. who question the fact of Kabir being a disciple of Ramananda[46]. These western scholars believe that Ramananda lived in the fourteenth century while Kabir lived in the fifteenth century. Moreover, they also point to the fact that there is no reference to a *Guru* in the *vanis* of Kabir. So historically, it is not possible that Kabir would have been associated with Ramananda. The basis of their placing Ramananda in the fourteenth century by them is a Sanskrit source *Agastya-samhita* according to which

[45] The most popular legend is about how Kabir became his disciple and took Ram *bhakti* from him. This legend will be discussed in detail in the second chapter.

[46] In his *Kabir and Ramanand: Kivadantiyan* (2004/2018), Dharmveer criticizes all the claims which establish Ramananda as the *Guru* of Kabir. He claims that it is a Brahmanical strategy to show him as Kabir's *Guru* in order to prove Ramananda superior to Kabir. In his *Kabir ke Alochak*, he concludes: "The *Guru* of Kabir could be a bee or a mosquito; the *Guru* of Kabir could be a dog or a cat, but Brahmin Ramananda could never be his *Guru*" (as cited in Dharmveer, 2018, p. 46).

Ramananda was born in a Kanyakubja family of Prayag (Allahabad) in the year 1400 of the Kali Age, corresponding to AD 1299. Western scholars have accepted it as the year of Ramananda's birth.

Agrawal criticizes this western claim and argues that this Ramananda was created in the 20th century by the Ramanandi activists on account of their rivalry with the *Shri Sampradaya* founded by Ramanuja:

> The association of Ramananda is believed to be with *Shri Sampradaya*, which was famous for its strong belief in the superiority of Brahmins and discrimination between the high and low and its conservatism. Because of this conservatism, the relationship of Ramananda with *Shri Sampradaya* became tense. In the Ramanuji *Shri Sampradaya*, Ramananda is regarded as one of his many disciples, not an *Acharya*.
>
> On the other hand, some Ramanandis who were unhappy with Ramanujis launched a movement in the twentieth century and severed not only their sect but also Ramananda himself from the Ramanuji *Sampradaya*. It was during this movement that the time of Ramananda was shown to be in the 14th century in place of the 15th century. Evidences were manufactured for legitimatizing Ramananda as a '*Shastrasiddha'*, moreover a *Bhashyakar Acharya*. On the basis of these evidences, the researchers adopted *Acharya* Ramananda of Sanskrit recreated by the sect, ignoring the historical Ramananda who wrote in Hindi. (p. 236)

Agrawal calls Ramananda (recreated in the 20th century) Sanskrit Ramananda, and the historical Ramananda Hindi Ramananda who, according to him, was a contemporary of Kabir and lived in the fifteenth century. Hindi Ramananda spread the *bhakti* of Ram in Hindi vernaculars.

The Hindi Ramananda has also attracted the attention of Vaudeville, but she supports the Sanskrit Ramananda. She refers to two Hindi *padas* attributed to Ramananda in the *Sarbangi* compiled by Dadupanthi Rajab. One of those *padas* is similar to a *pada* in the *Guru Granth*. She translates the common *pada* as follows:

> Wither I shall go? I am happy at home.
> My heart will not go [with me]: my mind has become a cripple.
> One day, I did have an inclination to go,

I ground sandal, I took aloes paste and many perfumes
And I was proceeding to worship God [brahma] in temple,
When my Guru showed me that God is in my heart.
Wherever I go, I find but water and stones,
But Thou art contained in full in everything…
All Vedas and Puranas, all have I seen and searched.
Go ye tither, if God be not here!
O Satguru, I am a sacrifice unto Thee,
Who hast cut away all my perplexities and errors;
Ramanand's Lord is the all pervading God [*ramata brahma*]
The Guru's *sabda* cuts away millions of *karmas*! (1974, p. 112)

She argues that "If this *pada* was really composed by Ramananda, the latter should indeed be considered as a true follower of Sant *mat* (doctrine): idol worship is clearly rejected, the supreme Lord is conceived of as invisible and all pervading, solely revealed through the sabda uttered by the Satguru, whereas Veda and Puranas avail nothing" (1993, p. 88). Vaudeville clearly shows the possibility of two Ramanandas: "That liberal saint may have been another Ramanand but, of that other Ramanand, we know nothing: he may have been influenced by Nathpanthi beliefs and, at the same time, cultivated a preference for the Vaishnava name of Ram" (1993, p. 89).

Ramachandra Shukla who favoured the Sanskrit Ramananda also expressed this possibility. On the basis of the Hindi *padas* attributed to Ramananda in the *Adigrantha*, Shukla (1929) says: "These *padas* are not the *padas* of Vaishnava *bhakta* Ramananda, may be of some other Ramananda" (p. 123).

If we consider the accounts of the oral tradition and contemporary sources such as *Kabir Parchai* by Anantadas and *Bhaktamal* by Nabhadas, Kabir had contact with Ramananda. Both the sources which were written about 100 years after the death of Kabir show him as a disciple of Ramananda. Therefore, the connection between Kabir and Ramananda cannot be negated. In fact, there was only one Ramananda who existed and was a contemporary of Kabir. It was the Hindi Ramananda or the historical Ramananda of the 15th century.

Influences on Kabir and His *Sadhana*

During Kabir's period, there were many sectarian and religious traditions prevailing in North India. Scholars believe that Kabir developed his path of *bhakti* by borrowing selectively from these traditions. Dwivedi observes:

> Kabir Das stood on such a meeting point, a point from where in one direction Hinduism emerges and in the other direction Muslimness emerges, where in one direction knowledge emerges and in the other direction lack of education, where in one direction the path of yoga emerges and in other direction, the path of bhakti, from where on one side *nirgun* reality emerges and in other direction *sagun* religious practices. He stood on that excellent crossroads. He was able to look in both the directions and he saw closely the faults and virtues of the paths growing in mutually opposite directions. This was the God given good fortune of Kabir Das. He made good use of it. (2005, p. 282)

Most of the missionaries of the 19th and early twentieth centuries are of the opinion that Kabir developed his *sadhana* out of the influences of Islamic and Christian spiritual practices. W. W. Hunter, Reverend Premchandra, Ahmad Shah, Westcott, George Grierson, Pandit Walji Bhai and Macnicol etc. find a Christen influence on Kabir and his teachings. Hunter perceives Kabir as the Indian Martin Luther of the 15th century. Westcott agrees with Hunter. Keay (1931), the last missionary scholar of Kabir, exemplifies a lot of similarities between Kabir's teachings and Christian principles: "There are many passages in the verses of Kabir which suggest to our mind passages in the Bible" (p. 169).

