

Kabir Centres: Sites of Emancipation

Kabir Centres and Their Traditions

Kabir Centres (*Kabir Maths*) are the monasteries where Kabirpanthi *Mahants* (heads), saints and *sadhus* live, practice *bhakti* based on Kabir, and transmit his messages and teachings among people⁵⁰. Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* established by Surati Gopal, Bandhavgarh *Kabir Math* by Dharmadas, Bidupur *Kabir Math* by Jagudas and Dhanauti *Kabir Math* by Bhagwan Das/Bhagu Das are the first four main branches or headquarters (*Mool Shakhias/Acharya Gaddis*) of Kabirpanth in North India (as already discussed in the first chapter)⁵¹. These *Maths* prospered and attracted a large number of followers. Later, a number of *Maths* came into existence at several other places in India. They are affiliated to one or the other branch of Kabirpanth. Some of them also gained in importance and attained the status of *Acharya Gaddi* (the seat of *Acharya*).

There are two types of Kabir centres: *Acharya Gaddi* (headquarters) which represents a sect of the Kabirpanth and the branches of *Acharya Gaddi*. The head of an *Acharya Gaddi* is called *Acharya* (the main *Mahant*) or *Mahant* and the heads of their affiliated *Maths* are called only *Mahants* who lead their *Maths* under the supervision of their respective *Acharyas*.

On the basis of the marital status of the *Acharyas*, Kabirpanth is broadly described into two major traditions: *Naad* and *Bind*. The *Naad* tradition pioneered by Kashi Kabir Chaura based-Kabirpanth is a *virakt* (ascetic) tradition. It is headed by a celibate *Mahant*. He is inherited by his most competent disciple as the next *Mahant*, who is also celibate. Like

⁵⁰ Meena Khandewal defines *Maths* as "monasteries where the scholarly monks of a particular order live and meditate" (p. 203).

⁵¹ I also discovered some sects which do not belong to any of the four major sects. However, they show great reverence to Dharmadas and rituals of the Dharmadasi tradition. They also perform its rituals. While interacting with Vidyanand Saheb, the *Mahant* of Satyakabir Vachan Vanshacharya Gaddi, Rosera, and many other men and women Kabirpanthis in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, I found that Dharmadasi rituals are getting more popular among many sects.

Kabir Chaura *Acharya Gaddi*, Dhanuati *Acharya Gaddi* and Bidupur *Acharya Gaddi* also represent the *Naad* tradition.

The *Bind* tradition initiated by Bandhavgarh Kabir *Math*⁵² is a householder tradition of Kabirpanth. It is headed by a householder *Mahant*. In the *Bind* tradition, generally, the son of the present *Mahant* becomes the next *Mahant*. It is also called the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth which was established by Dharmadas⁵³.

Physical Structure of Kabir Math

Generally, Kabir *Math* has a large or small building in which *Mahants* and *sadhus* live and perform their spiritual or religious practices. It also constitutes some accommodations for the guests visiting these centres⁵⁴. One of the most significant common characteristics of *Maths* is that they consist of the *Samadhis* (tombs or graves) of the previous *Mahants* and prominent *sadhus*. These *Samadhis* may be situated in the courtyard or outside the main building. The courtyard may also have temples of Kabir or some of the prominent former *Mahants*⁵⁵. The *Math* may also occupy an adjoining large or small piece of land where, generally, farming is done. For some *Maths*, farming is one of the main sources of income.

⁵² The present headquarters of the *Bind* tradition is at Damakheda near Raipur in Chhattisgarh.

⁵³ Although it is a householder tradition, some *Maths* with celibate *Mahants* have also been affiliated with this sect. However, many of its *Maths* with celibate *Mahants* shifted their affiliation to Kharsiya Kabir *Math*, Raigarh in Chhattisgarh after 1933 on account of the controversy (it will be discussed below in detail) over the succession of the seat of the *Mahant*.

⁵⁴ H. H. Wilson has discussed the physical structure of *Math* in general:

The *Mat'hs*, *Asthals*, or *Akaras*, the residences of the monastic communities of the Hindus, are scattered over the whole country; they vary in structure and extent, according to the property of which the proprietors are possessed; but they generally comprehend a set of huts or chambers for the *Mahant*, or Superior, and his permanent pupils; a temple, sacred to the deity whom they worship, or the *Samadhi*, or shrine of the founder of the sect, or some eminent teacher; and a *Dharma Sala*, one or more sheds, or buildings for the accommodation of the mendicants or travellers, who are constantly visiting the *Mat'hs*: ingress or egress is free to all; and, indeed, a restraint upon personal liberty seems never to have entered into the conception of any of the religious legislators of the Hindus. (p. 33).

⁵⁵ *Mahants* and saints of these *Maths* believe that the followers need some symbols to which they can offer their reverence. Although these practices are against the teachings of Kabir, for common people, these temples replace the Brahmanical temples and give them alternatives. The real significance of these temples and *Samadhis* lies in this fact.

Regular Members and Their Duties at Kabir Math

There are the following regular members of *Math*: *Mahant* and *sadhus*. Among the *sadhus*, one is chosen as the Manager of the *Math*, who plays a key role in operating the *Math* under the supervision of the *Mahant*⁵⁶. One of the *sadhus* is chosen as the *Pujari* who performs worship every morning and evening. One is chosen as the *bhandari* (cook) who cooks for all (living and staying at the *Math*) with the assistance of some *sadhus*. Other *sadhus* contribute to the different activities of the *Math* such as cleaning, farming etc. However, all are dependent on the *Mahant* of the *Math* who always guides and controls over them⁵⁷. The main duty of the *Mahant* is to preach the *sadhus*, saints and lay followers visiting the *Math*. He initiates novices into the panth⁵⁸ and regularly visits the existing followers at their homes in order to perform rituals and remind them of the responsibilities towards Kabir and the panth. He also officiates over the main rituals associated with the *Math* on the occasions of the programmes based on Kabir.

Daily Rituals and Ceremonies at Kabir Math

There are generally two types of daily rituals at *Math*: Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti* which are performed respectively every morning and evening. *Pujari* worships Kabir and *Samadhis* of the previous *Mahants* and *sadhus* with flowers, incense sticks and a lamp. It is followed by the collective recitation of different sets of verses attributed to Kabir⁵⁹ (both rituals will be studied below in the context of each selected *Math*). It ends with the circumambulation of Kabir's temples (if built at *Maths*) and offering *bandagi/saheb bandagi*

⁵⁶ At small *Maths*, the *Mahant* himself holds the responsibility of the Manager.

⁵⁷ Wilson notes: "*Math* is under the entire control of a *Mahant* or a Superior, with a certain number of resident *Chelas* or disciples; their number varies from three or four to thirty or forty, but in both cases there are always a number of vagrant or out-members; the resident *Chelas* are usually the elders of the body, with a few of the younger as their attendants and scholars; and it is from the senior and more proficient of these ascetics, that the *Mahant* is usually selected" (pp. 33-34). In case of the selection of a householder *Mahant*, Wilsons says: "In some instances, however, where the *Mahant* has a family, the situation descends in the line of his posterity" (p. 34).

⁵⁸ The *Mahant* also gives some of *sadhus* of the *Math* the authority of initiating the novices into the panth.

⁵⁹ All Kabirpanthi sects generally have their own versions of verses both for Morning Prayers and *Sandhya Arti*.

(a Kabirpanthi greeting) to Kabir's image or temple, *Mahant* and one another. At some *Maths*, *Sandhya Arti* is followed by *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes.

Annual Ceremonies and Rituals at Kabir Math

Generally, three types of annual ceremonies are performed at Kabir *Maths*: a) Kabir Jayanti, Kabir Nirvana Divas and Guru Purnima⁶⁰, b) Death Anniversaries of the former *Mahants* and c) Foundation Day of *Maths*. On these occasions, *satsang*, *pravachan*, *bhajan* programmes (Kabir-singing and preaching) and *Chauka Arti* (a principal ritual of the Dharmadasi tradition) and *Bijak Path* along with *Havan Puja* (a principal ritual of Kashi Kabir Chaura Kabirpanth, Jagudasi Kabirpanth and Bhagudasi Kabirpanth) are organized by the respective centres⁶¹. These ceremonies are also accompanied by *bhandaras* (feasts) for followers⁶².

⁶⁰ Kabir Jayanti has been the most important occasion for all the followers of Kabir and Kabirpanth. Kabir Jayanti, also known as *Kabir Prakat Divas*, is celebrated to commemorate the manifestation of Saint Kabir Das once a year on the full moon day in the Hindu month *Jyeshtha* (May-June). All the Kabirpanthi sects and their affiliates celebrate *Kabir Jayanti* on a large or small scale in order to express their devotion to Kabir. Kabir Nirvana Divas is the death anniversary of Kabir. It is celebrated on 11th day of *Maagh* (January-February) every year. Guru Purnima is a religious tradition to express gratitude towards spiritual teachers. It is celebrated on the full moon day in the Hindu month of *Ashadha* (June-July). On the occasion of Guru Purnima people visit the *Mahants* and *Gurus* and offer their reverence to them who have provided them with *diksha* (spiritual knowledge/initiation) and *kanthi-mala* (rosary). It is celebrated at Kabir Chaura every year and is more popular in eastern Uttar Pradesh.

