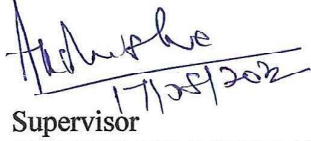


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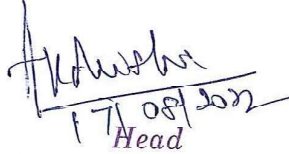
Supervisor

(Dr. AJIT KUMAR MISHRA)  
Associate Professor  
Department of Humanistic Studies  
Indian Institute of Technology  
(Banaras Hindu University)  
Varanasi: 221005

सहयुक्त आचार्य/Associate Professor  
मानवतावादी अध्ययन विभाग/Department of Humanistic Studies  
भारतीय प्रौद्योगिकी संस्थान/Indian Institute of Technology  
(काशी हिन्दू विश्वविद्यालय)/(Banaras Hindu University)  
वाराणसी-२२१००५ (उ.प्र.)/Varanasi-221005 (U.P.)



Co-Supervisor  
(Dr. SANJAY KUMAR)  
Professor  
Department of English  
Banaras Hindu University  
Varanasi: 221005



Head

Department of Humanistic Studies  
Indian Institute of Technology  
(Banaras Hindu University)  
VARANASI-221005 (U.P.)



## DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

I, **VEERU RAJBHAR**, certify that the work embodied in this thesis is my own bonafide work and carried out by me under the supervision of **Dr. Ajit Kumar Mishra** and **Prof. Sanjay Kumar** from July 2015 to August 2022 at the Department of Humanistic Studies, Indian Institute of Technology (BHU), Varanasi. The matter embodied in this thesis has not been submitted for the award of any other degree/diploma. I declare that I have faithfully acknowledged and given credits to the research workers wherever their works have been cited in my work in this thesis. I further declare that I have not wilfully copied any other's work, paragraphs, text, data, results, etc., reported in journals, books, magazines, reports dissertations, theses, etc., or available at websites and have not included them in this thesis and have not cited as my own work.

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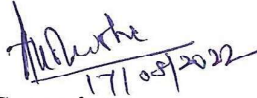
Place: VARANASI



(VEERU RAJBHAR)

## CERTIFICATE BY THE SUPERVISOR(S)

It is certified that the above statement made by the student is correct to the best of our knowledge.



Supervisor

(Dr. AJIT KUMAR MISHRA)

Associate Professor

Department of Humanistic Studies

Indian Institute of Technology

(Banaras Hindu University)

Varanasi: 221005

सहयुक्त आचार्य/Associate Professor

मानवतावादी अध्ययन विभाग/Department of Humanistic Studies

भारतीय प्रौद्योगिकी संस्थान/Indian Institute of Technology

(काशी हिन्दू विश्वविद्यालय)/(Banaras Hindu University)

वाराणसी-२२१००५ (उ०प्र०)/Varanasi-221005 (U.P.)



Co-Supervisor

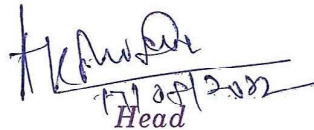
(Dr. SANJAY KUMAR)

Professor

Department of English

Banaras Hindu University

Varanasi: 221005



Department of Humanistic Studies

Indian Institute of Technology

(Banaras Hindu University)

VARANASI-221005 (U.P.)



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Kabir says: *Jin dhoondha tin paiyan* (one who explores achieves success). In my view, this exploration always needs an actively systematic guidance. Throughout the course of my research, I received it from my Guru Prof. Sanjay Kumar, Department of English, Banaras Hindu University. I would like to express my deepest sense of gratitude to him for his scholarly guidance, and for directing me during my fieldwork. The immense patience and indulgence he has shown for all my shortcomings and the faith he posed in me gave the support which I needed most as a research student. Without his constant encouragement and scholarly guidance, this thesis could not have been materialized.