Westcott and Keay also show his teachings to be profoundly influenced by the principles of Islam and Sufism. Westcott considers Kabir to be a Sufi and shows that Kabir's *sadhana* was the result of the influence of his Islamic family tradition. Keay (1931) says: "Certainly, it was the Muhammdan influence which we find to a much greater extent in the teaching of Kabir" (p. 5). However, Unlike Westcott, he says that though Kabir was influenced by Sufism, he was not a Sufi.

Shukla describes the composite nature of different influences on Kabir and his *sadhana*, but he identifies the Sufi element to be more dominant. He shows that Kabir developed his *sadhana* by mixing the element of love of Sufis with the *gyan sadhana* (the practice of spiritual knowledge) of Naths and Siddhas. Kabir follows the path which was already initiated by Naths and Siddhas:

> Those who protested against discriminations set aside the rituals and customs of worship and emphasized on an inner meditation. Nevertheless, the inner *sadhana* of the Nathpanthis was empty. There was no element of love in it. Although Kabir embraced many characteristics of the Nathpanth in his *vanis*, he realized this drawback…. Therefore, … Kabir took the element of love from Sufis for his devotion to a formless God and set out his *Nirguna* panth with great pomp and show. (p. 64)

Shukla further considers Kabir to be the founder of the *Nirguna* sect. However, Kabir never founded any sect. Kabir, according to him, established his sect by mixing devotional mysticism of Sufis, *sadhanatak* mysticism of the Hathyogis and non-violence and *prapttivad* (one's complete surrender to God) of Vaishnava with Indian *Brahmavad* (pantheism). All such elements appear in his *vanis*.

Another group of scholars underlines the major influence of Nath Panth on Kabir and his *sadhana*. Barthwal shows that Kabir's family was the follower of the Jogis, which was later converted into Islam: "To my understanding, Kabir also belonged to an ancient Kori, the contemporary *Julaha* dynasty, which was the follower of the Jogis before embracing Islam" (1945, p. 126).

Following Baṛthwal, Dwivedi developed this idea further, which has been accepted by many later scholars. However, there is a difference between Barthwal and Dwivedi. Barthwal not only considers Kabir to have been brought up in a Muslim family, but also born while Dwivedi claims that he was only brought up in it. Mariola Offredi (2002, P. 128)

translated the following conclusions drawn by Dwivedi about Kabir's relation with Nathpanth and Islam:

1. In the past, most of the castes to which present-day weavers belong did not acknowledge the Brahmins as superior.
2. A caste of householders that had lost its ritual status in the *varnasrama,* the Jogi, was widely scattered across northern and eastern India. These people were the Nathpanthi; they made a living from weaving and spinning, or begging alms in the name of Gorakhnath and Bharthari.
3. They believed in the *Nirakar* ('Formless'), despised the caste system and did not accept the concept of *avatar*.
4. They were regarded by Hindu society as of lowly ritual status or as untouchables.
5. With the arrival of the Muslims, they gradually became converts.
6. Mass conversions to Islam occurred in the Panjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal.
7. Kabir was raised in one such newly converted family.

Dwivedi denies any Islamic/Sufi influence on Kabir or at most, having little influence. According to him, the Nathpanthi *samskar* was more dominant in the family of Kabir and he developed his spiritual and social ideologies out of the same *samskar*. Later on, Kabir's *sadhana* got mixed with Ram *bhakti* propounded by Ramananda: "The *vanis* of Kabir are those vines which had sprouted from the seeds of the *bhakti* sowed in the field of yoga" (p. 123). Unlike Shukla, Dwivedi rejects the proposition that Kabir had received the idea of love from Sufism.

Vaudeville also finds Kabir's spiritual experience and *bhakti* to be influenced by Naths and Siddhas. She affirms: "Kabir was more conversant with the Nathpanthi tradition" and "it appears likely that some form of Nathism was his ancestral tradition" (1993, p. 78). However, unlike Dwivedi, she does not negate the impact of Sufiism on Kabir. She finds a close resemblance between the notion of *viraha* (separation from one's beloved), a central element in Kabir's poetry and the Sufi notion of *Ishq* (love). She says: "Kabir's own religious ideas and representations could not but be somewhat influenced by Sufi thought and imagery as suggested by many of his sayings" (p. 83). Moreover, she rejects the idea that Kabir's

bhakti was the result of Ramananda's influence. Instead, under the influences of Naths and Sufism, Kabir developed his path through his inner experiences.

Agrawal (2009) too underlines the impact of Nathism and Islam on Kabir's *sadhana*, but unlike Dwivedi, Vaudeville, Westcott and others, Agrawal does not consider the *sadhana* of Kabir being the result of his family having Nath *samskar* or being Muslim. He says that those scholars who consider Kabir's *sadhana* (spiritual practice) only the result of his family traditions are, in fact, nullifying Kabir's originality and individual choice. Kabir was definitely influenced by Nathpanthi, Islamic and other traditions, but he did not receive these influences passively. He experimented with these traditions and then developed his own independent path of *sadhana*: "If you listen to his *vanis*, you can understand yourself that Kabir, born in a weaver family and a brilliant son of Neeru-Neema, reached the state of being happy in the *Naradi bhakti* through the *Shakta*, Nathpanthi and Sufi spiritual practices in his search" (p. 176).

Kabir's poetry certainly reflects the influences of different sectarian and religious traditions of the time, but among them, Nathpanthi influence is more dominant in Kabir and his *sadhana*.

Kabir as a Poet

Kabir has often been seen as a religious teacher, a social reformer, a founder of a new religion/sect, a propagator of the unity between the Hindus and Muslims etc. However, not much scholarly attention has been paid to Kabir as a poet. Shukla considers Kabir primarily a preacher and suggests that Kabir's *vanis* do not express emotions and feelings, rather they lay emphasis on knowledge.

Das finds the elements of poetry in Kabir, but says that they are obscured by his mysticism. Kabir did not intend to write poems, but to search for truth was his sole aim: "As for his poetic faculty, many things have been influenced by his mysticism. He has not uttered poems for the sake of poems. He has propounded his ideologies in search of truth, it was his main function to enlighten the same" (2010, p. 43).