⁶¹ The Dharmadasi centres organize *Chauka Arti*, but the Kabir Chaura centres generally reject such rituals. Instead, the Kabir Chaura sect organizes *Bijak Path* in which the whole *Bijak* is recited. Kabir Chaura *Math* and the majority of its branches hold that the true teachings of Kabir are to be found in the *Bijak*. They lay more emphasis on Kabir's verses and their implementation in life in place of rituals. However, Kabir Chaura sect is not completely free from rituals. This sect performs Morning Prayer and Evening *Arti* (*Sandhya Path*) in devotion to Kabir on the pattern of Vaishnava tradition. *Bijak Path* is generally accompanied by *Havan Puja* (a fire ritual). Some branches of Kabir Chaura *Math* which are not on good terms with it also organize *Chauka Arti* in an irregular manner. Gopal Das, a prominent saint form Kabir Chaura, tells that *Chauka Arti* was also prevalent in the Kabir Chaura tradition. According to him, Kabir Chaura *Math* would organize only two types of *Chauka Arti*: *Anandi Chauka*, especially on the occasion of *Kabir Jayanti* and *Chalawa Chauka* especially on the occasion of Kabir Nirvana Divas. However, on the behest of the followers, they were organized on other occasions as well. Hess (2015) also identifies these two types of *Chauka Arti* at Kabir Chaura *Math*:

During the period of Lorenzen's fieldwork, 1976-94, *chauka arati* seems to have been an uncontroversial part of the lives of sadhus and lay followers at Kabir Chaura in Varanasi and its affiliates. Kabir Chaura recognizes two types of *chauka*: the *anandi* ("joyful") and *chalawa* (custom [ary]). The former is done on happy occasions such as initiation of new members; the latter is done when someone dies. In addition to these two, the Dharmadasi branch prescribes two more: *solah sut* (sixteen-son) *chauka arati* and *ekottari* (101) *chauka arati* — the former to celebrate a birth or to produce progeny, and the latter a very large-scale version of the rite performed only when the supreme guru, the lineage holder, is present. (p. 325)

Such occasions bring the followers of a particular sect to the respective centres, connect them with one another, strengthen their bond with the sect, and develop a feeling of community among them. Since a *bhandara* is generally of a democratic nature, anyone regardless of caste and class can participate in it. It develops a feeling of equality among the people participating in them. Shedding light on the significance of rituals in the Kabirpanth, Hess (2015) observes:

[S]jects (like nations, families, and individuals) require rituals. They need ways to solemnize membership, to conjure up the unseen founder, to renew their vows and symbolize their hopes, all the while invoking their communion with each other, their continuity with past and future members, their difference from non-members, and the difference in status and function among members. They need special times to get together and do their rituals. Along with ritual structures, they need structures of authority. Some people have special rights to interpret the master's words and tell his stories, initiate new members, represent the sect, and shape its policy. These special people also run the rituals and become the vessels of ordinary devotees' reverence and faith. They may be in a position to command obedience and receive material benefits. (pp. 323-24)

Bijak Path/Chauka Arti/Bhandara at Homes of Kabirpanthi Followers

The followers of Kabir Chaura *Math* and its affiliates generally organize *Bijak Path* (recitation of the *Bijak*) along with *Havan Puja* while the followers of Dharmadasi sect *Chauka Arti* at homes on the occasion of childbirth, death, marriage and house warming etc. *Bijak Path* and *Chauka Arti* are accompanied by *satsang*, *pravachan*, *bhajan* programmes and *bhandaras*. Apart from these two rituals, *bhandara* can be organized alone. When only *bhandara* is organized, it may be accompanied by *satsang*, *pravachan* and *bhajan* programmes. Harisharan Das Shastri, a Kabir singer from Maghar Kabir *Math*, tells that those

However, when Vivek Das became the *Mahant* in 2000, he prohibited these rituals at Kabir Chaura *Math*. He found these rituals or others against the principles of Kabir. Vivek Das lays more emphasis on bringing Kabir's *vanis* and radical thoughts of Kabir to the fore in place of *Chauka Arti*.

⁶² Besides the above occasions, if a resourceful Kabirpanthi or a group of Kabirpanthis wants to give *bhandara* at Kabir centres, he or that group consults the respective *Mahant* and with an assent being granted, the *bhandara* is organized. Kabirpanthi followers conduct this *bhandara* for their devotion to Kabir or after/for the fulfilment of their wishes or for the peace and prosperity of the family or for some other personal reasons.

followers who cannot afford expenditure organize only *Bijak Path* without the accompaniment of *bhandara*. Sometimes, many Kabirpanthis of a particular place get together to organize these rituals.

These rituals are organized for the prosperity and wellbeing of family and fulfilment of one's wish. Followers also hold these programmes on the occasions of childbirth, marriage, death, *griha pravesh* (house warming) etc. Besides, resourceful Kabirpanthi followers regularly organize *bhandara* or *Chauka Arti* etc. at home once a year.

On these occasions, followers invite the saints or *Mahants* from their respective Kabir centres to execute these rituals at their residences⁶³. They believe that if their *Gurus* visit their houses, they will be blessed. The rituals performed by their *Gurus* and saints will also ensure their welfare. The performances of these rituals provide satisfaction and a psychological relief to followers.

Bijak Path, *Chauka Arti* and *Bhandara* to be held at homes of Kabirpanthi followers are significant in the sense that they increase the influence of the respective sects among non-Kabirpanthis also. Since these ceremonies take place at homes of Kabirpanthis, a setting different from Kabir centres, non-Kabirpanthi villagers or people are attracted to them and Kabir's verses and messages through *pravchans* and *bhajans*. As a result, later on, some also join that particular sect.

Such ceremonies also spread Kabir's verses and beliefs associated with the sect. Through such rituals and messages of Kabir associated with reform of life and rejection of

⁶³ It is to be noted that *Chauka Arti* and *Bijak Path* along with *Havan Puja* have established a link between Kabirpanthi followers and Kabirpanthi *Mahants* and saints. Previously, *Mahants* and saints used to wander from village to village with *mandalis* and through *satsangs* and *pravachans* used to spread their sects and make new disciples. However, apart from *satsangs* and *bhajans*, they had no means to engage their disciples. Now, these *satsangs* and *bhajans* are accompanied by *Guru Puja*, *Chauka Arti* and *Bijak Path*.

caste distinction etc., saints and *Mahants* are also changing the lives of followers. They are getting a new way of life and confidence in society.

Since *Chuaka Arti* and *Bijak Path* are two principal Kabirpanthi rituals, a detailed background of both the rituals is required in order to comprehensively understand their significance.

Chauka Arti

Chauka Arti is regarded as the most sacred ritual of Kabirpanth, especially of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. According to the Dharmadasi tradition, Kabir himself initiated this practice. The legend goes as follows: Kabir went to Dharmadas in Bandhavgarh and enlightened both Dharmadas and his wife with his teachings and both became his devout followers. When Kabir was to depart from Bandhavgarh, Dharmadas prayed to Kabir to tell them the way through which they could practice his *bhakti* and spread his teachings. Kabir asked them to perform the ritual of *Chauka Arti*.

Hess also writes: "This *chauka* origin story is part of a larger narrative of Kabir's becoming an *avatar*, selecting Dharmadas as the founder of his 'forty-two-generation lineage,'... (pp. 326-27). Lorenzen too points out: "The historical origins of the *chauka* are unknown. Kabir Panthi legends attribute its foundation to Kabir itself" (p. 237). In his view, the earliest reference to it can be found in a work, undated but probably from the eighteenth century, called *Gyan Gudari* 'quilt of knowledge', which is associated with Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. However, the composition of *Gyan Gudari* has been included in the *Sandhya Path* booklets of almost all branches of the Kabirpanth. This ritual is also mentioned in several of the Kabirpanthi texts collected by the *sadhu* Yugalanand Bihari and published under the title, *Kabir Sagar* (1953).

Lorenzen suggests that the *Chauka* ritual seems to have been widespread not just among Kabirpanthis but also among other Eastern Indian low castes movements. According to him, it appears quite similar to the Hindu *Satyanarayan Vrat*:

Most of the basic elements of the *chauka* — offering sweets and fruits to God, breaking coconuts, doing *arati* over the guru-Mahant, distributing *prasad* — are common to many Hindu rituals. The overall structure of the *chauka* bears a definite resemblance to several simple “domestic” Hindu rituals such as the popular *Satyanarayan vrat*. (p. 238)

Whatever its origins may have been, it has become the central practice of the followers of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth and some other Kabirpanthi sects.

