

Men Kabir Singers: Towards Humanism

Traditions of Kabir-Singing by Men Singers

a) Approaching Kabir through His Oral and Performative Traditions

I have been attracted to Kabir since my school days. His verses, especially his couplets, and the spontaneous expressions of truth contained in them have always appealed to me. I often heard my late grandfather and a few elder persons of my village and neighbouring villages citing Kabir's couplets in their conversations. They, in fact, used his verses as proverbs. My interaction with such uses of Kabir's verses continued strengthening my bond with Kabir.

In 2013, I went to Banaras in order to pursue Master in Arts at the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University. Living and pursuing my higher education in Banaras, I often used to visit Kabir Chaura and Lahartara as these places are regarded respectively as the place of Kabir's birth and the place of his upbringing. During these visits, what attracted me most were the performances of Kabir's verses by Kabir singers from the *Maths* and other places on the occasions of Kabir Jayanti, Guru Purnima and some other programmes associated with these centres. Singers performed in the *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes organized by the *Maths*. Many lay followers of Kabir sang alone to the accompaniment of a *Khajadi* and many in groups. Some singers also sang Kabir to the accompaniment of other instruments such as *ektara*, *kartal*, *jhaal*, and *chimta*. During performances, they frequently recited or sang Kabir's popular couplets (*sakhis*) and explained them with great interest and enthusiasm. In fact, conversations (descriptions/explanations) about Kabir are often punctuated by *sakhis* (see Schomer 1987). Many other lay followers used to discuss Kabir's verses, legends and stories together in order to appreciate Kabir's greatness.

Each singer sang Kabir in his/her own way often drawing on his/her own regional folk style and gave different interpretations of these verses. I observed many forms of Kabir through these interpretations. John Stratton Hawley rightly comments: “There is no single Kabir. For all the stubborn sure-footedness built into his persona, he floats on diverse streams of performance and reception” (2012, p. 275).

All singers and audiences seemed completely devoted to Kabir. In order to express their devotion to Kabir, some also used to dance during the performances. The audiences were curious to listen to Kabir’s verses and explanations from the singers. Many of them also supported the singers as chorus or some with their rhythmic clapping. Happiness and joy could be seen on all faces. I realized that Kabir whom we study through the manuscripts of his verses is a textual Kabir and is just one aspect of Kabir. Hess (2015) rightly points out: “[I]n truth, Kabir is much more an oral-performative tradition than a written one” (p. 4).

It is obvious that our knowledge and understanding of Kabir based on his textual tradition is incomplete. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of Kabir, we also have to approach him through his oral and performative traditions where Kabir is lived, formed, interpreted and extended by people.

This strong presence of Kabir among people deepened my interest more in him and I undertook to do my Ph. D. on Kabir’s oral and performative traditions from July 2015. My main interest was to discover why people, especially singers and audiences are so deeply connected with Kabir and his verses and what Kabir and his verses meant to them. However, at outset of my study, I found Kabir’s oral world endless and spreading on the vast plane of India. To keep my study specific and feasible, I decided to study this phenomenon in some parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

In 2016, I met Shabnam Virmani in Varanasi during the first edition of the Mahindra Kabira Festival which is an annual event organized by the Mahindra Group (an Indian multinational conglomerate company headquartered in Mumbai, Maharashtra) and Teamwork Arts (an event management company headquartered in New Delhi) in order to celebrate Kabir's music and teachings. 'Mahindra Kabira Festival' is organized in November or December for three days. Shabnam Virmani was invited to perform and deliver a talk on Kabir. I interviewed her who revealed that she could not work on Kabir singers of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. However, these two regions have been primarily associated with Kabir. After Kabir's death, his main disciples Surati Gopal (Uttar Pradesh) and Jagu Das, Bhagu Das and Tattva and Jiva (Bihar) are said to have established the sects of Kabirpanth in these regions. Moreover, *Bijak*, the most sacred text of Kabirpanth was first discovered in these regions. From the perspective of understanding Kabir, his *vanis* and influence on people, these regions hold great significance.

The previous studies also highlight the fact that Kabir's oral and performative traditions have not been adequately explored and studied in these regions. I shall focus on some of those traditions in both regions, which scholars have ignored or given less attention. My study focuses on how Kabir is sung in Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth and Dharmadasi Kabirpanth in the context of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It also underlines those songs which are sung in the name of Kabir, but are different from Kabir songs ending with his signature line. Multiple innovations regarding musical instruments, styles, tunes and songs have been introduced and popularized in Kabir's oral performative traditions. My study discusses these innovations and examines their implications. Besides these innovations, I also study *Khajadi* Kabir-singing tradition of Bihar, which is one of the oldest Kabir performative traditions.

b) Kabir-singing and Men Singers

Music has been a special and inseparable characteristic of Kabir's poetry. Kabir himself had chosen the form of music to convey his message to people, which became dear to his followers, especially low-caste people (*sadhus*, saints, lay followers) who are believed to have nurtured and transmitted Kabir's oral and performative traditions from one generation to another. Agrawal (2007) and Hess (2015) point out that his poetry has been sung from his time till now. Hess suggests that "from the beginning, his poems have been sung, spreading across the northern half of the kite-shaped subcontinent, taking on the colors and styles of local folk traditions, as well as entering the repertoires of classical singers." (p. 8). Since Kabirpanth was established in the early 17th century, Kabirpanthi followers have been singing and popularizing Kabir's verses in more organized and active manner. In Kabirpanth, according to my observation, almost all men Kabirpanthis remember, speak, recite and sing a few verses of Kabir. They give exceptional and interesting descriptions and explanations of Kabir, his *vanis*, mysticism and other dynamics.

Among Kabirpanthi men singers, I identified saint-singers, semi-professional householder singers and ordinary householder singers. Besides, I also recorded the performances of Kabir-singing by non-Kabirpanthi singers including classical singers at Kabir centres and in non-sectarian programmes held especially by Maghar Mahotsava and Mahindra Kabira Festival.

Among saint singers, some are celibate by birth and some are those who left their householder life and started living at Kabir *Maths* like saints. Semi-professional singers are those who, on the one hand, practice Kabir-*bhakti* and on the other hand, practice Kabir-singing as their profession. Ordinary householder singers are those who know some *padas* and verses of Kabir and informally perform them among people. However, on some

occasions, they are encouraged by *Mahants* and *Gurus* to perform at local Kabirpanthi programmes.

These singers generally use the title *Das*²¹² or *Saheb*²¹³ after their names. The titles used by men singers serve to conceal their caste identity and experience a sense of community. However, they belong to mostly low castes (shudras and dalits) and most of them have a low economic status. Some of them are literate. It is to be noted that many illiterate singers claim themselves to be culturally literate and educated as they hold that their spiritual knowledge of Kabir makes them superior.

Men singers, especially the singers of the first two categories, wear white *kurta* and *dhoti* as the white is the holy symbolical colour of Kabirpanth. They generally sing Kabir in different local dialects of Hindi, but mainly in Bhojpuri. They perform Kabir at Kabir centres on the occasions of Kabir Jayanti, Guru Purnima, death anniversaries of the previous *Mahants* etc. as well as at the homes of Kabirpanthi followers who organize *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes on auspicious occasions such as childbirth, marriage, *griha pravesh* etc.

During the course of my fieldwork among men singers, I discovered that they sing and preach Kabir's verses and songs for varied reasons. However, one thing which is found in common is their extreme devotion and love to Kabir. Some sing Kabir because the truths in his *vanis* appeal to them. Some get peace and happiness. Some find courage and confidence. Some seek consolation through his *vanis* against social and political injustices suffered by them, and use songs to fight against these injustices. To some, Kabir's *vanis* teach a way of life. They use songs to make the people of their community and other lower communities aware of living a better life. To some, Kabir *vanis* give a feeling of community.

²¹² Servant or slave of God – *Bhakti* poets adopted the practice of using 'Das' after their names e.g. Kabirdas, Tulsidas, Raidas, Surdas, etc. Kabir's followers also use it with their names.

²¹³ Master – Kabirpanthis, now, use Saheb or Sahib after the name of Kabir to establish him as a god. They also use this title after their names.

Some sing Kabir as their profession for livelihood. Some seek a way of salvation through his *vanis*. Many sing for some other reasons also. This reflects that singers are associated with Kabir with different reasons.

c) Transcreations of Kabir and Men Singers

Kabir-singing always evolves according to demand of time, taste of people, religious, social and economic circumstances of singers and audiences and sectarian (Kabirpanthi) ideologies etc. Besides these contexts, Kabir-singing has also its own fluidity which causes different versions of Kabir's texts. Due to all these factors, transcreations of Kabir by men singers can be seen at many levels such as musical instruments, fluidity of Kabir's verses and *padas* in the oral and performative traditions, and verses written by others after Kabir's spirit, explanations and commentaries of the verses etc. However, one thing that is common and central among most of transcreations is Kabir's spirit which asks us to look within to identify and experience the Ultimate reality and make efforts to be united with this reality and inspires us to reject all types of social and religious evils and injustices in order to establish a true form of humanity where everyone is equal. In other words, they have the themes of Kabir's poetry concerning death, *bhakti*, individual awakening, social and religious criticisms, human equality, detachment from maya and removal of human human evils e.g. lust, greed and jealousy, attack on the consumption of non-vegetarian meals and alcoholic beverages etc.

However, there are also some transcreations which run counter to his true spirit. In these transcreations, Kabir is represented as God and is also worshipped through rituals. In spite of this fact, they have also a voice of protest against Brahmanical formulations as they are presented as a contrast to Brahmanical practices and Kabir is shown superior to all Hindu gods and goddesses.

In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, previously, singers used to perform Kabir's verses to the accompaniment of *Khajadi*, *ektara* and *sarangi*. *Ektara* and *Khajadi* are regarded as the traditional instruments of Kabir. These instruments are still used and attract the ordinary people, especially elder people. *Sarangi*²¹⁴ is used especially by wandering mendicants. Besides, men singers perform Kabir to the accompaniment of harmonium (especially in *mandali* or group singing) in the symphony of other instruments *Khajadi* or *dafali* or *jhaal*, *ektara/tanpura* and *kartal*, *manijra*, *chimta*, *dholak*, *tabla* etc. However, more common are harmonium, *dholak/tabla*, *jhaal* and *manjira*.

Some singers perform Kabir with their *mandalis* (groups) and some alone to the accompaniment of the *Khajadi*, *jhaal* and *ektara*, and *chimta*. Daya Saheb, a *Khajadi* singer from Bihar, says that the *mandali* Kabir-singing has now flourished more on account of earnings in Kabirpanth.

Young singers have also introduced guitar, violin, drum and banjo which have cultivated new flavour and interest in Kabir-singing. *Veena*, *sitar*, *tanpura*, *santoor* etc. are also seen in the performances of classical singers on Kabir. From the point of view of the musical instruments, the modern oral and performative traditions of Kabir have become more wide and comprehensive. Guitar, violin, drum and banjo have also attracted youth audiences towards Kabir.

²¹⁴ Edward O. Henry (1991) describes this instrument:

The sarangi has been used for centuries in North India to accompany the singing and dancing of courtesans as well as the vocalists of royal and more recently, the concert halls and soirees of the upper classes. Sarangi is held vertically, facing away from the player. The left hand do not stop the strings by depressing them to a fingerboard, as on the Instead the nails of the first or second finger are held against the string slide up or down it to effect pitch changes. Most Jogis bow only two with a few bowing only one. A few singers had mounted jingle bells horsehair bow, which is held with the right hand, palm up. The string the player's left hand is tuned to a higher pitch than the inside string, in some songs is tuned to the tonic but in others is tuned to the fifth other degree of the scale lower than the tonic. The melody is played on the outside string, while the inside string acts as a drone. The sarangi may have as many as forty sympathetic strings; the tattered instruments of the Jogis were often bereft. (p. 226)

The verses and *padas* which are performed in the name of Kabir in the oral and performative traditions can be broadly described into two categories: *Saar Vanis* and *Daas Vanis*. In the Kabirpanthi circle, the *padas* ending in Kabir's signature line are called *Saar/Mool vanis*. However, it is difficult to determine which verses are Kabir's and which composed by others. For example Ramprasad Das, a popular singer from Gorakhpur, tells that the following *bhajan* has been given in many collections of Kabir's *bhajans*. This *bhajan* includes some words of English such as quarters and notice²¹⁵. This shows that this *bhajan* is

²¹⁵ Hess (p. 134-36) also gives such examples. She cites the interview of Shabnam Virmani with Kapil Tiwari who justifies it and considers it the part of Kabir's world:

In the domain where we reach (often irritably, to use Keats's word) after fact and reason, older Hindi forms and word choices strengthen a text's claim to authenticity, even as modern diction and usage do the opposite. An obvious criterion for declaring a poem inauthentic is anachronism: it may contain modern objects that didn't exist in Kabir's time, or it may show Kabir interacting with someone who lived long before or after him. The example of the train was given earlier. Here is another:

The seeker aims
at the target, shoots. Hit
by the sky! Hit
by the guru's wisdom! Hit
by the true name!
Up-breath, down-breath. A rifle-shot
to the three-stream confluence
Light the fuse of love, let the bullet
of wisdom strike.
Take the sword of the elements,
the knife of mind,
the shield of the Word. Let the bullet
of wisdom strike.
In the fort of the body, armies gather.
Two soldiers clash.
The brave warrior stands his ground,
the coward runs away.

The language of rifle and bullet is modern. But the trope of being struck and wounded (*chot lagna*, *shabda ki chot*) by a weapon that is the guru's wisdom, the word, the name, or the *bhajan*, has been well established in the mainstream of Kabir poetry for centuries. Many poems speak of a bow and arrow or a spear; here the weapon has been modernized to rifle and bullet. The yogic terminology of breath, energy channels, and the confluence between the eyebrows, central to all the old Kabir traditions, is still here, as is the traditional figure of the body as a city or a fort. Should the whole song be rejected because of the rifle and bullet? Kapil Tiwari's views on authenticity in Kabir are bound up with his understanding of oral tradition and experience-based knowledge. Here is what he says about anachronism:

Kapil Tiwari (KT): The question that interests me is not so much the authenticity of the texts as the truth of that Kabir who is spread far and wide among the people. What dwells in people's hearts and souls? For me, if any authenticity is possible, it is here — in people's memory and behaviour, in their songs and music, where the tradition has continued unbroken. As for written traditions — the earliest anthology is the Guru Granth Sahib in Punjab, the Nagari Pracharini Sabha in Varanasi has brought out a critical edition, research on the Bijak has gone on. But for me there is a greater authenticity in the Kabir of people's living memory than in the critically edited literature....

composed by someone else. This *bhajan* suggests that death is inevitable to all human beings who must perform good deeds in life when alive. It is a *chetavani* (warning) *bhajan*²¹⁶:

*Re man musafir
Re man musafir nikalna padega
Kaya kuti khaali karna padega
Bhaade ke quarter ko kya tum sambhale
Ek din tujhe ghar ka malik nikale
Uska kiraya tujhe bharna padega
Kaya kuti khaali karna padega
Ayegi notice jamanat na hogi
Palle mein agar koi amanat na hogi
Hokar ke kaid tujhe chalna padega
Kaya kuti khaali karna padega
Re man, re man musafir nikalna padega
Kaya kuti khaali karna padega
Meri na mano yamraj to manayega
Tera karm ka dand tujhe marke bhagayega
Ghor narak dukh sahna padega
Kaya kuti khaali karna padega
Re man, re man, re man musafir nikalna padega
Kaya kuti khaali karna padega
Kahat kabir firega tu rota
Lakh chaurasi mein khayega gota
Fir fir janmana aur marna padega
Kaya kuti khaali karna padega
Re man musafir nikalna padega
Kaya kuti khali karna padega*

[O heart, the passer by,
O heart, the passer by, you have to pass away.
You have to evacuate the cottage of the body.
Why do you preserve the quarters borrowed on rent.
One day the owner of the house will turn you out.
You have to pay its rent.
You have to evacuate the cottage of the body.
The notice will be sent and there will be no bail.

Shabnam Virmani (SV): In collecting these song texts you must have come across many things that obviously didn't belong to the fifteenth century. Will you include those too?

KT: Yes, I will include those. When I say that this is a living folk tradition, it means that it is not a thing that's frozen in the past. So it will contain many objects and words that arise from today's reality. For example, when Tijan-bai sings *pandvani*, airplanes appear. There were no airplanes in the Mahabharata, but she has put its characters into airplanes. The power of improvisation makes the Mahabharata meaningful in the twenty-first century. So when folk singers sing Kabir's nirgun songs, many things can enter that didn't exist in Kabir's time. The singer is a person of our time expressing Kabir's truth, not his literal words. For the singer who seizes Kabir's truth, it makes no difference if the text has a train, a photo, an airplane, a rifle. What's the difference? The truth in which the singer has faith should be present there.

²¹⁶ *Chetavani bhajans* are very popular among singers.

If you do not have any money.
 Having been captured, you have to pass away.
 You have to evacuate the cottage of the body.
 O heart, the passer by, you have to pass away.
 You have to evacuate the cottage of the body.
 If you do not obey me, the god of death will force you to obey.
 The punishment of your *karma* (deed) will beat you to run away.
 You have to tolerate the pains of deadly hell.
 You have to evacuate the cottage of the body.
 O heart, o heart, the passer by, you have to pass away.
 You have to evacuate the cottage of the body.
 Says Kabir, you will wander weeping.
 You will dip into the *lakh chaurasi* (cycle of birth).
 You will have to take birth and die again and again.
 You have to evacuate the cottage of the body.
 O heart, the passer by, you have to pass away.
 You have to evacuate the cottage of the body.]

I have recorded this song from Ramprasad Das many times. He initiates this song sometimes as '*Hey man musafir*' and sometimes as '*Re man musafir*'. In one version, the verse '*Papo ke agni mein jalna padega*' comes in place of '*Ghor narak dukh sahna padega*'. It reflects that a singer may introduce different changes in the same composition when he performs it in different settings.

Ramdhari Prajapati from Jaunpur sings the following song in which a devotee has been compared to a washerwoman who expresses her *bhakti* through her work. It also lays emphasis on good *karma* which awards one with salvation or a seat in heaven. In this *bhajan*, a line 'O, Kashi is my bank and Maghar is my plank' shows that it is composed by someone else as in it, a devotee perceives Kashi and Maghar as the places of pilgrimage associated with Kabir:

Dhoye rahi santo dhoye rahi
Guru ghat dhobiniya dhoye rahi
Kahan tora ghat kahan tora pata
Are kahanwa sukhavane ko jaye rahi
Guru ghat dhobiniya dhoye rahi
Are kashi mora ghat, maghar mora pata
Amarpur sukhavane jaye rahi
Guru ghat dhobiniya jaye rahi
Are kahu ka rehu kahu ka saudan

*Ha kahu ka daag chhodaye rahi
Guru ghat dhobiniya dhoye rahi
Are satya ka rehu surat ka saudan
Are karm ka daag chhodaye rahi
Are guru ghat dhobiniya dhoye rahi
Ha kahe kabir saheb suno bhai sadho
Hain amarpura ko jaye rahi
Are guru ghat dhobiniya dhoye rahi*

[Washing, o saints, washing.
The washerwoman is washing the *ghat* of the *Guru*.
Where is your bank and where is your plank?
Where are you going to dry clothes?
The washerwoman is washing the *ghat* of *Guru*.
O, Kashi is my bank and Maghar is my plank.
I am going to Amarpur to dry clothes.
The washerwoman is washing the *ghat* of *Guru*.
Of what is the smectite and where the *saudan* has been made?
O, which blot are you scrubbing off?
The washerwoman is washing the *ghat* of *Guru*.
O, there is the smectite of truth and there is the *saudan* made of the face.
She is scrubbing off the blot of *karma*.
The washerwoman is washing the *ghat* of *Guru*.
O seekers, says Kabir, listen.
She is going to Amarpur (heaven).
The washerwoman is washing the *ghat* of *Guru*.]

Firat Das has written the following *bhajans* by using Kabir's signature lines. Firat Das says that only a few *bhajans* are sung from *Bijak*. According to him, singers often compose their *bhajans* after Kabir. He claims that some *padas* and verses are chosen from *Bijak*, but preference is given to those *padas* which can be sung rhythmically and people can be pleased and attracted²¹⁷. He himself has composed about half a dozen *bhajans*. He often sings the composition in programmes associated with Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*:

*Kahat kabir suno bhai sadho
Satguru miliha apanan mein
Mohe lagi lagan guru charnan mein
[Says Kabir, listen, o' seekers.
Satguru is found in our own people.
I have fallen in love with the feet of *Guru*.]*

²¹⁷ Probably, it is the reason that *Kabir Shabdavali* of Kabir Chaura *Math*, which is a collection of popular *bhajans* is preferred by singers.

Firat Das claims that he has composed the following song in order to move women audiences. This *bhajan* is based on human body and senses. Many of Kabir's *bhajans* are also based on emphasis of purifying human body by controlling over human senses for practising *bhakti* and experiencing God within:

Kahat kabir suno bhai sadho
Samjha murakh gavariya ho
Pancho raniya ho kaya mein bazaar laganiya
 [Says Kabir, listen, o' seeker,
 O stupid and ignorant people, try to understand.
 The five queens, the market is arrayed in body.]

In the following *bhajan* of Firat Das, human body has been compared to *chunri* (scarf) and emphasizes on salvation through *bhakti*²¹⁸. It also describes that human body is made of five elements e.g. earth, sky, water, air and fire and has three types of qualities: *satvik* (pure), *rajsik* (passionate) and *tamsik* (vengeful):

Bheej gaye chunariya
Prem ras bundwa bheej gaye chunariya
Bheej gaye chunariya
Prem ras bundwa bheej gaye chunariya
Kahe ke tore chunri bane hain
Kahe ke lage phulna
Prem ras bundwa bheej gaye chunariya
Panch tatva ke bane hain chunariya
Teen gunan ka phulna
Prem ras bundwa bheej gaye chunariya
Arti saaj ke chale na suhagin
Saheb Kabir se milana
Prem ras bundwa bheej gaye chunariya
Kahat Kabir suno bhai sadho
Bada sagar hain tarna
Prem ras bundwa bheej gaye chunariya

[The scarf is drenched.
 The scarf is drenched by the drops of the *rasa* of love.
 The scarf is drenched.
 The scarf is drenched by the drops of the *rasa* of love.
 Of what is your scarf made?
 Which flowers are attached to it?
 The scarf is drenched by the drops of the *rasa* of love.]

²¹⁸ There are many *bhajans* in which human body or soul is compared to a *chunri*.

The scarf is made of five elements.
The flower is of three virtues.
The scarf is drenched by the drops of the *rasa* of love.
O bride, go with a decorated *Arti*-pot,
To meet Kabir.
The scarf is drenched by the drops of the *rasa* of love.
Says Kabir, listen, o' seekers.
A huge sea has to be crossed.
The scarf is drenched by the drops of the *rasa* of love.]

In his next *bhajan*, the knowledge given by *Guru* has been compared to the raining clouds. It suggests that human beings should drench themselves with the shower of this knowledge. However, only rare people know its value:

Kahat kabir suno bhai sadho
Yah pad ke birale parkhe
Satguru gyan badariya barse
[Says Kabir, listen, o' seekers.
Rare people understand this *pada*.
The clouds of knowledge of *Satguru* are showered.]

Like Firat Das, Devendra Das, Harisharan Das and Naresh Das also suggest that singers add the refrain of Kabir to their compositions. Devendra Das also composes his *bhajans* and often sings them in Kabirpanthi programmes. He gives a significant observation of how he and other singers and followers of Kabir compose verses similar to the spirit of Kabir.

I have composed many *bhajans*. Yes, the fact of matter is that when *bhakti* reaches its summit, you forget your name, and you add the name of your adorable god. The same case is about the saints. They are not the original verses of Kabir, but they reflect the path of Kabir. They (singers) add the name of their *Guru*. When they (their compositions) become 40-50 years old, it seems that they are of Kabir because they express something matching with Kabir's. We start uttering similar verses to whatever Kabir said 600 years ago. Something like this is happening.

Harisharan Das Shastri has compiled a book entitled *Shri Kabir Sant Bhajanavali*, which contains 544 *bhajans*. According to him, they belong to sixty different saints including few *Saguna bhaktas*. However, most *bhajans* have the signature line of Kabir. It seems to have many interpolations from Harisharan Das Shastri himself. It is to be noted that

Harisharan Das Shastri and many other singers associated with him perform these *bhajans* in Kabirpanthi programmes. These *bhajans* are treated as the part of Kabir world. Harisharan Das Shastri also claims that Kabir has uttered a number of verses wandering hither and thither, but all of them have not been collected. Citing the following verse of Kabir, he points out:

Desh videsh ho fira ganv ganv ki thor

(I have wandered in the country and abroad and village to village.)

Kabir did not sit at one place. He continued wandering and spreading the message. There are several states in India. His words are true and they are found in books. The book that I handed over to you consists of many *padas* spoken by many saints, great men, poets and writers. I have collected them from the beggars on roads. I have collected from their mouths in trains and on the roads and also from other artists. Therefore, there are many diverse things, but only some of them have been selected as the gardener selects the flowers, and flowers are always scattered. Even today, when I go somewhere, I enrich my collection. And thus, there are endless words. There are also many different words which are heard. It has been a *sruti* tradition. The saints have spread their words in society and others have heard them. This is the reason that the *Bijak* is the collection of only a few words, but we cannot say that it is the whole. Besides, there are a number of words of Kabir in the oral tradition. When he says that he has not sat at one place '*Desh videsh hun phira ganv ganv ki thor*', he has wandered from street to street and village to village. Wherever he went, he uttered such words. Therefore, it is not possible to confine them in one book.

It is significant to observe the view of Shastri that the *Bijak* is not a complete collection of Kabir's *vanis*. Agrawal (2009) and Vaudeville (1974) and many other scholars also suggest that *Bijak* contains only a few selected verses of Kabir.

d) Changes/Transcreations in Kabir's Verses on account of Fluidity

There are some devout Kabirpanthi men singers who claim that they sing only the *padas* of Kabir. However, I have observed that they also sing other *bhajans* apart from Kabir's. These singers also claim that they do not make any change in the original compositions (*Saar Vanis*) of Kabir. However, during performances, some changes naturally or purposefully happen in them. Some Kabirpanthi singers replace 'Kabir Das/Das Kabir'

with 'Kabir Saheb/Saheb Kabir'. They use Saheb to show their reverence to Kabir. They believe that 'das' which means 'servant' denigrates Kabir.