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**(Veeru Rajbhar)**



# Content

		Page No.
<b>Preface</b>		xxi-xxiv
<b>Chapter: 1</b>		
<b>Introduction: Kabir, Bhakti and Traditions</b>		1-70
1.1	Kabir	1-15
1.2	Kabir and Bhakti Movement	15-28
1.3	Kabir and His Traditions	28-35
1.4	Literature Review	36-65
1.5	Objectives of the Study	65-66
1.6	Methodology	66-67
1.7	Chapterization	68-70
<b>Chapter: 2</b>		
<b>Kabir Centres: Sites of Emancipation</b>		71-185
2.1	Kabir Centres and Their Traditions	71-89
2.2	Kashi Kabir Chaura Math	89-111
2.3	Sadguru Kabir Baag Ahsram, Lahartara	112-129
2.4	Maghar Kabir Math	129-149
2.5	Lakshmipur Bagicha Math, Rosera	149-161
2.6	Mahadev Math-1, Rosera	161-172
2.7	Mahadev Math-2, Rosera	172-177
2.8	Harihar Mela, Sonapur	177-182
2.9	Conclusion	182-185

<b>Chapter: 3</b>		
<b>Men Kabir Singers: Towards Humanism</b>		186-301
3.1	Traditions of Kabir-Singing by Men Singers	186-216
3.2	Ramprasad Das	216-236
3.3	Anupam Das	236-251
3.4	Devendra Das and ‘Tana Bana’	251-265
3.5	Qawwali Singers (Ahmad Brothers)	265-279
3.6	Khajadi Singers of Kabir in Bihar	279-296
3.7	Conclusion	296-301
<b>Chapter: 4</b>		
<b>Women Kabir Singers: Women’s Agency and Feminization of Kabir</b>		302-379
4.1	Tracing Kabir-Singing by Women Singers through Oral Tradition	302-332
4.2	Renu Bharati	333-345
4.3	Gyansarovar Maharaj	346-359
4.4	Bisarathi Devi	360-377
4.5	Conclusion	377-379
<b>Chapter: 5</b>		
<b>Kabir at Maghar: A Model of Composite Culture</b>		380-444
5.1	Kabir among the Muslims of Maghar: Reception, Adaptation and Accommodation	380-408
5.2	Maghar’s Kabir: An Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity	408-443
5.3	Conclusion	443-444
<b>Chapter: 6</b>		
<b>Conclusion: Contemporary Relevance of Kabir</b>		445-462
<b>Reference</b>		463-470

<b>Appendix:</b> List of the Respondents Incorporated in the Thesis	471-474
List of the Published Research Papers Related to the Thesis	475



## List of Figures

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	Page No.
Figure 1: Dharmadasi <i>Chauka</i> Design.....	81
Figure 2: Performance of <i>Bijak Path</i> and <i>Havan Puja</i> at Kashi Kabir Chaura <i>Math</i> .....	85
Figure 3: Firat Das enlightening a group of followers of Kabir from Haryana with Kabir's legends, teachings and <i>vanis</i> at Kashi Kabir Chaura <i>Math</i> .....	94
Figure 4: Sadguru Kabir Baag <i>Ashram</i> , Lahartara (Dharmadasi Naadvansha Kabir <i>Math</i> ).....	112
Figure 5: Lahartara Dharmadasi (Naadvansha) Kabir Temple and Pond.....	119
Figure 6: Celebration of Kabir Jayanti at Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir <i>Math</i> and Temple...	125
Figure 7: Performance of <i>Chauka Arti</i> at Kabir temple on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti 2017.....	128
Figure 8: Kabir <i>Mazar</i> (left side) and Kabir <i>Samadhi</i> at Maghar.....	130
Figure 9: Cave of Kabir at Maghar.....	135
Figure 10: Tomb of Bijali Khan who invited Kabir to come to Maghar.....	138
Figure 11: From left Ali Hussain, Shaida Hussain, Khadim Hussain and Sahil Hussain.....	139
Figure 12: <i>Mahant</i> Vichar Das performing <i>Chauka Arti</i> at Maghar Kabir <i>Math</i> .....	146
Figure 13: Statue of Hanuman at Lakshmipur Bagicha <i>Math</i> .....	154
Figure 14: Ramprasad Das singing and preaching Kabir at Kashi Kabir Chaura <i>Math</i> .....	217
Figure 15: Anupam Das performing Kabir at Lahartara.....	237
Figure 16: Tana Bana Group (Gaurav Mishra, Devendra Das, Bhagirathi Das and Krishna Yadav) performing Kabir at Deoria (U. P.).....	254
Figure 17: Ahmad Brothers performing Kabir at Maghar.....	266