Meaning of Kabirpanthi *Chauka Arti*

Chauka Arti combining the words ‘Chauka’ (a square containing a particular design and different elements of worship) and ‘Arti’ (waving a lamp before Kabir/*Guru* in Kabirpanth) is a ritual to worship Kabir/*Guru/Mahant* in Kabirpanth. Linda Hess explains the terms *Chauka* and *Arti*:

Arati is a generic term for the most common kind of Hindu worship, involving various offerings to the divine, with some items being returned as blessed gifts to the worshippers. It culminates with waving of burning lamps before the deity in Hindu settings, or before the guru or image of Kabir in the Kabir Panth. *Chauka* means square and refers to the specifically adorned four-sided space that must be prepared for the rite as it is practiced in the Panth. (p. 324)

In *Kabir and Kabirpanth*, K. Dwivedi notes that the *Chauka* ritual can also be called a *Satvik Yajna* (pure fire sacrifice).

Types of *Chauka Arti*

There are four types of *Chauka Arti*: *Anandi Chauka*, *Chalawa Chauka*, *Solah Sut Chauka* or *Janmauti Chauka* and *Ekottari Chauka*. Among these four *Artis*, *Anandi Chauka* is the most popular.

Anandi Chauka

Anandi Chauka is organized during the principal festivals of the panth and at the time of the initiation of new members. It is also performed on auspicious occasions at homes of Kabirpanthi followers such as marriage, *griha pravesh* etc. It requires an *Acharya* or another *Mahant* to perform it. Most Dharmadasi Kabirpanthis organize *Anandi Chauka* at least once a year.

Chalawa Chauka

Chalawa Chauka is performed to ensure the peace of the soul of a person who has recently died. It is also performed by an *Acharya* or another *Mahant*.

Solah Sut Chauka

Solah Sut Chauka is performed for those who wish to have a child or to celebrate the birth of a child or for/after the fulfilment of some wishes. It requires one *Acharya* and fifteen other *Mahants*. The presence of an *Acharya* is necessary.

Ekottari Chauka

It is called the *Mahayajna* of Kabirpanth. It is performed for the propitiation of 101 ancestors. Its performance requires 1 *Acharya* and 100 *Mahants*. The presence of the *Acharya* is necessary in *Ekottari Chauka*.

These *Artis* have two main components: verbal and non-verbal. The verbal components include the performances of a set of ritual songs along with Kabir's *bhajans* and other *bhajans* expressing Kabir's spirit. The non-verbal components include the activities of the *Mahant* and his assistants (there are some *sadhus* to support the *Mahant*) related to the ritual, various offerings of the fruit, sweets, cloth, and so on. The differences between these

forms of *Chauka* ritual relate in part to the quantity and number of offerings needed to celebrate them. For instance, whilst for the *Anandi Chauka* only five to seven coconuts are needed, for *Ekottari Chauka* 101 coconuts are needed (see K. Dwivedi, p. 198). The other differences are the occasions (on which they are performed), number of priests (who help the *Acharya* perform the ritual) and songs (which are performed on these occasions).

Design of the *Chauka*

The preparation of *Chauka* is very significant as it is pregnant with different symbolical meanings. A square or rectangular piece of white cloth is spread out on clean ground or an elevated wooden pedestal. A white canopy is hung over the cloth. Five small squares are drawn on the cloth — one each on the four sides and one in the middle of the cloth. Diagonal lines stretching from the square in the middle are drawn.

Various materials used during the ritual are placed on each of the small squares. On the square in the centre are placed dried and fresh fruits, sweets, and betel leaves. A *kalas* (a particular kind of pot) filled with water is placed on the eastern square. An oil lamp with five wicks and decorated with mango leaves is placed on the top of the pot. A *gyoti* (oil lamp) with ghee, its bowl lined with flour paste, is placed on the northern square. On the southern square, a glass of *panchamrit* (*amidal*) is kept. This is the mixture of milk, sugar and five ground spices: clove, cardamom, black pepper, *chironji* and raisins. On the western square are placed five to ten or more coconuts. The *Mahant* sits on the western side. To his right is placed a heavy flat stone on which he breaks the coconuts.

In the Dharmadasi tradition, each of the five small squares is dedicated to different *Gurus*: the central square to the Satyapurush (Kabir), the eastern square to the *Guru* Bankeji,

the southern square to the *Guru Chaturbhuj*, the western square to the *Guru Sahteji*, and the northern square to the *Guru Dharmadas*⁶⁴.

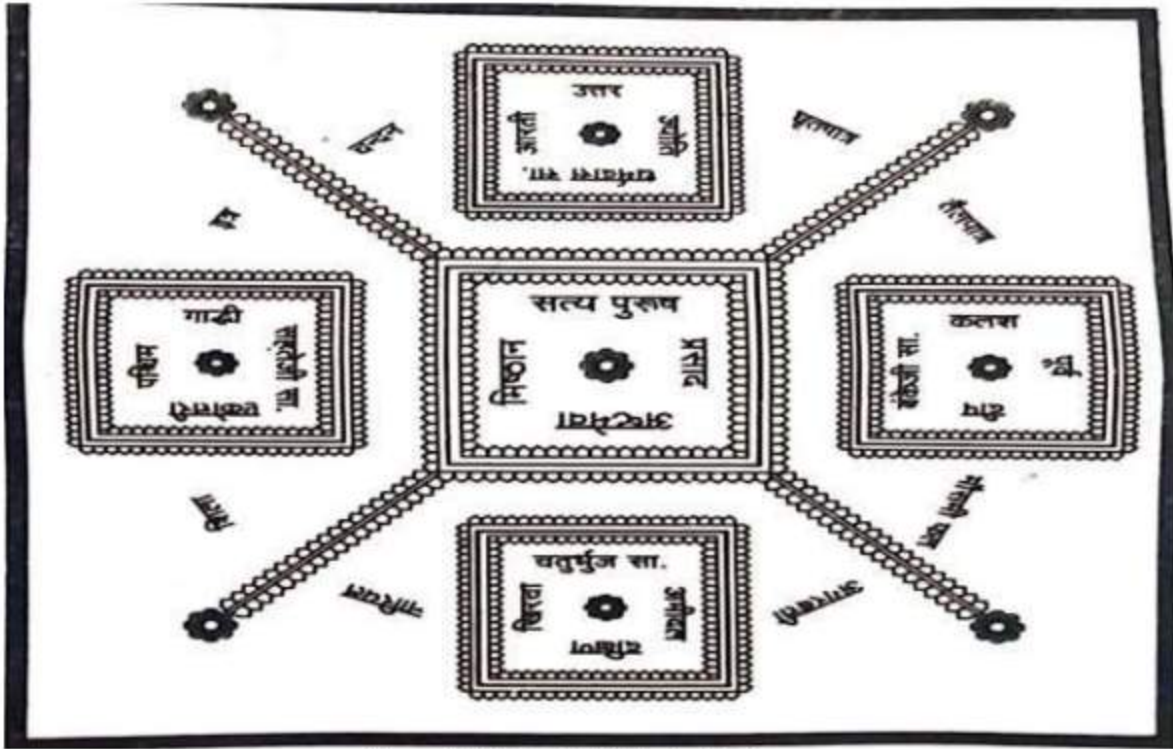


Figure 1: Dharmadasi *Chauka* Design

Stages of Kabirpanthi *Chauka* Ritual

Lorenzen has mentioned nine stages of *Chauka Arti*. It starts by drawing a pattern of five squares and diagonal lines on the ground using flour and setting up in these locations various items such as a *kalas* (a water pot), a lamp, a banana plant, and coconuts as well as seats for the *Mahant* and a minister (*divan*). The next stage is accompanied by music and singing of devotional songs. During it, the *Mahant* arrives and takes up a special seat in the ritual area. The third stage is the lighting of the lamp and the recitation of various verses. The

⁶⁴ According to a Dharmadasi legend, Kabir incarnated in all the four Hindu epochs: *Satyayuga*, *Tretayuga*, *Dwaparyuga* and *Kaliyuga*. Sahteji, Bankeji, Chaturbhuj and Dharmadas were the disciples of Kabir respectively in these four epochs. Thus, Dharmadasi *Chauka* design establishes Kabir as God and undermines the Brahmanical *avatar* theory of God.

fourth stage is the making of offerings of coconuts, and other material gifts to the *Mahant* whilst a range of traditional songs about the ending of life in *samsara* and attainment of liberations are sung. The fifth stage is when the *Mahant* breaks the coconuts which have been offered. This leads to the sixth stage which is where the coconuts and other food offerings are offered to *Satyapurush*, the divine spirit. After this in some branches, new followers can be initiated into the panth. In the seventh stage, the sprinkling of the sanctified water is performed and it is followed by the eighth stage, the climax, which is an *Arti*, a lamp offering. It is followed by the distribution of the *prasad*, the blessed food offerings, which forms the ninth stage of this ritual.