Dwivedi considers Kabir primarily to be a saint and religious leader: "Kabir was a *Dharmaguru*. Therefore, the spiritual *rasa* of his *vanis* should be tasteless" (p. 170). Following Das, he also says that Kabir never intended to write poetry. The characteristics of a poet came to him as a by-product: "The reverberation of the formless through attribute, echo of untellable through tellable are the ultimate demonstration of the poetic power, isn't it? However, that reverberating thing is primary, not the style and material of the reverberation. Thus, poetic sensibility in his verses is a by-product…" (p. 173).

Dwivedi even underlines the echo of emotion of love in his poetry and exemplifies Kabir conveying devotion to God as a woman. He appreciates the creativity of Kabir's language and admits that Kabir has the characteristics of a poet but according to him, Kabir's intention was never to be a poet. However, his appreciation of Kabir's language is noteworthy:

> Kabir had a great command over language. He was a dictator of language. In what form he wanted to utter his things, he let the language to express so in the same way, if not directly, then by forcing it. The language seems helpless before Kabir as if it did not dare to reject any demand of this careless and rude saint. The power of converting untellable into tellable in the language of Kabir is rarely found in any other writer. (p. 170)

Like Dwivedi, Vaudeville is also attracted to Kabir for his creative use of language and perceives Kabir as a poet, but she points out that Kabir cannot be regarded as a poet in the traditional Indian sense: "Indifferent to 'literature', unskilled in the delicate art of ornate

poetry, Kabir cannot be called a Kavi 'poet' in the traditional Indian sense" (p. 129). She regards him as a poet in an unconventional manner: "If not a learned poet, a *Kavi* in the traditional sense, the little weaver of Benares was indeed a great poet, one of the greatest known in India and elsewhere" (p. 130). She rightly says that Kabir is the best poet to write on death: "No other poet in India — perhaps no other poet in the world — has spoken about 'Kal', 'Death', as Kabir has done, with such tragic intensity" (p. 106). However, Vaudeville misinterprets Kabir's attitude to death. In fact, death was also a matter of celebration for Kabir. Agrawal (2009) rightly says, "In the poems of Kabir, death is not only an end but also a beginning. It is not only a fear, but also a delight" (p. 416).

Agrawal establishes Kabir as a complete poet whose poems reverberate with intense feelings of love. He criticizes Shukla saying that Kabir certainly lays emphasis on mystical knowledge, but the aim of this knowledge is love as well. All forms of love can be found in Kabir's poetry. To express them to God, he himself adopts the form of a woman. Agrawal also criticizes the view that Kabir was a *Dharmaguru*' or a preacher: "Kabir did not want to become a *Dharmaguru*. Neither his life nor his compositions give this impression" (p. 175).

He evaluates Kabir as a poet on the basis of the following parameters: theme of love (feeling) and death, passion for human form, and creativity of language. He argues that if love and passion for human form are considered to be the parameters of a poet, Kabir must be accepted as a poet. His temperament and treatment of language are of a poet. Just as no one becomes a poet without love and passion for human form, similarly no one becomes a poet without confronting death in his compositions. Love and death are the primary and ultimate truth not only of life but also of the poem. (2009, p. 62)

Kabir's love for God is like that of a woman for her lover or husband. His formless God very often takes a *Saguna* form. Death is an integral theme of many of Kabir's poems.

Whatever Kabir says, he says through songs and verses. Most importantly, one can always hear rhythmic sound and beauty in them. Following the evaluation of Agrawal, Kabir really appears to be a complete poet. In *The Bijak of Kabir*, Hess also accepts that "Kabir was a poet" (2000, p. 7).

Kabir and Kabirpanth

Many scholars such as H. H. Wilson, William Cooke, G. H. Westcott, F. E. Keay, Parshuram Chaturvedi, Kedarnath Dwivedi, Peter Friedlander, David N. Lorenzen, Linda Hess, Purendu Ranjan etc. have shed light on the history and organization of Kabirpanth, Kabir legends and other legends constructed by Kabirpanth, its doctrines, rituals and ceremonies, and its spread and have also discussed Kabir centres. The earliest reference to Kabirpanth occurs in the work of Wilson, written in the early nineteenth century. Considering Kabirpanth as a Hindu religious sect, Wilson has commented on its social composition, organizational form, myths and rituals. He also notes the spread of Kabirpanth: "There is no doubt that the Kabirpanthis, both clerical and lay are very numerous in all the provinces of upper and central India, except perhaps in Bengal" (p. 54). He has focused more on Kabir Chaura *Math*. Like Wilson, Crooke in his *The Caste and Tribes in the North-West Provinces* considers Kabirpanth as a Hindu religious sect and sheds light on its doctrines drawing on the work of Wilson.

A few Indian scholars also provide us with some ideas about Kabirpanth in the late nineteenth century. Among them, Pramatha Nath Bose and J. N. Battacharya are foremost. Both these scholars were influenced by Wilson and draw on him. In *Hindu Castes and Sects: An Exposition of the Hindu Caste System and the Bearing of the Sects Towards Each Other and Towards Other Religious System*, J. N. Bhattacharya notes that Kabirpanth has spread more in Central and Western India than in Bengal and South India: "A large part of the low

caste population of Central and Western India are followers of Kabir. In Bengal and Southern India there are very few resident Kabirites" (p. 496). He points out that the Kabirpanthi *sadhus* neither worship idols nor perform ostentatious rituals: "The Kabirite monks worship the spirit of Kabir. The priests of the sect do not administer any mantra to their followers" (p. 496). Bose also notes about the large-scale spread of Kabirpanth in Northern and Central India: "The most numerous Kabirpanthis are in Northern and Central India" (p. 40). Bose further points out that Kabirpanthis consider Kabirpanth to be a Vaishnava sect due to Kabir's connection with Ramananda, but they do not practice Vaishnava worship. However, Kabirpanthis have not yet given up the practice of caste.

In the early 20th century, two exclusive works on Kabirpanth were written by Westcott (1907) and Keay (1931). Westcott was a bishop. His Christian bias is reflected in his estimation of Kabirpanth. He has largely relied on his observation to describe the history of two of the *Maths* in North India: Kashi Kabir Chaura and Damakheda. He also consulted Wilson's description of the panth. He felt that the religious practices of Kabirpanth were influenced by Christianity. Keay's study originally written as a thesis submitted to London University, has discussed history and organization of Kabirpanth. Regarding the establishment of Kabirpanth, he writes: "Surati Gopal is sometimes regarded as the real organizer of the panth" (94).