Figure 18: Nandlal Das with his <i>Khajadi</i> at Lahartara Kabir Temple.....	280
Figure 19: A group of <i>Khajadi</i> singers from Lakhisarai (Bihar) performing Kabir at Lahartara.....	285
Figure 20: A group of <i>Khajadi</i> singers from Rajgir (Bihar) performing Kabir through songs and dance at Lahartara.....	286
Figure 21: Naresh Das (in the middle) performing Kabir at Lahartara.....	292
Figure 22: A group of <i>sadhvi</i> singers and preachers from Bihar.....	306
Figure 23: <i>Sadhvi</i> Amrit Das (at Maghar) and <i>sadhvi</i> Seva Das (at Chauri Chaura) performing Kabir.....	307
Figure 24: Jaya Dasi and Tara Dasi from Bihar performing Kabir at Lahartara.....	308
Figure 25: Dulo Dasi and Pramila Dasi, both from Bihar, performing Kabir at Harihar <i>Mela</i> , Sonapur.....	311
Figure 26: Ordinary householder women singers performing Kabir.....	314
Figure 27: Dukhani Dasi from Bihar performing a song based on Kabir's women disciples: Khemsari, Mandodari, Indramati and Ameen.....	323
Figure 28: Audiences at the performance of Dulo Dasi at Maghar Kabir <i>Math</i> .....	331
Figure 29: Renu Bharati performing Kabir at Harihar <i>Mela</i> , Sonapur.....	334
Figure 30: Audiences at the performance of Renu Bharati at Sonapur Harihar <i>Mela</i> .....	342
Figure 31: Gyansarovar Maharaj performing Kabir at Maghar.....	346
Figure 32: Bisarathi Devi (second from the left) performing Kabir at Maghar.....	361
Figure 33: Bisarathi Devi along with Munakka Devi performing Kabir at Deoria.....	363
Figure 34: Muslims men and women entering the campus of Kabir <i>Samadhi</i> Temple.....	383
Figure 35: Muslims visiting Kabir <i>Mazar</i> and Kabir <i>Samadhi</i> on the occasion of Eid 2019.....	387
Figure 36: Muslim followers of Kabir at Kabir <i>Samadhi</i> and Kabir <i>Mazar</i> .....	392

Figure 37: A Muslim family visiting and worshipping Kabir at the Kabir <i>Samadhi</i> temple.....	393
Figure 38: Performance of <i>Qurankhani</i> at Kabir <i>Mazar</i> .....	396
Figure 39: Procession of <i>Chadarposhi</i> to Kabir.....	397
Figure 40: Performance of <i>Qurankhani</i> after <i>Chadarposhi</i> to Kabir.....	398
Figure 41: Muslims of Maghar participating in <i>Urs</i> (feast) of Kabir <i>Mazar</i> .....	399
Figure 42: Mahant and <i>sadhus</i> of Maghar Kabir <i>Math</i> participating in the <i>Urs</i> .....	401
Figure 43: Kabir <i>Dwar</i> (Gate) at the entrance of Maghar town.....	412
Figure 44: Kabir <i>Nirvana Sthali</i> and its components.....	413
Figure 45: Hindus and Muslims of Maghar on the <i>Ghat</i> of Ami river.....	414
Figure 46: Muslims of Maghar at the Shiva Temple on the occasion of Eid 2019.....	415
Figure 47: Javed Ahmad on the <i>Chabutara</i> of Shiva Temple.....	415
Figure 48: Hindus and Muslims visiting Kabir <i>Mazar</i> and Kabir <i>Samadhi</i> .....	417
Figure 49: Schools and college run by Maghar Kabir <i>Math</i> .....	434
Figure 50: Students participating in the inauguration ceremony of <i>Khichadi Mela</i> organized by Kabir <i>Math</i> .....	435
Figure 51: Hindus and Muslims worshipping Kabir on the occasion of <i>Khichadi Mela</i> (Maghar Mahotsava).....	437
Figure 52: Maghar <i>Khichadi Mela</i> (Maghar Mahotsava).....	437
Figure 53: Maghar Mahotsava 2020.....	439
Figure 54: Hindus and Muslims of Maghar watching Maghar Mahotsava together at night.....	440



## Preface

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Kabir, the fifteenth century saint-poet of North India, has been a part and parcel of people – especially dalits and shudras – lives. His poetry has been lived and breathed, created and transcreated, sung and recited, quoted as proverbs and transmitted from one generation to next in the oral and performative traditions. In fact, the vibrant oral and performative traditions of Kabir testify to his unbroken popularity and relevance among people. It clearly suggests that we need to understand and approach Kabir through his oral and performative traditions. However, Kabir has been studied and understood mostly through his written traditions. Oral and performative traditions, which can provide fresh insights into Kabir and his contemporary relevance, have received scant attention.