Changes are very common even in a single song of Kabir in terms of order of the verses, repetitions etc. The following are the excerpts of the four renditions of *jhini jhini chadariya*²¹⁹ varying from each other. Here, *chadariya* refers to human body which only Kabir could keep it pure from human vices throughout his life:

Rendition of Rameshwar Das, a singer from Hajipur, Bihar:

Chadariya ram naam ras bini chadariya
Chadariya jhini re jhini
Ram naam ras bini chadariya
[The blanket is woven with the *rasa* of the name of Ram.
Subtle, subtle blanket
The blanket is woven with the *rasa* of the name of Ram.]

Rendition of Ram Prasad Das, a singer from Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh:

Chadariya, chadariya jhini re bini
Chadariya jhini re bini
Chadariya jhini jhini re bini
[Blanket, subtle, subtle blanket
Subtle blanket is woven.
Subtle, subtle blanket is woven.]

Rendition of Israr Ahmad, a *Qawwali* singer from Bharpahi, Gorakhpur:

Bhini re bhini, chadariya bhini re bhini
Tohe ram naam ras bhini
Chadariya, jhini re jhini
[Drenched, drenched, the blanket is drenched.
That is drenched with the name of Ram;
Subtle, subtle blanket.]

Rendition of Devendra Das from Kabir Chaura, Varanasi:

²¹⁹ In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, two songs '*jhini jhini chadariya*' and '*moko kahan dhoondhe re bande*' are very popular. Lorenzen (1996) also ranks them first and seventh out of 20 most popular songs of Kabir. However, women rarely sing these *padas*.

Chadariya jhini re jhini
Chadariya jhini jhini
Chadariya jhini re jhini
Chadariya jhini jhini
Ram naam ras bhini
Bhini, bhini, ram naam ras bhini
 [Subtle is the blanket.
 Subtle, subtle blanket.
 Subtle is the blanket.
 Subtle, subtle blanket.
 It is drenched with the *rasa* of the name of Ram.
 Drenched, drenched, drenched with the *rasa* of the name of Ram.]

Rameshwar Yadav sings it longer than the other singers. The term Ram and *rangrej* (dye) come nowhere in the rendition of Ram Prasad Das. Some lines which are in others' renditions are also absent in his rendition. In the *Qawwali* style (rendition of Israr Ahmad), the verses are repeated many times. However, it is shorter than others'. The four renditions also differ in the order of the verses, tunes and rhythm. This shows the fluidity of a single *pada* of Kabir and the same *pada* is sung differently by different singers. Each singer introduces some changes in the same *pada*. The same case is about many other *padas* of Kabir. Hess (2015) points out: "Kabir texts become relatively fluid when sung in live spaces, in contrast to their fixity in written or recorded form" (p. 80). In her study on Malwa singers, Hess discusses that a single song has many variations from one singer to another: "Nearly every song we heard from multiple sources in Malwa had variations from one singer to another, often from one occasion to another" (p. 82). Jaroslav Strand also comments on the different authorial versions of a single song: "In an oral tradition there may be more than one authorial version and, of course, more than one variant of each of these several authorial versions in consequence of their having been presented by still other performers before their different audiences" (p. 45).

In his essay "Jogis and Nirgun Bhajans in Bhojpuri-Speaking India: Intra-Genre Heterogeneity, Adaptation, and Functional Shift", Henry has compared three versions of

"Hira Ratan" Nirguna song of Kabir, which he collected from three singers of Jogi caste. He points out many differences in these three versions in terms of rhythm, tune, repetition, scale, elaboration, form of melody and words and phrases. He relates the reason of these differences to singers' competence and the open nature of application of tunes:

Several factors give rise to this diversity. First is the differences in the musical backgrounds and abilities of the Jogis. Some of them have performed as professional musicians; others are only part-time mendicants, almost entirely self-taught. Those with professional experience, it appears, employ the tunes and techniques of the genres they played professionally. Those without that experience employ simpler techniques and the tunes of songs they hear in and around the village.

Second is an obvious absence of restriction on the tune which can be employed, coupled with a copious supply of other music from which to borrow. This means that a new tune can be composed to suit a text or an existing tune can be borrowed from another song in or out of the genre, and used alone or combined with another tune or part of a tune. Such borrowing has been documented for a number of other genres in the region; the nirgun bhajan hardly stands alone in its musical heterogeneity. (pp. 236-37).

The *padas* (which do not have the signature line of Kabir or in which the name of Kabir is inserted differently) composed by Kabir's disciples and followers are called *Daas Vanis*. The *Nirguna* or other devotional songs (embodying Kabir's spirit) composed by Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi singers, writers and saints, which convey Kabir's spirit and sensibility become a part of his performative world. The following *bhajan* is regularly sung in the musical repertoire of Kabir and treated as Kabir's own words. Ramprasad Das introduces it as one to have been composed by a Kabirpanthi devotee Hansh Das. It comes with following signature line of Kabir completely different from his traditional signature line: "*Kahana hain ye saaf saaf, Sadguru Kabir ka*" (*Sadguru* Kabir has said with clarity). It is sung in both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar²²⁰:

²²⁰ I also recorded this *bhajan* from Dulo Dasi, a woman Kabir singer from Bihar. However, there are many differences between both versions. For example, in the version of Dulodasi, in place of "*Kahana hain ye saaf saaf, Sadguru Kabir ka*", the line "*Are Saheb Kabir saaf saaf, hani unako saaf hain*" (Oh, Saheb Kabir is pure and so are his words).

Man ki tarang mar lo, bas ho gaya bhajan
Bas ho gaya bhajan
Adat buri sudhar lo bas ho gaya bhajan
Man ki tarang mar lo, bas ho gaya bhajan
[Kill the caprices of the heart; this is the only true *bhajan*.
This is the only true *bhajan*,
Improve bad habits; this is the only true *bhajan*.
Kill the caprices of the heart; this is the only true *bhajan*.]

In the performative world, *Saar Vanis* and *Daas Vanis* are generally preceded by Kabir's couplets²²¹. Besides, some tributary verses are also used alone or with the couplets. The couplets serve as tribute to Kabir and also reflect the themes of the *padas* being sung. It is to be noted that the recitation of these verses at the beginning legitimizes and contextualizes even the *Daas Vanis*.

Many singers perform *Saar Vanis* or *Daas Vanis* and make running commentaries (punctuated by Kabir's couplets) on them. During their commentaries and explanations, they start many of their sentences with 'Kabir says/Kabir has said' which also validates *Daas Vanis* and make them the part of Kabir's performative corpus²²².

²²¹ Singers choose different couplets to initiate their performances. This also stimulates variations when other singers sing the same *padas*. Sometimes, a set of some couplets are also sung together in place of *padas*. Hess brings out an interesting observation in relation to *padas* and couplets being sung together:

Getting our heads out of books and tuning in to oral-performative life reveals a good deal about the dynamics of categories. An interesting organizing factor in a performance is the relationship of *sakhis* to bhajans—a relationship of which we would have no clue if we knew only written texts. In books, the couplets (called *sakhi*, *saloku*, or *doha*) and the songs (called *pad*, *shabda/shabad*, or *bhajan*) are always in two separate compartments. They are literary genres. In folk performance in the Hindi region, they are nearly always mixed. A bhajan is preceded by one or more *sakhis*, which should be thematically related to the bhajan. An expert singer can string together a wonderful series of *sakhis*, each touched off by the last, and each expressing some aspect of what is to come in the bhajan. The *sakhis* are sung in a musically different way from the bhajans, producing melodic and rhythmic variations that experienced audiences find pleasing. Malwi singers sometimes use a form called *rekhta*, in place of or along with *sakhis*, to introduce a bhajan. *Rekhta* as they perform it is a dense and intense metrical form whose melody has a more dramatic quality than the *sakhi*. (p. 154)

²²² Through their commentaries and explanations of *Saar Vanis* and *Daas Vanis*, singers transcreate different images of Kabir, which are marked by their personal and social experiences and circumstances.

e) Examples of *Daas Vanis* in Performances of Men Singers

Many men singers often compose their compositions (*Daas Vanis*) after Kabir's spirit and perform them in the public gatherings. They also perform the songs composed by other singers and followers. I recorded Ram Prasad Das from Gorakhpur singing a song "*Mujhmein Ram hain tujhmein Ram hain*" already composed and sung by Nandan Das, a Kabir singer from Mirzapur. In the rendition of Ram Prasad, the following lines of the song are absent. When Nandan Das sings this song, he uses many quotations and sayings, but Ramprasad uses many *sakhis* of Kabir in his simultaneous commentary on this verse. It reflects that each singer transcreates the same *pada* in different ways during performances:

Ek baap ke ham sab bete, ek hamari mata
Are khana pani dene wala sabka ek hi data
[We are the sons of one father, we have one mother.
O, the caretaker of all is the same God.]
Na jane kis murakh ne ladna hamein sikhaya
Sabse kar lo pyar jagat mein koi nahi paraya
[It is not known which stupid person has taught us to fight.
Love all in the world, no one is alien.]

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

In this sectarian environment, the names of Kabir and Dharmadas often come together. Many songs are attributed to Dharmadas, and many others include the names of both Kabir and Dharmadas. Once Prahladji showed me a thick collection of Kabir bhajans edited by Yugalanand, a Damakheda devotee. The great majority of poems concluded with an unvarying half-line, 'Kabir says to Dharmadas.' Prahladji suggested that many of these songs were traditionally sung with no mention of Dharmadas, but that sectarians had pasted in the chhap that supported their version of history. (pp. 92-93)

I recorded the following song from Siya Ram, a *Khajadi* singer from Madhubani, which is one of the most popular *bhajans* attributed to Kabir as *Guru* and ends in Dharmadas's signature line. It is sung in both Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In this *bhajan*, devotees pray to *Guru* for enlightening them.

Dhani dharmadas saheb ke arji
Aa bhoolan rahiya bata dijiye
Satguru paiyan lagu naam ko lakha dijiye
[Dhani Dharmadas submits an *arji* to Saheb.
Oh, tell the way forgotten by me.
Satguru, I touch your feet, make me understand the meaning of name.]

Harisharan Das Shastri from Maghar Kabir *Math* sings the following verse attributed to Dharmadas. The *bhajan* emphasizes that one needs to continue practising *bhakti* consciously in order to get salvation. He sings it with the following introductory commentary which highlights that many of the *padas* sung in the name of Kabir are also based on a time frame and exerts an influence accordingly:

As we are discussing in the morning, the *padas* of Kabir are time bound. Which *padas* should be sung at what time? His *padas* are made accordingly. Therefore, I will sing a *pada* which is sung in the morning. There are *padas* which are sung in the evening. There are different *padas* for the afternoon. All have their respective influences due to a particular time. Kabir says that in the morning, the farmer who is sleeping late at home is awoken by his guardian. In the same way, we are sleeping in the world. How does a saint awake us in the morning? Kabir says that the people of the world are passers-by. They all are travellers. They all have slept under trees on the way. Then, how Kabir is awakening them.

Are dharmadas araj kari vinawe
Araj kari dinwa ho, araj kari vinawe
Paar hohiye na
Hansa paar hohiye na
Ho ho
Are uthu re batohiya bhayil subhaiya
Chale ke have na
Tuhara gharwa lambi duriya chale ke have na
[O, Dharmadas submits a prayer,
Submits a prayer, submits a prayer.
Will cross,
Hamsa (swan) will cross.
Ah, ah!

O, the passer-by, wake up, it is morning now.
You have to go.
Your home is situated at a long distance and we have to go.]

I discovered that the singers of Bihar sing more songs attributed to Dharmadas and *Guru/Satguru* than the singers of Uttar Pradesh. It sheds light on the great influence of Dharmadas Kabirpanth and Dharmadas on them. I also found that the singers who are devout followers of Kashi Kabir Chaura tradition rarely or do not sing verses attributed to Dharmadas. I never found Ram Prasad Das singing any verse attributed to Dharmadas. Rejecting the authority of Dharmadas, he considers Kabirpanth of Kashi Kabir Chaura to be the real Kabirpanth. This shows how the ideology of the panth affects the selection of the songs by a singer. However, verses attributed to Dharmadas are equally popular among the lay followers and singers of all Kabirpanthi sects.

There are also found many *padas* after the popular tunes of Bollywood film songs, Bhojpuri films/Album songs and also after DJ tunes (they will be discussed below). This shows that the modern music is also influencing Kabir's world of performance. In fact, Kabir is being updated according to the time, space and taste of audiences. Such songs help singers reach audiences of all age groups, especially the young generation. In his essay "The Rise of a Folk Music Genre: Biraha" (1989), Scott L. Marcus mentions such innovations in the *biraha* folk genre and describes the reason of the adoption of film tunes by singers and composers in *birahas*: "It was the perfect strategy for keeping up with the trend-oriented aspect of a modern popular culture: if a new song were sweeping the city (from a film or on the radio or records), within a week or two biraha singers would be incorporating that song into their own" (p. 23). In his Ph. D. Dissertation "Kirtan: A Study of the Sonic Manifestations of the Divine in the Popular Hindu Culture of Banaras" (1986), Stephen M. Slawek also mentions such innovations in the *kirtan* genre. Slawek provides two examples of *kirtan* groups that used tunes from film songs, and for one states that "they have set many of

their bhajan (hymn) texts to popular film tunes with the intention of broadening the appeal of their kirtan so that members of the younger generation would also be attracted to the path of bhakti (devotion)” (as cited in Henry, p. 237).

Many songs dedicated to Kabir in relation to Lahartara, Kabir Chaura and Maghar are composed and performed by singers as these places are associated with Kabir respectively by Kabir’s birth, upbringing and death. This shows how these compositions of Kabir are tied to contexts of occasion and place. Anupam Das, a Kabir singer from Bihar, who is a devout follower of Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir *Math*, was inspired to compose the following *bhajan* in which he also highlights the home of Neeru, Kashi Kabir Chaura:

We have been celebrating the Kabir *Jayanti*. It dawned upon my mind why I should not compose a *bhajan* related to the birthplace of Kabir Saheb. It is my own composition. It is patterned on the *dandiya* tune²²³.

Saheb prakat bhaye kashi mein aaj neeru ka ghar pyara lage
Ho saheb prakat bhaye kashi mein aaj neeru ka ghar pyara lage
Ho aaj khushiyan ki chhayi bahar neeru ka ghar pyara lage
[Saheb appeared in Kashi; the home of Neeru looks nice today.
O, Saheb appeared in Kashi; the home of Neeru looks nice today.
O, today spreads the waves of happiness, the home of Neeru looks nice today.]

Nandan Das often composes his songs and performs them in the Kabirpanthi programmes held at Kabir Chaura *Math* and other places. His compositions give him a special recognition among Kabirpanthis. He has written the following *sohar* song on the birth of Kabir and sings it on every occasion of Kabir Jayanti at Kabir Chaura *Math*. Many singers, especially of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar sing Kabir in *sohar* folk singing style²²⁴:

²²³ A song on which *Dandiya Raas* is performed. *Dandiya Raas* is the socio-religious folk dance originating from Indian state of Gujarat and popularly performed in the festival of Navaratri.

²²⁴ In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Kabir is also sung in *jhoomar* [*Jhoomar* is a lively form of music and dance that originated in the Multan and Baluchistan, also thrived in Sandalbar areas (Faisalabad, Jhang, Chiniot, Nankana Sahib, Toba Tek districts of Punjab). It is slower and more rhythmic form. The songs evoke a quality that reminds of swaying], *sohar* (folk songs sung on the occasions of childbirth or birth anniversary) and *birah* (songs based on the pain of separation from one’s beloved or a longing to meet one’s beloved) and other regional and local folk genres. The following is an example of *jhoomar* song with Kabir’s signature, sung by Harisharan Das Shastri:

Saheb Kabir gavana purabi mein jhoomarwa

Jyeshtha sudi puranmasi din somvaar rahal ho
Ho lalna parkat bhayina purayin ke paat ta saheb kabir ayila ho
[It was Monday, the full moon day of *Jyeshtha*.
O son, Kabir appeared on the leave of the lotus; Saheb Kabir came.]

Nandan Das's following song establishes Kabir's connection with Varanasi and describes him as a kind figure:

Are Saheb Kabir dilwala hain
Vo to kashi banaras wala hain
[Oh, Saheb Kabir is kind hearted;
He is the dweller of Banaras.]

He has composed a song on Maghar, in which he appreciates the greatness of Maghar with all its cultural characteristics associated with Kabir. It is to be noted that it ends in Raidas's signature which hints at how singers are aware of the fact that Kabir, Ravidas and other saints were raising the issues in favour of the weak and poor. This song earned Nandan Das a great recognition and reputation as a Kabir singer:

Are maghar nagri ke mahima apaar ba
Maghar nagri ke mahima apaar ba
Jahanwa bahela ek maghar nadiya
Logwa karela snan din aur ratiya
Vo vo jahanwa bahela ek maghar nadiya
Logwa karela snan din ratiya
Hola rog mukti ami rasdhar ba
Maghar nagri ka mahima apaar ba
Bhukhale ko mile jahan bharpet rotiya
Nange badan ko mile chir aur longotiya
Are bhaktan ke nayiya ka saheb patvaar ba
Maghar nagri ka mahima apaar ba
Charo taraf tana bana kargha bunala
Kabir college kahan khaadi bhandar ba
Maghar nagri ke mahima apaar ba
Ek taraf saheb ka sachha darbar ba
Ek taraf baba ka ek mazar ba
Ram rahim jahan ek sarkar ba
Maghar nagri ka mahima apaar ba

Fir nahi hansa ahiha naiharwa
Cheto re batohiya bhayil subahiyo
[Saheb Kabir sings a *jhoomar* in the *Purabi* dialect.
The *hansa* (swan) will not come to the natal home again.
O the passer by, beware, the morning has turned up.]

*Sant mahant sati sevak dasa
Sadguru vachan vishvasa
Pawan raidas guru charan adhaar ba
Maghar nagri ka mahima apaar ba*

[O, the significance of Maghar is great.
The significance of Maghar is great,
Where the Maghar river flows.
People bathe in day and night.
O, where flows the river of Maghar.
People bathe there day and night.
Here one finds the deliverance from diseases; the Ami is full of *rasa* (nectar).
The significance of the river of Maghar is great.
Hungry people get *chapati* to the fill.
The nude bodies get clothes and scarfs.
O, Saheb is the rudder of the boats of the *bhaktas*.
The significance of Maghar town is great.
Here, everywhere clothes are woven with handlooms.
There are Kabir College and the stock of *khadi* clothes.
The significance of Maghar is great.
On one hand, there is the true courtyard of Saheb.
On the other hand, there is the *Mazar* of Baba,
Where Ram and Rahim are one.
The significance of Maghar is great.
Saints, *Mahants*, *Satis* (chaste women), servants and slaves
There is faith in *Sadguru's vanis*.
The feet of *Guru* are the only shelter, says Pawan Raidas.
The significance of Maghar is great.]

f) Kabir's Social Criticism in *Daas Vanis*

Kabirpanthi men singers sing many songs criticizing non-vegetarianism and alcoholism. Many of these songs also give them scope to ridicule upper castes and priests and to assert their own superiority. I cite here a few lines of such a song of Keshav Das who is from Bihar and belongs to the Dusadh caste. These lines show that the upper castes have indulged in what are considered despicable while those castes which were hated for their meals and manners are now learning good *samskar* through Kabir who is God for them. In fact, upper castes kept the consumption of non-vegetarian meals at the centre of discrimination against shudras and dalits and therefore, more songs which reject this centre can be heard:

Brahman kshatriya taadi piyo kanthi bandhe paasi
Murga anda roj udavo panda aur pujari
Hay re kaljugva kamaal kayile nari
[Brahmins and Kshatriyas drink *taadi* and people of the Dusadh caste tie *kanthis*.
Pandas and priests eat chickens and eggs.
Oh, *Kaliyuga*, women have done wonders.]

While ridiculing these upper castes people, they are also aware of the oppression perpetrated against them on the basis of caste, class and creed. They had to face the severe experiences of untouchability which is “still an issue in India, even though discrimination against “untouchables” is declared illegal in the constitution” (Hess, p. 161). Dalit singers attack Brahmins who kept them away from reach of god in the temple by declaring them as those of filthy and polluting bodies: “For millennia priesthood has been the preserve of Brahmin males, who have literally and figuratively guarded the doors so that their holy images would not be polluted by bodies regarded as intrinsically filthy” (Hess, p. 161). Such *padas* provide them a feeling of prestige and personhood and let them find their God in Kabir as he, to them, fought their war against Brahmins and other upper caste people. While Keshav Das and his group including women sang this song, I saw great happiness, confidence and courage on their faces and also the sprit in the group, which was full of a voice of protest and dignity. Martin calls this phenomenon ‘liberation spirituality’:

The liberation spirituality is a type of theological reflection engaged in both by and for the ‘poor’ broadly defined, reflecting their understanding of the nature of God and the religious life. Herein we find a critique of social and religious hierarchies, but also an affirmation of true religious authority as derived from lived experience and an assertion that knowing and loving God grows within the radical living practice of religion. Moreover, reflection focuses primarily on the struggle to affirm dignity and (re-) claim one’s true identity as beloved of God and to know a loving God while living under inhuman conditions. Indeed, these reflections are marked by a deep and nuanced sense of joy, hope, and faith, tested and tempered in the fire of suffering.

Within this type of theological reflection, we also find the poor and disenfranchised laying claim to religious practices and narratives as their own, interpreting their relevance for their own lives, and retelling the stories in the idioms of their own experience. (pp. 200-01)

Many men singers perform a number of songs criticizing Brahmanical hypocrisy, caste discrimination, *saguna* tradition of worship at temples. Rameshwar Yadav ridicules pilgrimages, statue worship and exposes Brahmin priests who cheat common people and have an immoral character.

Patthar ke murti bole na chale
Hile na dole khaye na piye
Mandir ke panda bada thagera
Paisa thaglas, mithayi thaglas
Ghur ghur ke hamaro nihare
[A statue of stone neither speaks nor walks,
Neither moves nor eats and drinks.
The *panda* (Brahmin priest) of a temple is a notorious swindler.
Swindles money, swindles sweets;
Even gazes at me again and again.]

Sometimes, their criticisms feature through the *sakhis* which they use before singing their *padas* and also during their commentaries and explanations. Ramshewar Das speaks the following *sakhis* of Kabir:

Pothi padh padh jag mua pandit bhaya na koya
Dhayi akhar prem ka padhe se pandit hoye
(Reading book after book, the world dies; no one becomes a scholar.
The term love is made of four letters; one who reads [understands] it becomes a scholar.)

Kankad pathar chun ke masjid liye banaya
Ta chadi mulla baag diyo, bahara hua khudaya
(Mosque is built of chosen brick and stone;
Mullah climbing that masque addresses loudly as if God were deaf.)

Din bhar rakhe roza, raat hanat hain gaya
Ko khuda bandagi kaise khushi khudaya
(Fast all day, kill cows at night,
Here prayers, there blood, does this please God?) [Translated by Linda Hess]

In his commentary, he compares Hindu gods and goddesses to devils and ghosts:

*Kahe Kabir mati ke lola
Bhutwa ke pujale bhutwa hola*
[They (gods and goddesses) are puppets made of soil (stone),
Worshipping ghosts makes one a ghost.]

One who worships a ghost or the soil (stone) is a fool. One is ignorant....
Saheb forbids to worship all gods and goddesses, devils and ghosts and
worship of statues and forbids to go to temples.

I argue that Kabir must not be understood exclusively through *padas* (both *Saar/Daas Vanis*) sung in the name of Kabir but through an integrated analysis of *padas*, *sakhis*, *rekhta*, contexts, commentaries and explanations of singers. In this way, we will discover and understand Kabir with all his dynamics in the oral and performative traditions.

Broadly speaking, during performances, two aspects of Kabir — spiritual and social messages — are highlighted. Both the terrains of Kabir often intersect or carry each other together. Even though singers sing Kabir's *padas* based on spiritual themes, they touch upon Kabir's social messages in their commentaries or explanations. Hess, Agrawal and K. Tiwari also find both the terrains joined with each other. Hess writes: "To represent the view that the political and spiritual cannot and should not be separated in Kabir" (p. 361). According to Agrawal, both spiritual and social do not exist separately in Kabir:

To listen to the unbroken continuity of worldly and transcendent, outer and inner, social and spiritual, to listen constantly to the word resounding endlessly inside and outside and to live in accordance with their interdependence — this is what Kabir calls *ghat sadhana*, spiritual practice in the body.... His much-cited and much-praised social consciousness and social criticism develop from his spiritual search. Kabir's *ghat sadhana* throws his revolutionary enthusiasts into great embarrassment; but without it, his social consciousness and criticism are impossible. When Kabir looks at society, he sees it through the eyes of that dream which is revealed to him by *ghat sadhana*. (Translated by Linda Hess, p. 362)

Agrawal refuses to surgically remove Kabir's spiritual expressions while embracing his humanism and social-political commentary:

Again and again Kabir's poetry reminds us: between worldly and transcendent, inner and outer, social and spiritual, there is no opposition. To

understand this non-opposition, there is no need to search “outside.” If there is any way to get free of the incompleteness that haunts us, to be released from the habit of chopping our fullness into pieces, it will be through realization “within the body” [*ghat bhitar*] of our human essence: “Search and you’ll find it instantly, in a split second. Kabir says, listen seeker: it’s the breath of your breath.” (Translated by Linda Hess, p. 361).

g) Performances of Kabir Men Singers in Other *Nirguna* and *Saguna* Sects

It is interesting to note that men singers perform not only for the Kabirpanth, but also for other *Saguna* and *Nirguna* sects. Ramprasad Das, Nandan Das, Devendra Das, Harisharan Das Shastri are often invited by different non-Kabirpanthi sects to perform. It is to be noted that Ramprasad Das and Nandan Das sing most of the songs in other sects, which they regularly sing in Kabirpanthi programmes. They blur the boundaries between Kabirpanth and other sects not only through their crossings but also their performing similar *padas* in those sects. The following two *bhajans* of Nandan Das which express Kabir’s spirit attract the audiences of all sects. The first *bhajan*²²⁵ suggests that we must devote ourselves to *bhakti*; we should not be proud of our wealth, caste and class; human life is transitory and death levels all differences between high and low, rich and poor etc. and the second one asks people to do *bhakti* of Ram and to reject faith in the *Shastras*, the *Ramayana* and the *Gita*. Only *bhakti* to the Almighty ensures one’s salvation.