Kedarnath Dwivedi (1965) conducted an extensive fieldwork in North India. He discusses the history of different sects and their prominent branches in detail. He also discusses the main Kabirpanthi ritual "Chauka Arti" more comprehensively than previous scholars.

Parshuram Chaturvedi's study of the Sant tradition in North India also deals with Kabirpanth in detail. He relied mainly on the religious scriptures of the panth and the then unpublished research of Kedarnath Dwivedi on Kabirpanth.

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend to study Kabirpanth on the basis of oral data. Baidyanath Sarasvati's paper "Notes on Kabir: A Non-literate Intellectual" (1977) on the social and religious aspects of the panth, and R. L. Khandewal study of the social composition of Kabirpanth in north India, Peter Friedlander's paper on reform and rituals in Kabirpanth, half a dozen papers of Lorenzen on socio-political dimensions of Kabirpanth in north India are some prominent examples.

In his essay "Kabirpanth and its Social Content" (1978), Khandeval sheds light on the origin of Kabirpanth and its division into two sects: "After the death of Kabir, his son Kamal was requested to lead the sect and become its preceptor, but he declined. The followers seem split up into two divisions on panth. The headquarters of the major branch was at Kabir Chaura in Varanasi and a minor branch was founded at Chhattisgarh in Madhya Pradesh by Dharmadas, a close disciple of Kabir" (p. 81). Khandeval significantly mentions that many downtrodden people joined Kabirpanth for a feeling of community, but Kabirpanth has failed in freeing itself from the caste problem: "However, it must be added that the Kabirpanth did not succeed much in eradicating castes even from the limited followers it has attracted through the ages. They have descended from the high ideals of Kabir and confirmed themselves only to following his religious teachings alone" (p. 82).

Lorenzen's essays "The Kabirpanth and Politics" (1981a), "The Kabirpanth: Heretics to Hindus" (1981b), "The Tradition of Non-Caste Hinduism: Kabirpanth" (1987a), "The Kabirpanth and Social Protest" (1987b), "The Rituals of Kabirpanth" (1996) etc. are prominent studies on Kabirpanth. In these essays, Lorenzen focuses especially on the social

dimensions of the beliefs and practices of Kabirpanth. He foregrounds a voice of dissent in the Kabirpanthi rituals and practices against the dominant socio-religious ideology of *Varnashrama-dharma*. Lorenzen aptly points out that Kabirpanthi rituals or practices are the substitutions of the Brahmanical formulations: "His (Kabir's) followers have incorporated some of these practices within the Panth, but this has been done in a rather ambiguous manner, one which partakes more of the character of a 'substitution' than a 'replication' of caste Hindu practices" (1987a, p. 267)

Another significant issue which Lorenzen deals with is a Kabirpanth's rejection of caste system. He suggests that the people of lower castes in Kabirpanth do not suffer from inferiority complex on account of their low caste status:

> The more egalitarian ideology of the Kabirpanth does provide them with a positive self-image, one which rejects the innate and absolute character of the inferior status to which they are relegated by more orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism. Their membership in the Kabirpanth indicates a general acceptance conditioned by another vision of the ultimate nature of that society and of their own innate worth within it. In this vision the absolute value of the untouchable is not inferior to that of the Brahman. (1987b, p. 283)

Lorenzen also studied the daily rituals and verses and poems sung during these rituals at Kabir centres, especially at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* and also the main Kabirpanthi ritual "Chauka Arti" in detail. It is interesting to note that during the period of Lorenzen's fieldwork between 1976 and 1994, *Chauka* ritual was also popular at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*.

Apart from these works, two scholars have focused exclusively on the myths of the panth. David Scott has collected some of these myths and has attempted to situate them in socio-religious conditions prevailing at the time of Kabir. Uma Thakural's article on Kabirpanthi myths is also valuable. Uma Thakural compares the Kabirpanthi pattern to the

Purnanic pattern in term of constructing different rituals in Kabirpanth and points out their significance.

Ranjan's *The History of Kabirpanth: A Regional Process* (2008) is an attempt to trace the history of Kabirpanth at the regional level. He has described its growth in a chronological sequence and has tried to understand the evolution of a religious order in the historical perspective. He has also focused on the Kabirpanthi symbolic order to highlight the idiom in which Kabirpanthis have contested the hegemonic tradition and the manner in which they have constructed their worldview. He also deals with the organizational arrangement and the mode of functioning of a religious sect, which, according to him, have been one of the most neglected themes in religious studies in India. His book particularly focuses on Kabir centres of Bihar.

In his essay "Ritual and Reform in the Kabirpanth" (2010), Friedlander discusses the ideological differences between Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* and Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. He points out that Vivekdas, the present *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, has fought against the propagation of ritualistic practices and false myths in Kabirpanth. On the other hand, the Dharmadasi tradition has constructed rituals and myths which do not reflect Kabir's actual teachings and principles. According to Vivekdas, the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth has denigrated Kabir's actual message.

Hess (2015), a prominent scholar of Kabir also gives a brief introduction of Kabirpanth (especially Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth and Dharmadasi Kabirpanth), its principal ritual *Chauka Arti* and its significance. She points out that Kabirpanth has hinduized Kabir on the Vaishnava model. However, it has also rejected many hegemonic components of Vaishnava or Brahmanical models:

> The Hinduizing process gained momentum in a sectarian environment. In its symbols, rituals, and structures of authority, the Kabir Panth has used generally Hindu and particularly Vaishnava models and terminology: guru and mahants, *arati* and *sandhya path*, *diksha* and *prasad*, *tulsi* beads, occasional Sanskrit chants, and a likeness of Kabir in the place normally occupied by a Hindu divine image. But they haven't imported all Hindu forms equally. Notably, they tend to refuse caste; their leaders often speak strongly against caste and their leaders often speak strongly against caste, their institutions and functions generally appear free of caste distinctions. The social emphasis corresponds with their membership — the vast majority being from formerly untouchable castes and poor agricultural classes in rural North India. (p. 318)

She rightly mentions that *Chauka* ritual maintains the powerful authority of the *Mahants* and strengthens the sects as institutions. She also discusses how Vivekdas has criticized ritualistic practices of Kabirpanth in order to bring forth Kabir's radical spirit.