Significance of Kabirpanthi *Chauka* Ritual

Chauka ritual, according to Kabirpanthi followers, is a source of different spiritual and worldly profits for them. Shyam Das, a Kabirpanthi saint from Lahartara Kabir *Math*, suggests an interesting symbolical meaning of *Chauka Arti*. According to him, *Chauka* means *chaukas* (to be alert or careful) and *Arti* means (*prakash*) light. People must be alert to four things: *khani* (food habit), *bani* (language), *rahani* (manner of living life) and *gahani* (understanding). If they improve these four things, their life will be full of the light of happiness and prosperity. Such symbolical meanings are often emphasized in Kabirpanthi *Chauka* ritual.

Kabirpanthis generally believe that *Chauka* ritual represents the purification of human body and ensures a passport to heaven after death. The five wicks of the oil lamp show five elements of which our body is made. The *gyoti* (oil lamp) fuelled with ghee presents soul. These five elements and soul together form a human being. The *Chauka* ritual ensures the welfare of human being before and after death. Hess observes: "In addition to being a medium for worshipping Guru-as-God and God-as-Guru, the *chauka* is supposedly able to

deliver amazing practical results, from washing away sin and improving mental health to seeing God, reaching heaven (Satyalok), and attaining final liberation” (p. 327). She further cites Grindhmuninam Sahab, the 14th *Mahant* of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth (Damakheda) who, according to her, wrote of the centrality and incomparable power of the ritual:

In our lineage, *chauka arati* holds the first place among prescribed actions. Nothing else has been given as much importance as this. Whatever auspicious activity or important social work one may do, nothing can be complete without *chauka*.... Birth, marriage, death—in all these circumstances, the completion of *chauka* is essential. *Chauka arati* is a kind of scientific knowledge. In *chauka arati* the five elements are mingled in a scientific way, and a tremendous power comes forth from this. Both physical and spiritual components are present in this mysterious creation, and one can thus gain success in both realms. (p. 327)

Prakashmuninam Saheb, the 15th *Mahant* of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth, also explains the spiritual meanings of various physical actions:

Breaking the straw symbolises rising above the three *gunas* [qualities of material existence]. The *kanthi* [*tulsi* bead worn on a string around the neck] is dedication to *satyapaurush*. Taking the name is attaining the form of the swan [*hamsa*], or opening the door of spiritual knowledge. And to receive the certificate is to attain liberation.... This *puja* was held for the first time in the home of Dhani Dharmadas in Bandhavgarh. Satyapurush Sadguru Kabir Saheb himself designed it, and this very form has been preserved by lineage-gurus and passed on to the faithful. This *puja* is a message of immortality in the world of death; it is the creation of Satyalok [heavenly Realm of Truth] on this earth. The power to do it correctly rests only with lineage gurus or with those *kadihar* [“helmsmen,” a term used in the Dharmadasi Kabir Panth for Mahants] whom they select and authorize (as cited in Linda Hess, p. 326).

Their views clearly suggest that *Chauka* ritual has a great impact on Kabirpanthi followers. It also maintains the authority of the *Mahant* in the sect since he is the principal actor of the ritual. Hess points out: “*Chauka arati* is closely linked to maintaining the powerful authority of the Panth gurus in the Dharmadasi tradition. As its centre is worship of the guru” (p. 327).

The *Chauka* ritual is also a form of protest against the Brahmanical rituals. The *Mahant* replaces a Brahmin priest in Kabirpanthi rituals. The people present on the occasion are from different lower castes including dalit castes. All find in their *Mahant* a priest who does not discriminate between them. He is seen as a symbol of Kabir. The *Mahants*, saints and the ordinary followers together form a Kabir community⁶⁵. All have a feeling of equality and respect in this community. Lorenzen also observes: “One of the ways in which the opposition is expressed is in the active participation of both lay *bhagats* and *sadhus* in the same rituals, regardless of caste, and the absence of Brahmin officiants. Even more striking is the near equal participation of female *bhagats*” (pp. 248-49). Hess also points out: “During the *chauka*, the local *mahant*, the lineage holder of the Panth, Kabir, and God (Satyapurush) are conflated” (p. 327).

Bijak Path along with Havan Puja

The *Bijak* is the holiest book of Kabirpanth. It is regarded as the fundamental composition of Kabir. Almost all the sects accept the authority of the *Bijak*⁶⁶. These sects believe that *Bijak Path* can be the best way to approach and understand Kabir. The practice of *Bijak Path* is more popular in the three major Kabirpanthi sects: Kashi Kabir Chaura, Dhanauti and Bidupur. However, the origin of *Bijak Path* is uncertain. Purnedu Ranjan (2008) suggests in the context of Bihar that the practice of *Bijak Path* is a recent phenomenon. In my view, this practice must have been introduced in order to deal with the overriding influence of *Chauka Arti* on Kabirpanthi followers. Owing to a strong influence of

⁶⁵ In his *Kabir ke Alochak*, Dharmveer uses ‘*Lakshya Samaj* of Kabir’ for the Kabir community (p. 30).

⁶⁶ However, the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth has an ambivalent attitude to the *Kabir Bijak*. Although it has its version of the *Bijak*, but in this tradition, a greater focus is given on the *Anurag Sagar*, which is written in the form of dialogue between Kabir and Dharmadas. Hess (2015) sheds light on the fact:

Though both panths accept the *Bijak* is the only sacred and authentic text. The Dharmadasis are ambivalent about the *Bijak* and place a higher value on the *Anurag Sagar* (Ocean of Love), which they believe Kabir composed and Dharmadas wrote down. The two works are very different. The Dharmadasis also regard a number of works as authentic-many of them having the word *sagar* (ocean) in the title. (p. 316)

Chauka Arti on people, these sects might have decided to cultivate a major ritual like *Bijak Path* in order to have their hold on new and old followers. Through *Bijak Path*, they have, on the one hand, continued to give prominence to the *Bijak* and on the other hand, they also serve the aspiration of those followers who want rituals as a form of worship.



Figure 2: Performance of *Bijak Path* and *Havan Puja* at Kashi Kabir Chaura Math

According to Byasmuni Das, a prominent saint of Kashi Kabir Chaura Math, the recitation of the *Bijak* is an old practice. However, *Havan Puja* (fire ritual) which supplements and follows the recitation of the *Bijak* is a recent phenomenon. He claims that the practice of *Havan Puja* was initiated in the Kabir Chaura sect by Ganga Sharan Saheb, the 21st Mahant of Kashi Kabir Chaura Math about 25-30 years ago. Since then, it has been performed along with the recitation of the *Bijak*. However, Byasmuni Das admits that they occasionally face opposition from some followers due to the practice of *Havan Puja*. They believe it to be against the spirit of Kabir. As a result, in such situations, only *Bijak Path* is performed.

Stages of Bijak Path and Havan Puja

It has mainly four stages⁶⁷. First of all, a small square or rectangular *Havan Kunda* (fire pit) is made of brick and wet clay on a clean ground and is decorated with flowers and flour of wheat⁶⁸. An earthen lamp and a betel leaf with a nut are put at each corner of the *kunda*. Then, a portrait of Kabir is placed (on a table or elevated site) to the east or north of the *kunda* and is decorated with flowers. One *kalas* (pitcher or pot) having mango leaves and water covered with an earthen dish is also placed there. The earthen pot contains rice or barely with a small earthen lamp on it. The items of *Havan Puja* such as ghee, sesame, jaggery, barley, rice, *dhup* (small pieces of incense wood) etc. are arranged and mixed together. Dry mango wood for burning/smouldering in the *Havan Kunda*, camphor for *Arti* ceremony and different types of fruits for *Prasad* are also arranged. The dry mango wood, a betel leaf along with a nut on it, *Navgrah Shanti* wood (a pious wood related to the worship of the nine planets) and ghee are put into the *kunda*.

The second stage begins when *Mahants*⁶⁹, saints and *sadhus* sit around the *kunda* for reciting the *Bijak*. Generally, five *sadhus* are required for the performance of *Bijak Path*. Lay followers also gather there to listen to the *Bijak Path* and watch the whole ceremony. At the beginning, the mango wood in the *kunda* is smouldered and kept smouldering throughout the ritual. It is followed by the recitation of a *vandana* (prayer) song attributed to Kabir. Then, the recitation of the whole *Bijak* commences. This recitation is accompanied by offering the mixed items of the *Havan Puja* bit by bit into the fire of the *kunda*. It is concluded with the recitation of *Bijak Phal* (a set of verses reflecting the significance of the *Bijak*) and *Stuti* (praise or tribute songs attributed to Kabir).

⁶⁷ I have described this ritual on the basis of my observation of its performance in Kabir Chaura sect.

⁶⁸ A concrete *Havan Kunda* has been built at Kabir Chaura *Math*.

⁶⁹ However, the presence of the *Mahant* is not necessary.