Jagat mein koi na permanent
Jagat mein koi na permanent
Bahar aakar bhool gaya kyo prabhu ka agreement
Jagat mein koi na permanent
[No one is permanent in the world.
No one is permanent in the world.
Why did you forget the agreement of God after coming outside (out of mother’s womb)?
No one is permanent in the world.]

²²⁵ The singers and preachers of other sects also sing this *bhajan* although Nandan Das claims his version original.

In this *bhajan* 'permanent' and 'agreement' 'restaurant' and 'tent' etc. are English words. Nandan Das says that he often chooses to sing this *bhajan* in a setting where literate audiences are also present.

Ho jao taiyar gaadi kashi ji se aati hain
Ram naam ka ticket kata lo ek aati ek jati hain
Ved shastra, ramayan, gita hamako nahi batate hain
Lakh chaurasi station se junction par rah jati hain
[Be ready, the train comes from Kashi;
Book the ticket in the name of Ram, one comes and one goes.
The *Vedas*, the *Shastras*, the *Ramayana* and the *Gita* do not tell us the truth
They remain at the junction of *Lakh Chaurasi* (cycle of birth).]

Sometimes, singers also sing songs attributed to Paltudas, Meera and other saints in Kabirpanthi programmes. Harisharan Das Shastri sings a *bhajan* foregrounding the importance of *Guru*. However, this *bhajan* is dedicated to Paltu Das. This is very popular among the Kabirpanthis, especially of Uttar Pradesh. I also recorded it from Malati Devi, a woman singer from Jaunpur. It is interesting to note how Harisharan Das Shastri relates it to Kabir in his preceding commentary.

Kabir has instructed that in the practical life unless we adopt a *Guru*, our life will not be meaningful and our life will not progress. Therefore, it is seen that there are householders in the family and at home, but they adopt God (*Guru*) or great souls or saints. There are millions or billions of members in his family. His lovers continue increasing. Therefore, Kabir has said:

Bin guru nahi vistar
(No progress without *Guru*.)

There will be no progress without a spiritual *Guru*. Others will end with your and my bodies in fire. Here is the journey of *Guru*. Therefore, there is a *shabda* of Paltu Saheb.

Are ke kholi bharam ke kevadiya ho satguru bina saheb
Ke kholi bharam ke kevadiya ho satguru bina saheb
Are naihar mein rahna kuchh gunavo na sikhani
Are sasure mein gayile fuhariya ho satguru bina saheb
Ke kholi bharam kevadiya ho satguru bina saheb
To apne mana ka dhana badi kulvanti
Are are doobahi na pawe gagariya ho satguru bina saheb
Ke kholi bharam ke kevadiya ho satguru bina saheb
To paltu das chhode kuljatiya

*Are satguru milan sangatiya ho satguru bina saheb
Ke kholi bharam ke kevadiya ho satguru bina saheb*

[O Saheb, without *Satguru*, who will unlock the door of hallucination?
O Saheb, without *Satguru*, who will unlock the door of hallucination?
O, living in the *natal* home, I did not learn any skill.
O Saheb, without *Satguru*, I went to the house of my in-laws as a boorish.
O Saheb, without *Satguru*, who will unlock the door of hallucination?
I have done everything according to my wishes only.
O Saheb, without *Satguru*, I am not able to touch the pitcher.
O Saheb, without *Satguru*, who will unlock the door of the hallucination?
Paltu Das has given up the difference of caste and dynasty.
O Saheb, I have found a friend in the form of *Guru*,
Without *Satguru*,
O Saheb, without *Satguru*, who will unlock the door of hallucination?]

The following is the *bhajan* of Meera²²⁶ sang by Anupam Das²²⁷. In this *bhajan*, Meera says that she has fallen in love with *Satguru*, but the world is unaware of it:

*Mohin lagi satguru se preet duniya kya jane
Kya jane re bhai kya jane
Mohin lagi satguru se preet duniya kya jane*
[I am in love with *Satguru*; the world does not know it.
The world does not know it.
I am in love with *Satguru*; the world does not know it.]

Such songs based other saints also enrich and broaden Kabir's oral and performative world and make it more comprehensive.

h) Kabir's Stories among Singers and their Audiences

Studying the personal history of Prahlad Singh Tipanya, the popular Malwa Kabir singer, Hess suggests, "Telling the stories of Prahladji and others is important because it is also a way of telling the story of Kabir. Kabir lives in singers and listeners, social contexts, and personal histories" (p. 22). My study deals with such stories in connection with Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It focuses on following singers: Ramprasad Das from Gorakhpur,

²²⁶ Meera songs also attract women audiences to Kabir.

²²⁷ Men singers prefer to sing mostly those *padas* of Meera which are attributed to *Guru*. However, women singers sing all types of Meera's songs.

Anupam Das from Lakhisarai, Bihar, 'Tana Bana' led by Devendra Das from Kashi Kabir Chaura Math, A group of *Qawwali* singers from Gorakhpur, and *Khajadi* Singers from Bihar.

Ram Prasad Das

Ramprasad Das is one of the most popular Kabir singers in Uttar Pradesh. I heard his name from all the saints and many lay Kabirpanthis of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* during my fieldwork in the early months of 2016. All appreciated him for his Kabir-singing and instructed me to meet him. I saw him for the first time as a public figure in June 2016 on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti at Kabir Chaura *Math*. He wore white kurta and dhoti and had a white turban on the head. He was surrounded by hundreds of audiences on the platform of Kabir Samadhi temple and by thousands of audiences sitting and standing down the platform. Ramprasad Das stood on the platform among the audiences and had a plastic *Khajadi* (tambourine) in his left hand and beat it rhythmically with the other hand. It followed his melodious singing of Kabir *bhajans*. In between, he also made a running commentary on Kabir's teachings and messages. His commentary was punctuated with a number of popular *sakhis* of Kabir. All present on the occasion were completely mesmerized by his Kabir-singing and influential commentaries. However, due to a huge crowd, I could not meet him.



Figure 14: Ramprasad Das singing and preaching Kabir at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*

In October 2016, I went to Maghar Kabir *Math* in Sant Kabir Nagar, Uttar Pradesh. There too, I heard a lavish praise of Kabir-singing of Ramprasad Das from all the saints of the *Math*. I decided to visit Ramprasad Das the next day. From Maghar *Math*, I went straight to Banahava Baba Kabir *Math*, Khajuri in Gorakhpur, where Ramprasad Das lives. He is the *Mahant* of this *Math*. I met and interacted with Ramprasad Das at the Khajuri *Math* which is about twenty kilometres away from Maghar. He welcomed me wholeheartedly as he welcomes others. He was a gentle, simple and amicable human being, but radical in his views about Kabir. I interviewed him and recorded his songs there. Since then, I have interviewed, recorded and observed his performances repeatedly at different places in Banaras, Gorakhpur and Sant Kabir Nagar.

Ramprasad Das was born in 1977 at Rajakua village in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. He belongs to an extremely backward caste Lonia. His childhood name was Rama. His mother passed away a few months after his birth. He was brought up by his grandmother. She was a

Kabirpanthi follower who had taken *diksha* from Maghar Kabir *Math*. Ramprasad Das received his first lesson of Kabir's teachings from her grandmother and his first lesson of Kabir-singing from a local Kabirpanthi *Mahant* Ramdas.

There was a Kabir *Math* in the Rajakua village, headed by the *Mahant* Ramdas who was associated with Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*. Ramdas was a great scholar and Kabir singer. Nearly all the villagers were his disciples. He used to sing Kabir *vairagi (Nirguna) bhajans* every evening. Most of the followers including women of the village used to assemble at the *Math* to listen to his *bhajans*.

Ramprasad Das's grandmother also used to regularly visit the *Mahant*. He accompanied her as well. The *bhajans* of Ramdas laid a profound influence on him. They stimulated an interest in him in learning and singing *bhajans*. One day after the end of the *bhajan* programme, Ramprasad Das went to Ramdas and expressed his wish to learn *bhajans*: "Going to the *Mahant* one day, I pleaded with him. I also want to sing *bhajans*. How can I sing?" He said, "O child, bring a note book and I will write *bhajans* on that." Ramdas wrote the following *bhajan* which suggests that human body is priceless like diamond, and one must use it in practising *bhakti* for salvation:

Jatan karo heerwa lage bada daam
Satya ka palara, surat ke daadi
Naam ke sherwa se taulo aatho yaam
Heera ke maram jauhari jane
Vu kya jane jake kaudi na rache Ram
Jatan karo heerwa lage bada daam
[Make efforts, diamond (human birth) is very costly.
The scale is made of truth, the rod is of awareness.
Weigh days and nights with a cast iron of *Name*.
It is a goldsmith who knows the value of diamond.
One who does not have even a little devotion to Ram does not know its value at all.
Make efforts, diamond is very costly.]

Ramprasad Das learnt this *bhajan* by heart and next day he sang it before the regular public gathering. All the audiences present there were pleased with his melodious voice and

admired his Kabir-singing. Finding the voice quality and style of Ramprasad Das remarkable, Ramdas also encouraged and promoted him to sing more and more. He used to write a *bhajan* for him every day and give him an opportunity to sing in the public gathering. Thus, he learnt about 20 *bhajans* from Ramdas. However, all the *bhajans* were not of Kabir, but they expressed Kabir's spirit and sensibility: "All the *bhajans* he wrote were related to Kabir's spirit. They were related to Kabir's spirit and sensibility which people believe in. There were some *padas* which were attributed to Kabir Saheb. They were used with 'Kahat Kabir....' There were some *padas* composed by others, but they were influenced by Kabir Saheb."

This is how the journey of Ramprasad Das's Kabir-singing started. Soon, he got opportunities to sing those *bhajans*²²⁸ in other Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi settings. Even the teachers of his school often asked him to perform *bhajans*.

When Ramprasad Das was in his third standard, his grandmother also took him to Maghar on the occasion of Kabir Nirvana Divas. There he got an opportunity to sing *bhajans* before Amrit Saheb, the 22nd *Mahant* of the Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*. It was his first performance before a huge gathering of the Kabirpanthis. Being impressed by his performance and style of singing *bhajans*, Amrit Saheb applauded and rewarded him 5 rupees. Since then, he was regularly invited to Maghar on the occasion of *Kabir Nirvana Divas*. He earned a great reputation as a Kabir singer at Maghar Kabir *Math* and among its followers.

Ramprasad Das's Becoming an Ascetic: *Man Lago Mera Yaar Fakiri Mein*

With the journey of his Kabir-singing also started the journey of his becoming an ascetic. The following popular *pada* of Kabir stimulated the spirit of asceticism in him:

²²⁸ Ramprasad Das often performs these *bhajans* even today.

*Man lago mera yaar fakiri mein
Akhir yah tan khaak milega
Kahan phire magruri mein
Man lago mera yaar fakiri mein*

[Friend, my heart is deeply engaged in the spiritual practice (like that of a mendicant)²²⁹.

At last, this body will meet with dust.

Where do you wander in pride?

Friend, my heart is deeply engaged in the spiritual practice (like that of a mendicant).]

This *bhajan* attacks the vain pride of human beings by reminding them of the transitory nature of human life. It also devalues the rich and speaks in favour of the poor and suggests that God resides in the poor who have patience, contentment and continuously practice devotion to God, which gives them the real pleasure. Ramprasad Das shares his experience about this *bhajan*: “Each line of this *bhajan* used to influence me.” His aspiration to be an ascetic became too strong to be suppressed. He even made three unsuccessful efforts to run away from his home to Maghar. Ramprasad Das used to shout at her grandmother and threaten her that he would run away one day and no one would find him. When she realized that it is impossible to prevent him, she handed him over to Khajuri Banahava Baba Kabir *Math*, Gorakhpur, which is at a distance of three kilometres to the north of his village.

This *Math* belongs to the sect of Paltudas and was founded by Banahava Baba, a prominent and spiritually powerful saint of this tradition. The people of Khajuri and other neighbouring villages were his disciples. When Ramprasad Das was taken to this *Math* in 1984, it was headed by Prabhu Das, who was, previously, a Kabirpanthi saint²³⁰. Now, this *Math* was, in a way, the direct confluence of two *Nirguna* traditions: Paltudasi and Kabirpanthi. Ramprasad inherited the same mixed atmosphere.

²²⁹ (i) Hess also recorded this song from Kaluram Bamaniya of Malwa. She translates ‘*man lago mera yar fakiri mein*’ as ‘This mind, my friend, has learned to love owning nothing’.

(ii) In the version of Kaluram Bamaniya, ‘*kyo phire magaruri mein*’ has come in place of ‘*kahan phire magruri mein*’. Such changes are common in oral tradition.

²³⁰ Prabhu Das first wanted to become the disciple of Ramdas, but he refused to make him his disciple due to a personal reason. However, he requested Banahava Baba to make Prabhu Das his disciple. Banahava Baba and Ram Das were friends as Banahava Baba always invited Ram Das to his annual *bhandara* and other programmes and vice-versa. Banahava Baba agreed and made Prabhu Das his disciple.

Prabhu Das named him Ramprasad Das. Since he was given as an offering to Baba Banahava Baba *Math*, he added '*Prasad*' (offered food to God)' to his name. Living at the Banahava Baba *Math*, his reputation as a Kabir or *Nirguna* singer continued spreading. He continued to be invited to perform even in local marriages and other ceremonies: "The people used to be happy with my performance. In marriages, the people used to invite and say that the *bhajans* of Ramprasad Das must be organized."

When he was in 12th standard in 1997, Prabhu Das died. The saints of the Khajuri *Math* chose him the *Mahant* of the *Math*. Now he took care of the *Math* and also continued his higher education and completed his Bachelor of Arts' degree. During his study too, he was invited to many places in Gorakhpur and Basti in order to perform at different *Saguna* and *Nirguna* programmes. Soon, he formed his *mandali* which consisted of some members from the *Math* and some outsiders. On the invitation of his resourceful followers, he performed with his *mandali*. However, he frequently performs alone to the accompaniment of his *Khajadi*. One of the reasons of his singing alone is that there are many poor followers who cannot afford the charge of the whole *mandali*. He goes to these people alone to perform and preach Kabir's verses and accepts whatever they offer him happily.

His Kabir-singing got a new impetus in 1999 when he was selected to perform Kabir for All India Radio Gorakhpur. Since then, he has continuously performed for it. Besides, All India Radio Lucknow, Mau and Delhi have also broadcast his live performances on Kabir. The most important turn in his Kabir-singing came when he was heard by *Acharya Vivek Saheb* at Maghar in 2005 on the occasion of the Kabir Nirvana Divas. He was so impressed by his singing that he invited him to come to Varanasi on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti. Now, he regularly visits Kashi Kabir Chaura and performs Kabir on Kabir Jayanti and other occasions as a lead singer and preacher. He is popular not only among the followers of Kashi Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth in Uttar Pradesh but also among its followers in Madhya Pradesh,

Rajasthan, Panjab, Haryana, and Gujarat etc. He continues visiting these states with *Mahant* Vivekdas and sometimes alone.

Finding his great influence and popularity among people, Vivekdas has appointed him the *Mahant* of 12 Kabir *Maths* located at different places in Gorakhpur, Sant Kabir Nagar, Deoria, Kushinagar and Mau. The main purpose of Vivekdas to choose Ramprasad the *Mahant* is to preserve the properties of Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth in these regions. The local people, especially of Upper castes, want to usurp and sell them. Ramprasad Das has been involved in a direct conflict with Brahmins at two *Maths*: Charan Paduka *Mandir*, Ghasi Katra, Gorakhpur and Kabir *Math*, Ijarah, Deoria. They want Ramprasad Das to leave the place. At Ghasi Katra, Brahmins formed a 'Sant Seva Committee' about 38 years ago for their selfish motive²³¹. They made commercial buildings on some pieces of the land of the *Math* and also sold some pieces. Vivekdas and Ramprasad Das have filed a petition against them.

Ijarah *Math* has also been associated with Ghasi Katra. It spreads about in an area of 16-17 *bighas*. The local Brahmins (*Chaturvedis*) have given some pieces of land to the farmers on *hunda* (contract farming). Ramprasad Das and Vivek Das are successfully fighting a battle against these Brahmins and other upper castes in order to save the *Maths* associated with Kashi Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth²³².

Since Ramprasad Das is a devout follower of Vivek Das, following him, he also rejects all types of rituals in Kabirpanth. He popularizes Kabir's messages and teachings among people only through singing and preaching Kabir. In all his performances, Ramprasad

²³¹ One stubborn man from the Bhumihar caste had also occupied two rooms of the *Math* illegally for 27 years and locked them. When Ramprasad opposed and asked him to open the lock, he refused and threatened him and other saints living at the *Math*. However, Ramprasad Das remained firm and got the lock broken. Next day the person of the Bhumihar stole away the bolero car of Ramprasad Das's driver, which was parked in front of the *Math*. Ramprasad used this bolero to travel for his programmes at different places. They filed a missing complaint at the local police station. When the Bhumihar came to realize that he would be exposed and he would be defamed, he reached the police station and bribed the police in order to ensure that the car must not be given, rather the driver should be given the insurance amount.

²³² However, Ramprasad Das's becoming the *Mahant* of twelve *Maths* reflects his desire for power.

Das inspires audiences to adopt and implement Kabir in life. He emphasizes on the message that Kabir becomes the part of one's life if one lives him. According to Ramprasad Das, the *vanis* of Kabir are tied to music and express truth of our life and therefore people naturally develop an interest in them:

In reality, music is attached to life.... Actually, the music is a part of our life. You see that the *vanis* of Kabir Saheb, the *vanis* of Dariya Saheb and those of all other saints, they have not uttered much in prose, they have expressed in verse. Poetry has sprouted as a natural expression. We sing what they have uttered. Our interest grows in them unintentionally. All the Kabirpanthis flow in the same current. Moreover, it is the truth which we speak and listen to. If you listen to it, you will begin to flow in it. It is a wonderful current. It happens in his poetry.

The *bhajans* of Kabir are natural expressions of the soul whereas there are only few natural expressions in Tulsi's *bhajans*. These expressions are more of scholarship. They are written with a demonstration of pedantry.... They (Kabir's *bhajans*) are natural expressions. That spontaneous expressions touch heart naturally. Therefore, naturally, people want to sing Kabir more. They want to sing because they are natural expressions. Easiness is dear to the soul²³³.

All other Kabir singers whom I have interviewed also claim that Kabir has uttered the truth and explain and interpret it differently. These varied interpretations bring plural images of Kabir's truth. Harisharan Das Shastri, a popular Kabir Bhojpuri singer from Maghar *Math* says that Kabir is a scientist; therefore, there is truth in his *vanis*: People are attracted to Kabir for this truth:

A saint or sage is a researcher or scientist. A scientist propounds his reasoning for the whole universe and he reads the mood of the universe. He propounds his message studying the rule of Nature. This is a reality. There is a similar system in the heart of everyone, about which Kabir is talking and which Nature provides outside. If a doctor says that the blood belongs to the same group, it is natural that they have also equality to each other in terms of mind and temperament. You are associated with that vast life. In between, some misguide you that you are this and you are that. When Kabir and some other great men say something, it resounds in ears. Kabir is a scientist. On the basis of his scientific temperament, whatever he prescribes is for all people. It is suitable for all and is embraced by all

²³³ I have recorded the majority of people claiming that Kabir has spoken in an easy manner. The easiness, naturalness and simplicity attract them towards Kabir.

Ramprasad Das perceives Kabir as the emperor of the saints, and claims that Kabir's courage and energy in his *vanis* attract people towards him. According to him, Kabir's *vanis* are a source of courage, power and energy:

Kabir Saheb is called the emperor of the saint society. There is unlimited power in his *vanis*. The greater personality a man has, the more energy there will be in his *vanis*. That energy is of great use. That is why, *Sadguru* is found in every heart and everyone has to accept it in the future. People will accept him because the courage which is needed is in Kabir Saheb.

Humanity and Social Criticism in Ramprasad Das's Repertoire

Ramprasad Das strongly believes that the thought of Kabir can undoubtedly establish a true form of humanity. According to him, many persons have worked for humanity, but Kabir surpasses all. Ramprasad Das himself prefers to perform *bhajans* which promote and nurture humanity:

I love *bhajans* which give the message of humanity, love, brotherhood and which do not differentiate between the Hindus and Muslims; which do not cause jealousy, hatred, denunciation and deception. I like such *bhajans*. They tell us the right path. I also write some *bhajans*. However, I sing *bhajans* mostly collected in *Kabir Bhajanavali* and the *bhajans* of the saints. I select, remember and perform them.... I choose those *padas* of Kabir, which reject attachment, malignity, strictness of heart and insult. I select those which convey love, friendship, good will, mercy, truth, service of humanity and *bhakti*. I perform such *padas*. There are many such *padas* which are based on humanity, human love, and liberation from artificiality. They are very dear to human beings. Humanity is the greatest spirituality. That is the best way of living. That is worship, *bhajan*, meditation and *satsang*.

His preference reflects how he himself serves humanity and inspires his audiences to embrace the path of humanity. During the performances of Ram Prasad Das, I have often observed, he criticizes the practices of caste, colour, gender etc., which, according to him, are an obstacle to humanity. He often cites the following verse of Kabir in his commentaries and explanations, which questions the Brahmanical four-fold *varna* and conveys the message of human equality:

*Ek tvacha ek haad mal mutra, ek rudhir ek guda
Ek boond se srishti racho hain, ko brahman ko suda*
(Every human body is made of similar bones, excreta, blood and flesh;
The whole universe is created out of a single drop of sperm, then who is Brahmin and
who is Shudra?)

It is often followed by the following verse of Kabir when Ramprasad Das propagates the message of equality of human beings. It has been taken from the *Bijak*. In this verse, Kabir derails both the Brahmins and Muslims for their claims of hypocrite superiority:

*Jo tu brahman brahmani ko jaya, to aur rah se kahe na aya
Jo tu turk turkani jo jaya, to pet hi mein kahe na sunnat karaya
Aur pahir janyeu jo brahman hona mehari kya pahinaya
Janm janm ka shudrin parose tu pande kyo khaya
Sunnati karaye turk jo hona to aurat ko ka kahiye
Ardh shariri nari bakhani tate hindu rahiye*

[O Brahmin, if you are a born of Brahmin woman, why are you not born of any other way?

O Muslim, if you are a born of Muslim woman, why do you not get your *sunnat* (circumcision) performed in the womb?

If putting on the thread makes you a Brahmin, what do you have your wife put on? She remains shudra by birth and continues serving you food, o Brahmin, why do you eat it?

If circumcision makes you a Muslim, what do you call your woman? Since woman is called man's other half, you might as well remain a Hindu.]

It is to be noted that this verse also speaks for the equality of women in both Hindu and Muslim religions.

Ramprasad Das advises people to reject *panditayi* (the trap of Brahmins) and *mullahayi* (the trap of Mullahs). He alerts people not to fall into the traps of Brahmin priests and Mullahs who lead people astray for maintaining their hegemony and superiority over them through their religious and social discourses:

*Pandit mullah jo likh dina
Chhad chale ham kuchh nahi lina*
(Whatever Brahmins and Mullahs have written,
I have rejected them and accepted nothing.)

Kabir never followed their practices while the Hindu society is entangled in the trap of the Brahmins and the Muslim society is in the trap of the Mullahs. Kabir rejected both.

*Baba vo darbar hamara hindu musalman se nyara
Jahan janeyu na sunnat hoyi pandit mullah base na koi*
(Baba, that is our courtyard which is better than those of the Hindus and Muslims;
Where the rituals of *Janeu* and *Sunnat* are not performed nor there live Brahmins and Mullahs.)

Ramprasad Das always begins his Kabir-singing with the recitation of some popular Kabir's couplets or invocatory verses dedicated to Kabir and *Guru*. A few of these couplets are also those which convey Kabir's biting social and religious criticisms. The following *bhajan* sung by him is popular among the Kabirpanthi audiences associated with Kabir Chaura and the followers of other sects. The *bhajan* suggests that human beings have lost their spiritual *path* and it is only *Guru* who can show them a true spiritual path and take them to the stage of salvation. This *bhajan* also rejects the approaches of the Mullahs and Pundits for finding out God. It is also to be noted that most of the *bhajans* of Kabir show a blend of multiple themes at the same time representing both his spirituality and social criticisms (Hess, 2015):

*Namo namo gurudev jo, saadh swarupi dev
Aadi ant gun kaal ke, janan hare bhev*
(Homage to the *Guru* who is like a god;
Death has both beginning and end; one does not know the mystery.)
*Sab ghat mere sayiyan suni sej nahi koya
Balihari ghat vahi ki ja ghat prakat hoya*
(My God lives in every heart; no bed is empty;
That heart is fortunate in which divine qualities manifest.)
*Aisa heera chhad ke kare aur ki aas
Te nar doyak jayenge, sat bhake ravidas²³⁴*
(Leaving such a precious diamond, one expects for something else;
That human being will be doomed to hell; the truth Ravidas speaks.)
*Purab disha hari ko basa pashchim allah mukama
Dil maa khoj dil hi ma mein khojo yihan karima rama*
(Hari lives in the east and Allah lives in the west.)

²³⁴ It is interesting to note that Ramprasad Das has spoken one couplet with the signature line of Sant Ravidas. This reflects how the voices of saints who have similar issues to say are shared together by the singers.

Search for within your heart; search for only within your heart where Allah or Ram resides.)

Hindu kahe mohi ram pyara, turk kahe rahimana

Apas mein do lad lad muye, maram na kahu jana

(The Hindus say Ram is their beloved while the Turks say Rahimana [Allah].

Both fight and kill each other but do not understand the truth.)

More heera, more heera aa

More heera heraya gaye kachare mein

Kachare mein kachare mein aa

More heera heraya gaye kachare mein

Koi khoje purab koi khoje pashchim

Koi khoje purab ho koi khoje pashchim

Koi khoje, koi khoje ho pothi patre mein

Mor heera, mor heera heraya gaye kachare mein

Kachare, kachare, kachare mein

Mor heera heraya gaye kachare mein

Mulla khoje quran kiteb mein

Pandit khoje ho pothi patre mein

Mor heera heraya gaye kachare mein

Mor heera heraya gayal kachare mein

Kachare mein kachare mein

Mor heera heraya gaye kachare mein

Das kabir ek heera payo

Heera payo, heera payo

Baadh liyo, baadh liyo

Baadh liyo heera achare mein

Mora heera, mor heera heraya gaye kachare mein

Kachare kachare kachare mein

Mor heera heraya gaye kachare mein

[My diamond, my diamond,

I have lost my diamond in the dirt.

In the dirt; in the dirt.