These works certainly impart significant insights into Kabirpanth and its different aspects, but most of these studies focus more on the traditions and practices of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* and Damakheda Dharmadasi *Math* and ignore the traditions and practices of other Kabirpanthi sects and their prominent branches which also hold a great influence on people and have a strong following. We do not have any definite idea if they have the similar traditions either to those of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* or Dharmadasi Kabir *Math* or they differ from both. Even in case of Kashi Kabir *Math*, its annual ceremonies and rituals have not been studied comprehensively. The practice of *Bijak Path* accompanied by *Havan Puja* has been ignored, but it is as significant as the *Chauka* ritual. Maghar Kabir *Math*, which has gained in significance similar to its *Acharya Gaddi* (headquarters), received less scholarly attention to its traditions and practices.

How Kabir centres transmit and popularize Kabir among masses, especially through *satsangs* and *pravachans,* has also been given less attention by the scholars. However, *satsangs* and *pravachans* are the most significant ways of transmitting Kabir's teachings and messages and of influencing a large number of people.

Kabir legends in Kabirpanth have been studied, but they do not suggest which of those legends are more important for a *Math*. During the course of my study, I found that a few legends are more meaningful for some *Maths*, but the previous studies do not suggest this phenomenon. Besides, some *Maths* have also constructed their own legends associated with the founder *Mahant* and others. They hold significance similar to Kabir legends themselves and increase the influence of the respective *Maths* among people. However, they are simply ignored. Although Ranjan has attempted to study these aspects in terms of the Kabir *Maths* situated in Bihar, a more comprehensive study is required. My study of the selected Kabir centres in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh is an attempt in this direction and fill the gaps mentioned above. In shedding light on the symbolical and social significance of Kabirpanthi rituals, my study not only aligns with those of Lorenzen, Ranjan and Hess but also add more new dimensions to it.

Kabir among Muslims

Many Scholars have noted the strong presence and popularity of Kabir among Muslims. Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* (1598) sheds light on Kabir's popularity among both the Hindus and Muslims: "Kabir was respected by both the Hindus and Muslims" (as cited in K. Dwivedi, 1995, p. 10). Abdul Haq Dihlavi, in his Persian work *Akhbar-al-Akhyar*, composed some years later than *Ain-i-Akbari*, shows that "Kabir's verses were already being read or quoted in Sufi circles in Delhi and Agra at the beginning of the 16th century" (as cited in Vaudeville, 1974, p. 34). The *Dabista-i-Mazahib* by Mubadshah/Muhsin Fani of Kashmir (1645-1653) claims that Kabir was equally popular between the Muslims and the Hindus from North India to Odisha. He finds Kabir popular among Muslims also: "The testimony of *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* ascribed to Muhsin Fani of Kashmir and probably written in the mid seventeenth century, testifies to the continued prestige of Kabir among Indian Muslims, especially among those who shared the liberal tendencies of Akbar and Abul Fazl" (as cited

in Vaudeville, 1974, p. 34). John Malcolm (1812) too underlines the reception of Kabir among the Hindus and Muslims:

> The celebrated Sufi or philosophical deist lived in the time of the emperor Sher Shah. He was, by trade, a weaver, but he has written several admired works. They are all composed in a strain of universal philosophy and benevolence; and above all, he inculcated religious toleration, particularly between Mohammedans and Hindus by both of whom his memory is held in high esteem and veneration. (p. 145)

Towards the end of the 19th century, William Crooke in *The Caste and Tribes in the North-West Provinces* highlights the popularity of Kabir among Muslims and Hindus: "Next to *Ramayana* of Tulasi Das, there is perhaps no body of literature which is so popular among the Hindus, as the *Bijak* of Kabir, and his verses and apothegms are ever on the lips of Both the Hindus and Musalmans" (p. 74). He further adds: "Owing to his connection with the weaver caste, many Julahas are fond of calling themselves Kabir Bansi, or Kabir Panthi, without much reference to the special doctrines associated with the name of Kabir" (p. 73). This reveals that not only the Hindus but also the Muslims have been the followers of Kabir. It brings out one more fact that there was not such a rigid boundary of religion between the Hindus and Muslims up to the 19th century as it exists today.

Ahmad Shaw who first translated the *Bijak* into English in 1917 also testifies to the popularity of Kabir among the Muslims: "It was because Indian Muslims welcomed Kabir's efforts in combating idol-worship that they claimed him as Muslim, even going so far as to acknowledge him as a *pir,* a Muslim Sufi or saint, for his self-denying and pious life" (as cited in Vaudeville, 1974, p. 15)

Towards the early twentieth century, Westcott (1907), Das (1928), Shukla (1929) and Keay and after the mid twentieth century, K. Dwivedi (1965) and Vaudeville (1974) give passing references to Muslim followers of Kabir. Shyam Sundar Das and Ram Chandra

Shukla note that there are Muslim followers of Kabir in Kabirpanth. Westcott, Keay, Dwivedi and Vaudeville[47] mention Muslim followers of Kabir, especially in the context of their visit to Kabir *Mazar* at Maghar.

Dharwadker also sheds light on Kabir's reception by Muslims at Kabir *Mazar* in Maghar. Mentioning Kabir's popularity among Muslims through the works of Abdul Haq Dehlavi and Mohsin Fani and limiting to the family of the Muslim caretakers of Kabir *Mazar* at Maghar, Dharwadker notes:

> This is broadly consistent with the fact documented in Abdul Haq Dehlavi's *Akhbar-al-Akhyar* (composed between 1590 and 1619) and Mohsin Fani's *Dabistan-i Mazahib* (mid-seventeenth century, that Indian sufis in the Agra, Delhi and Kashmir regions were reading Kabir's poetry during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. The tradition has continued throughout the colonial and post-independence periods, with a family of Muslim caretakers maintaining the mausoleum as a place of sufi worship and down to the present. (2003, p. 4)

Thus, Westcott, Keay, Dwivedi, Vaudeville and Dharwadker limit their focus only on Kabir *Mazar*. They completely ignore the Muslims of the Maghar town (which consists of Kabir's shrines at its east periphery) in terms of their relationship with Kabir. These scholars also do not give any definite idea about how Muslims perceive the Kabir *Samadhi* temple (adjacent to Kabir *Mazar*) and other relics associated with Kabir at Maghar. My study fills these gaps and further discovers how Kabir plays a significant role in developing and maintaining a syncretic relationship between the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar. The co-existence of Kabir's shrines (Kabir *Mazar* and Kabir *Samadhi*) reflects the actual relationship between the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar town itself and strengthen their unity influencing and transforming the social milieu of Maghar.