The third stage begins with the *Arti* ceremony of Kabir. All the people present there stand and sing an *Arti* song together. During this *Arti*, people wave a *thali* with burning camphor in it before the portrait of Kabir and the *Havan Kunda*.

The last stage begins with the preparation of *Prasad* of the fruits kept there. It is concluded with the distribution of the *Prasad* among the people present on the occasion.

Significance of *Bijak Path* and *Havan Puja*

According to the Kabir Chaura tradition, *Bijak Path* is performed for different purposes and it is named accordingly: *Shanti Path* (for peace in oneself and one's family), *Aishvarya Path* (for prosperity), *Bandh Moksha Path* (for salvation), *Pret-bhoot Shanti Path* (for exorcising ghosts), *Dhukh Se Nivaran Path* (for ending pains and sorrows), *Varsha Aavahann Path* (for invoking rain), *Vipatti Nivaran Path* (for removing troubles), *Shanti Bachan Path* (for developing a good relationship with others on the basis of one's way of speaking to them affectionately), *Shatru Manmardan Path* (for overcoming enemies), *Marand Mantra Path* (for killing enemies/evils)⁷⁰. One can clearly see that this ritual serves people in different ways. The performance of *Bijak Path* gives them satisfaction and a psychological relief. However, many of above purposes of *Bijak Path* run counter to Kabir's spirit.

Like *Chauka Arti*, *Bijak Path* also gives the sects (which support the *Bijak* as true teachings of Kabir) a way to attract people into their folds.

Through this ritual, the recitation of the *Bijak* has become a public phenomenon. Byasmuni Das suggests that previously, the recitation of the *Bijak* was an individual practice.

⁷⁰ In all formats, the whole *Bijak* is recited. The only difference is the recitation of the different two-line verses corresponding to each *Path* at the completion of one of the sections of the *Bijak* (which is divided in twelve sections) or at the completion of the recitation of each *ramaini*. The recitation of a corresponding two-line verse is called *sampoot*. Each *sampoot* is followed by offering the mixed items of the *Havan Puja* into the *kunda*.

Sadhus and saints used to recite to themselves and understand the meanings of the verses. Now, all the verses of Kabir contained in the *Bijak* are transmitted among audiences (including illiterate and uneducated ones) at centres and homes of followers. Thus, they are also exposed to all the religious and social messages and teachings of Kabir.

Bijak Path and *Havan Puja* appear similar respectively to *Ramayana Path* (*Ramcharitmanas Path*) or *Mahabharata Path* and *Brahmanical Yajna*. However, they contain a voice of dissent or protest against hegemonic Brahmanical religious practices. Kabir's rejection of Brahmanical practices, *Vedas* and other religious scriptures, Hindu gods and goddesses, hypocrisies, *varna* and castes etc. echoes through the *Bijak Path*. *Havan Puja* is believed to be performed for the purification of environment at home or *Math*. However, the purpose of preserving it as a Kabirpanthi practice is a significant attack on the position of Brahmin priests. Byasmuni Das reveals that some followers want *Havan Puja* to be performed at their homes. If it is not performed by Kabirpanthi saints and *Mahants*, they may invite Brahmin priests to officiate over this ritual. In order to keep Brahmin priests away, they themselves perform this ritual.

During the performance of *Bijak Path* and *Havan Puja*, a portrait of Kabir is also installed. It reflects that Kabir as God substitutes and undermines the Holy Trinity and other Hindu gods and goddesses.

Like *Chauka Arti*, in *Bijak Path* too, Kabirpanthi *Mahants* and saints replace the Brahmanical priests. It is more of a democratic nature as women also recite the verses of *Bijak* and perform *Havan Puja*.

Although Kabirpanthi rituals can be seen as a betrayal of Kabir's radical iconoclasm and his insistence on inner faith and moral integrity, they are embedded with an opposition to

many of the accepted religious and social norms of more orthodox Hinduism. Lorenzen (1996) rightly argues:

Kabir Panthi rituals are not simply the product of an abject capitulation to the social and cultural pressures that foster Sanskritization, Hinduization, and socioreligious homogenization. In the first place, the rituals of the Kabirpanth are quite simple and inexpensive compared to those of more orthodox Hindu monasteries and temples. More important, however, is the fact that Kabir Panthi rituals express, in both actions and words, an implicit opposition to many of the accepted religious and social norms of more orthodox Hinduism at the same that they incorporate the basic structure and many formal elements of more orthodox rituals. (p. 248)

The above discussion clearly suggests that Kabir centres play an important role in transmitting Kabir's teachings and messages among people and have constructed their ways to reject the Brahmanical hegemonic practices and attract people in their folds. Studying Kabir through their practices and traditions can really give us new insights into the contemporary relevance of Kabir. In this chapter, I have studied the following centres and their traditions: Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir *Math* (Sadguru Kabir Baag *Ashram*), Maghar Kabir *Math*, Lakshmpur Bagicha *Math*, Rosera, Mahadev *Math*-1 (*Mool Gaddi*), Rosera, Vachan Vanshacharya Gaddi Mahadev *Math* (Mahadev *Math*-2), Rosera and Harihar *Mela*, Sonapur.

Kashi Kabir Chaura Math

Kabir Chaura *Math* is situated at Kabir Chaura⁷¹ in Varanasi. It is the place where Kabir spent most of his life transmitting his spiritual and social teachings among masses. It is called the *Karmabhoomi* of Kabir. It is also known as Siddhapith Kabir Chaura *Math* Moolgadi. The term 'Moolgadi' combining 'Mool' (Original) and 'Gadi' (Seat) shows that Kabir Chaura *Math* has been the main seat of Kabir and the headquarters of Kabirpanth⁷².

⁷¹ Kabir Chaura is a locality in Varanasi. Its earlier name was Narharpura.

⁷² The followers of Kabir Chaura sect claim that the Kabirpanth initiated by the Kabir Chaura *Math* is the real Kabirpanth.

Before its establishment as a *Math*, it used to be the home of Kabir and the place⁷³ of his spiritual practices. After Kabir's death at Maghar⁷⁴, Surati Gopal, one of his main disciples, developed it into a Kabir *Math*, popularly known as Kabir Chaura *Math*. There have been 23 *Mahants* since its establishment: Surati Gopal, Gyan Saheb, Shyam Saheb, Laal Saheb, Harishukh Saheb, Sheetal Saheb, Sukh Saheb, Hulas Saheb, Madhav Saheb, Kokil Saheb, Ram Saheb, Maha Saheb, Hari Saheb, Sharan Saheb, Pooran Saheb, Nirmal Saheb, Rangi Saheb, Guru Prasad Saheb, Prem Saheb, Ram Bilas Saheb, Amrit Saheb, Ganga Sharan Saheb, and Vivek Saheb.

Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* (*Acharya Gaddi*) has a large number of branches in different parts of the country. It has also many branches in other countries. Millions of Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers of Kabir have been associated with this *Math* and its branches.

Kabir's Heritage at Kabir Chaura *Math*

Kabir Chaura *Math* has many relics associated with Kabir's life. These make it a unique Kabir centre and attract both Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers of Kabir from all around the world:

a) Neeru Tila

Neeru Tila used to be the home of Kabir. It was demolished a few years ago and at this place, a high-tech cottage reflecting the journey of Kabir's life is being constructed. It consists of one handloom to demonstrate how Kabir used to weave cloths with it.

⁷³ It is adjoining to the home of Kabir. It is said that Veer Sigh Baghel, the then King of Banaras and one of Kabir's firm disciples, donated some more pieces of land adjacent to this place for the establishment of Kabir Chaura *Math* as he was the owner of the place.

⁷⁴ Towards the last years of his life, Kabir left Kashi for Maghar and took his last breath there.

Nearby are the graves of Neeru and Neema⁷⁵ and a 'Neeru and Neema *Samadhi Smarak*' is constructed over their graves. In 1957, this *Smarak* was renovated by *Acharya* Ram Bilas Saheb, the 21st *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*. It reminds us of the foster parents of Kabir and establishes his connection with them.

b) Kabir Chabutara and Kabir Bijak Temple

According to Vivek Das, the present *Mahant* of Kabir Chaura *Math*, after Kabir became a disciple of Ramananda⁷⁶, there used to be large gatherings at his *satsangs* and *bhajans*. Kabir Saheb used to work on the weaver's handloom (*kargha*) most of the day and enlightened the gatherings in the remaining time. The number of people continued increasing. As a result, the space available in front of Kabir's house was no longer sufficient. Another elevated place was chosen near his house for gatherings:

When the gatherings started swelling beyond limits, another platform was built to accommodate the large crowd. Then a huge '*mandap*' was raised on this platform for *satsang* (religious discourse) purposes, which today is better known as Kabir Saheb's *Updesh Sthal* (Preaching Platform). This place has now been developed into the 'Bijak Mandir'. It was here that Kabir Saheb taught his followers the basics of *Bijak* that denotes the secrets of knowledge, and it was here that he undertook the *sadhana* (transcendental meditation) to attain *Bijak*. Later on, this same platform came to be known as Kabir Chabutara. Now the whole colony is named Kabirchaura. (*Acharya* Vivekdas, p. 105)

The *Bijak* Temple was renovated by Ram Bilas Saheb, the twenty first *Acharya* of Kabir Chaura *Math*. This temple houses some historical things associated with Kabir: a pair of clogs (*khadau*), a wooden pot (*kashtha patra*) for drinking water and a trident (*trisul*) of a Gorakhpanti saint⁷⁷. A garland of one thousand beads given to Kabir by Ramananda was also kept in it, but it was stolen a few years back. In the courtyard of this temple, there is a

⁷⁵ Neeru and Neema are called the foster parents of Kabir. A legend related to this relationship has been discussed below.