I have lost my diamond in the dirt.

Someone searches for it in the east and someone in the west.

Someone searches for it in the east and someone in the west.

Someone searches for in the books and scriptures.

My diamond, I have lost my diamond in the dirt.

I have lost my diamond in the dirt.

Mullahs search for it in the Quran and other religious scriptures.

The Pundits search for it in their religious scriptures.

I have lost my diamond in the dirt.

I have lost my diamond in the dirt.

In the dirt; in the dirt.

I lost my diamond in the dirt.

Das Kabir found a diamond.

Found a diamond, found a diamond.

Get it tied; get it tied.

Get the diamond tied into the scarf.

I lost my diamond in the dirt.
In the dirt, in the dirt.
I lost my diamond in the dirt.]²³⁵

Ramprasad Das's following *bhajan* which he performs in all his programmes is a bitter attack or satire on the hypocrisies of Hindus and Muslims. It also attacks the consumption of non-vegetarian meals by both Hindus and Muslims. It is his own composition. He composed it on account of his spiritual agony which he felt when he saw the Hindus shouting 'Jai Shri Ram' on account of Ram Temple agenda of Ayodhya and later got drunk. It suggests that people claim to be devout followers of Ram of Ayodhya, but do not follow his ideals. Similarly, Muslims claim themselves to be true devotees of Allah, but completely ignore the true path of Allah:

*Ki rama rama hare hare
Bakari murgi ghare ghare
Hare krishna hare rama
Do do anda subah shama
Dinbhar ram ram, sham ke bela du sau gram
Raghupati raghav raja ram, pata na pave seeta ram
Roza rahe roj roj, murgi mare khoj khoj
Jab bhayil murgi ka khoj bhitar chal gayil teeso roj
Jab chhuri tu haath mein leena tab murshid ko kyo nahi chinha
Kitno dan dan padho namaza, hasil na hoyiha eko kaaja
Ka kari namaz jaban badi bigari
Din bhar roza namaz gujara sham ke bela halala kare chhagdi (bakari)
Ka kari namaz jaban badi bigadi
Kare halal darad nahi ave alag alag kar dale charo tangdi
Ka kari namaz jaban badi bigadi
Le roti boti palang par baithe miyan miyayin khaye ek sangri
Ka kari namaz jaban badi bigadi
Kahat kabir suno bhai sadho
Miya miyayin ka chhoot gayin sangri
Ka kari namaz jaban badi bigadi*

[Recite Rama-Rama! Hare-Hare!
Goats and hens are cooked at every home.
Recite Hare Krishna! Hare Rama!
They eat two eggs every morning and evening.
Recite Ram-Ram the whole day, eat two hundred *gram* meat.
Recite *Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram*, however, Sita and Ram do not know the fact.

²³⁵ This *bhajan* also reminds us of Kabir's popular *bhajan* 'jhini jhini chadariya'.

The Muslims have *Roza* every day and search for hens and kill them.
 When the hens were searched for, it was found out that they were swallowed for thirty days.
 When you take knives in your hands, why did you not recognize the *Murshid*.
 Though you read *namaz* several times, you cannot accomplish anything.
 What will the *namaz* serve if tongue is addicted to a bad habit?
 You spent the whole day in performing *roza* and *namaz*, you kill and eat goat in the evening.
 What will the *namaz* serve if tongue is addicted to a bad habit?
 You do not feel pity while killing the goat and cutting its four legs.
 What will the *namaz* serve if tongue is addicted to a bad habit?
 With *chapati* and pieces of meat, husband and wife sit together on a cot.
 What will *namaz* serve if tongue is addicted to a bad habit?
 Says Kabir, listen, o' seekers.
 Both husband and wife die and are separated from each other.
 What will *namaz* serve if tongue is addicted to a bad habit?]

This composition strongly expresses Kabir's spirit and reminds us of all those verses of Kabir written on the same theme. It is to be noted that Ramprasad Das has added the refrain of Kabir to this *bhajan* which conveys Kabir's iconoclastic spirit and sensibility. Purushottam Agrawal coined the phrase '*Uprachanaye of Kabir*' to categorize such verses. One can clearly see that Kabir's signature line provides a grammar or formula to singers and other followers to convey what they observe in personal, religious and social realities.

Ramprasad Das continues this *bhajan* mixing it with the following *pada* of Kabir which attacks the ignorance of the people who search for God outside. He has added first two lines of his own to this *bhajan*. In the oral tradition, words, verses and stanzas are easily added to and dropped off Kabir's *padas*²³⁶:

Ghar mein kehu mar gaye ta turant phukanta
To bahar murga kaahen pet mein dharanta
Kehi samjhau jagat bhayo andha
Ek do hote unhi ko samjhate
Sabhi bhula gaye pet ke dhandha
Kehi samjhau jagat bhayo andha
Ghar ki vastu nikat nahi dar se
Diyana baar ke dhoodhat andha
Kehi samjhau jagat bhayo andha
Kahat kabir suno bhai sadho

²³⁶ Hess writes: "Dropping a stanza is common in oral tradition" (p. 101)

*Ek din jahiha langoti chhaar banda
Kehi samjhau jagat bhayo andha*

[If someone dies in a home, he is immediately cremated.
Then, why is a dead cock eaten?
How many persons should I make understand, the world has become blind?
If there were one or two persons, I would make them understand.
All have forgotten for the stomach.
How many persons should I make understand, the world has become blind?
The object of the home is not far away from one's reach.
But the blind person searches for the same with the light of a lamp.
How many persons should I make understand, the world has become blind?
Says Kabir, listen, o' seeker.
One day a few persons will certainly be aware.
How many persons should I make understand, the world has become blind?]

The following is one of the most popular *bhajans* of Kabir, which rejects temples, mosques and Hindu and Muslim religious scriptures, beliefs and ritualistic practices of worship. I have recorded this *bhajan* from many singers of Uttar Pradesh:

*Moko kahan dhoondhe re bande main to tere paas mein
Na teerath mein na moorat mein, na ekant nivas mein
Na mandir mein na masjid mein, na kabe, kailash mein
[O seekers, where do you search for me, I reside in you;
Neither in pilgrimages nor statues nor in solitude places;
Neither in temples nor mosques nor in the Qaba, nor on the Kailash Mountain.]*

In his commentaries and explanations, Ramprasad Das even raises the issue of cow and attacks both the Brahmins and Mullahs for causing controversies between Hindus and Muslims. His criticism is very significant from the point of view of the present Indian politics where the agenda of cow is heavily propagated for seeking votes and compartmentalizing the Hindus and Muslims separately:

*Pandit bachhiya ki pochh ko hindun pakdave
Mullah bachhiya ke gala ko turkan katvave
Pandit to pachha liye mullah aga leena
Aga pichha chhekaye ke khatara kiye maheen
[Brahmins get the tail of cow caught by the Hindus.
Mullahs get the neck of cow cut by the Muslims,
Brahmins take the back part and Mullahs the front part.
Claiming the back and front, they have aggravated the danger.]*

It was originally composed by Sharan Saheb, a Kabirpanthi singer from Uttar Pradesh. In further lines, he even goes to extent calling both Brahmins and Mullahs monsters. Ramprasad Das emphatically claim that Brahmins have made people Hindus and Mullahs Muslims, but it is only Kabir who has inspired people to be true humans.

Martin, Lorenzen and Henry point out that Kabir's songs or verses which are presently sung do not show Kabir's bitter and aggressive critique that is found in the *Bijak*. Henry notes 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 etc. rather than Kabir's aggressive social criticisms (1996, pp. 233-244). Lorenzen also writes:

The religious and social themes and the stylistic devices found in these most popular of Kabir's popular *bhajans* largely overlap with those of the songs found in the three oldest collections of Kabir's compositions. Nevertheless, differences do exist. The most obvious one is that the 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 aggressively and wit. (p. 207)

Martin who studied Kabir's oral and performative traditions among the Meghval singers in Rajasthan also points out:

[T]he voice we hear is radically different in tone from that found in the Kabirpanthi *Bijak*, paralleling the observations of Henry and Lorenzen. The sharp critiques aimed at Hindu and Muslim religious leaders and high caste Brahmans with their false sense of purity and pride are absent, as is harsh and berating language of challenge designed to jar the listener out of his or her complacency or delusion....

The Kabir of the Meghval oral traditions of western Rajasthan appears not so much as a fiery preacher full of condemnation or as a tormented lover in a stormy relationship, but instead, as a weaver of dignity and protest. Rather than being direct, his social and religious critique is embedded in what is praised and what devalued. He is still addressing others (a fundamental characteristic of Kabir), but his words are directed to ordinary people and sadhus, both encouraging and challenging them. He cajoles and goads people into acting responsibly and respectfully toward self and others, and into

claiming their own dignity and place as full human beings in the world. (pp. 204-05)

The three scholars derive their conclusions on the basis of the *padas* which end with Kabir's signature line. However, performances on Kabir contain Kabir's *padas* (*Saar Vanis*), *Daas Vanis*, Kabir's *sakhis*, *rekhtas*, explanations and commentaries, narratives of legends and contexts. When they are analysed together, one can see not only Kabir's spirituality but also his social criticisms, which are found in the *Bijak* and other manuscripts. The above songs, commentaries and *sakhis* which form the repertoire of Ramprasad Das reflect the same fact. I have found that the singers in whose songs the major emphasis is even on spirituality bring the context of social criticisms of Kabir during their commentaries and explanations punctuated by Kabir's critical *sakhis* and aspects of the legends. Both forms of Kabir often run together in the performances of singers.

The second thing, which has been ignored by these scholars, is the personal histories of the singers in relation to their spiritual/religious, social, political and economic contexts. I have interacted with many singers who have critical views against the orthodox and inhuman Brahmanical and Islamic practices, but sing many spiritual songs of Kabir. Like Linda Hess and Purushottam Agrawal, I also find that all the aspects of Kabir are intertwined and must not be separated. Hess cites an example of this link between social and spiritual domains, which I also observed in many singers of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar:

Prahladji leaps directly from the *anahad nad* to social equality, the folly of claiming superiority on the basis of caste, class, religion, sect, nation, and so on. In a heartbeat, he links up those deeply interior, extremely subtle, notoriously difficult-to-attain states of spiritual exaltation to songs satirizing Hindu and Muslim bigots and phonies, arrogant Brahmins, foolish Mullahs, clueless pilgrims, and myopic yogis. (pp. 38-39)

Ramprasad Das: An Inspiration for Audiences

Ramprasad Das goads, inspires and creates a spiritual and social awakening among people through his *bhajans* and influential commentaries. He also inspires others doing so going among the people as Kabir did. He follows the following approach of Kabir to awaken them, but unlike Kabir, he chooses the public gatherings in *satsangs*:

*Kabira khada bazaar mein, mange sabki khair
Na kahu se dosti na kahu se bair*

(Kabir stands in the market, praying for the welfare of all;
He is neither a friend of anyone nor an enemy of anyone.)

Kabir does not sit in the jungles, caves, mountains, on the banks of rivers to convey his words. He preaches his words among his people. He goes to market and expresses his words with challenges. The truth is that the market is a public place. Though temples and mosques are called the public places, in reality, they are not because temples are for Hindus and Muslims will not go to them. Muslims go to mosques, but Hindus will not go to these places. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, kings and queens, rich and poor all go to market. Therefore, Kabir chooses the market, a public place. He stands at place from where he can see everyone and understand the people of every nature and their needs and problems. He has uttered his words about them. He did his job.

His following *bhajan* asks people to wake up and practice *bhakti* and good deeds which are their real friends and help them liberate from the cycle of death:

*Bande kar le, bande kar le aap nivera
Bande kar le aap nivera
Aap nivera, aap nivera, aap nivera
Bande kar le aap nivera
Aap jiyat lakh aap thaur kar
Muye kahan ghar tera
Bande kar le aap nivera
Aap nivera, aap nivera
Bande kar le aap nivera
Yahi awasar yahi chetahu prani
Yahi awasar yahi chetahu prani
Ant koi nahi tera
Ant koi nahi tera
Bande kar le aap nivera
Yahi awasar nahi chetahu prani
Ant koi nahi tera
Bande kar le aap nivera
Kahat kabir suno he sadho*

*Kahi kabir suno hain santo
Kathin kaal ka ghera
Bande kar le aap nivera*

[Seeker, enlighten; seeker, enlighten yourself.
Seeker, enlighten yourself.
Enlighten yourself; enlighten yourself; enlighten yourself
Seeker, enlighten yourself.
Understand and concentrate till alive.
Understand and concentrate till alive.
You die, where is your home?
Seeker, enlighten yourself.
Enlighten yourself; enlighten yourself
Seeker, enlighten yourself.
O human being, this is the opportunity; be watchful.
O human being, this is the opportunity; be watchful.
No one will be yours at end.
No one will be yours at end.
Seeker, enlighten yourself.
O human being, this is the opportunity and if you are not careful, no one will be yours
at end.
No one will be yours at end.
Seeker, enlighten yourself.
Says Kabir, listen, o' seeker.
Says Kabir, listen, o' seeker.
There is an unbroken circle of death.
Seeker, enlighten yourself.]

His *bhajans* and explanations/commentaries have inspired many to become Kabir's followers. His melodious singing and heart touching style make him equally popular among Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers. In 2019, I attended a programme of Ramprasad Das at Jangal Nakin village in Gorakhpur. I found non-Kabirpanthis profoundly influenced by his Kabir-singing. I interviewed Patiraj Yadav, one of those non-Kabirpanthi audiences, who comments on his singing:

His style of singing is excellent. It is very strong. It cannot be described. He sings very well, there is no match of his. I had already heard his name. I came here a month ago and came to know that he was about to come here. The *bhajans* which I have heard are very melodious. They are very enchanting *bhajans*. Everyone should adopt Kabirpanth. There is the welfare of all in this sect. Whether you talk about the *Ramayana* or other religious scriptures, they are very conservative. However, whatever has been said by Kabir is completely bare. It is a bare description; therefore, all should adopt this panth. They should accept it wholeheartedly.

Haridas, a Kabirpanthi admirer of Ramprasad Das, points out why people love his Kabir-singing. He also brings out what he and others learn from Ramprasad Das.

If you talk about the *bhajans* of Saheb ji (Ramprasad Das), they are intensely emotional and heart touching. He makes us familiar with ourselves through his *bhajans*. If someone is ignorant/illiterate, he also cares for him in his own way. He also explains to him. Thus, he makes us familiar with the self. He makes us know what we should do in our society, future and for our body. What should we do for this? Everyone earns, but what will we leave after our death? What will we take with us in the end? After joining this Kabirpanth, we have realized that we were in darkness, but we still have some time that we should reform ourselves. We should adopt *bhajans*; we should purify ourselves. We should have no repentance. Whatever mistakes we have committed in our life in the past whether knowingly or unknowingly, now we should at least improve them.

Being influenced by his singing and preaching of Kabir, Pardeshi Das, who is a dalit Kabir singer, sees a glimpse of Kabir in Ramprasad Das: "There are some glimpses of Kabir in him. We also realize so." He has become a role model for many men (Shivam Das, Shravan Das, Janhit Das, Umesh Das, Pardeshi Das, Baburam, Satyam Das, Rammilan Das, Sadhusharan Das, Niyam Das, Rajkumar Das, Ramsingh Das and Santosh Das, Harish Das and Bhanu Pratap Singh²³⁷) and women (Kshama Saheb, Shanti Saheb, Anurag Saheb, Seva Saheb, Meera Saheb, Shevari Saheb) singers who learnt *bhajans* from him and are now lighting the torch of *bhakti* among people.

Ramprasad Das among Local Upper Castes and Other Sects

Rajkumar Yadav, another follower of Ramprasad, says: "He is respected a lot. He is worshipped in his region. The people of all castes and classes invite him whether they invite others or not. I have evidenced that pandits, Brahmins of our region also invite him". However, I find it quite contradictory to what I observed and recorded from Ramprasad Das during his performances. Ramprasad Das himself reveals the fact that since he has been

²³⁷ Bhanupratap Singh is a Thakur and has taken *diksha* and *kanthi* from Ramprasad Das and become a follower of Kabir.

living among those Brahmins and Thakurs since he was 10 years old. He has changed their attitude positively towards Kabirpanthi followers. Some of the local Brahmins and Kshatriyas assemble at his performances and also participate in the *bhandara* of Banahava Baba Kabir *Math*. Ramprasad Das has brought a kind of change in their attitudes at least towards Kabirpanthis. This is really a great contribution of Ramprasad Das, at least in his region.

Kabir has also given space to Ramprasad among the people of all other communities of his region and he has transmitted Kabir among them as well. I have personally observed in the *bhandara* of Banahava Baba that Ramprasad is popular across the *Saguna* and *Nirguna* traditions and among the people of the nearby areas. He really presents an image of Kabir for his audiences and followers.

Anupam Das

Anupam Das is an extraordinary semi-professional householder Kabir singer from Bihar. I first heard him at Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir *Math* in 2017 on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti. Thousands of audiences present there were mesmerized by his melodious Kabir-singing patterned on the Bollywood and Bhojpuri film and DJ music tunes. He performed the *Daas Vanis* attributed to *Guru/Satguru/Kabir* and Dharmadas's devotion to Kabir with a new flavour which attracted the audience towards him. In between, he also sang *Saar Vanis* of Kabir ending with his signature line, which seemed to have more impact on the audience. He also mixed them with the modern tunes which distinguished him from the other singers who performed on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti. After his performance, I interviewed him. Subsequently, I recorded his performances and interviewed him between 2017 and 2021.



Figure 15: Anupam Das performing Kabir at Lahartara

Anupam Das was born on 26 January 1977 at Halsi in Lakhisarai, Bihar. He is a dalit Kabir singer and belongs to the Dusadh caste. His family has been Kabirpanthi since many generations. It follows the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. His parents often used to visit Lahartara, especially on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti. Anupam Das also accompanied them. He regularly participated in the *satsang* and *pravachan* programmes held in his village and neighbouring villages. He was profoundly influenced by Kabir *bhajans* in these programmes and he himself started singing. In the meanwhile, Anupam Das had already inherited the *samskar* of Kabir-singing from his father who was a prominent Kabir-singer and had his *bhajan mandali*.

After a few years, Anupam Das became a popular Kabir singer in his region. However, soon, he became more interested in Bhojpuri Album music as some of his friends appreciated him by saying that he had a melodious voice and he should use his calibre for singing Bhojpuri album songs. He was thus persuaded and decided to become a Bhojpuri album singer.

After completing his High School, he did not pursue higher education in order to establish his career as Bhojpuri album singer. However, his poverty became an obstacle to the fulfilment of his dream as the economic status of his family was poor at that time and he could not get any monetary support in order to learn the art of singing Bhojpuri album songs. Some of his friends worked in Delhi for livelihood. They advised him to accompany them to Delhi in order to earn and fulfil his dream. He went to Delhi and took a job of whitewashing and painting.

In Delhi, he came across Pal Singh who also belonged to Bihar. He was a trained musician whom Anupam Das pleaded with to train him in singing Bhojpuri album songs to the accompaniment of the harmonium. Under his guidance, he became a good singer. With the help of Pal Singh, he also got his first Bhojpuri album song '*Mar Karbaybu Ka*' released by a music company Ganga Cassette, Delhi. It became very popular in Bihar and earned a great reputation for him. He returned from Delhi and soon, he began to be invited to perform at many places in Bihar. He formed a 'Raj Musical Orchestra Group', which became popular in his region. During the same period, with the help of Guddu Anand, his music composer, he got his second album '*Murder Karyabi Re*' released from Patna. Anupam Das again went to Delhi in order to get those albums converted into videos.

After a few days, on his way back to Bihar with the video cassettes of the two album songs, his wallet was pickpocketed in the train. Being afraid of being caught and sent to jail by the Travelling Ticket Examiner (TTE), he got down from the train at Banaras Railway Station and went to Lahartara Dharmadasi *Math* on foot. There were already many saints of Bihar at the *Math*. Anupam Das started living with Achint Muni who was also from his own village.

The next day, Anupam Das participated in the daily rituals of the *Math*. The *Math* organizes Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti* every day. During *Sandhya Arti*, a *satsang* and *bhajan* programme is also organized. Achint Muni introduced Anupam Das to the gathering that he was a good singer of *bhajans*. He was given an opportunity to perform *bhajans*. He sang two *bhajans* which enthralled everyone present on the occasion. At the end of the *Sandhya Arti*, Sudhakar Das (Udaynaam Saheb), the successor *Mahant* of the *Math*, admired his singing and said to him: “You sing very well. What do you do? Contribute to our programmes with your *bhajan*-singing. There will be a spread of Kabir’s *vanis*, words and our programmes will also be continued.” Anupam Das gave his consent as he took it as a way of devotion, fame as well as earnings.

After a couple of days, Anupam Das accompanied Sudhakar Das to Madhya Pradesh in order to perform in Kabirpanthi programmes which continued for fifteen days. During these days, he received a lot of appreciation and respect from the Kabirpanthi followers for his singing *bhajans* of Kabir. It was during these programmes that he felt that Kabir-singing was better than the Bhojpuri album singing which, according to him, gave him more money but less respect as Bhojpuri album songs were obscene. He felt a kind of detachment and decided to take to Kabir-singing full time.

After these programmes, Sudhakar Das allowed him to go home, and asked him to return to perform in his future programmes. He agreed and thus, since 2008, he has been visiting different states of India with Sudhakar Das for performing in Kabirpanthi programmes. He has adopted Sudhakar Das his spiritual *Guru* and expresses his gratitude to Kabir for a pure transformation in his life.

With regular performances in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and other states, he has become very popular among people.

His performance at Lahartara *Math* on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti every year makes him popular among the followers of all Kabirpanthi sects. He is now regarded as the representative singer of Lahartara Dharmadasi *Math* (and its headquarters Kharsiya *Gaddi*).

Anupam Das generally performs Kabir to the accompaniment of the harmonium along with his *mandali* and sings Kabir in Hindi and Bhojpuri. He rarely makes commentaries on his songs as he often performs with Sudhakar Das who, in between his performances, gives *satsangs* and *pravachans*. However, when he performs alone, he makes commentaries as well.

Anupam Das performs both *Daas Vanis* and *Saar Vanis*. I have observed that in Dharmadasi Kabirpanth, more *Daas Vanis* are sung and they are equally popular with the *Saar Vanis*

***Daas Vanis* in the Repertoire of Anupam Das**

Most of the songs in his repertoire are attributed to Kabir as *Satguru/Guru* and to the devotion of Dharmadas to Kabir²³⁸. In the following verse which ends with the signature of Dharmadas, the devotee (Dharmadas) celebrates the arrival of his *Guru* (Kabir) at his native place and pleads with him to liberate from the cycle of rebirth:

Dharmadas darshan ki pyasi
Bhav paar pakad karo payiyan
Ki aaj satguru aaye meri galiya
Ho aaj satguru aaye meri galiya
[Dharmadas has a strong wish for *darshan* (of *Satguru*).
Cross the sea by catching his legs.
O, *Satguru* has come to my street.
O, *Satguru* has come to my street.]

Anupam Das has patterned this *bhajan* on a fast DJ music tune and has become very popular among the followers of Dharmadasi tradition. Due to the performance of this

²³⁸ In Dharmadasi Kabirpanth, *Guru*-worship is given more prominence and therefore, Anupam Das composes and performs many songs attributed to *Guru*.

composition, he has begun to be called '*Galiya Vale Saheb*': "After this song is played on DJs, people start dancing. I am profoundly influenced by this *bhajan*. Many people know me through this *bhajan*.... The people call me '*Galiya Vale Saheb*'. The people address me as '*Galiya Vale Saheb*'. Many listen to such *bhajans* of mine to dance."

In fact, such *bhajans* are in a great demand. The youth are more attracted to the Kabir's *bhajans* and other *bhajans* patterned on the tunes of the Bollywood, Bhojpuri film and DJ music tunes. Anupam Das says: "In Kabir programmes and *shobha yatras*, Kabir followers want DJ-like tunes to dance in order to express their devotion to Kabir. This is the reason that I choose the Bollywood tunes in order to compose *bhajans*."

It is interesting to observe that Kabir's performative world is being updated by young singers according to the taste of young audiences of Kabir. They are introducing new verses, styles and tunes into Kabir with a view to appealing to them. Anupam Das says:

I explore how to sing the *padas* of Kabir Saheb. Previously, the *padas* of Saheb were sung to the accompaniment of *Khajadi*, but today there is quite a different trend. The youth are being disconnected from Kabir Saheb. They are deeply engaged in their modern tunes. They are engrossed in DJ music tunes. This is the reason that I wish to attach them to Kabir and influence them. I want to do so with the *padas* of Kabir. How should they like them? How would they listen to my *padas* sitting before me? How can they say that he is singing well? These things are there in my mind. How should they be sung according to their flavour? I am devoted to this research.

Anupam Das has patterned the tune of the following *bhajan* on that of the popular *Nirguna* song "*jhoolani ke rang sachā hamar piya*"²³⁹. It is sung at a fast pace. In this *bhajan*, Dharmadas expresses his devotion to Kabir, which removes his sorrows and pains:

Satguru se dil laga hamar piya
Dharmadas kar jori ke vinawe
bhav bandhan dukh bhaga
Vo vo bhav bandhan dukh bhaga hamar piya
Satguru se dil laga hamar piya

²³⁹ "*Jhoolani ke rang sachā hamar piya*" is sung in the name of Kabir and is very popular among the Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi singers of Uttar Pradesh.

Satguru se dil laga hamar piya
[My husband, I have fallen in love with *Satguru*.
Dharmadas submits a prayer with his folded hands.
My attachment with the earthly things, and sorrows have ended.
O my husband, my attachment with the earthly things, and sorrows have ended.
My husband, I have fallen in love with *Satguru*.
My husband, I have fallen in love with *Satguru*.]

Taksaar Das, another singer from Lahartara *Math*, sings a song with the signature line of both Dharmadas and his wife and has patterned it on the Bollywood song tune '*Naina re*' from the movie '*Dangerous Ishhq*'. In this song, both Dharmadas and Ameen pray to Kabir for giving them his *darshan* (divine vision and blessing):

Dharmadas ji, ameen vinawe
Ameen mata, ameen vinawe
Bin dekhe nahi chaina ho
Darshan kar logi tum naina
Darshan kar logi duno naina, duno naina
Duno naina ho duno naina ho
Darshan kar logi dono naina
[Dharmadas and Ameen submit a prayer;
Ameen Mata submits a prayer;
There is no peace without your *darshan*.
O eyes, you will have a *darshan*
Both eyes will have a *darshan*; both eyes;
Both eyes, both eyes
Both eyes will have a *darshan*.]