[47] Vaudeville also gives a passing reference of the fact that like Hindus, Muslims have also honoured Kabir in India: "From Panjab to Bengal and from the Himalayan frontiers to South India, he has been hailed by Hindus and Muslims alike as a great mystic and bold religious reformer" (p. 3).

Kabir beyond Manuscripts

In the oral and performative traditions of Kabir, one can hear many verses e.g. '*Jahanwa se ayo amar vah deshwa*', '*Jhini-jhini bini chadariya*' and '*Moko kahan dhoondhe re bande*' '*Kaun thagawa nagariya lootal ho'* which are not found in any of the major manuscripts of his poetry, but these verses are treated as those of Kabir and are quite popular with masses. In *Praises to a Formless God: Nirguni Texts from North India*, Lorenzen asserts that popular verses of Kabir are found mostly in the oral tradition of Kabir:

> Probably over two thousand religious songs *(pads*, *bhajans*, *sabdas*, and *ramainis*) attributed to Kabir have so far been published. Many more are found in oral tradition and in unpublished manuscripts. Academic scholars have concentrated their study almost exclusively in the three oldest known collections of Kabir's songs and verses: the *Kabir Bijak* associated with the Kabirpanth, the *Kabir Granthavali* associated with the Dadu Panth, and the songs and verses found in the *Guru Granth Sahib* of the Sikhs. With only a few exceptions, however, the songs attributed to Kabir that are most popular today are not those found in these three collections. (p. 205)

These verses bear Kabir's spirit and his signature line. Agrawal calls them '*Uprachanaye* of Kabir': "Such compositions which are absent from the written accounts, but bear Kabir's sensibilities and teachings as well as the signature of his name can be called *Uprachanaye*" (p. 43). Keay also suggests that there are innumerable *sakhis*, or couplets in circulation, which are attributed to Kabir, but all of them are not actually composed by Kabir himself: "It is not at all likely that all of them are really the work of Kabir. Most of them are however in his spirit and in substance with the teaching to be met with in *Bijak* and *Granth*" (p. 74). Keay clearly hints at *Uprachanaye* of Kabir which might have been composed by others. Given the presence of large numbers of such verses in the oral tradition, Wilson goes so far as to suggest that Kabir may not actually have existed as a person in blood and flesh but Kabir is just a generic name under which many persons have composed their verses:

> I think it not at all improbable that no such person as Kabir ever existed, and that his name is a mere cover to the innovations of some free-thinker amongst the Hindus: perhaps some one of those considered as his principal disciples: his names are very suspicious, and Jnyani, the sage, or Kabir, the greatest, are generic rather than individual denominations: at any rate, even if the individual were distinct, we must suppose that the name which occurs in his writings is nothing more than the Tak'hallus or assumed name, under which both Musselman and Hindu poets have been accustomed to send their compositions into the world. (p. 45)

Though mistaken in denying the existence of Kabir, Wilson makes an insightful observation that many persons were writing or composing verses under the name of Kabir. Dharwadker also suggests that 'a community of poets/authors' have contributed to the corpus of the compositions found in the name of Kabir. Kapil Tiwari is also of a similar view: "Many generations have composed thousands of *Nirguna padas* under Kabir's signature in their own ways" (p. 8).

In fact, Kabir is deeply embedded in the oral tradition. He lives in folk memory and continuously evolves and is manifested in performances. However, in the academic world, the major focus is laid on the textual Kabir. Kabir's oral and performative traditions which can provide deep insights into Kabir have not been comprehensively explored and studied. Kabir needs to be understood through these traditions. Agrawal rightly proposes that Kabir should be discovered through folk memory, sphere and religion (lived practices). Before discovering or researching Kabir, it is necessary to communicate with the folk memory of Kabir. In an unpublished review of Agrawal's *Akath Kahani Prem Ki: Kabir Ki Kavita aur Unka Samay,* Lorenzen (n. d.) also demonstrates this significant gap in Kabir's study: "One area where much scholarly work remains to be done is the study of popular *bhajans* attributed to Kabir and the musical traditions of their modern performance" (p. 2). K. Tiwari too suggests that Kabir needs to be understood in the context of the oral tradition (p. 8).

Only a few researches have been carried out on Kabir's performative traditions. Edward O. Henry (1988; 1991; 1995) has transcribed, translated, and analysed about twenty

songs of Kabir, which he collected from itinerant singers of the *Jogi* caste in the Bhojpuri-speaking region of Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar. David N. Lorenzen (1996) carried out fieldwork in Banaras in 1990 and 1992 to collect the most popular songs of Kabir among Kabirpanthi saints, common followers and also many non-Kabirpanthis. He has translated and analysed twenty songs which, according to him, are the most popular *bhajans* of Kabir. Nancy M. Martin (2002) has studied Kabir-singing among the selected Meghval singers of western Rajasthan and discussed the themes and implications of the songs sung by them.

The above three scholars note a softening of the social and religious critique in the songs recorded by them in comparison to the *Bijak* and other major manuscripts of Kabir's poetry. Henry points out that the themes which predominantly emerge from the songs of his collection are imminence of death, transiency of all things, urging nonattachment, tangle of delusions, salvation through devotion. However, he observes in a general sense that "They [*Nirguna* songs including those found in the name of Kabir] rebel, explicitly or implicitly, against priestly dominance" and "[s]uch heterodox, sometimes anti-Brahmanical songs are sung throughout India" (1991, p. 222).

Lorenzen writes: "[T]he bhajans of the modern collections generally soften the sharp, often sarcastic social and religious criticism found in many songs of the older collections. Such criticism is not absent from the modern collections, but in them it tends to be muted and expressed with less aggressivity and wit" (p. 207).

Martin also says: "The voice we hear is radically different in tone from that found in the Kabir-panthi *Bijak*, paralleling the observations of Henry and Lorenzen" (p. 204). According to her, the songs sung by the Meghval singers of Rajasthan are voice of empowerment rather than that of protest.

Tiwari (2007) has brought out a book '*Lok Mein Kabir: Kabir Ki Chhap Vale Nirguna Padas'* which consists of more than one thousand verses of Kabir collected from oral and performative traditions prevailing in Uttar Pradesh (Bundeli and Bhojpuri regions), Madhya Pradesh (Malwi region), Bihar (Maithili region), Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. These are those *padas* of Kabir which generally end with his signature line '*Kahe/Kahat Kabir suno*', but most of them are not composed by Kabir. This book establishes Kabir as a poet of the masses and shows how people of different regions have adopted and transcreated Kabir in their own ways in their social and cultural milieus.