⁷⁶ Kabir is said to be one of the twelve main disciples of Ramananda.

⁷⁷ Some *sadhus* of the Kabir Chaura sect believe that Gorakhnath himself awarded this *trisul* to Kabir when Kabir defeated him in a debate at Kabir Chaura *Math*.

Gaddi of the *Mahant*. After Kabir, all the *Mahants* give *satsangs* and *pravachans* from this *Gaddi*. On the walls of the courtyard, the portraits of all the *Mahants* are hung. It is the only temple dedicated to the *Bijak* (the *vanis* of Kabir).

c) Well

There are two wells on the campus of Kabir Chaura *Math*: one before the Neeru and Neema *Samadhi Smarak* and one in front of the *Bijak* Temple. The latter is believed to be the main well associated with Kabir. According to the *sadhus* of this *Math*, this well symbolises the thirst of Kabir's followers for spiritual knowledge and its fulfilment.

d) Kabir *Samadhi Mandir*

Kabir *Samadhi* Temple is believed to have been built by Surati Gopal and Veer Singh Baghel. It is said that when Kabir's body turned into flowers at the time of Kabir's death at Maghar⁷⁸, they brought some flowers to Kabir Chaura *Math* and buried them here and built a temple over the grave. On the platform of this temple, Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers sit, share and learn Kabir's thoughts and teachings. Formal *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes of the *Math* are frequently held at this platform. It is used as a dais. A portrait containing the images of all the *Mahants* is hung on the front wall of the *Samadhi* Temple. Many popular *sakhis*⁷⁹ of Kabir printed on flex boards have also been installed in the temple.

Kabir among people at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*

When people visit Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, they are introduced to different aspects of Kabir's life, *bhakti* and his verses. Kabir Chaura *Math* lays emphasis on transmitting Kabir's teachings through his *vanis*. Here, Kabir is seen as a weaver who practices his *bhakti*

⁷⁸ According to a popular legend, when the Hindu and Muslim followers of Kabir were fighting to cremate his corpse according to the rites of their own religions, Kabir's corpse turned into flowers to stop their fight.

⁷⁹ However, most of these *sakhis* are not found in the *Bijak* of Kabir Chaura *Math* and also in other major manuscripts of Kabir's poetry.

and profession of weaving craft together. Kabir Chaura *Math* represents Kabir as an iconoclastic critic questioning and challenging the orthodox Brahmanical and Islamic religious and social practices which are considered to be an obstacle to the path of humanity. He is also shown as one ridiculing scholastic pride and arrogance and promoting love, equality, and other humane values among people. In fact, Kabir Chaura *Math* has tried to recreate the life of Kabir. Most of the walls of this *Math* are inscribed with Kabir's popular verses and many pictures presenting various aspects and events of Kabir's life. The *Math* has also created many legends and myths of Kabir. Some of them portray him as a super-human or an incarnation, a phenomenon which Kabir himself has criticized. Kabir Chaura *Math* also observes some practices and rituals (I shall discuss below), which appear contradictory to Kabir's spirit and his teachings. Even the *Samadhi* Temple and *Bijak* Temple are the examples of such contradictions. However, these temples convey an egalitarian message that anyone can visit them and show reverence to Kabir without any discrimination. They foster the values of equality, oneness and love among people.

Kabir in Legends at Kabir Chaura *Math*

When followers of Kabir visit Kabir Chaura *Math*, they are introduced to more than a dozen legends⁸⁰ shedding light on the characteristics of Kabir's personality and *bhakti*, his struggle, contribution to humanity, criticism of Hindu-Muslim fights and prejudices, rejection of caste and *varna* and his challenges to Brahmin priests, Mullahs, Sufi *Pirs*, Kings and Emperors.

⁸⁰ I have found most of Kabir legends in many versions. They even differ from one narrative to another among Kabirpanthi followers. However, their main bodies remain same.



Figure 3: Firat Das enlightening a group of followers of Kabir from Haryana with Kabir's legends, teachings and *vanis* at Kashi Kabir Chaura Math.

Lorenzen observes that legends in general are “more directly concerned with the specific socio-economic and political situations faced by the communities in the course of their historical development” (p. 5). Most of the legends of Kabir also reveal social and political situation of Kabir's time. The following are some of Kabir's legends:

a) Neeru, Neema and Kabir: Kabir's Advent from Lahartara to Kabir Chaura

Neeru and Neema, a Muslim weaver couple, were the foster parents of Kabir. They found Kabir as a baby at Lahartara pond and brought him to Kabir Chaura (Neeru Tila). According to the legend (about Kabir's birth)⁸¹, Neeru and Neema were coming from

⁸¹ Many versions of this legend are found within and outside Kabirpanth. Lorenzen also writes: “One of the most popular legends, and one with a wide range of quiet different versions, is that of Kabir's birth” (p. 43). All Kabirpanthi versions of this legend reflect the desire of Kabir's followers to somehow deny, or at least mitigate, the opprobrium attached to his Muslim and low-caste family heritage.

Westcott mentions two versions of this legend found outside Kabirpanth in which a Brahmin widow is called the mother of Kabir:

The first legend relates that his mother was a Brahmin widow who went with her father on a pilgrimage to the shrine of a famous ascetic. To reward the devotion of the pilgrims the ascetic

Manduadeeh⁸², Varanasi after their *gauna* (the custom of bride's second coming to groom's home after her marriage). When both reached the Lahartara pond, Neema felt thirsty. She went to the pond to drink water. As soon as she reached the bank, she saw Kabir as a baby lying on the ground⁸³ at some distance from the pond⁸⁴. She picked up the baby and wanted to take it home but fearing social opprobrium, Neeru forbade her. They argued. Neema was so moved by the motherly compassion for the baby that Neeru had to finally give up before her insistence. They brought Kabir to Kabir Chaura and raised him.

prayed that the women might become the mother of a son. The prayer of so holy a man could not fail to find fulfilment and in due course, the Brahman widow became the mother of Kabir. The mother to escape dishonour exposed the infant, who was discovered and adopted as her own by the wife of a weaver.

According to another version of this story Ramananda, who was the ascetic referred to, said that he could not recall his blessing but would arrange that the birth should not be after the usual manner, but that the infant should issue from the palm of its mother's hand. His promise was realised and the infant after birth was placed on a lotus flower in the midst of the Lahar Tank. It was there discovered by Nima, the wife of Niru, and by her taken to her husband's house. (p. 3)

Kabirpanthis believe that this legend has been fabricated by some Brahmins to prove Kabir to have belonged to a Brahmin lineage after they had found Kabir a saint with exceptional qualities. According to them, Brahmins thought that a person from a lower caste could not become a saint and therefore, wanted to accommodate Kabir in the Brahmin community. Kabirpanthis reject any Brahmin connection with Kabir's birth in their own versions of the legend. This also shows their own voice of protest against Brahmanism as well.

Westcott describes one more legend which I have also recorded from many Kabirpanthis:

Kabir descended from heaven to earth. The lotus flower was blooming in the place where Kabir was born. The bees were tired of humming. Peacocks, larks and other kinds of birds in their flight passed circling round the tank. Thunder and lightning were in the air when Kabir became manifest in the heart of a lotus flower, in the midst of the Lahar tank. A feeling of thirst overcame Nima, the newly wedded wife of Niru, the weaver as after the marriage ceremony she was making her way to her husband's house. She approached the tank but was much afraid when there she beheld the child. She thought in her heart 'this is probably the living evidence of the shame of some virgin widow.' Niru suggested that they might take the child to their house, but Nima at first demurred, thinking that such action might give rise to scandal. Women would ask, "Who is the mother of a child so beautiful that its eyes are like lotus"? However, laying aside all fears they took pity on the child. On approaching the house, they were welcomed with the songs of women, but when the women saw the child dark thoughts arose in their hearts and they began to ask, "How has she got this child"? Nima replied that she had got the child without giving birth to it and the women then refrained from asking further questions.(p. 4)

⁸² Its earlier name was Mandur. It is situated in the southern part of Varanasi.

⁸³ At the same spot, a small temple was built on behalf of Kabir Chaura *Math*. This place has now been developed into a *Math*, a branch of Kabir Chaura *Math*. It is presently being headed by Govind Das. It is known as 'Lahartara Kabir Udbhav Sthal' (the place of Kabir's origin).