Anupam Das himself has composed many *padas* of Kabir attributed to *Guru/Satguru* and performs them in public gatherings. However, he likes to sing his own compositions towards the end of Kabirpanthi programmes:

When the programmes ends or the programmes of Saheb (*Mahant*) end, I observe the spirit of the people. I sing the *bhajans* suiting their spirit. When the programmes of Saheb (*Mahant*) end, I also perform my own compositions. I have composed the *bhajan* myself:

Manav ka tan pakar sharan mein awo sadguru ka
Tera jivan badal jayega
[Come to the shelter of *Satguru* since you are born with a human body.
Your life will be transformed.]

This is my own composition. There are many compositions written by me. I have twenty *bhajans* in one of my albums. People like them very much.

Anupam Das has composed a *bhajan* related to Lahartara as the centre of the Kabirpanthi pilgrimage and tells why Kabirpanthis should visit Lahartara. The tune of the *bhajan* is patterned on the tune of a popular song “*Lag ja gale*” from the movie “*Wo Jo Hasina*”:

It is a holy duty of Kabirpanthis to visit Lahartara ... it is our *Prakatyā Bhoomi* (birthplace of Kabir); there is Qaba for Muslims, there is Kashi for those who believe in the *Sanatan Dharma*; here there is the Vishwanath temple. In the same way, we believe that the Kabirpanthi followers should visit Lahartara *Dham* (holy place). It is the duty of true Kabirpanthis to visit this at least once. Here, the earth is very valuable. One must visit this place once. There is one *pada* of mine based on this. It is a profound *vachan* (verse):

Saheb prakat bhaye jahan vah dwar le chalo
Us punya kashi dhaam ek baar le chalo
Saheb prakat bhaye jahan vah dwar le chalo
Us punya kashi dhaam mein ek baar le chalo
Saheb prakat bhaye jahan
Ye sans chal rahi hain abhi to nashib se
Ji bhar ke dekh loo unhe jakar kareeb se
Kuchh din hain jindagi bas udhaar le chalo
Us punya kashi dhaam mein ek baar le chalo
Saheb prakat bhaye jahan.

[Take me to the place where Saheb was born.
 Take me to Kashi, that sacred place of pilgrimage.
 Take me to that place where Kabir was born.
 Take me to that sacred place Kashi once.
 Where Saheb was born.
 This breath is running due to a great fortune.
 I want to see it to the full going close to it.
 The life is remaining only for a few days, take me there.
 Take me once to Kashi, that sacred place.
 Where Saheb appeared.]

Taksaar Das also sings a tribute song to Uditnam Saheb, the founder *Mahant* of Lahartara Kabir Temple where Anupam Das’s song urges us to go. He has patterned his composition on the tune of the Bollywood song “*Tera naam liya tujhe yaad kiya*” from the movie ‘*Ram Lakhan*’:

Saheb uditnam kashi mein banaya dhaam
Kar na saka koi aisa tumne kaam kiya hain
Bada naam kiya hain

[Saheb Udinam built a holy place in Kashi.
He did what others could not do.
He has increased the fame (of Kabir Saheb).]

The rituals of the Dharmadasi tradition also give a great scope to Anupam Das to compose and sing devotional songs attributed to Kabir. The following *bhajan* sung by Anupam Das is very popular among his men and women audiences. He generally sings this *bhajan* during the *Arti puja* of the *Mahant* and *Chauka Arti* in the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. It gives Kabir a woman-friendly image among women followers. I will discuss this phenomenon in detail in the next chapter:

*Chalo sakhi arti utare sadguru saheb ki
Kahnwa se aye saheb kahnwa padhare
Kahnwa padhare ho kahnwa padhare
Kaune sakhi aa kaune sakhi arti utare sadguru saheb ki
Satyug mein aaye saheb mathura padhare
Khemsari arti utare satguru saheb ki
Chalo sakhi arti utare satguru saheb ki
Treta mein saheb lanka padhare
Lanka padhare ho lanka padhare
Mandodari arti utare satguru saheb ki
Chalo sakhi arti utare satguru saheb ki
Dwapar mein aaye saheb girinar padhare
Dwapar mein saheb girinar padhare
Saheb padhare girinar padhare
Indramati arti utare satguru saheb ki
Chalo sakhi arti utare satguru saheb ki
Kaljug mein saheb bandhavgarh padhare
Bandhavagarh padhare garh bandhav padhare
Ameen mata arti utare, satguru saheb ki
Chalo sakhi arti utare satguru saheb ki
Chalo sakhi arti utare satguru saheb ki*

[Friends, let us perform the *Arti* of *Satguru Saheb*.
From where has Saheb come and where has he arrived?
Where has he come, where has he come?
Friends, let us perform the *Arti* of *Satguru Saheb*.
Saheb appeared in the *Satyayuga* and reached Mathura.
Khemsari performs the *Arti* of *Satguru Saheb*.
Friends, come and let us perform the *Arti* of *Satguru Saheb*.
In the *Tretayuga*, Saheb reached Lanka.
He reached, reached Lanka.
Mandodari performs the *Arti* of *Satguru Saheb*.
Friends, let us perform the *Arti* of *Satguru Saheb*.

Saheb, in the *Dwaparyuga*, reached Girmargarh.
Saheb, in the *Dwaparyuga*, reached Girmargarh.
Saheb reached Girmargarh.
Indramati performed the *Arti* of *Satguru* Saheb.
Friends, let us perform the *Arti* of *Satguru* Saheb.
Saheb arrived at Bandhavgarh in the *Kaliyuga*.
He arrived at Bandhavgarh, he arrived at Bandhavgarh.
Ameen Mata performs the *Arti* of *Satguru* Saheb.
Friends, come and let us perform the *Arti* of *Satguru* Saheb.
Friends, come and let us perform the *Arti* of *Satguru* Saheb.]

The following song which Anupam Das sings, especially on the occasion of *Chauka Arti*, contains a term “*Satnam*”. This term is used for Kabir and sometimes, it is also used as a greeting in the name of Kabir. This song urges to recite ‘*Satnam*’, which will provide one a human birth in next life²⁴⁰.

Padho padho re
Padho padho re
Vo padho padho re, dua satnam baith tan pavo re
Vo padho padho re, dua satnam baith tan pavo re
[Oh, recite;
Recite, recite;
Oh, recite, recite
Oh, Recite, recite, recite the prayer of *Satnam* and get a human birth easily.
Oh, Recite, recite, recite the prayer of *Satnam* and get a human birth easily.]

Anupam Das also sings *bhajans* attributed to other saints or composed by others. He often sings Meera’s *padas* dedicated to *Guru* (an example is already discussed). However, according to him, the *bhajans* of Kabir make more impact on the masses.

There are many great *padas* of Meera and also of Saheb which I sing. I also sing others’ *padas* dedicated to *guru*.... There are many *padas* of Kabir dedicated to *Guru*. There are the *padas* attributed to *Guru* and attributed to the shelter of *Guru*. We sing them. The *bhajans* of Kabir Saheb influence more. Besides, there are many other *bhajans* which are sung on the dais of Kabir.

²⁴⁰ In Indian religious sensibility, human birth is considered to be rare. It is said that after death, one has to take birth eighty four million times in forms of different creatures and only then, one gets a human birth.

Saar Vanis in the Repertoire of Anupam Das

Anupam Das also sings many *Saar Vanis* of Kabir. The following is his favourite *bhajan*, which he sings in every programme of Kabir. This *bhajan* strikes people to seek the divine power within and forbids them to wander in Mathura and Kashi in search of God. It rejects the Brahmanical and Islamic ways of reaching God and suggests that it is only the spiritual *Guru* who unveils this truth and removes hallucinations of ordinary masses. It also undermines the Holy Trinity of the Hindu religion. Anupam Das calls this *bhajan* the *Saar Vani* of Kabir and it is an example of *Ulatbansi* (upside down language) of Kabir²⁴¹:

Jyoti mein hi mein tel hain jyo chakmak mein aag
Tera pritam tujhmein hain jaag sake to jaag
(There is oil in the lamp, as there is fire in the lightning;
Your beloved/God resides in you, wake up if you can.)

Pani mein meen pyasi
Pani mein meen pyasi
Sun sun aanve hansi
Mohe sun-sun aanve hansi
Pani mein meen pyasi
Sun sun aanve hansi, re mohe
Sun sun aanve hansi
Atam gyan bina nar bhatke koi mathura koi kashi
Atam gyan bina nar bhatke koi mathura koi kashi
Jaise mrig nabhi bich kasturi
Jaise mrig nabhi bich kasturi, ban ban fire udasi
Sun sun aanve hansi
Jal beech kamal, kamal beech kaliya, taapar bhanvar nivasi
So man baste sati sanyasi lok bhayo sab
Sun sun aanve hansi
Vo mohe sun sun aanve hansi
Jake dhayn dhare vidhi harihar
Muni jane kahe atthasi
Jake dhyan dhare vidhi harihar
Muni jane kahe atthasi
Jo tere ghat mahi biraje, param purush abhinasi
Sun sun aanve hansi
Vo mohe sun sun aave hansi
He haji tere door batave, door ki baat nirasi

²⁴¹ Hess describes that “songs in Kabir’s paradoxical style called *ulatbansi* (‘upside-down language’)” (p. 20).

He haji tere door batave door ki baat nirasi
He haji tere dur batave, dur ki baat nirasi
Kahe kabir suno bhai sadho
Guru bina bharam na jasi
Sun sun aanve hansi
Vo mohe sun sun aanve hansi
Vo mohe sun sun aanve hansi
Pani mein meen pyasi sun sun aanve hansi
Ho mohe sun sun aanve hansi
Ho mohe sun sun aanve hansi

[Fish is thirsty in water.
Fish is thirsty in water.
Hearing this, I laugh.
Hearing this, I laugh.
Fish is thirsty in water.
Hearing this, I laugh.
Hearing this, I laugh.
Without the experience of the divine power within, human being wanders in Mathura and Kashi.
Without the experience of the divine power within, human being wanders in Mathura or Kashi.
As there is the musk in the novel of the dear,
As there is the musk in the novel of the dear, but it wanders from forest to forest in sadness.
Hearing this, I laugh.
As there is the lotus in water and buds within lotus, on which the bee lives.
He lives in the heart of Sati and saints, but common people are unaware.
Hearing this, I laugh.
O, hearing this, I laugh.
Lord Hari, remembers Him in a proper manner.
Saints and sages call Him 88.
Lord Hari, remembers Him in a proper manner.
Saints and sages call Him 88.
One who resides in your heart, is the Almighty, Eternal.
Hearing this, I laugh.
O, hearing this, I laugh.
Your *Haji* tells that He resides at a far distance and the matter of distance is full of sadness.
Your *Haji* tells that He resides at a far distance and the matter of distance is full of sadness.
Says Kabir, listen, o' seekers.
Without *guru*, the hallucinations do not end.
Hearing this, I laugh.
O, hearing this, I laugh.
Fish is thirsty in water.
Hearing this, I laugh.
O hearing this, I laugh.
O hearing this, I laugh.]

I have observed that many dalit Kabir singers perform such *bhajans*. To me, these verses express a community feeling of the dalits who were debarred from entering temples on the basis of their untouchability. Through such *bhajans* and *padas* of Kabir, they seem to have a feeling that God resides in their hearts and they reject the temples of Hindu gods and goddesses as Anupam Das does in this *bhajan*.

The following *bhajan* sung by Anupam Das, which ends with the signature line of Kabir, is an example of how Kabir's *bhajans* travel from one place to another and how the same *bhajan* is sung differently by different singers. This *bhajan* is very popular among the singers of Malwa, Madhya Pradesh. In this verse, human body has been compared to a cart in which God lives or sit. Those who serve God with their good deeds receive His help in all difficulties.

Jara dhire dhire gadi hakon
He jara hole hole gadi hakon
Vo mere ram gadi vale
[Move your cart slowly, slowly,
O, move your cart lightly, lightly.
O' my Ram is riding.]

Linda Hess describes the recension of Prahlad Tipanya sings it in the following way:

Jara halke gadi hakon
Mere ram gadi vale
Jara dhire dhire gadi hakon
Mere ram gadi vale
[Move your cart along lightly.
My Ram is riding,
Move your cart slowly, slowly,
My Ram is riding.] (Translated by Hess, p. 313)

The next *bhajan* of Kabir sung by Anupam Das criticizes those who eat non-vegetarian meals. It expresses that when a person dies, his or her body is immediately taken out of home and is cremated. However, it is ironical that people bring the dead bodies of other creatures, cook and eat them:

Baahar se ek murda laye, nun tel ghee sana
Ta murde ki bani rasoyi ghar bhar karat bakhana ho santo
Manus tan baurana ho santo manus tan baurana
Kahat kabir suno bhai sadho
Yah pada hain nirvana
Jo yah pad ke bujhe samjhe, vahi chatur sayan ho santo
Manush tan baurana
Manus tan baurana ho santo
 [Bring a corpse from outside and mix it with oil and ghee;
 The meal is prepared from corpse and all the members admire the taste.
 Seekers, human being has gone mad; human has gone made
 Says Kabir, listen o' seekers.
 This *pada* is a *nirguna*.
 O' seekers, one who understands this *pada* is really wise and sensible.
 Human being has gone mad
 Seekers, human being has gone mad.]

Anupam Das propagates the message of vegetarianism through Kabir-singing and *bhajans*. In this context, he is profoundly influenced by the Kabir-singing and preaching of Swami Vivekanand Das who belonged to his own village. His father was also the disciple of Swami Vivekanand Das who was a great singer and preacher of Kabir. Swami Vivekanand Das used to wander from place to place in Lakhisarai and make people aware by Kabir's teachings and messages. He himself used to compose *bhajans* after Kabir's spirit. Anupam Das describes the influence of Vivekanand Das on himself:

I was influenced by the *bhajans* of Kabir and Swami ji of my village. Swami Vivekananda used to spread the *vanis* of Kabir, wandering around every region; he spread the *bhajans* of Kabir in his regional Bihari tune.... In order to warn and make people aware, he used to sing influential *bhajans* in straight Bihari language.... He used to make all aware:

Chhiya re chhiya mat khao machhaliya
Thari lota durgandh kiya re kiya
Mat khao machhaliya
Chhiya re chhiya mat khao machhaliya
 [Fie! Fie! Do not eat fish.
 Thari (plate) and lota sting.
 Do not eat fish.
 Fie! Fie! Do not eat fish.]

There are many such *bhajans*, we heard from him in childhood, but today these *bhajans* are purifying all. We organize an annual fair there in the name of Swami Vivekananda. After reflecting on his *bhajans*, it seems that they convey true knowledge. I was really influenced by the *bhajans* of Saheb ji.

I discovered many singers from Lakhisarai, Nevada, Shekhpura and Jamui to be influenced by Swami Vivekanand Das. Many followers became Kabir singers from the inspiration of Swami Vivekananda. This really shows how influential saints and singers used to transmit Kabir's teachings among the people and influence them. These verses have the same impact on people as those of Kabir.

I have observed that most of the singers, especially dalit singers, attack non-vegetarianism and consider it one of the main reasons of their backwardness. Kabir appeals to them as he himself has rejected the consumption of non-vegetarian meals and creates a sense of purity. Therefore, Anupam Das says: "The ideology of Kabir is pious. It is a pure ideology." Anupam Das has a strong sense of purity and impurity based on meals. Since impurity is made the basis of discrimination (untouchability) against dalits perpetrated by Brahmins, Kabir and Kabir help Anupam Das and other dalit singers adopt a kind of purity which gives a sense of dignity and find ways to fight against untouchability. It is also one of the reasons that they are attracted to Kabirpanth. I observed a feeling of confidence on the face of Anupam Das while he described the practice of purity in his family and the message of purity which is emphasized in Kabirpanth:

Joining Kabirpanth is not to enter the house of the aunt ... whoever wants to come to Kabirpanth, should not think that it is the home of the aunt because there is a principle of Saheb in it. First of all, your meals and manners should be pure in it. The meals and manners of my parents have been pure since childhood. There should be everything good in it. Everything should be pure.

Due to transformation in their lives, they celebrate Kabir *bhakti* and express their gratitude to him and also to Kabirpanthi *Gurus* and *Mahants* who take this legacy of Kabir ahead. Anupam Das expresses his gratitude in the following way.

Main vari jau re balihari jau re
Vari jau re balihari jau re
Mera satguru saheb aa gaya, main vari jau re
[O, I sacrifice myself, I surrender myself;

O, sacrifice myself, surrender myself;
O, my *Satguru* Saheb has come, I sacrifice myself.]

Anupam Das is also contributing his part to this legacy of Kabir through his *bhajan* singing: “I just spread Kabir through the medium of music. On the vast daises of Kabir programmes, I continue spreading Kabir by the medium of the music as I am singing before you right now. If I get time to sing, I sing.... I do this service. I want to do this. I am thankful to Saheb ji (Kabir). I want to spend my time with it (Kabir-singing) and would like to die with it. I always wish for the same.”

To sum up, Anupam Das has contributed to Kabir’s performative tradition with many new versions of songs. Kabir is equally popular in the new versions of songs as well. They are attracting the youth audiences. In fact, these versions have broadened and updated Kabir’s performative and oral traditions. Since Anupam Das performs on behalf of the Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir *Math*, his singing patterned on Bollywood, Bhojpuri film and DJ-music tunes will continue flourishing and enriching Kabir’s performative traditions.

Devendra Das and ‘Tana Bana’

One certainly expects to listen to Kabir’s verses and *bhajans* at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, the home of Kabir, which express Kabir’s spirit and sensibility as here Kabir is said to have sung his verses and preached his messages and teachings among people. I heard and recorded many such *bhajans* from Devendra Das, a prominent Kabir singer, who has been living at Kabir Chaura *Math* since childhood and has been serving it (Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*) through his singing and preaching.

Devendra Das was born on 3 February 1987. He is basically from Nadiya Chhattisgarh, but came to Kabir Chaura *Math* at the age of seven. He is from the Kurmi caste and belongs to a poor Kabirpanthi family. Devendra Das learnt Kabir-singing and playing

instruments such as *harmonium*, *tabla*, and *dholak* from his father who was an excellent Kabir singer.

The family of Devendra Das has been associated with a local Kabir *Math* at Nadiya which is a splinter *Math* of Dharmadasi tradition²⁴², but it still follows and practices Dharmadasi rituals. The *Mahant* of the Nadiya *Math* often used to visit Kabir Chaura, Lahartara and Maghar. He found many saints and students who lived and studied at Kabir Chaura *Math* and its branch Maghar *Math*. Board and lodge are free here for students²⁴³.

On his return, the *Mahant* told the parents of Devendra Das about this tradition. With his help, they sent Devendra Das to Kabir Chaura *Math*. Having lived at Kabir Chaura *Math* for one year, he was sent to Sant Kabir Ram Vilas Das Inter College, Maghar, run by Maghar Kabir *Math*. He completed his Intermediate and returned to Kabir Chaura *Math* permanently. Living here, he completed his Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Master of Arts (MA) in philosophy from Banaras Hindu University. During his education, he became a follower of Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth²⁴⁴. According to him, people in Chhattisgarh know Kabir more through rituals,

²⁴² The founder *Mahant* of the Nadiya Kabir *Math* opposed the hereditary tradition of choosing the successor *Mahant* in Damakheda Dharmadasi Kabirpanth, split himself from it, and established his own independent *Gaddi* at Nadiya.

²⁴³ (1) Now, most prominent Kabir *Maths* follow this tradition.

(2) However, girls do not have this privilege as they are still supposed to be an impediment to the spiritual path of man in the patriarchal Sant tradition. In spite of this, some elder *sadhvis* have started living at a few of the *Maths* headed by male *Mahants*.

²⁴⁴ Here, he understood Kabir's relevance in a new light and found him a way to live life:

If we observe in the present environment, they (Kabir's *vanis*) give a purpose to life. It is an easy way to live life. If we study the *padas* of Kabir deeply, we get an inspiration to live our life through them as today there are many conflicts such as casteism, discrimination and regionalism among us. We learn how such things survived in Kabir's times. There were similar situations at that time also. The people had nothing to eat. They had no homes to live in, but today they have everything. In spite of that, we get relief and an awareness to live life through Kabir's *vanis* in many conflicts. When in these conditions, he lived so, why do we not live with love and affection under these (present) conditions?

The relevance of Kabir's *padas* is obvious. It seems that the situation of Kabir might have been similar to that in which we live.... We feel closeness to it (Kabir's poetry). We get a purpose of living our life. We get help because we are not from a very higher class. We are from such a background where we get inspiration from Kabir's *bhajans* and *padas*.

According to him, Kabir has become an ideology open to all the communities:

Kabir is not the name of any human being. Kabir is an ideology. He is a thought. I feel that Kabir Saheb is not for a particular community nor is he personal. He talks about the entire humanity.... It is not that he talks for the Hindus or Kabirpanthis or the Muslims, rather he

but when he came to Kabir Chaura *Math*, he found a different Kabir who attacks rituals and pageantries. He now emphasizes that Kabir must be known only through his *vanis*²⁴⁵.

During his study, he also continued performing in the *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes organized by Maghar Kabir *Math* and Kabir Chaura *Math*. After completing his MA, he took to Kabir-singing full time. The greatest achievement of Devendra Das is to lead a singing group 'Tana Bana' which consists of the following Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi members: Umesh Kabir (32 years old) from Kabir Chaura *Math* (he plays the *ektara* and explains the meanings of the songs), Gaurav Mishra (30 years old) from Banaras (he plays the *manjira* and supports as chorus), Krishna Yadav (28 years old) from Banaras (he plays the guitar and supports as chorus), Harish Das (35 years old) from Kabir Chaura *Math* (he also plays the *ektara* and explains the meanings of the songs.), Bhagirathi Das (36 years old) from Kabir Chaura *Math* (he also plays the *ektara* and support as chorus). However, the regular members of this group are Devendra Das, Krishna Yadav and Gaurav Mishra. All the members of the group are highly educated.

speaks for humanity. He speaks to the humanity why humans are sleeping. You have all energies of the five elements. You are wondering with them. However, due to laziness and ignorance, you say that I am useless. Somewhere or other, he talks about *janoon* (passion). When we transmit these things among the audiences, whether they are children, young persons or old persons, they realize that Kabir is not from any tradition but he is a human. He talks about humans. Therefore, the name of Kabir is not just a name, but also an ideology.

²⁴⁵ It suggests an ideological different between Dharmadasi Kabirpanth and Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth.



Figure 16: Tana Bana Group (Gaurav Mishra, Devendra Das, Bhagirathi Das and Krishna Yadav) performing Kabir at Deoria (U. P.)

This group was formed in 2017. The origin of ‘Tana Bana’ Group owes to Umesh Kabir. Umesh Kabir²⁴⁶ reveals what inspired him to form this group:

The main reason of forming this group was to present the teachings of Kabir in an interesting manner among people.... Devendra Das and I live at the same *Math*, I talked to him about it. He asked me to suggest a concept on which they could work together. Kabir talks about ‘Tana Bana’ in his entire philosophy, and when Kabir talks about it, he means how to weave life in a beautiful manner. I suggested that we should form a group by the name of ‘Tana Bana’. The reason to form this team was to tell people about Kabir in a way in which they could adopt whatever Kabir has said. We have chosen a style in which we talk about Kabir, sing Kabir, explain Kabir and also talk about his significance so that people may accept him.

Devendra Das initially rejected the idea of Umesh Kabir by saying that no one would listen to them, but under his constant inspiration, he prepared the first composition ‘*Piya milenge*’, patterning it on a modern tune. As a trial, he first sang this composition before a few foreign friends of Umesh Kabir who were on a visit to Kabir Chaura *Math* and wanted to listen to Kabir *bhajans*. They were so mesmerized by the composition that they began to

²⁴⁶ Umesh Das is so influenced by the teachings of Kabir that he has started writing his name as Umesh Kabir. I find the spirit of Kabir in his behaviour and conduct. He preaches Kabir’s teachings and messages to those who visit Kabir Chaura *Math* and want to know Kabir.

support him as chorus. Later on, he along with his group sang the same composition many times at the *ghats* of the Ganga to find out its impact on the people present there and got a tremendous success. Devendra Das says: “Many people remember the song *piya milenge* and ask me to sing this *bhajan* again and again.” This *bhajan* suggests that people must remove the veils of pride, greed, arrogance, sin, lust, jealousy and other human vices which do not let them meet God, their spiritual husband:

Piya milenge, milenge piya milenge

Milenge piya milenge

Milenge piya

Piya milenge, milenge piya milenge

Milenge piya milenge

Milenge piya

Ghoonghat ke pat khol

Piya milenge, milenge piya milenge

Milenge piya milenge

Milenge piya

[You will meet the beloved; you will meet the beloved.

You will meet the beloved.

You will meet the beloved.

You will meet the beloved; you will meet the beloved.

You will meet the beloved.

Uncover the veil from your face,

You will meet the husband; you will meet the beloved.

You will meet the beloved.

You will meet the beloved.]

If we look at the structure of the *bhajan*, the phrase “*piya milenge*” is being highlighted and repeated several times. Devendra Das initiates each line and other members of the group support him as chorus and repeat the phrase “*piya milenge*” several times to the accompaniment of the musical instruments mentioned above. The chorus is a central attraction of their singing. On the one hand, it helps the audiences to understand the *padas* of Kabir through repetitions and on the other hand, it deeply engages them in the complete performance of the *pada*. Another aspect which also attracts the audiences and facilitates their understanding is the introductory and concluding commentaries on each *pada*. Moreover, they also mix the tunes of Kabir’s *padas* with *Sufiyana (Qawwali)*, western,

Bollywood and Bhojpuri film song tunes and styles in order to appeal to more audiences including youth audiences. All these aspects have brought novelties in the repertoire of 'Tana Bana'.

Devendra Das reveals how he patterns his *bhajans* on a few nodal components: "The present generation is attracted to the words such as *piya*, *sanvariya* etc. Somewhere or other, we have highlighted these words and it has laid a great impact on people. There should be a few such words which must move the heart of people. There should be some tunes which may move people. The purpose of the entire song ("*piya milenge*") is the same.