Hess (2015) and the Indian documentary filmmaker, Shabnam Virmani (2008a, 2008b, 2008c 2008d, 2008e, 2008f, 2008g) have explored Kabir's oral and performative traditions in India (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat) and Pakistan (Karachi and Sindh). Hess extensively deals with the Malwi performative traditions of Kabir, which she has studied through the popular Malwi Kabir singers, especially Prahlad Tipanya. Virmani has documented the singers, especially the male singers of Madhya Pradesh (Malwa), Rajasthan, Gujarat and Pakistan.

Hess's book reflects how Kabir's oral and textual traditions are interlinked and how they influence and enrich each other; how Kabir singers sing, live and use Kabir; how they create and recreate Kabir in the oral traditions; how Kabir fulfils their social and political aspirations and needs; how the performances of Kabir bring people together and create spiritual, social and political consciousness among them. Her book also brings out how Kabir shifts from the spiritual realm to the political realm in the oral traditions and how both the realms often overlap each other as well.

Thus, the above works certainly provide significant insights into oral traditions of Kabir, but they have their limitations. The first limitation is regarding the region chosen for

study. Since Kabir's oral and performative traditions are prevalent on a vast plain of Indian subcontinent, many regions still need to be studied.

My study focuses on some parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. However, since there are different traditions of Kabir-singing in both regions, I undertake to study those traditions e.g. men *Khajadi* Kabir-singing of Bihar, innovative Kabir-singing etc., which have received no or less attention. The studies of Henry, Lorenzen and Tiwari focus on those *padas* which end with Kabir's signature line while my study also sheds light on many such *padas* which do not end with Kabir's signature line, but they are also being sung in the name of Kabir and are equally popular.

Lorenzen and K. Tiwari do not reflect anywhere how Kabir is transcreated by singers although they rightly suggest that many *padas* of their collections are not found in the early manuscripts of Kabir's poetry. Henry illustrates the transcreation of a single *pada* of Kabir into three recensions. In my study, I have demonstrated and discussed how singers transcreate Kabir at different levels.

These scholars have also completely ignored audiences who form a significant part of Kabir-singing. Apart from Henry, they also do not have any clear idea about how singers live and breathe Kabir. Henry has discussed the musical performances and lives of the singers, but his study is quite limited in scope. Lorenzen gives a list of the popular songs of Kabir but does not discuss any musical performance of the singers as his purpose was to discover only the most popular songs of Kabir. The main purpose of Kapil Tiwari was also to collect the *padas* of Kabir and not to discuss the musical traditions or performances in the regions. Therefore, in the context of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, we do not get any definite idea of Kabir's oral and performative traditions except the fact that Kabir is sung in the regions. These studies also do not reflect how Kabir is performed in the traditions of Kabir Chaura

Kabirpanth and Dharmadasi Kabirpanth as Kabir's oral and performative traditions in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are profoundly influenced by both the traditions. My study focuses on these aspects and attempts to fill the research gap.

Another significant aspect which these studies have ignored is Kabir's oral and performative traditions among women singers. They focus mainly on male singers. Lorenzen, Henry, and Martin mention no woman singer. Tiwari's work suggests at one or two places that the women singers of Malwa sing Kabir. Hess and Virmani mention only a couple of women singers: Bhanvari Devi (a folk singer of Kabir from Rajasthan), Parvathy (a Baul singer from Bengal), Lila-*behn* and her friend, also named Lila, the two women singers from Malwa, Madhya Pradesh, and Vidya Rao (a Hindustani classical singer). Apart from these passing references to women singers, there is hardly anything else on women singers of Kabir. In fact, one was not even aware of the existence of women's performative traditions of Kabir. However, during the course of my study, I discovered vibrant traditions of Kabir-singing among women singers in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Objectives of the Study

As discussed above, Kabir has been studied mostly through his written traditions. Our understanding of Kabir is more of a textual nature. However, Kabir is a phenomenon more of the oral and performative traditions. His poetry is lived and breathed, created and transcreated, sung and recited, quoted as proverbs and transmitted from one generation to next in the oral and performative traditions. In fact, the vibrant oral and performative traditions of Kabir testify to his unbroken popularity and relevance among people. It clearly suggests that we need to understand and approach Kabir through his oral and performative traditions. I have undertaken to understand and interpret Kabir and his contemporary

relevance through his oral and performative traditions popular especially among the common masses in parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar[48].

The objective of my study is to examine how Kabir is a part and parcel of people's life. The research work seeks to study the following components under this broad objective:

1. To examine how Kabir serves people spiritually and socially through the traditions and practices of the selected Kabir *Maths*
2. To study the traditions of Kabir-singing by men singers and analyse their significance
3. To unearth Kabir's oral and performative traditions among women singers and analyse their significance
4. To explore Kabir's presence among the Muslims of Maghar and examine what brings Kabir close to them
5. To examine how Kabir plays a significant role in developing a composite culture between the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar

Research Methodology

My research work required an extensive fieldwork for data collection. I carried out my fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar from 2016 to the early months of 2022. I chose Kabir centres in Banaras, Sant Kabir Nagar, Jaunpur and Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, and Saran, Patna and Samastipur in Bihar for my fieldwork. I chose Kabir centres because people from different parts of the country regularly visit some of these *Maths*. On the occasions of

[48] I chose these regions because Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are primarily associated with Kabir. Since Kabir was a dweller of Banaras, his verses and messages were transmitted in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar on a large scale. After Kabir's death, his three main disciples Surati Gopal, Jagu Das and Bhagu Das are said to have established their sects of Kabirpanth respectively in Uttar Pradesh (Kabir Chaura *Math*, Varanasi) and Bihar (Bidupur Kabir *Math*, Vaishali and Bhagtahi Kabir Math, Siwan). There have been vibrant oral and performative traditions in all these sects. These centres attracted large numbers of followers of Kabir in their fold from these regions. Moreover, *Bijak*, the main Kabirpanthi manuscript was first discovered in Bihar. The earliest *Bijak* of Kabir Chaura *Math* came in 1885 in manuscript and 1928 in the print version (Dharwadker, pp. 31-32). However, according to Vivek Das, the present *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, there had been many minor manuscripts of Kabir's verses at Kabir Chaura *Math* since its establishment.

different ceremonies, a large number of people gather at all the centres. It became feasible for me to interact with a large number of *Mahants*, *sadhus*, singers, audiences and other followers of Kabir.