⁸⁴ However, there seems to be confusions about the exact spot of Kabir's appearance. Its followers sometimes claim that Kabir lay on the ground, sometimes among the bunch of lotus flowers, sometimes on a lotus flower (placing Kabir on a lotus flower aligns them with Dharmadasi approach to Kabir's appearance). In his *Kabir and His Footprints*, Vivekdas's description also reflects these confusions as he writes at one place "a newborn baby lying on the ground at some distance from the pond" (p. 9) and at another place, he writes "crying amongst the thick lotus growth on the hillock in the pond" (p. 92).

b) Kabir, Ramananda and Panchganga Ghat

Kabir is called the most prominent disciple of Ramananda. At Kabir Chaura *Math*, the following couplet is often cited to show Kabir's connection with Ramananda:

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

The legend of Kabir's becoming a disciple of Ramananda is always transmitted among followers of Kabir by the saints of Kabir Chaura *Math*. They say that Kabir was a perfect saint himself and needed no *Guru*. Since during that time, the saint without a *Guru* was called a *Manmukhi* (follower of her own heart), not a *Gurumukhi* (follower of a *Guru*), Kabir therefore chose Ramananda as his *Guru*. This legend goes as follows: Kabir wanted to become a disciple of Ramananda. He went to his *ashram* (dwelling), but he was prevented by the Brahmin disciples of Ramananda from meeting him since Muslims, and shudra and dalit Hindus were not allowed to become Ramananda's disciples. Therefore, Kabir sought a stratagem to become his disciple. He found out that Ramananda used to go to the Panchganga Ghat everyday early in the morning to bathe in the Ganga. Next day, Kabir went to the Panchganga Ghat and lay down on one of the stair steps on Ramananda's path to the Ganga⁸⁵ like a child. Ramananda did not see him and stepped onto the chest⁸⁶ of Kabir. As soon as he realized that he had put his foot onto the chest of a boy, he (Ramananda) cried out 'Ram, Ram....'⁸⁷ However, Kabir took the word 'Ram' as the *mantra* of *bhakti* given by Ramananda to him and left the place. Ramananda could not recognise Kabir because of darkness.

Kabir now started claiming that Ramananda had made him his disciple. One of his Brahmin disciples heard him and reported it to Ramananda. Ramananda summoned Kabir.

⁸⁵ Some Kabirpanthis also tell that he took the form of a child.

⁸⁶ Some also say that he stepped on his forehead.

⁸⁷ Some also tell that Ramananda supported Kabir to stand up and said to him: "Boy, say Ram, Ram".

Kabir became elated when he came to know that Ramananda wanted to meet him. He immediately went to him. Ramananda asked him when he made him his disciple. At this, Kabir reminded him of the incident at the Panchganga Ghat and his giving the *mantra* of the name of Ram. Kabir further said that Ram is the essence of all and is in everybody. At this, Ramananda stood up from his seat and embraced him⁸⁸. Ramananda called Kabir to be the best of all his disciples.

This legend establishes a connection between Kabir and Ramananda. On the one hand, it also reflects a strong impact of Ramananda in the terrain of *bhakti* and on the other hand, sheds light on the fact that shudras and dalits were not allowed to become his disciples and practice *bhakti* for salvation. It means that they were not considered eligible for practicing *bhakti* on account of their low caste status. However, Kabir challenged and broke this prejudice. Kabirpanthi followers often cite this legend in order to highlight their superiority over Brahmins. In fact, through this legend, they themselves express their protest against Brahmanical prejudice, discrimination and oppression. Kabir's becoming the disciple of Ramananda and his challenging the Brahmanical discrimination give them (shudras and dalits) a feeling of dignity and also provide them a psychological relief.

c) Kabir and Kamali

Outside Kabirpanth, Kabir is regarded as a householder saint who was married to Loi. Kamali is believed to be their daughter. However, all Kabirpanthis reject this view and claim that Kabir was a celibate saint⁸⁹. They consider Loi and Kamali to be his disciples. Instead, they claim that Kamali was the daughter of Sheikh Taki⁹⁰. According to the legend, Kamali

⁸⁸ Some also say that Ramananda bowed down to Kabir and pleaded him to sit on his seat, but Kabir preferred to remain as his disciple. It shows Kabir superior to Ramananda in terms of spiritual powers.

⁸⁹ Lorenzen (1992) suggests that one of the main aims of this legend is to deny that Kabir was a natural father of Kamali.

⁹⁰ Sheikh Taki was a prominent Sufi of his time and was a religious teacher of Emperor Sikandar Lodi. He was jealous of Kabir's popularity and tried to challenge his knowledge many times. On his instigation, Sikandar

always kept ill and therefore, she was buried alive. A week later, Kabir visited Delhi. Sheikh Taki went to see Kabir and pleaded with him to revive her. Kabir went to her grave and brought her back to life. Kamali refused to stay with her father. She became a great scholar and preacher under the supervision of Kabir. This legend serves to demonstrate Kabir's superhuman powers.

d) Kamali, Surati Gopal and Kabir

It is one of the most popular legends of Kabir associated with Kabir Chaura *Math*. According to this legend (as already discussed), Sarvadananda/Sarvajeet, an arrogant southern Indian Brahmin scholar, challenged Kabir for a debate. Defeated in the debate, he became a disciple of Kabir. Kabir enlightened Sarvadananda with his teachings and gave him a new name 'Shruti Gopal' (also called Surati Gopal/Surat Gopal).

This legend is an attack on a scholastic pride and arrogance. It also establishes the superiority of the spiritual powers of Kabir over Brahmanical pedantry. I observed that this legend attracts people, especially illiterate and uneducated followers towards Kabir. In fact, they receive a feeling of respect and dignity for themselves from Kabir's victory and superiority over a Brahmin scholar and claim that they practice the *bhakti* of Kabir, which makes them feel superior to Brahmins.

e) Kabir and Veer Singh Baghel

The legend goes as follows: As Kabir's popularity increased, huge crowds regularly came to listen to his religious discourses. In order to ward off the crowd, he thought of a stratagem. He went out to a public square in the company of a prostitute. He pretended to be

Lodi tried to torment and oppress Kabir on 52 occasions (popular as 52 *Kasani*). But he failed and was defeated every time by Kabir. Both surrendered before Kabir. These legends reflect how Kabir challenged and defeated the Hindu and Muslim authorities of the time fearlessly. They also strengthen the hold of Kabir and Kabirpanth on people within and outside Kabirpanth. For Kabirpanthis, they are a source of their confidence and a feeling of superiority. They feel to be strongly attached to Kabir.

in an inebriated state and carried a bottle with him. He was ridiculed by the Brahmins and *Mullahs*. From the public square, he went to the court of King Veer Singh Baghel. The King and others present in the court were stunned to see Kabir's degenerate behaviour. They were even more astonished when Kabir began to pour the water of the bottle on his own feet. He was asked to explain the reason of pouring water. He told them that at Jagarnath Puri, Orissa, one (*panda*) of his disciples was cooking food and suddenly his cottage caught fire. Kabir, through his spiritual power, came to know about his disciple's distress. He poured the water to extinguish the fire. Everyone doubted his explanation. The King sent a messenger to Puri to verify it. The messenger found it true. The King realized that he had insulted Kabir. He feared that his whole empire would now be destroyed by the curse of Kabir. Therefore, they took off their royal clothes and hurriedly went to Kabir to apologize to him. They took a bundle of wood and an axe with them and decided to commit suicide if Kabir did not forgive them. However, Kabir welcomed them when they reached him.

This legend testifies to Kabir's popularity among the ordinary masses, of which the Brahmins and *Mullahs* were jealous. It also reflects Kabir's strong influence among the rulers and kings and Kabir never bows down to any political authority. For Kabir, all poor, rich, kings and common people were same. The *panda* (a Brahmin priest) has also been shown as a devotee of Kabir. It establishes Kabir's greatness among Brahmins through the *panda*.

Lorenzen puts it with clarity:

Kabir's encounter with the *panda* of Jagarnath also portrays him as eager to serve a representative of Brahmanic orthodoxy. At the same time, it bestows on Kabir miraculous powers for superior to those of the presumably good but clumsy *panda*. The hostility of the Brahmins toward Kabir coupled with his somewhat ambiguous behaviour toward them is a typical of several Kabir legends such as those of the Brahmins demanding food and the unexpected feast. In this *panda* legend, it is Kabir who bestows *prasad* (grace) on the *panda*, not the *panda* who bestows *prasad* (rice offering) on Kabir.