'Tana Bana' has also derived its inspiration from two other such groups 'Kabir Cafe' and 'Mati Bani'. They also perform Kabir in a mix of *Sufiyana* and western music styles and have popularized Kabir not only in India but also outside:

We were inspired by 'Kabir Café' and 'Mati Bani' and planned like them. Devendra Das prepared his composition and thus the journey has been continuing. This is how it started and people also began to like 'Tana Bana'. We have different tunes and voices. There are few instruments. There is a combination of the traditional instruments e.g. *ektara* and *dafali* (plastic *Khajadi*) and the modern instrument e.g. *guitar*. People like it very much. They are curious to listen to the *padas* of Kabir. It is in a high demand among people. People want to listen to the same *bhajan* again and again.

However, unlike 'Kabir Café' and 'Mati Bani', 'Tana Bana' has maintained both the traditional and modern forms of Kabir's culture, especially in the context of the musical instruments. On the one hand, *ektara* and *khajadi* represent simplicity and originality of Kabir and on the other hand, the guitar highlights an innovation in Kabir-singing. Devendra Das comments on the significance of both:

There are some traditional things of Kabir: his traditional instruments and his style. We want to present them in a new way. His instruments have been preserved. *Khajadi* and *ektara* should be kept at the front as today Kabir is not alive. You also see *ektara*. It suggests the presence of Kabir Saheb. *Khajadi* suggests the *sadhukaddi* tradition of Kabir²⁴⁷. In old days, common people

²⁴⁷ This tradition still survives among the singers of Bihar on a large scale.

were not literate. They had not learnt music. Without learning music, they expressed their devotion. We felt that we should preserve the legacies of Kabir among people. They must not be removed, rather they should be used to be associated with youth audiences.

We included the guitar because the youth do not accept *ektara* easily. There must be an instrument to attract all. Through the guitar, we sing at many scales. However, we have only one scale on the *ektara*. It produces a single tune. That does not give us the movement. Therefore, to have a guitar was necessary. It was used for the encoding of tunes. It also gives a good show like a band. It seems that something good is happening.

The symphony of the traditional and modern musical instruments definitely lays a special impact on audiences as I observed among Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi audiences of all age groups at Kabir Chaura and other places.

‘Tana Bana’ performs Kabir in both the Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi settings and is getting increasingly popular. It has performed Kabir in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and Delhi. In Banaras, they are also in a great demand. They often perform Kabir in many programmes associated with Ganga Ghat such as such as Ganga Dussehra, Dev Diwali and many others. They are regularly invited to perform by All India Radio and Radio Mirchi, Varanasi. Colleges, universities and other institutions are also inviting ‘Tana Bana’ to perform Kabir.

The greatest achievement of ‘Tana Bana’ is that it has also spread Kabir beyond Kabir centres and is connecting him with non-Kabirpanthis, especially the youth. Devendra Das says that even those who do not know Kabir try to be associated with him through their performances:

Even though people are not familiar with Kabir Saheb, when we sing his *bhajans*, they seem to adopt Kabir.... When we sing his *bhajans*, people ask whose *padas* they are. It seems that now people like to be connected with Kabir. People ask who Kabir is. What is he? How is he? Kabirpanthis do follow Kabir, but when those who are not Kabirpanthis try to know Kabir, it will ensure our success. Now, we are doing something for Kabir.

Devendra Das further adds:

I say repeatedly that Kabirpanthis will listen to us even though we do not sing in a melodious manner. From the spiritual perspective, it is true, but non-Kabirpanthis do not have any spiritual intention. They seek some deal of entertainment. We have introduced a new pattern which has also been very successful among non-Kabirpanthis. This has strengthened our morale. The interest of non-Kabirpanthis in listening to Kabir is really great. It has encouraged us. We have made many varied tunes. We have started planning to compose more such tunes which can make even non-Kabirpanthis listen to us. How the youth will listen to Kabir? How should we form tunes? How should we sing Kabir? We make experiments. It has brought a positive result as well.

Kabir really appears tied to the sectarian settings. Singers really need to perform his verses and spread his teachings and messages among non-Kabirpanthi audiences, which will extend the influence and relevance of Kabir among people.

Another significant achievement of 'Tana Bana' is that it has been spreading those verses of Kabir at Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi settings, which the Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth gives a high value and most of them are found in its popular collection "*Kabir Shabdavali*". Kabir's popular *bhajans* such as *Moko kahan dhoondhe re bande* [O seeker, where do you search for me?], *Bhala hua mori mataki footi* [It is good that my pitcher is broken], *Chadariya jhini re jhini* [Subtle, subtle blanket], *Sadho, ye murdo ka ganv* [Seekers, this is the village of dead bodies], *Bhakti bhav na boojhe duniya* [The world does not understand devotion], *Naiharwa hamka na bhav re* [The natal home does not suit me], *Sanyi ki nagariya jana hain* [You have to go to the city of God] and *Pijade vali na re muniya* [O, the bird in the cage] etc. in the repertoire of 'Tana Bana' suggest the same fact. Most of the *bhajans* end with Kabir's signature line and strongly express Kabir's spirit. They have the themes of death, transitory nature of human life, *bhakti*, social and religious awakening, reunion with God, greatness of *Guru*, detachment from *maya*, attack on orthodox and oppressive Brahmanical and Islamic formulations, human equality etc.

Devendra Das chooses *bhajans* from *Kabir Shabdavali* and *Kabir Bijak* of Kabir Chaura Math. He is rendering most of the *bhajans* of *Kabir Shabdavali* and *Kabir Bijak* into

the singing style of 'Tana Bana'. They perceive these collections as the real compositions of Kabir.

There is a collection of Kabir Saheb in the form of the *Bijak*. It is one of his main *granthas*. *Bijak*, *Kabir Shabdavali* are its (of Kabir Chaura) main collections. They are its authentic collections. We choose especially the authentic *padas*. We believe that he might have spoken them. We reflect on them (on *padas*) because many people have written many verses in the name of Kabir with their selfish motives. They compose *padas* like those of Kabir by using *Kahe Kabir*... We feel that they are also of Kabir. We meditate on which *padas* belong to Kabir and which do not belong to him. Kabir would have actually uttered them about society. Then, we include them. We feel that they have been uttered by Kabir because we have been associated with Kabir for 25-30 years. We make a sense of how Kabir speaks and for whom he speaks.

Singers determine the authenticity of Kabir's *bhajans* in their ways. Devendra Das determines their authenticity on the basis of his long experience. In his essay "Problems of Authenticity in the Kabir Texts Transmitted Orally in Rajasthan Today", Bahadur Singh asks a blind *sadhu* singer how he decides that a *vani* actually belongs to Kabir. The singer replies: "If a *vani* has a profound meaning, then of course it is Kabir's; if not, it is only an imitation" (P. 197). However, since Kabir's *vanis* were transmitted orally for about a century before they were written down, it is difficult to verify their authenticity. Bahadur Singh rightly says: "In the huge majority of texts, at any rate those orally transmitted, there can be no proof of authenticity or inauthenticity" (p. 196)

Devendra Das generally chooses relatively easier *bhajans* of Kabir to perform so that all can understand²⁴⁸. He makes tunes of the songs accordingly. Kabir really evolves and is updated according to time, tune, style and other contexts:

We try to sing mostly the songs of Kabir. There are many simple words in '*moko kahan dhoondhe re bande*'. They are on the tip of the tongue of the

²⁴⁸ Hess gives a similar observation about Prahlad Singh Tipanya: "Actually Prahladji sings the most "difficult" bhajans very rarely in public performances, as he doubts that people can understand them. Because I liked them so much, he produced a great many examples for me. I tried to convince him to sing them onstage more, asserting that people would be able to appreciate them" (p. 150).

people. As I sing one line, it will remind them of the whole song. As '*piya milenge*' is very common because they are the words which are frequently used. They are used in films. As in every home, women frequently utter *piya*. So, we select such *bhajans* of Kabir which contain such words. People do not accept difficult *bhajans* as they do not understand them.

This selection reflects why all the *padas* and verses of the *Kabir Bijak* and other major collections of Kabir's poetry are not sung. I have observed one more reason that singers need a rhythm in *bhajans*. They prefer those *bhajans* which can be rendered rhythmically and which can move audiences.

The performances of 'Tana Bana' are now getting more popular. 'Tana Bana' is being identified as a group of Kabir-singing from Kabir Chaura *Math*. *Mahant* Vivek Das also supports the performances of 'Tana Bana'. However, initially, he neglected 'Tana Bana', but he now appreciates and encourages this group. The members also introduce 'Tana Bana' as a team of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*. Thus, it extends the influence of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* among Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi members, most significantly its message that Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* emphasizes on knowing Kabir through his *vanis*, not through rituals.

It is interesting to note that 'Tana Bana' is being invited by Ravidasiya sect and other non-Kabirpanthi sects. Besides the *vanis* of Kabir, Devendra Das also sings the *vanis* of Ravidas. The followers of Ravidas are attracted to 'Tana Bana'. It is successful in bringing the youth closer to the *vanis* of Kabir, Ravidas and others. Devendra Das claims that they want to inspire society through the *vanis* of all saints bringing them together: "'Tana Bana' is associated with Kabir. It means weaving.... We not only sing Kabir but also Meera Bai and Ravidas. We are to bring them together at one place and want to weave such a blanket of their verses which can give a good inspiration to society.... We will present the verses of saints as a supporting system of life." I have observed that 'Tana Bana' has really started

bringing awakening among people. More audiences have increased because of the repertoire and style of 'Tana Bana' Kabir-singing.

'Tana Bana' and Caste

The members of the group are from diverse backgrounds. In public gatherings, Devendra Das initially used to introduce Gaurav Mishra and Krishna Yadav with their caste identities and Kabirpanthi members with 'Das' identity in the public gatherings. This could make Kabirpanthis prejudiced against Gaurav Mishra because of his being a Brahmin. However, non-Kabirpanthi audiences were surprised to know the fact that although Kabir bitterly attacked and questioned Brahmins, he performed Kabir with a great devotion. Devendra Das now does not address any of the members with their caste identities and replace them with the phrase 'Tana Bana':

If we address Gaurav as Gaurav Mishra in public gathering, people (Kabirpanthis) sitting there will judge him in a very different way. It automatically arouses caste consciousness in mind. This happened once when we had gone to Patna in order to perform. There was a programme organized by the dalits. They repeatedly asked us of our castes as if they had taken all of us to be Brahmins.... In this situation, we have to be very careful. We introduce ourselves just with the surname 'Das'. We are the devotees of Kabir. I have also instructed these boys not to reveal their surnames in their introductions and just to tell that they are from 'Tana Bana' and introduce as Gaurav Tana Bana only.

In fact, 'asking and doubting the identity of the members of 'Tana Bana'' by the dalits reflects that they have a bitter experience of discrimination perpetrated by Brahmins on the basis of caste, *varna*, temple-worship etc. They were tagged with untouchables and treated worse than animals:

They [Brahmins] were responsible for the creation of the structure of the society and religion, but on the other hand, they also legitimized the oppression of the working classes. Under Brahmanical Hinduism, the lower castes were subjected to all sorts of mistreatment. They were not allowed to read books, meditate, or live with dignity in the society. They were often treated as criminals, slaves and untouchables. (Shukdeo Singh, p. 231)

Kabir and Brahmins are two different worlds. It is rare when a Brahmin takes to Kabir-singing. It is more ironical when he sings those verses of Kabir in Kabirpanthi gatherings, which attack Brahmanical formulations (tenets and creeds) and criticize Brahmins for perpetuating human inequality in society. However, Gaurav Mishra does sing it.

Music breaks the boundaries of caste, class and creed. Gaurav Mishra became a part of 'Tana Bana' through the inspiration of Devendra Das when both met in 2017. He first adopted Kabir-singing not as devotion to Kabir, rather as a way of earnings. He now seems to have devotion to Kabir: "I like the verses very much. Let me tell you that I also sing filmy songs, but I find more pleasure in Kabir's *padas*. I am totally engrossed in it. I like it very much."

He now considers himself to be an integral part of 'Tana Bana': "There is an equal importance of all the members. They all are like the wheels of a single van." He confirms that he now does not face any difficulty among Kabirpanthis. However, he has to suffer from the members of his family, relatives and friends. They are aware of what Brahmins have done against the people of lower castes and of how Kabir challenged and questioned them in return. While trying to prevent Gaurav Mishra, they are using irreverent expressions against Kabir, Kabirpanth and Kabir-singing:

I had to face some difficulties in the beginning. I had to suffer a lot. They said: "What was there for you on that path. Will you become a Kabirpanthi? Similarly, my relatives said: "O, what are you singing? We do not understand." My friends said: "Oh friend, we do not understand anything. You sang Bollywood songs; what have you now started doing? You have a very good voice. What is this?" I did not pay attention to any of them. I just said to them: "I like it". I used to leave the place when someone tried to make me understand deeply. I did not reply anything and just said "yes".

"To make me deeply understand" suggests that they tried to prevent him by their discriminatory ideologies. Now, Gaurav Mishra has adopted Kabir-singing as his profession.

I also find his inclination towards Kabir when he says that Kabir has said the truth:

Veeru Rajbhar (VR): “Kabir has criticized Brahmanism. Do you not feel bad?”

Gaurav Mishra (GM): “No, I do not. I am an artist. I like singing Kabir *bhajans* very much. It seems to me that they have truth.”

VR: “Do you agree that whatever Kabir has said is true?”

GM: “Yes, there is truth. I know only this that there is no difference between Brahmins and low caste people. You should be good by heart. It is not important that you belong to either a high caste or low caste. It is good if you talk to one properly. I do not make any distinction between low and high or think he is lower than I am. This is not in my mind at all.”

VR: Do you think that our conservative society based on a feeling of high and low should change?

GM: Why should it not change? It must change.

Can Gaurav Mishra change the attitudes of his Brahmin people who continuously oppose his singing in Kabirpanth? Some of the members of his family have consented to his destiny. However, there are more obstacles ahead.

‘Tana Bana’ team has also been associated with an annual event “Ghat Walk” which is organized by Vijay Nath Mishra, the younger brother of the *Mahant* of Sankat Mochan Temple, and a neurologist at the Department of Neurology, IMS (Institute of Medical Sciences), Banaras Hindu University. This “Ghat Walk” emphasizes on knowing the traditions of Banaras walking along the banks of the Ganga. Devendra Das highlights how “Ghat Walk” makes us familiar with the traditions of Banaras and the role of Kabir-singing in it:

We are also associated with the “Ghat Walk”. It is our Mr. Vijay Nath. He is a neurologist. He has a mission of “Ghat Walk”. What is “Ghat Walk”? If we have to know the tradition of Banaras, we have to do “Ghat Walk”. Somewhere or the other, through “Ghat Walk”, Kabir, Tulsi and many others made their lives successful. However, we do not know Banaras. Then we should know the culture of Banaras through “Ghat Walk”. Who was Kabir? Who was Tulsi Das? Somewhere or the other when you go to the Tulsi Ghat, you would be familiar with the ideology of Tulsi and when you go to Shri *Math*, there you would be familiar with the ideology of Kabir. This is how he has launched a mission. We are also the part of this “Ghat Walk”. It gives an opportunity to perform the *bhajans* of Kabir.

Devendra Das claims that many Brahmins associated this “Ghat Walk” listen to his Kabir-singing. He also sings *padas* criticising hegemonic Brahmanical formulations against humanity before them. I asked him if the Brahmins did not oppose him. His reply is significant:

There has been no reaction till now. Whatever Kabir says has a practical value. The fact of the matter is that if I tell you that touching fire will burn you, it is practical and is applied to all whether we are Hindus and Muslims. If you reject the fact, it is your foolishness. Brother, it is known to all that fire will burn and water will drown you. It is practical. People know the truth. When you commit any wrong deed, you have a fear in your heart. You may try to hide the truth throughout your life. The soul within you declares that you are guilty no matter which caste or community you belong to. The knowledge of Kabir is of such kind which attacks falsity and shows the right path. It is not that Kabir has spoken only for Hindus. He has also spoken for Muslims in different ways. When we preach Kabir’s ideologies, I realize that those who take the most interest are Brahmins. Let me tell you that I have found the Brahmins the best audiences of mine. Vijaynath Mishra is my firm follower. He is the greatest example.... He does not call other artists. He wants to listen to only Kabir. There too, we reject the Brahmanical formulations:

Pahan puje hari mile to main puju pahar
(If one meets Hari by worshipping a stone, I will worship a mountain.)

We preach Ram to be searched for within:

Tere ghat mein hain ram
(Ram is within you.)

Even before him, we do speak out against Brahmanism and he himself recites Kabir’s verses. It is a living example. Brahmins listen to us. There are all Brahmins in his team. Some are Tiwaris, some Dubeys and some are Pandeyas.... Now they listen to us... Let me tell one more thing. I do not sing only. I have left home even at this age. It is also an important factor behind my impact on them that this man has given up all attachment and *maya*.... Vijay Nath Mishra is influenced by us not only because of our singing but also because of the fact that we are saints.... When we are on dais, he touches our feet. If you see this, you will be overwhelmed. He inspires us.... When we climb dais and if there are officers of high rank, he asks them to come down saying that saints have come. It is really a great thing that a person of such a high society respects you so.

It is really great that Kabirpanthis are respected by Brahmins. It is not necessary that Brahmins should touch the feet of the shudras and dalits, but they must consider them equal to themselves. If upper castes give respect and equal rights to the people of lower castes, it

will really bring harmony in the society and will provide a feeling of dignity and self-esteem to them. It will really change the society and the dream of Kabir will come true. However, the fulfilment of Kabir's dream seems impossible. The example of Devendra Das is just an exception. I also know an example of a Kabir singer being beaten by Brahmins in Azamgarh for raising a voice of protest against them, but I still believe that Kabir will continue inspiring many people to keep the fight on against their social and religious injustices and discriminations.

Qawwali Singers (Ahmad Brothers)

Among *Qawwali*²⁴⁹ singers, Kabir is popular not only in India but also in Pakistan. Shabnam Virmani and Linda Hess discovered Mukhtiyar Ali from Bikaner, Rajasthan in India and Fariduddin Ayaz and Shafi Mohammad Faqir respectively from Karachi and Sindh in Pakistan. They are prominent *Qawwali* singers of Kabir. Abida Parveen who is a famous Pakistani singer of Sufi music also sings Kabir's verses. There are yet many more *Qawwali* singers of Kabir in India and Pakistan, who need to be discovered in order to understand Kabir's relevance among them. I have discovered one group of *Qawwali* singers near Maghar, the place of Kabir's death. During the course of my fieldwork at Maghar in 2018, I met this group of *Qawwali* singers led by Israr Ahmad. They were invited by Khadim Hussain, the caretaker of the Kabir *Mazar* on the annual celebration of the *Urs* (the death ceremony of Kabir) at Kabir *Mazar*. They sang Sufi devotional songs in praise of Kabir, which were listened to with a great interest by both the local Hindus and Muslims present on the occasion. Their singing session was followed by my interview with them. Subsequently, I recorded their performances and interviewed them on couple of occasions at Maghar between 2018 and 2021.

²⁴⁹ *Qawwali* is a form of Sufi Islamic devotional singing in India and Pakistan. It is an energetic musical performance of Sufi Muslim poetry that aims to lead listeners to a state of religious ecstasy or to a spiritual union with Allah (God).

Israr Ahmad is from Bharpahi in Gorakhpur, which is a neighbouring village of Maghar. Israr Ahmad (47 years old), Rafiq Ullah Ahmad (50 years old) and Amruddin Ahmad (45 years old) are real brothers. Israr Ahmad and Rafiq Ullah Ahmad perform alternatively as lead singers. Amaruiddin Ahmad supports them as a chorus and introduces many couplets, *shayaris* and sayings in performance. Amaruiddin Ahmad is accompanied or supported as chorus by Mohammad Ismael (55 years old), one of his cousins. Their group consists of six regular members including Basgovind (a dalit), who plays the *dholak* or *tabla*. He belongs to the Chamar caste.



Figure 17: Ahmad Brothers performing Kabir at Maghar

All the members come from a low economic background. The Ahmad brothers also hawk clothes in their free time. They buy clothes from Bardahiya Bazaar (a vast local market) at Khalilabad in Sant Kabir Nagar and sell them in villages.

The Ahmad brothers have inherited Sufi or *Qawwali* singing from their ancestors. They also perform Sufi devotional songs in praise of Kabir. Although they are professional

singers, they have a strong devotion to Kabir as they have been associated with Kabir and Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* since childhood. They often visit this place for the blessings of Kabir. They regard Kabir as a Sufi saint or *Wali*. Mohammad Ismael says: “We have a lot of devotion to Kabir. We are thankful to him. He has achieved and practiced the highest spirituality. He has brought the Ganga (Ami river)²⁵⁰ to Maghar. She has come here to touch the dust of his feet. If he had no power, the Ganga would not have come from there. I really have faith in him. I thank him. The Muslims have a strong faith in Kabir ji”. Amiruddin Ahmad also expresses his strong faith in Kabir: “We are very close to him. We love him. We have faith in him. Our grandfather and father also believed in him. Today we also follow him. The people of our entire locality follow him.... We like his message of unity. Whatever he has done is good. Everything is good in him. It is the reason that we like him.”

The view of Mohammad Ismael reflects that they know Kabir more through his legends associated with Maghar, which present Kabir with an extraordinary spiritual power. They are devoted to Kabir as they have always seen Kabir as their local Sufi saint. I have observed that the Muslims of Maghar and neighbouring regions express their intense devotion to Kabir on account of the influence of his spiritual powers. I will discuss this aspect in detail in the fifth chapter.

Kabir in the *Qawwali* Repertoire of Ahmad Brothers

The Ahmad brothers often sing a long *Dastan* of Kabir²⁵¹ in *Qawwali* style. This story is about Kabir and his wife Loi²⁵². It goes as follows: One day some guests (*sadhus*) visited

²⁵⁰ The legend associated with the Ami has been discussed in the second chapter.

²⁵¹ I recorded the same *dastan* from Surendra Pratap Singh, a companion singer of Ramprasad Das. However, the version of Surendra Pratap is shorter.

²⁵² Kabirpanthis reject the fact that Kabir was a married saint. They consider Loi his disciple. Lorenzen writes: [T]he story is found only in two non-Kabir Panthi sources: the Muslim *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* attributed to Muhsin Fani and the Varakari author Mahapati's *Bhaktavijay*. The reason why Kabir Panthi authors do not mention the legend is quite simple. As has been noted (above, pp. 18-19), the *sadhus* of Kabir Panth refuses to accept that Kabir could ever have been married.

Kabir. He had no food to serve them. He asked Loi what to do. With the consent of Kabir, she decided to sleep with a local merchant in return for groceries. The merchant had already been eyeing her. He gave her groceries when she agreed to visit him that night. After Kabir served the guests and they departed, he asked Loi to keep her word to the merchant. It was raining in the night. Kabir himself took her on his shoulders and carried her to the merchant. The merchant asked her how she managed to come without getting her feet muddy in the rain. When she explained it, he began to repent and became the disciple of Kabir and Loi.

Kabir-Loi Dastan (Narrative/story)

*Jab koi dwar pe aye na bhukha jaye,
 Pal bhar na bisraye ki mehman hain bhagwan
 Jab koi dwar par aye na bhuka na jaye,
 Pal bhar na bisraye ki mehman hain bhagwan
 Ek roj ka kissa hain ki mehman aa gaye
 Ek roj ka kissa hain ki mehman aa gaye
 Khana nahi tha paas kabira laja gaye
 Bole kabir loi se bibi main kya karu
 Ab kis tarah mehman ki khatir jama karu
 Loi ne kaha ham pe ek ashik hain dukandar
 Kahiye to vada karke lau main kuchh udhar
 Bole Kabir suno mori naar
 Dharm nahi to jeena hain dhikkar
 Dharm hain sathi to kate dukh bhar
 Chahe tan man bik jaye na bhukha jaye
 Pal bhar na bisraye ki mehman hain bhagwan
 Jab koi dwar par aaye na bhuka jaye
 Pal bhar na bisraye ki mehman hain bhagwan
 Mehman hain bhagwan
 Sohar ki baat man, loi dukan par
 Pahuchi vaha to boli baniye se haskar
 Ye Shah ji kuchh apka yahsan chahiye
 Paisa hain nahi paas mein saman chahiye
 Baniye ne kaha jo jo jarurat hain batao
 Aur saude ke sath meri jaan le javo
 Ek arj phakhat hain meri hasrat nikal de
 Ense bhala maut musibat hain tal de
 Loi kahe suno mere dildar
 Ye jhoot nahi karo ji etbar, raat ko aaungi mere yaar*

Other religious groups had no such difficulty in accepting the early tradition of Kabir's marriage. Sikh tradition, for instance, accepts that Kabir, like Guru Nanak, was married. The particular legend, however, is not found in Sikh sources. (pp. 49-50)

Mere mehman hain aaye na bhukha jaye ki
 Pal bhar na bisraye ki mehman hain bhagwan
 Mehman hain bhagwan
 Jab koi dwar par aaye na bhukha jaye
 Ki pal bhar na bisraye
 Aaye mehman hain bhagwan
 Mehman hain bhagwan
 Baniya ke ghar se jo saman vo layi khana paka mehman ko ji bhar ke khilayi
 Biti jo adhi raat to kabir ne kahan,
 Loi kiya tha vada kya usko bhula diya
 Loi ko hua yad jhatt se shringar kar liya
 Yedi mein mehavar lagake jhatt se chal diya
 Bole kabir thaharo hai pani baras raha
 Kambal lo sar par dal ye mano mera kahan
 Kandhe pe aa baith jara
 Kandhe pe aa baith jara
 Rup na bigadhega ye tera
 Pahuncha du main ji tumako vaha
 Mera saman badhaye, na bhukha jaye
 Ki pal bhar na bisraye hain ki mehman hain bhagwan
 Jab koi dwar pe aye na bhukha jaye
 Ki pal bhar na bisraye
 Hain mehman hain bhagwan
 Sohar ki baat maan kandhe pe chad gayi
 Kuchh der me us baniye ke dware pahuch gayi
 Baniya tha intjari mein karvat badal raha
 Loi ko dekha paas to koso uchhal pada
 Baithke vo palang par laga dekhane shabab
 Yedhi par nazar dali to akal ho gayi kharab
 Bania ne kaha Loi chhupana na chahiye
 Barkha mein kaise aayi ho batana chahiye
 Loi kahe suno mere dildar
 Jhoot nahi hain karo ji etbaar
 Pahuncha kar preetam gaye hain tere dwar
 Mera sringar bachaye ki bhukha jaye
 Ki pal bhar bisaraye
 Ki mehman hain bhagwan
 Mehman hain bhagwan
 Mehman hain bhagwan
 Baniya kabir ji ki imandari dekhkar
 Sar ko utha ke rakh diya loi ke kadam par
 Bola tu meri maa ho main aulad hun tera
 Kar do devi ji maaf ye apradh haim mera
 Tune hame paap ka pyala pila diya
 Tune hame paap ka pyala pila diya
 Ab mata hame gyan aur eman chahiye
 Santo ka seva karne ka arman chahiye
 Ye kaali kahe ye manav sahi, dharm nahi to kuchh bhi nahi
 Aakhir mein kahna hain mera bas yahi
 Ki santo par dhyan lagaye na bhukha jaye

*Ki pal bhar na bisraye
Aaye mehman hain bhagwan
Mehman hain bhagwan
Jab koi dwar par aaye na bhukha jaye
Ki pal bhar na bisraye
Mehman hain bhagwan
Mehman hain bhagwan*

[When someone comes to the door, he should not let be hungry.
Even a single moment of time should not be spent,
The guest who comes home is God.
When someone comes to the door, he should not let be hungry.
Even a single moment of time should not be spent,
The guest who comes home is God.
It is the story of one day that some guests came to his home.
There was no food in the home, so Kabir was ashamed.
Kabir said to Loi, his wife, what should I do?
Now what should I serve the guests?
There is one shopkeeper who is my lover, said Loi.
If you allow me, I would borrow something from him by making a promise to him.
O my wife, says Kabir.
Without religion, it is useless to live.
If religion is our companion, we can spend life even in sorrow.
Whether body and heart is sold, no one should let be hungry.
Even a single moment should not be spent,
The guest who comes home is God.
When someone comes to the door, he should not let be hungry.
Even a single moment should not be spent,
The guest who comes home is God.
The guest is God.
Hearing the words of Kabir, Loi followed him.
Loi spoke to the shopkeeper at the shop.
The fact of the matter is that I need a favour.
I have no money but I need things.
The Bania said, whatever you need, tell me.
My sweetheart, take my life for the things.
I make an entreaty, satisfy my desire.
Death is better than it, end my problem (restlessness).
Loi said, o my lover, listen to me, this is not false.
Trust me, my lover, I will come to you in the night.
My guests have come, they should not go hungry.
Even a single moment should not be spent,
The guest is God.
The guest is God.
When someone comes to the door, he should not let be hungry.
Even a single moment of time should not be spent,
The guest who comes home is God.
She cooked food with the groceries which she brought from Bania and fed them to the fill.
Kabir said to his wife in the mid night.