At these centres, I interviewed *Mahants*, *sadhus* and lay followers. I also observed, recorded and participated in different ceremonies and rituals associated with the centres and took important notes. I made the direct and participant observations of the performances of men and women singers, recorded these performances and interviewed the singers, audiences and other followers of Kabir. Subsequently, I interviewed singers, audiences and other followers, recorded and observed the performances of singers at homes of Kabirpanthi followers and other different settings. I also observed and recorded the performances of Kabirpanthi rituals in these settings. I interviewed the host Kabirpanthis and *Mahants* and saints who officiated over these rituals. In case of Maghar, I also spent many days at Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* and in Maghar town observing their daily milieu, interviewing and interacting with both the Hindus and Muslims of different age groups.

Thus, the data collected primarily from my site visits, field notes, direct and participant observations, in-depth, semi-structured and open-ended interviews were prepared, transcribed and analysed using the thematic analysis method[49] which yielded some significant and interesting insights into Kabir's oral and performative traditions, and also into the experiences, opinions, beliefs and values, knowledge and worldviews of the men and women Kabir singers and other followers of Kabir included in this study. It evidently reflects that Kabir continues to be a part and parcel of people's life.

[49] Thematic analysis is a method of analysing qualitative data. It is usually applied to a set of texts, such as an interview or transcripts. The researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes — topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly. There are various approaches to conducting thematic analysis, but the most common form follows a six-step process: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up.

Chapterization

The present study consists of six chapters including "**Introduction: Kabir, Bhakti and Traditions**". The "**Introduction: Kabir, Bhakti and Traditions**" is divided into three sections. The first section "**Kabir**" deals with Kabir's life and works, establishes him as a poet of masses and further foregrounds the significance of Kabir and his poetry in Indian as well as universal contexts. The second section "**Kabir and Bhakti Movement**" deals with the origin and spread of the Bhakti Movement, and highlights Kabir's contribution to the Bhakti Movement in the context of North India. The third section "**Kabir and His Traditions**" focuses on Kabir's oral (performative) and written traditions, and Kabirpanth.

The second chapter "**Kabir Centres: Sites of Emancipation**" deals with the traditions and practices of the selected Kabir *Maths* and examines their significance. It sheds lights on how the later sects or *Maths* have gained in prominence, on the one hand, by borrowing a mix of the traditions of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* and Damakheda Dharmadasi Kabir *Math* and on the other hand, by constructing their unique local beliefs, legends, traditions and practices. It further reflects how Kabir *Maths* transmit Kabir's religious and social teachings among masses. One of the significant findings has been that Kabir centres develop a Kabir community through ceremonies, rituals and activities, especially associated with Kabir, and convey a feeling of equality, self-respect and self-confidence among their followers (shudras and dalits). It analyses how Kabirpanthi rituals substitute the Brahmanical rituals and express a voice of dissent and protest against Brahmanism. Kabirpanthi rituals have a number of symbolical connotations which undermine the Brahmanical concepts of rebirth, salvation and reject the Holy Trinity e.g. Brahman, Vishnu and Mahesh (Shiva).

The third chapter "**Men Kabir Singers: Towards Humanism**" focuses especially on the men singers of the eastern Uttar Pradesh and men *Khajadi* singers of Bihar. It highlights

two prevailing ways of performing Kabir: traditional and innovative. The traditional form of Kabir-singing shows the continuity of Kabir's oral and performative tradition from his time to the present. *Khajadi* Kabir-singing which is one of the oldest traditions of Kabir-singing is a vibrant part of this continuity. On the other hand, the innovative form of Kabir-singing suggests how Kabir-singing evolves according to time, place, and religious, social and economic circumstances of singers and audiences. This chapter brings out that in the name of Kabir, *Saar Vanis* (ending with Kabir's signature line) and *Daas Vanis* (apparent compositions of Kabir's disciples and followers) are being sung in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It shows how Kabir's followers have been composing and adding to the corpus of *Saar Vanis*. They compose these verses on account of multiple personal and social factors. *Saar Vanis* and *Daas Vanis* continue to cultivate a social and spiritual awakening among subalterns and to inspire them to protest against social and religious injustices and discriminations in order to live a life of respect and dignity. It finally examines differences between men Kabir-singing in Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth and that in Dharmadasi Kabirpanth.

The fourth chapter "**Women Kabir Singers: Women's Agency and Feminization of Kabir**" is dedicated to the traditions of Kabir-singing by women. This chapter unearths vibrant traditions of Kabir-singing by women singers. Women singers use Kabir-singing to challenge patriarchal attitude of North Indian society and to carve out space for themselves in Kabirpanth and outside. It examines how women singers, through their songs and commentaries, deconstruct the masculine world of Kabir and his anti-women image, feminize Kabir and give him a woman-friendly identity bringing him close to women's world, who not only speaks in favour of women but also criticizes any gender discrimination. This chapter further reflects that women singers, especially radical women singers, also question and challenge caste and *varna* through their songs and influential commentaries. Kabir-singing raises the living standard of women singers socially as well as financially. Becoming

financially independent in family and outside, they also challenge and subvert the law of Manu that women must always be kept dependent on men. This chapter analyses how Kabir-singing provides women singer a life of respect, mobility and agency in Kabirpanth and society at large.

The fifth chapter "**Kabir at Maghar: A Model of Composite Culture**" consists of two sections. The first section explores Kabir's presence among the Muslims of Maghar (the place of Kabir's death). It examines how Kabir has become a part of their spiritual, cultural and social life. For their faith in Kabir, they claim to reject the propagation of the orthodox Deobandi and Wahhabi Islamic groups, which give a strong emphasis on purifying Islam of the non-Islamic elements. It is interesting to note that in the increasing fire of communalism when religious leaders impose strict segregational codes on their followers shunning mixed religious practices, the Muslims of Maghar have not only preserved the tradition of their attachment to Kabir but also continued to foster this syncretic tradition for the future generations. The second section studies how Kabir brings both the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar together developing a composite culture between them, influencing and transforming the social, cultural, religious, and everyday life of Maghar. Kabir has been at the epicentre of the relationship between the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar. The common traditional belief of the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar "Kabir wanted them to live together" has been the foundation of a shared culture between them. This shared culture is seen at their spiritual, social, cultural and economic levels.

The sixth chapter "**Conclusion: Contemporary Relevance of Kabir**" synthesizes the observations and analysis undertaken in the foregoing chapters. It sums up the strengths and weaknesses of the research work and suggests future directions for further research on Kabir.