My study undertakes to understand and interpret Kabir and his contemporary relevance through his oral and performative traditions popular especially among the common masses in parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

My research work required an extensive fieldwork for data collection. I carried out my fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar from 2016 to the early months of 2022. I chose Kabir centres in Banaras, Jaunpur, Sant Kabir Nagar, and Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, and Saran, Patna, Samastipur and Lakhisarai in Bihar for my fieldwork. I chose Kabir centres because people from different parts of the country regularly visit some of these *Maths*. On the occasions of different ceremonies, a large number of people gather at all the centres. It became feasible for me to interact with a large number of *Mahants*, *sadhus*, singers, audiences and other followers of Kabir. The data collected primarily from my site visits, field notes, direct and participant observations, in-depth, semi-structured and open-ended interviews were prepared, transcribed and analysed using the thematic analysis method which yielded that Kabir continues to be a part and parcel of people's life. His spiritual and social

messages continue to appeal to people, encourage, inspire, goad, warn, and guide them, and elevate their life with a feeling of dignity and respect.

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

The second chapter “**Kabir Centres: Sites of Emancipation**” deals with the traditions and practices of the selected Kabir *Maths* and examines their significance. Through the practices and traditions of Kabir centres (Kabir *Maths*) which together form Kabirpanth (a devotional sect based on Kabir’s teachings), Kabir has served people both spiritually and socially. One of the significant findings has been that Kabir centres develop a Kabir community through ceremonies, rituals and activities, especially associated with Kabir, and convey a feeling of equality, self-respect and self-confidence among their followers (shudras and dalits).

The third chapter “**Men Kabir Singers: Towards Humanism**” focuses especially on the men singers of the eastern Uttar Pradesh and men *Khajadi* singers of Bihar. It highlights two prevailing ways of performing Kabir: traditional and innovative. The innovative form of Kabir-singing suggests how Kabir-singing evolves according to time, place, and religious, social and economic circumstances of singers and audiences. In the name of Kabir, *Saar Vanis* (ending with Kabir’s signature line) and *Daas Vanis* (apparent compositions of Kabir’s

disciples and followers) are being sung in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. *Saar Vanis* and *Daas Vanis* continue to cultivate a social and spiritual awakening among subalterns and to inspire them to protest against social and religious injustices and discriminations in order to live a life of respect and dignity.

The fourth chapter “**Women Kabir Singers: Women’s Agency and Feminization of Kabir**” is dedicated to the traditions of Kabir-singing by women. This chapter unearths vibrant traditions of Kabir-singing by women singers. Women singers use Kabir-singing to challenge patriarchal attitude of North Indian society and to carve out space for themselves in Kabirpanth and outside. It examines how women singers, through their songs and commentaries, deconstruct the masculine world of Kabir and his anti-women image, feminize Kabir and give him a woman-friendly identity bringing him close to women’s world, who not only speaks in favour of women but also criticizes any gender discrimination. This chapter further reflects that women singers, especially radical women singers, also question and challenge caste and *varna* through their songs and influential commentaries. Kabir-singing raises the living standard of women singers spiritually, socially as well as financially. Becoming financially independent in family and outside, they also challenge and subvert the Law of Manu, which suggests that women must always be kept dependent on men. This chapter analyses how Kabir-singing provides women singer a life of respect, mobility and agency in Kabirpanth and society at large.

The fifth chapter “**Kabir at Maghar: A Model of Composite Culture**” consists of two sections. The first section explores Kabir’s presence among the Muslims of Maghar (the place of Kabir’s death). It examines how Kabir has become a part of their spiritual, cultural and social life. For their faith in Kabir, they claim to reject the propagation of the orthodox Deobandi and Wahhabi Islamic groups, which give a strong emphasis on purifying the Islam of the non-Islamic elements. It is interesting to note that in the increasing fire of

communalism when religious leaders impose strict segregational codes on their followers shunning mixed religious practices, the Muslims of Maghar have not only preserved the tradition of their attachment to Kabir but also foster this syncretic tradition for the future generations. The second section studies how Kabir brings both the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar together developing a syncretic culture between them, influencing and transforming the social, cultural, religious, and everyday life of Maghar. Kabir has been at the epicentre of the relationship between the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar. The common traditional belief of the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar “Kabir wanted them to live together” has been the foundation of a shared culture between them. This shared culture is seen at their spiritual, social, cultural and economic levels.

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