Loi, you had committed a promise, have you forgotten it?
 Loi was reminded of it and she immediately decorated herself.
 Having coloured her heel, she immediately left for.
 Said Kabir, stop, it is raining outside.
 Cover your head with a blanket, obey me.
 Come and sit on my shoulder.
 Your decoration will not be spoiled.
 Let me take you there.
 You should enhance my respect, no one should let be hungry.
 The guest who comes home is God.
 When someone comes to the door, he should not let be hungry.
 Even a single moment should not be spent,
 The guest who comes is God.
 Obeying the words of the husband, she climbed upon the shoulders.
 After a short while, she reached the door of that Bania.
 The Bania was waiting and tossing in bed.
 He saw Loi near him and began to jump in happiness.
 Sitting on the cot, he began to watch the beauty.
 When he looked at the ankle, he went off his mind.
 The Bania said that Loi should not hide.
 She must tell how she came in the rain.
 O my lover, listen to me, said Loi.
 I am not telling a lie, trust me.
 My dear husband made me reach your door.
 He protected my decoration, no one should let be hungry.
 Even a single moment should not be spent,
 O, the guest is God.
 The guest is God.
 Finding the honesty of Kabir, Bania put his head at the feet of Loi.
 Bania, said, you are my mother and I am your son.
 I have committed a crime.
 You have made me the drink the cup of the poison.
 You have made me drink the cup of the poison.
 Now mother, I need knowledge and honesty.
 I want a wish to serve the saints.
 O, says Kali, that human is right, there is nothing without religion.
 Now, ultimately, I would like to say
 Concentrate your attention to the saints, no one should let be hungry.
 Even a single moment should not be spent,
 The guest who comes home is God.
 The guest is God.
 When someone comes to the door, he should not go hungry.
 Oh, the guest is God.
 The guest is God.]

This *Dastan* ends with the signature of 'Kali', but I did not get more details about him from Israr Ahmad. This story reflects the exploitation of the poor and weak by the rich; however, the poor and weak can protect themselves by changing the hearts of the rich

through their spiritual practices. It also propagates the popular Hindu belief “Guest at one’s home is God”.

Martin recorded the same *dastan* from the poor Meghval singers of Rajasthan and analysed:

One might posit that these low castes people’s experience of God is not of a God who saves His people by miracles. Instead, liberation comes through human initiative and ingenuity coupled with unswerving devotion to God. The story of Kabir and Loi reflects such an experience of God, for their actions lead to the merchant’s conversion and thus their freedom from his exploitation, rather than miraculous intervention by God. (p. 213)

Lorenzen observes: “It combines protests against economics and sexual exploitation of poor low-caste people by local merchants with an insistence that even the poor owe charity and hospitality to religious ascetics” (p. 48).

Qawwali singers often sing devotional songs composed by prominent Sufi poets Amir Khusrow and Bulleh Shah. ‘*Naina milake*’, ‘*Dama dam mast qalandar*’ are very popular in their singing. The Ahmad brothers also fitted Kabir into the composition ‘*Naina milake*’ originally composed in *Avadhi* by Amir Khusrow, a 14th century Sufi mystic. Israr Ahmad concludes it with his own signature line²⁵³. He begins it with the following *rekhta* (entreaty/prayer):

Baba Kabir aapka darbar aali hain
Dware akadas pe aya apka adna savali hain
Mukaddar ka sataya hun meri laaj rakh lena
Basad tajim chaukhat chumkar kahata savali hain
[*Baba Kabir, I have come to your door.*
Your poor beggar has come to your door.
I have been tormented by my misfortune, save my prestige.
The beggar kisses your kind threshold and prays.]

²⁵³ Such interpolations are very common in oral tradition. In the context of Kabir songs, Shabnam Virmani discusses many such interpolations. In her collection *Kaun Sunta Hain*, she describes that many songs of Kabir are sung with the signature of different poets: “Many of the songs of ‘Kabir’ in this oral collection bear the signature of poets like Bhavani Nath, Gulabi Das, Bana Nath, Hussain Faqir, Dharmadas and others, about most of whom very little is known except that they were inspired ... to compose their own songs replete with ... Kabirian ideas and images” (as cited in Hess, p. 88)

Chhap tilak sab chhini re mose naina mila ke
Naina mila ke, naina mila ke
Chhap tilak sab chhini re mose naina mila ke
Baba kabir pe bali bali jaun
Bali bali jaun, main bali bali jaun
Baba kabir pe bali bali jaun
Mohe suhagin kinhi re mose naina mila ke
Naina mila ke, naina mila ke
Chaap tilak sab chhini re mose naina mila ke
Hindu muslim sikh isae
Apas mein sab bhai bhai
Hindu muslim sikh isae
Apas mein sab bhai bhai
Dono ka man har lini re mose naina mila ke
Naina mila ke naina mila ke
Chhap tilak sab chhini re mose nain mila ke
Jab kashi tan taje kabira
Taje kabira, taje kabira
Ghar maghar kar linhi re mose naina mila ke
Chhap tilak sab chhini re mose naina mila ke
Kahte hain israr machal kar
Kauval machal kar, kauval machal kar
Kahte hain israr machal ke
Apne hi rang mein rang lini re mose naina mila ke
Naina mila ke, naina mila ke
Chhap tilak sab chhini re mose naina mila ke

[By looking at my eyes, he has taken away all my appearance and identity from me.
 By looking at my eyes, by looking at my eyes.
 By looking at my eyes, he has taken away all my appearance and identity from me.
 I surrender to Baba Kabir again and again.
 I surrender to Baba Kabir again and again.
 I surrender, I surrender.
 He made me *suhagin* (married woman) by looking at my eyes.
 By looking at my eyes, looking at my eyes.
 By looking at my eyes, he has taken away all my appearance and identity from me.
 The Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians are brothers among one another.
 He charmed the hearts of both by looking at my eyes.
 By looking at my eyes, looking at my eyes.
 By looking at my eyes, he has taken away all my appearance and identity from me.
 When Kabir gave up Kashi,
 Kabir gave up, gave up,
 When Kabir gave up Kashi,
 He made Maghar his home, by looking at my eyes.
 By looking at my eyes, looking at my eyes.
 By looking at my eyes, he has taken away all my appearance and identity from me.
 Says Israr with enthusiasm.
 Say *Qawwals* with enthusiasm.
 Says Israr with enthusiasm.

He coloured me in his own colour by looking at my eyes.
By looking at my eyes, looking at my eyes.
By looking at my eyes, he has taken away all my appearance and identity from me.]

This verse suggests that God embraces one with no artificialities and hypocrisies; *bhakti* breaks the social boundaries like caste, class, creed, colour, rich and poor; before God, everyone is equal. It also celebrates the arrival of Kabir at Maghar from Kashi.

While performing Kabir, the Ahmad brothers also include the songs dedicated to humanity, unity between Hindus and Muslims, etc. in their repertoire. They use different types of *shayaris* and quotations dedicated to humanity and spirituality. They understand that Kabir propagated humanity profoundly. They explain the meanings of *padas* of other Sufi saints and writers in relation to Kabir's spirit. While giving priority to humanity, they even reject the orthodoxy, especially of their religion (Islam). They reveal that in the Muslim community, there is a Wahhabi group which rejects the singing tradition and shrine-worship in Islam. However, they do not follow the ideologies of this group. They believe that humanity is a true religion. Mohammad Ismael and the Ahmad brothers reject the opposition of orthodox Muslims against their singing and visiting the shrines of Sufi saints. I recorded the following views of theirs, which reflect that the Wahhabi movement targets the shrine worship and the practice of music in Islam:

Mohammad Ismael (MI): We have not joined the Wahhabi group²⁵⁴. We are not of that group. They asked us to follow their ideologies, but we refused and said that God is one. Apart from Him, there is no other god in the world. He makes and mars whatever He pleases. Except Him, there is no one else who has this power. Whatever He wants will happen.... We all belong to Him. When we go to a *Mazar* or shrine of god, we pray for something, He gives us. God gives us. It is his blessings which He showers over us.

Amiruddin Ahmad (AA): Wahhabis do not give us permission. Let me tell you who do not give permission. They are divided into many sects e.g. Shia and Sunni. Those who created Wahhabi group are of this opinion. They allow no musical programme

²⁵⁴ Wahhabism is a conservative movement within Islam's Sunni branch. It is named after its founder, theologian Mohamed ibn Abdul Wahhab, who was born in the 18th century in what is now Saudi Arabia. Wahhab advocated a return to a "purer" form of Islam, focusing on its origins and the absolute sovereignty of God.

even in marriage.... No music programme should be organized²⁵⁵. There will be no programme of *Qawwali*. They reject all this. However, our Sunni people get programmes organized at all the shrines. All our elders perform *Qawwali*. They all organize programmes.

MI: The Sunnis organize all the programmes. They visit shrines, sing *Qawwalis* and offer blankets. They receive blessings.

AA: There is no problem. If they forbid us, we give a positive reaction. However, we go our way. We do what we please. We have no enmity with them.... Whether they allow music or not, we have to go everywhere. We have to meet everyone. Everything depends on us.

RU: They are Deobandis²⁵⁶ or Wahhabis. They have their own principles. If they come to us, they say that Sunni people offer *fatiha* in their ceremonies. They should not do so. Tell us when we should not remember the name of God. They are those people who forbid. When their own grandparents or parents die, they visit shrines. They feel bad at this.

The above views reflect that orthodox Muslims want to impose a strict form of Islam which has no scope for shrine-worship and music. It is the part of their orthodox religious reform movements through which they want to shape Islam on a purely scriptural identity.

Sufi shrine-worship and performance of *Qawwali* are such significant traditions which also create a shared space between the Hindus and Muslims visiting shrines for blessings. However, the scriptural Islam has no space for these shared traditions, which bring both the Hindus and Muslims together. Peter Gottschalk (2001) writes:

A remarkable feature of popular religion in South Asia is the widespread popularity of shared religious traditions which bring together Hindus and Muslims ... in common worship and ritual participation. These traditions are, by nature ambiguous in terms of clearly defined communal categories, defying the logic of neatly separated and demarcated communities defined on the basis of a reified, scripturalist and essentialized understanding of religious identity. (p. 23)

In his essay "Shared Hindu-Muslim shrines in Karnataka: Challenges to Liminality" Yogindar Sikand discusses that the orthodox religious reform movements in both Hindu and

²⁵⁵ Razuiddin Acquil (p. 22) notes that for the orthodox guardians of Islam, "music" has been "haram, or a forbidden act."

²⁵⁶ The Deobandi movement is aligned with Wahhabism and advances an equally harsh, puritanical interpretation of Islam. The Deobandi movement began with the founding of the Darul Uloom Deoband in 1866.

Muslim religions have attacked the shared traditions and he relates the process of their origin to the introduction of the Census:

Faced with religious movements for 'reform', 'orthodoxy', such traditions have increasingly come under attack, as powerful organizations seek to redefine them. Increasingly, 'fuzzy' identities are being replaced by clearly demarcated boundaries, resulting in these traditions gradually being identified as unambiguously 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' or as the case might be. While the origins of this process may be traced to colonial times, in particular to the introduction of the Census as a tool to map and categorize religious communities and to the politics of competing communalisms, it has, in the post-independence period, received added impetus by the active intervention of communal organizations seeking to purify these traditions and their followers of what is seen as their tainted association with the religious beliefs and practices of the other communities". (pp. 166- 67)

However, on the other hand, the Muslim followers of Barelvi tradition²⁵⁷ support and follow these practices (I will discuss this phenomenon in connection with Maghar in the fifth chapter), especially music and shrine-worship.

The Ahmad brothers and other members of the group perceive the initiatives of Wahhabi Muslims or Deobandi Muslims as an obstacle to humanity. They take inspiration from Kabir to continue their singing and spreading the message of humanity among people. In the following song, they express their wish to meet Kabir in order to remove their sorrows and difficulties. This song is based on a feeling of *birah* (separation from one's beloved) and *milan* (meeting or mingling with one's beloved):

Shah kabir, shah Kabir
Shah kabir saheb fakir ko pa gaye
Hindu aur musalman ka parda hat gaye
[Shah Kabir, Shah Kabir
Shah Kabir Saheb embraced the poor.
He removed the curtain of hallucinations of the Hindus and Muslims.]

²⁵⁷ The Barelvi movement, in contrast to the Deobandi movement, defends a more traditional South Asian version of the faith centred on the practices of Sufi mysticism. Barelvi is the 'soft version of Islam'. The Ahl-i Sunnat or Sunni Barelvi movement began in the 1880s under the leadership of Ahmad Raza Khan (1856-1921). The movement derived its name from Bareilly, the home town of Ahmad Raza Khan in Uttar Pradesh.

Baba kabir saheb pheraba nazariya, bolayiba ki na
Hey saheb Kabir saheb pheraba nazariya bolayiba ki na
Apne rauje pe savaliya bolayiba ki na
Rat din johila, bulawa kab aayi
Ab na sahal jai hamase judayi
Hamake bulawa baba apne nagariya, bolayiba ki na
Apne rauje par savaliya bolayiba ki na
Baba kabir saheb pherba najariya, bolayiba ki na
Apne rauje par savaliya, bolayiba ki na
Rahmat ki dar se phuhaar tohare angana
Aayi bajhiniya duvare tohare angana
Aya nirala vohi tohari atariya, bolayiba ki na
Apne rauje par savaliya bolayiba ki na
Ye baba kabir saheb pheraba nazariya bolayiba ki na
Apne rauje par savaliya bolayiba ki na
Hey bahut dino se baba bate arman ho
Rat din tarsela hamaro pran ho
Kahiya bolayiba baba apne nagariya bolayiba ki na
Apne rauje par savaliya bolayiba ki na
Sutale mein dekhi baba sapana tuhar ho
Hamake sahara de da kahe israr ho
Kahte rafiq hamari beetela umariya, bolayiba ki na
Apne rauje par savaliya bolayiba ki na
Apne rauje par savaliya bolayiba ki na

[Baba Kabir Saheb, turn your look; you will call us, won't you?
 Baba Kabir Saheb, turn your look; you will call us, won't you?
 You will call the poor persons at your mausoleum, won't you?
 I wait for day and night, when shall we be called?
 Now we are not able to tolerate the separation from you.
 Baba, call us to your city, won't you?
 You will call the poor persons at your mausoleum, won't you?
 Baba Kabir Saheb, turn your look, you will call us, won't you?
 You will call the poor persons at your mausoleum, won't you?
 With the fragrance of kindness, your courtyard is showered.
 The childless woman came to your courtyard.
 Nirala came to your cottage; you will call us, won't you?
 You will call the poor persons at your mausoleum, won't you?
 Baba Kabir Saheb, turn your look; you will call us, won't you?
 You will call the poor person at your mausoleum, won't you?
 Baba, there has been a wish in the heart for a long time.
 My breathing is restless day and night.
Baba, when will you call me?
 You will call us, won't you?
 You will call the poor person at your mausoleum, won't you?
 In our sleep, we have a dream of yours.
 Give me your support, entreats Israr.
 Says Rafiq, my age is passing; you will call us, won't you?
 You will call the poor persons at your mausoleum, won't you?
 You will call the poor persons at your mausoleum, won't you?]

Kabir's Nirguna songs in the Repertoire of Ahmad Brothers

The Ahmad brothers sing Kabir's *padas* with great interests. Some of the *Nirguna padas* sung by the Ahmad brothers in Bhojpuri are: '*Kavane nagariya hamare sayiyan ji ke dera*' [In which city does my husband have his shelter?], '*Mati ka yi banal shaririya mati mein mil jayi*' [This body is made of clay and will turn into dust], '*Are beetal jale sagri umariya, bhajan nahi kayilu gujariya*' [O my wife, all age is spending, but you did not devote yourself to *bhajans*], '*Naihar se nata tode sanyian ji se nata jode*' [She breaks her tie from the natal home and transfer it to her husband], '*Manbe mor kahanwa sonara, garh de mor gahanwa*' [O, goldsmith, obey me; make my ornaments], '*jhini re jhini chadariya*' [Subtle, subtle blanket], '*Kayila jatan sakhi sanyian milan ki*' [O friend, make attempts to meet the beloved/husband], '*Bole kaya mein suganwa bada lahri*' [The parrot in the body speaks with a lot of joy] '*Doliya kanhaar leke ayile mor sajanwa*' [My husband has come with a palanquin carried by palanquin bearers] etc.

These are the popular verses of Kabir sung in the Bhojpuri region. They also appeal to these *Qawwali* singers and become a part of their repertoire. Mohammad Ismael even claims that singing and listening to the *Nirgunas* of Kabir empower them. According to him, Kabir's *padas* occupy the highest place: "Kabir's *bhajans* are better. No other songs stand before Kabir's. Both (spiritual and social) are joined with each other. Both are joined. *Nirgunas* have dual meanings. They convey the message of love. Every person can understand them.... All young and old, poor and rich, educated and uneducated people understand *Nirguna* songs²⁵⁸."

The repertoire of the Ahmad brothers shows an interaction between Kabir-singing in Bhojpuri and devotional *Qawwali* singing. Both enrich, influence and borrow some elements from each other. Their *Qawwali* repertoire presents Kabir more as a Sufi saint. However,

²⁵⁸ However, it is difficult to understand many of the *Nirguna* songs of Kabir.

most importantly, *Qawwali* singing on Kabir and singing of Kabir's *padas* by *Qawwali* singers in Bhojpuri/other dialects of Hindi bring the audiences of both the communities together and wield a feeling of unity between them.

Khajadi Singers of Kabir in Bihar

One of the oral and performative traditions of Kabir which make us experience Kabir intimately is *Khajadi* singing because of its simplicity and naturalness and also because of the fact that the *padas* sung in the repertoire of *Khajadi* singing have been orally transmitted with little mediation of the written texts of Kabir; therefore, it gives us a glimpse of how Kabir might have been sung in the past and it expresses that continuity although some of *Khajadi* singers might have received a few oral *padas* of Kabir from educated singers who read and took them from the written texts of Kabir. *Khajadi* singing is one of the oldest traditions of Kabir-singing. It is believed to be one of the traditional musical instruments of Kabir. It is said that Kabir himself used to spread his *vanis*, teachings and messages to the accompaniment of *ektara* and *Khajadi*. However, in the present context, *Khajadi* is more prevalent than *ektara*. *Khajadi* singing is prevalent particularly in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Kolkata and Chhattisgarh. However, it is more popular in Bihar. Most of the Kabirpanthis of Bihar have *Khajadis* with them. Singers from *sadhus* to householders sing Kabir to the accompaniment of *Khajadi*. They generally sing Kabir in Hindi, Bhojpuri, Maithili and Magahi.

***Khajadi*: A Musical Instrument**

Khajadi is made of wood and leather. It is one headed drum. One of its sides is covered with leather and the other side is left open. It is played while holding it in one hand and hitting by the other. This *Khajadi* is also called *Vairagi* in the Kabirpanthi tradition. It is

believed that the tune of *Khajadi* cultivates in people a deep ecstatic experience of *bhakti* and union with God and a feeling of detachment from an earthly life.



Figure 18: Nandlal Das with his *Khajadi* at Lahartara Kabir Temple

Prevalence of *Khajadi* in Bihar

Khajadi singers claim that the tradition of *Khajadi* singing in Bihar has been in vogue since Kabir's time. They learnt this *Khajadi* singing from their ancestors and *Gurus*. According to them, it is popular because it is easy for them to carry it everywhere. It can be easily played. It can be played alone and also in the symphony of other instruments. However, the prevalence of *Khajadi* in Bihar reflects Kabir's strong appeal to the ordinary masses and on the other hand, the low economic status of *Khajadi* singers for whom *Khajadi* is the cheapest musical instrument and easily available. It also reflects the conscious role of the *Mahants* and saints who actively spread Kabir's messages and teachings in order to attract people in the fold of Kabirpanth. It was easy for them to carry *Khajadi* from one place to another. Their performances attracted many householders who first saw Kabir-singing to the accompaniment of *Khajadi* and later, who themselves started singing to the accompaniment

of *Khajadi*. I met a number of *Khajadi* singers who claim that they have learnt Kabir singing from their *Gurus*.

Those singers and preachers whose main aim is to make people aware and change their lives have also played a key role in spreading *Khajadi* in Bihar. Naresh Das who has inspired many including his son, daughter and son-in-law to sing and preach Kabir highlights the huge expansion of *Khajadi* tradition in Bihar:

It is spread in Bihar on a large scale. It is prevalent in Bihar. We have expanded it on a large scale. It is colossal. We are not free from programmes in Bihar. This is how it is prevalent in Bihar ... There can be found twenty people in every village who play *Khajadi*. There is a huge tradition of this in Bihar. It is difficult to measure it. There are such artists who do not take any nap in performance in the whole night.

The view of Naresh Das clearly suggests that there is still a strong tradition of Kabir-singing in Bihar.

Three Forms of *Khajadi* Kabir-singing

Khajadi performances are generally seen in three forms: 'Group Singing with *Khajadi* accompanied by other musical instruments' in which the *Khajadi* singer is supported by the members with other instruments such as *dholak*, harmonium and *manjira* etc. 'group singing with *Khajadi*', in which most of the members have their own *Khajadis* and support the lead *Khajadi* singers as chorus to the accompaniment of their own *Khajadis* and 'Solo singing with *Khajadi*', in which a *Khajadi* singer performs alone to the accompaniment of his *Khajadi*.

The first type is formal and singers perform on *dais*. The second type is informal and they perform it in any setting except the main *dais*. The third type is both formal and informal. In the first type and second type, the *Khajadi* singer may be the lead singer or a part of the chorus.

Khajadi Singers and Kabir-singing

Most of the present *Khajadi* singers of Bihar belong to the age group 40-80 years, which, according to the Brahmanical *Ashram* system [in which human life is believed to be of 100 years and divided into four stages (each of 25 years): *brahmcharya* (student life), *grihastha* (household life), *vanaprastha* (retired life) and *sannyasa* (renounced life)], suggests the last two stages of the *Ashram* system. However, many of these singers took to Kabir-singing to the accompaniment of *Khajadi* when they were quite young.

Khajadi singers perform Kabir for hours without a break. They never sing Kabir with any external help e.g. diaries or books. *Bhajans* flow through their memories. They claim that songs come from within and have no end. Nandlal Das who is so devoted to Kabir that he starts singing Kabir alone anywhere on or without any occasion. He claims to sing Kabir *bhajans* for eight hours alone: “See, when my companions assemble, we sing together. If they do not come, I do not worry for anything. If someone invites me to a programme for five or six hours or eight hours, I sing alone. I say that my *Guru* knows!”

During *Khajadi* singing, a single song continues for a long time punctuated by repetitions, commentaries and physical activities such as dance and clapping. They start dancing at any point of *Khajadi* singing as if they were in a trance. There is a regular rhythmical variation in the tempo of *Khajadi* singing. It begins with a slow motion and grows faster. The rhythm and tempo of playing *Khajadis* follows those of the singing of the singers.

Categories of Khajadi Singers

During my fieldwork among *Khajadi* singers, I identified mainly three types of *Khajadi* singers: saint *Khajadi* singers, semi-professional *Khajadi* singers and ordinary

householder *Khajadi* singers. However, these categories often overlap or are mixed with one another on some occasions (it has been discussed below).

Saint *Khajadi* singers are those singers who live at *Maths*. Some of them are celibate and some are householders, but have left their homes and started living like saints. These singers often sing alone or in groups at *Maths*. Saint singers are also invited to perform Kabir in the Kabirpanthi programmes organized at Kabir centres and homes of the followers.

Semi-professional singers are those who start Kabir singing as their devotion to Kabir and on account of the opportunities of earnings, they also make it their profession. Generally, they do not demand money for their singing. As in Kabirpanth, it is a practice of offering money, clothes etc. as a farewell gift at the end of the programmes, they remain happy with that. However, the rich host Kabirpanthis know that they have invited the semi-professional singers, they give them a fair amount of money.

Householder singers are those who sing only for devotion and live at their homes. In villages, they often assemble in the evening at the homes of some Kabirpanthis among them and perform Kabir-singing like a *kirtan*.

Most of the *Khajadi* singers have no school education, but they are well-versed in singing Kabir. They are poor dalits and shudras, but are rich with Kabir's thoughts.

***Khajadi* Performances at Prominent Kabir Centres on Kabir Jayanti and Other Important Occasions**

When the singers of all three categories travel to Lahartara and Kabir Chaura on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti and to other prominent Kabir centres on some other important ceremonies and occasions, they form groups of their familiar or local people. They often travel to these places with their own local *Mahants* or *Gurus* or *Aguas*. Most of the members

are householder Kabirpanthis. Reaching the target places, they stay and perform Kabir together. I identified several groups of *Khajadi* singers from different parts of Bihar on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti at Lahartara *Math* and Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*: group of *Mahant* Ramsharan Das, group of *Mahant* Munshi Das, group of Seetaram Das, group of Naresh Das, group of Siya Ram, group of Harakhi Saheb, group of Ramshri Das, group of Kuar Saheb, group of Keshav Saheb, group of Kishori Saheb, group of Prabhu Saheb and group of Sadan Das etc.

At these centres, the above categories, especially saint *Khajadi* singers and householder singers, are mixed. Even women followers join the groups and play *Khajadi*. The identity of performers and listeners in this tradition is often diluted because the listeners also become performers. They share *Khajadis* with one other. Those who do not have *Khajadis* also accompany performances with their rhythmic clapping. Many of the members who have *Khajadis* play them together and those who have not *Khajadis*, support as chorus or support through their rhythmic clapping. The common Kabirpanthi followers from other states also join them.



Figure 19: A group of *Khajadi* singers from Lakhisarai (Bihar) performing Kabir at Lahartara

In the group *Khajadi* singing, there is more than one lead singer. These lead singers sing alternatively and others repeat them and this continues for hours. Their performances are very enthusiastic and energetic. Several variations of speed, tempo, movement and physical activities take place during their performances. Some of the singers and listeners start dancing in devotion to Kabir. I found many dalit and shudra singers and listeners dancing and expressing a feeling of dignity and personhood. My observation is similar to what Hess observes about Ram Prasad Aradiya and the members of his *mandali* from Madhya Pradesh who are poor and belong to a lower caste, claim their space through Kabir singing:

Look at Ram Prasad Aradiya and his *mandali* in Dhunsi village — men who work as labourers, who are economically and socially marginal, who may live at subsistence levels, who are not accorded a sense of dignity and personhood by the caste-ridden structures of mainstream society. In the *satsang*, we witness them claiming that space as their own, with a sense of joy and ecstasy. Watching them dance and sing, I recognize the sense of power and personhood that the poetry and music are filling their bodies with. (p. 394)



Figure 20: A group of *Khajadi* singers from Rajgir (Bihar) performing Kabir through songs and dance at Lahartara

***Khajadi* Singers and Kabir**

Khajadi singers claim that they organize themselves and their people through Kabir-singing. In fact, they strongly believe that their own lives are transformed and also they themselves transform the lives of their people through Kabir-singing and his messages. They clearly appear to live and breathe Kabir. Kabir is their guide, benefactor, messiah, saviour and God. Their singing is an indication of their profound intimacy with Kabir. They also perceive Kabir according to the experience, which has brought change in their lives or appealed to them. For example, when I asked Naresh Das what Kabir means to him or who Kabir is. He replies that he (Naresh Das) lived a miserable life before adopting Kabir; after he adopted Kabir, his life was miraculously changed; therefore, Kabir was his God; he was everything for him and he always helped him.

During their commentaries, they also introduce Kabir's legends which give a respectful and dignified meaning to their lives and the lives of their audiences. In fact,

Kabir's legends in which he has challenged or defeated their Brahmin opponents give a lot of confidence to them and help them live a life of dignity and respect. Nandlal Das (he is 70 years old; he learnt Kabir-singing from his *Guru* and has been singing Kabir for 50 years), a dalit (Dusadh) singer from Rajgir, follows Kabir because he challenged Ramananda, a Brahmanical *Guru*, who had to accept the superiority of Kabir. He sees his own victory in Kabir's. We can clearly see how this legend inspires a *dalit* singer: "I follow Kabir because he became the disciple of Ramananda who used to make disciples only from upper castes. He grasped neither a pen nor a book. However, he surpassed the disciples of Ramananda. Whatever he said without pens and books took him more ahead than his disciples. Therefore, we understand his *Saar shabd*."

We can clearly see in Nandlal Das an impression of the pain of Brahmanical oppression against dalits. He is aware of how Brahmins exploited and discriminated against them through untouchability, caste, *varna* and education. Kabir gives him a psychological relief.

Repertoire of *Khajadi* Kabir Singers

Like other singers, *Khajadi* singers also perform *Saar Vanis* and *Daas Vanis* of Kabir. Kabir's old *Nirguna* songs are very popular among *Khajadi* singers. They also sing many *Daas Vanis* attributed to Dharmadas or to his devotion to Kabir. A strong emphasis on devotion to *Guru* is found in their repertoire. They consider *Guru* not only as a spiritual guide but also a medium of their religious and social awakening. They see the image of Kabir in their *Gurus* whose words are religious scriptures.

Their songs also feature important themes of Kabir's poetry: Death, *bhakti*, salvation, religious and social awakening, *Guru*, detachment from *maya* and human vices such as lust,

greed, anger and jealousy, attack on the consumption of non-vegetarian meals, alcoholic beverages, criticism of orthodox Brahmanical and Islamic practices etc.

Among spiritual songs of Kabir, many songs are sung based on the theme of death. In these songs, death is seen in different contexts. One important context in which death is celebrated is that it is a leveller. It levels differences between rich and poor, high and low on the basis of caste, class etc. Such songs betray an inherent critique of those who are responsible for such discriminations. Kabirpanthi singers are mostly dalits and shudras. I find that the singers discredit such distinctions through these songs. Both the singers and audiences believe that Kabir is talking about their welfare in these songs too. These songs also fill them with energy, confidence, a feeling of self-respect and psychological relief.

Now let us look into the lives of some *Khajadi* singers to discover how they adopt, live and practice Kabir. I have discussed here two *Khajadi* singers: Gaya Das from Roersa, Samastipur and Naresh Das from Damodarpur, Lakhisarai in order to underline Kabir's relevance in connection with *Khajadi* singers.

Gaya Das

Gaya Das is from Rosera, Samastipur. He is 90 years old. He belongs to a dalit community and he has no formal education. He has been singing Kabir since childhood. He learnt it from his *Guru*. He left his home twenty years ago and now has been living at Rosera Mahadev *Math*. At the *Math*, he regularly sings Kabir's verses to the accompaniment of the *Khajadi*. Gaya Das has been attracted to Kabir and Kabir-singing for the sweetness in his *vanis*. He claims that Kabir never spoke any harsh words:

Meetha sabse boliye sukh upaje chahu ore
Vashikaran ek mantra hain tejo vachan kathor
Din garibi bandagi sabko samjhe heet
[Speak to everyone sweetly, joy spreads everywhere.
Discarding harsh words is the only *mantra* of captivating people.
Consider all the poor and weak your own.]

The following comment of Gaya Das shows how the poor and subalterns find Kabir close to themselves: “He never spoke anything harsh. He considers everyone his own whether he is poor and helpless. One who respects the poor is the greatest one. He is a calm saint. He is the greatest saint. Kabir is the greatest of all saints. He used to captivate others by speaking melodious words”.

Gaya Das is a dalit and perceives Kabir as his own because he spoke in favour of the poor and weak people of low castes. In fact, he finds Kabir’s *vanis* sweet because Kabir spoke harsh words against Brahmins who have tormented and exploited dalits and shudras through discriminations against them in the name of caste, *varna* and creed. It is also one of the reasons that dalit and shudra followers of Kabir regard Kabir as the best saint. Gaya Das sings:

Sant mein kabir sant hain sahi
Aur sant ko main manta nahi
[Among all saints, Kabir is the only true saint.
I do not follow any other saint.]

The following *bhajan* which Gaya Das often sings is popular among *Khajadi* singers. This *bhajan* shows that two creatures may look to be of the same complexion, but their deeds do not match with each other. It inspires human beings to do good deeds along with the *bhakti* of *Guru*.

Rangwa mein rangwa mili jai re karamwa nahi mili
Nahi mili ho nahi mili ho karamwa nahi mili
Kag koilariya ke eke bare rangwa
Rangwa mein rangwa mili jaat re karamwa nahi mili
Kaya kako ghar har lete hain koyil kako kuchh det
Apni nekhi bain se sabako man har let hain

Hansa bagulva ke bare eke rangwa
Bagula machhariya tin khaat re karamwa nahi mili
Rangwa mein rangva mili jaat re karamwa nahi mili
Manav danav ke eke bate rangwa
Danav boli dukhdayi re karamwa nahi mili
Danav bada dukhdayi re karamwa nahi mili
Rangwa me rangwa mili jayi re karamwa nahi mili
Kahat kabir suno bhai sadho
Guru charanwa mein rahal laptai ho karamwa nahi mili

[The complexion of one's body will match that of other, but their deeds will not match.

They will not match, they will not match, the deeds will not match.

A crow and a cuckoo have the same complexion.

Their complexions match each other, but their deeds do not match.

The sound of the cock takes away something from us while that of the cuckoo gives us something.

Through her sweet voice, the cuckoo charms everyone.

A swan and heron have the same complexion.

The heron eats fish, the deeds do not match.

Their colours match each other, but their deeds do not match.

Human and devil have the same complexion.

The devil is pain giver, the deeds will not match.

The devil is pain giver, the deeds will not match.

The colours match each other, but the deeds do not match.

Says Kabir, listen, o' seekers.

I will embrace and live at the feet of *Guru*.

The deeds do not match.]

This *bhajan* is also a critique of hypocrite people who harm innocent people and show that they are their benefactors. I find ordinary and poor *Khajadi* singers more open hearted and living life with simplicity and naturalness beyond hypocrisy and artificiality.

Again, the following *bhajan* is very popular among *Khajadi* singers and this *bhajan* suggests that a *bhakta* aspires to meet his *Guru*. It is an *arji* song attributed to Dharmadas and expresses his longing to meet his *Guru*. This shows how along with songs ending with Kabir's signature line, the songs with the signature line of Dharmadas are also popular among *Khajadi* singers:

Dharmadas yah arji karatu hain guru ke charan balihari
Abki baar ubaru saheb dharab charan tumhare re
Andeshwa lagi rahi

Kab hot guru se milan ho andeshwa lagi rahi
[Dharmadas submits this prayer to *Guru* surrendering himself to his feet.
O, Saheb, do my welfare this time; I will embrace your feet.
This doubt is lingering in my heart.
When would I meet *Guru*? The doubt is lingering in my heart.]

The following *bhajan* is also sung by many *Khajadi* singers. This *bhajan* elaborates the greatness of *Guru* and suggests that no one is as great as *Guru* is and due to his blessings, one can win the contest of life full of struggles.

Satguru sam koi nahi saat deep nav khand
Aa teen lok na payiye aur ek hi sab brahmand
(No one is like *Satguru* in seven continents and nine world-divisions.
There are not three *Lokas*, rather there is only one universe.)

Kahe Kabir es jag ke andar, ense koi na bada ji
Ho ense koi na bada ji
Jitale baji, japar guru bane hain raji jitale baji
[Says Kabir, no one is greater than him in the world.
O, no one is greater than he is.
Has won the contest.
One blessed by *Guru* has won the contest.]

Kabir-singing by Gaya Das reflects what Kabir means to him and what Kabir's verses do to him. He has been living and breathing his life through Kabir and Kabir-singing. On the one hand, his own spirituality based on Kabir represents the power of Kabir's spiritual inspiration and on the other hand, his claim "Kabir never speaks harsh words" shows how he is influenced by Kabir's social messages.

Naresh Das

Naresh Das is one of the most popular *Khajadi* singers from Bihar. I first heard his performance at Dharmadasi Lahartara Kabir Temple in Varanasi. He sang and danced in devotion to Kabir as if he were in a trance, but at same time, he made an influential commentary on what he sang. He was supported as chorus by half a dozen *Khajadi* singers and many ordinary Kabirpanthi followers. All the audiences present around his group were

engrossed in his magical and extraordinary performance which continued for hours. When it stopped, I interviewed him. I subsequently recorded his performance and interviewed him at his village in Bihar.



Figure 21: Naresh Das (in the middle) performing Kabir at Lahartara

Naresh Das is an extraordinary semi-professional *Khajadi* singer. He is 45 years old. He is from Damodarpur, Lakhisarai. He belongs to the Yadav caste. He has five brothers and he is the eldest one. He has no formal education. He has been a Kabirpanthi follower since he was 20 years old. His father was also a Kabirpanthi follower. Except his father, all the members of his family, including him were non-vegetarian. One day, Prayag Das, the *Guru* of his father visited his home and he went to serve him food. Prayag Das inspired him to become a Kabirpanthi follower and give up eating non-vegetarian meals. He agreed and took *diksha* and *kanthi* from him.

His mother asked him to eat a non-vegetarian meal several times because of her care and love for her son, but he successfully resisted as he was now a Kabirpanthi follower. After

a few months, he became seriously ill and his body was emaciated. There was no hope of his survival. Along with the treatment, he was advised to regularly eat a non-vegetarian meal in order to get recovered soon, but he refused. He mediated Kabir again and again and started getting recovered. When he became completely healthy, he devoted himself to the *bhakti* of Kabir. He forsook the worship of any Hindu god or goddess, rather adopted Kabir his real God. He started participating in *satsangs* and *pravchans* which he calls schools of ordinary people: "There, *satsang* is a school and those who are the part of this are educated in the real sense."²⁵⁹

Seeing the *Khajadi* singers in *satsangs* and *pravchans*, he also began to practice playing the *Khajadi* and soon learnt it. He also learnt to play the *dholak* and pleaded with a local *Mahant* Masin Das to give him opportunities to play the *dholak* in Kabirpanthi programmes. He started playing *dholak* or *Khajadi* in Kabirpanthi programmes.

However, the financial condition of his family was poor. His mother and wife (whom he married in his teen and had two children) asked him to do a job in order to earn and help the family and not to waste his life playing *Khajadi* and *dholak*. He refused and told them that he would never leave this path. Kabir would help him. He would get everything through his *bhajans* and *bhakti*. He would not work as a worker.

One day after the programme which continued the whole night, he saw that during the farewell, the main singers and other members were given 100 rupees and clothes each while he received just 10 rupees. He decided that now he would sing *bhajans* and will not play the *dholak* so that he could also get more money. Soon, in the next programme, when he refused to play the *dholak*, he was given an opportunity to sing. He mesmerized all the audiences with his melodious and powerful voice and earned a lot of appreciation. Since then, he has

²⁵⁹ I also find them as schools where cultural lessons are taught to people. However, modern generations lack these cultural lessons.

regularly been performing Kabir-singing. He often performs to the accompaniment of his *Khajadi* alone or with his *mandali*.

Kabir-singing has increasingly improved his financial status and has earned him a great reputation as a Kabir singer in Bihar. He continuously moves from place to place in order to perform Kabir. He claims that he does not demand money for programmes and Kabirpanthi hosts themselves offer him money and clothes as a farewell gift. With this money, he has also established a small Kabir *Ashram* at his village.

It is also to be noted that he has transformed the lives of hundreds of people through his singing and preaching in Lakhisarai, Shekhpura, Jamui etc. He claims that wherever he goes, he certainly makes some disciples. They become his disciples when they are influenced by his singing and *pravachans*: "I go to village after village and return after improving the lives of some people. I return after giving them *kanthi*. I have this principle. I had nothing, but through his blessings, I have now everything."

He claims that Kabir-singing and preaching give him courage and strength. He further claims that Kabir means the brave or bravest one who exists in everyone:

I follow him because Kabir Saheb is the bravest one. He is the bravest one who lives in the body of everyone. Whoever speaks in this body is the bravest one. He is Kabir. The day he comes out of the body, no one will care for you and no one will care for me. Whatever temples, mosques and tanks you see, if one dies here, will be worthless for one. Therefore, I practice *bhakti* and perform *bhajans*. Till our *jiva* or soul survives, if we do something with our hands and hear through our ears, our life will be better and it will pave to salvation. Otherwise, we are already moving towards hell. We have found a very good body and we think that we will see good things and will eat good things. If we do not see good things and eat good things, we are wasting our valuable things. Therefore, I spend most of my time in singing *bhajans*.

I have found many other Kabirpanthi followers and singers saying that Kabir means brave. He is brave in the sense that they get inspiration from him. They claim that they sing

Kabir to make their lives better and to make others aware. The self-improvement through Kabir is a great achievement for them

Naresh Das performs various types of *bhajans* of Kabir. He claims that he also composes his own *bhajans* using the refrain of Kabir at their end: “If I find something new in my heart or if I find something suitable, I make my own *bhajans*. If not suitable, I give it up.” He claims the following *bhajan* to be his own composition which suggests that without practicing *bhakti*, one cannot understand its value and God:

Are kahin kabir suno ho bhai sadho
Yahi pad ke jo arth lagave
Are pahuche hain mool thekan sauda kinhe se jane
[O seekers, listen, says Kabir.
Whoever understands the meaning of this *pada*, reaches the real place.
You will know if you buy things yourself.]

I have observed that the line ‘*yahi pad ke jo arth lagave*’ which follows Kabir’s signature line in above *padas* suggest that such *padas* might have been composed by Kabir singers or followers themselves. It features in many *bhajans* which are sung in Bihar.

Through his active and enthusiastic singing and preaching Kabir, Naresh Das has become an important voice of Kabir-singing in his region. His huge popularity attests to it. ‘*Chetana*’ (to warn or alert) and ‘*Jagana*’ (to awake or make aware) oneself or other people are two very significant aspects which are reflected by Kabir’s poetry, personality and legends. Many singers who have inherited these aspects are really serving humanity. Naresh Das is one of them.

Thus, to sum up, Kabir-singing to the accompaniment of the *Khajadi* takes us closer to Kabir. *Khajadi* singers mostly transmitted Kabir orally with less mediation of written texts and digital media. It makes us feel how Kabir might have been sung in early days.

Khajadi singing gives a glimpse of how Kabir himself might have awakened people to live a life of dignity and respect.

How Kabir-singing influences people and makes Kabir a part of their life can be best seen through *Khajadi* singers. *Khajadi* singing makes us experience Kabir. It is also an expression of devotion towards Kabir and his words. It makes the uneducated and illiterate singers and audiences spiritually and socially learned people.

It not only develops a strong relationship of the singers and audiences with Kabir's world but also effaces the gap between singers and listeners as both sit and sing together. The audiences not only listen to the *padas* but also experience their influences by their close and direct participation in performance. Besides, they also celebrate a spirit of dignity, personhood and equality. This is the space where there is no one is poor, weak and low. The differences on basis of caste, *varna*, colour, gender and creed are dissolved and result in only one identity — Kabir's followers. However, they are also aware of religious and social injustices against which they have to continue their fight.

Thus, *Khajadi* singing is the source of inspiration and motivation for people. It will continue inspiring and motivating the people of Bihar to live life with Kabir.

Conclusion

The early manuscripts of Kabir's poetry collected in Panjab and Rajasthan suggest that Kabir was sung in both the regions as they were collected from the oral and performative traditions of Kabir prevalent in these respective regions. These traditions undoubtedly travelled from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the two regions, which were primarily associated with Kabir. However, *Bijak*, the first manuscript associated with these regions, was found as late as 1805. It is the product of the Kabirpanthis themselves. The *Bijak* also informs us about

Kabir's oral and performative traditions before 1805 as many of the verses of the *Bijak* were taken from those long-standing traditions²⁶⁰. However, the establishment of Kabirpanth (after the death of Kabir) more clearly and strongly informs us of the Kabir's oral and performative traditions in these regions as it (Kabirpanth) has always been practicing and popularizing Kabir's verses from the *Bijak* in its *satsang* and *pravachan* programmes. Kabir's oral and performative traditions developed and flourished more through Kabirpanth in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. In fact, Kabirpanthi followers have popularized Kabir's oral and performative traditions in a more organized and active manner in these regions.

Since these manuscripts were collected by male followers of Sikhpanth, Dadupanth and Kabirpanth, they clearly reflect that Kabir's oral and performative traditions were first transmitted and nurtured by men singers, preachers and lay followers.

Among men Kabir singers of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, there are many popular Kabir-singing traditions on the basis of musical instruments: *Khajadi*-singing, *Dafali*-singing, *Chimta*-singing, *Sarangi*-singing, *Ektara/Tambura*-singing, *Jhaal/Kartal*-singing, *Dandtal*-singing, *Harmonium*-singing and *Dholak*-singing etc. The *Harmonium*-singing is always accompanied by different musical instruments while other singing traditions may and may not be accompanied by these instruments. The *Harmonium*-singing accompanied by different musical instruments has recently flourished in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. One of the reasons which have given a fillip to the *harmonium*-singing is the source of earnings in Kabirpanth.

In Kabir's oral and performative traditions, men singers perform both *Saar Vanis* and *Daas vanis* in the name of Kabir. The present study has shown that singers contribute and

²⁶⁰ However, some of the verses of *Bijak* may be the interpolations by Kabirpanthi *Mahants*, saints and other followers of these regions.

extend the *Saar vanis* and *Daas Vanis*. Kabir has become a musical language. Kabir singers use the grammar or model of this language and produce their own versions. In fact, Kabir's poetry continues to be a living mass phenomenon and to evolve depending on interests of singers and audiences, places, rituals, and religious, social and economic backgrounds of singers.

Transcreations of Kabir by men Kabir singers associated with Kashi Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth come closer to the spirit and sensibility of Kabir while many compositions of Dharmadasi singers run counter to Kabir's spirit and sensibility. Since Dharmadasi Kabirpanth emphasizes on reaching Kabir through rituals and *Guru*-worship, more *arji* (tribute) songs to Kabir and songs based on *Guru*-worship have been composed. These songs present Kabir/*Guru* as God or an *avatar* who is prayed for removing the sufferings of people and whose *darshan* will be beneficial. They also suggest that coming to the shelter of Kabir/*Guru* will change the life of people. They will receive blessings of Kabir or *Guru*. These songs are, in a way, patterned on the *Saguna* way of *bhajan* singing and are well received by audiences, especially Dharmadasi Kabirpanthi audiences.

Young men singers have also attracted young audiences towards Kabir by patterning *Daas Vanis* and *Saar Vanis* on modern music or on the pattern of a mix of Bollywood and Bhojpuri film, *Sufiyana*, western and DJ-music tunes. In this process, Kabir's performative world gets updated and broadened, especially according to the taste of the young audiences of Kabir. The contribution of 'Tana Bana' is very special as they have modernized Kabir's popular *padas* (*Saar Vanis*) through new tunes, rhythm and styles. Most importantly, they have taken Kabir among non-Kabirpanthi audiences beyond Kabir centres. Kabir is really needed to be continuously sung and spread among the non-Kabirpanthi audiences so that they may get different inspirations which Kabir's *vanis* provide.

A good singer and preacher really influences and appeals to a large number of people by goading, inspiring and creating a spiritual and social awakening among them through his *bhajans* and influential commentaries. They can really play a great role in reforming society with the messages and teachings of Kabir. However, they will have to have the courage and firm-determination as Kabir had during his time. I find a spark of this courage in Ramprasad Das when he fearlessly questions the orthodox Brahmanical and Islamic practices.

Seeing the religious fanaticism in both Hindu and Muslim religions, *Qawwali* Kabir-singing by Muslim singers also needs to be explored, encouraged and promoted as their performances bring the people/audiences of both the communities (Hindus and Muslims) together, wielding a feeling of unity, love and brotherhood between them.

Kabir performances influence not only audiences but also singers themselves. Physical activities such as dance and clapping by men singers and audiences during Kabir-singing reflect how it affects them musically and ideologically. In fact, through these physical activities, they celebrate Kabir's spirit which encourages and inspires dalits and shudras to practice *bhakti* without any discrimination and to strongly oppose the religious and social injustices. They really have a feeling dignity and protest, what Nancy M. Martin calls a spiritual liberation.

Kabir's social criticism is still conveyed by singers. Temple-worship, pilgrimages associated with Hindu gods and goddesses, hypocrisies of Brahmins, immoral character of Brahmin priests, attack on non-vegetarianism, discrimination on the basis of caste, *varna* and economic status, Islamic and Brahmanical ways of finding God etc. are still criticized and ridiculed. The Holy Trinity of the Hindu religion is also undermined. Singers also raise the contemporary issues such as Ram-temple, Cow-protection controversies between the Hindus

and Muslims. In fact, they convey in the idiom of Kabir what they observe in personal, religious and social realities.

Some of the singers such as Ramprasad Das and Devendra Das associated with Kashi Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth have dared to perform Kabir even before a few Brahmins and other upper caste people those *padas* or verses which criticize the orthodox Brahmanical tenets and creeds. They have tried to change their mindset at least towards them and some other Kabirpanthis. Such initiatives must be continued to change their attitudes towards all other shudras and dalits. However, it seems difficult. Vijay Nath Mishra who, according to Devendra Das, is his devout follower, has only Brahmin members in his “Ghat Walk” campaign. If he really follows the ideology of Kabir, he must include the members of lower castes too. Devendra Das himself forgets the pains of dalits and shudras which they suffered due to discriminations on the basis of caste and *varna* when he claims to find his best audiences in Brahmins. His own desire to be like one of the Brahmins is reflected. In the context of Ramprasad Das, he has become the *Mahant* of a dozen Kabir *Maths*. It clearly reflects his desire to have power similar to a Brahmin priest. However, a positive aspect of Ramprasad Das as a *Mahant* is that unlike many *Mahants* of Kabirpanth, he has rejected rituals and emphasises on knowing and experiencing Kabir through his *vanis*. His repertoire of songs always reflects a bitter criticism of caste, *varna*, temple and mosque and other religious and social evils.

Unlike, Nancy M. Martin, David N. Lorenzen and Edward O. Henry, I hear Kabir’s bitter and aggressive critique that is found in *Kabir Bijak*. I propose an integrated approach to study Kabir’s oral and performative traditions. According to it, when we observe and analyse Kabir’s *padas* (*Saar Vanis*), *Daas Vanis*, Kabir’s *sakhis*, *rekhtas* attributed to Kabir/*Guru*, explanations and commentaries, personal histories of singers and audiences, narratives of legends and contexts, we can hear not only Kabir’s spiritual messages but also his social

criticisms found in the *Bijak* and other manuscripts, which continue to inspire people to establish a sound form of humanity (in which everyone is equal and has a respectable status of life).