Kabir's adamant refusal to bow down before political authority in the person of the king is another important element in the ideological message of both the

legend and Sikandar legend, Ananta-das emphasizes this theme more than the authors of most later versions. Kabir's attitude is summed up in his assertion that for him there is "no difference between king and commoner" [6.2]. This is both a cry of defiance against of all men (and perhaps even of women as well). At the same time, Kabir's gracious and forgiving behaviour toward the repentant king shows again Kabir's great generosity and nobility. In this legend, it is king who is the humble petitioner, while Kabir is the noble bestower of favours. (1992, p. 32)

Thus, one can hear many legends popular at Kabir Chaura *Math*, in which he challenges, criticizes and defeats Brahmin priests, Mullahs and arrogant sectarian practitioners; makes fun of Hindu and Muslim conservative religious practices; criticizes pedantry of scholars; attacks caste, *varna* and other kinds of discrimination against weak and helpless people; spreads message of love among people and prays for the welfare of all. These legends certainly glorify Kabir and establish him as a super-human. Moreover, they manifest the ideology of the poor and powerless, not of the rich and powerful. Through these legends, followers of Kabir, especially the followers of lower castes, are conveying their own voice of protest and dissent against the issues like caste distinction, *varna* system and other religious and social discriminations which they have faced or are facing. Lorenzen (1992)'s observation about Kabir's legends embedded with a voice of protest is noteworthy here: "Indeed, in the case of social meanings that are implicit and explicit in the Kabir's legends, their primary intention is to protest against social discrimination and economic exploitation rather than any legitimation of existing institutions of domination" (p. 5).

Kabir in Books at Kabir Chaura *Math*

Kabir Chaura *Math* has also been spreading the message of Kabir through books. The *Mahants* and *sadhus* of the *Math* have written many significant books on Kabir. Some of the popular books of the *Math* are: *Kabir Bijak*, *Kabir Mahabijak*, *Kabir Shabdavali*, *Kabir Jivan Katha*, *Kabir ki Virasat*, *Kabir ka Sach*, *Kabir ki Sakhi*, *Kabir Chaura Math: Shunya Se Shikhar Tak*, *Kabir ke Katil*, *Kabir Saheb*, *Tej Punj Prakash*, *Kabir Sahitya ki Prasangikata*,

Bhula Log Kahe Ghar Mera, Kabir Tirtha, Budha Bansh Kabir Ka, Kabir Chaura Math Ka Yogdan, Moolgadi: Ek Parichay, Siddha Peeth Kabir Chaura, Sant Kabir Ka Sahajyoga, Kabir Sidhant Darshan, Kabirpanth mein Vachanvansh ke Gunahgaar Guruva, Kabir and His Footprints, A Brief Introduction of Lord Kabir, Kabirpanth me Teen Tigdami Vansho Ka Khel, Vansh Kabir Ka Ansha, Kabir Ki Sikha, Kabir ke Dharma Siddhant Ki Prasangikata, Guldasta, Kabir Tirtha: Ek Jhalak, Amarpur Desh Apana, Kabirpanth me Dharmadas Ka Jhunjhuna, Kabir Sakhi Saar and Kabir Bhajanavali,

I found *Bijak*, *Mahabijak* and *Kabir Shabdavali* most important ones among these books. The verses compiled in the *Bijak* are believed to be the actual verses uttered by Kabir. The earliest edition of the Kabir Chaura *Bijak* was published in 1885 in manuscript and 1928 in print (Darwadker, pp. 31-32). It has 84 *Ramainis*, 115 *Shabd*s, 353 *Sakhis* and few other verses patterned on different local folk genres of songs. With regard to the late production of the *Bijak* at Kabir Chaura *Math*, Vivekdas says that there were already many small manuscripts of Kabir's verses, but they were not compiled till then. Some of them also used to be immersed into the Ganga when they became too old to be preserved.

The *Mahabijak* is the second most important book of the Kabir Chaura *Math*. It is an encyclopaedic book on the collection of Kabir's *vanis*. It includes the *vanis* of Kabir preserved in different manuscripts and the *vanis* collected from the oral traditions. There are twelve major chapters in this book. Each chapter has twelve sub-chapters. The book has around 5000 *sakhis* of Kabir. It also has verses of Kabir given in the *Guru Granth Saheb* and *Kabir Granthavali* by Shyam Sundar Das. The following verse from the Introduction of this book suggests uncountable verses in the name of Kabir in oral traditions:

*Jete patra banaspati, aur ganga ki rein
Pandit bechara kya kare, kabir kahe mukh bein (Kabir Mahabijak, p. iii)
(There are countless leaves of trees and there are countless drops of water in the Ganga....*

What can a scholar do? Kabir has uttered verses in large numbers orally.)

The oral world of Kabir is an unmapped phenomenon. The following account of Ganga Sharan Das Shastri, the 23rd *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, and the editor of *Mahabijak*, reflects the fact:

I visited village after village in India. I went to different provinces and heard the *vanis* of Kabir and I found myself drowned into the sea of Kabir's *vanis*. People recited *vanis* of Kabir throughout night. I do not know whether they were reciting their own compositions written on the pattern of Kabir or the actual *vanis* of Kabir. I thought that I should go to the tribal areas as well. I collected and scripted down Kabir's *vanis* in the same form as they were recited to me. I went round tribal areas of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bihar and found that the tribal people whose languages I could not understand sang Kabir's *padas*. I heard them. I could understand only the refrain 'Kahe Kabir Suno bhai sadho'. Apart from this, I could not identify what they were singing. (p. iv)

Kabir Shabdavali is a popular collection of *bhajans* and *padas* sung in the name of Kabir. Many *bhajans* sung in the oral traditions of Kabir in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are found in this collection. It consists of 344 popular *padas* and more than 122 other compositions.

Vivek Das and His Vision at Kabir Chaura Math

Vivek Das is the 24th *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*. He has been heading this *Math* since 2000. He has tried to recreate Kabir's spirit, Sant tradition and its message and to highlight Kabir's contribution to humanity among Kabir's followers visiting Kabir Chaura *Math*. He focuses on transmitting Kabir's radical image. He has always rejected the Dharmadasi rituals and practices which, according to him, have created a different image of Kabir. The following are some of Vivek Das⁹¹'s significant contributions:

⁹¹ He even criticized the BJP government in 2014 for its discriminatory policies and as a result, the leaders of BJP avoid visiting Kabir Chaura *Math* and giving any help to it. They prefer visiting Maghar Kabir *Math* and use it for their political activities.

1. Kabir and His Companions

Vivekadas has got the statues of Kabir with his four companions built on the campus of Kabir Chaura *Math*. Kabir has an *ektara* in his hands. The other saints have *Khajadi*, *tambura*, *dholak* and *jhaal* with them. This shows how Kabir and his companions moved from one place to another transmitting his teachings and awakening the common masses against all social and religious injustices, discriminations, and evils through *bhajans* and religious discourses. Thus, he led the Bhakti Movement in the medieval North India.

2. Dadu Dayal (dhooniya/cotton-carder), Sena (barber), Ravidas (cobbler), Dariya (tailor), Gora (pitcher man) and Meera

Vivekadas has installed the statues of these figures to represent the significance of the *Nirguna bhakti* tradition. Most of these devotees were from the low castes and enriched Kabir's legacy of *Nirguna bhakti* after him. Like Kabir, they also taught people practicing *bhakti* and working for livelihood together. Their examples suggest that no work is inferior and every work must be done with dignity and confidence. I have observed that Kabir's followers are inspired by them when they are introduced to these saints at the Kabir Chaura *Math*.

It is striking to note that the followers of Ravidas from Haryana, Punjab and other places who come to visit Ravidas Temple at Sirgovardhan, Varanasi also visit Kabir Chaura *Math* for his association with Kabir. They believe that both Ravidas and Kabir were *Guru bhais* (disciples of the same *Guru*) and become happy seeing the statue of Ravidas and respect showered on him at the Kabir Chaura *Math*. They also believe that Kabir and Ravidas fought together against all evils and discriminations perpetrated on basis of caste and *varna*. With the same belief, dalit Kabirpanthis visit the Ravidas temple at Sirgovardhan, Varanasi

as well and highlight Kabir's connection with Ravidas. Thus, Kabir Chaura *Math* is politically and socially connecting the followers of Ravidas with Kabir.

The statue of Meera has also been erected here. Although Meera was a Rajput, she showed a complete surrender to a *Guru* from a low caste for *bhakti*. It is said that she first came to Kabir Chaura to become Kabir's disciple, but Kabir suggested her to go to Sant Ravidas. This reflects that the influences of these saints were also strongly felt by upper castes in the social and spiritual realms.

3. Different Images on the walls of the *Math*

Under the supervision of Vivekdas, many different images (some with couplets and some without couplets) have been inscribed on the inner and outer walls of the *Math*. These images also transmit Kabir among Kabir's followers. I have observed people watching and discussing these images, and receiving and appreciating Kabir and his teachings.

Kabir in Ceremonies and Rituals at Kabir Chaura *Math*

The rituals at the Kabir Chaura *Math* can be broadly divided into those that are performed daily and those that are performed on special occasions: annually, monthly, or at irregular intervals. Its principal daily rituals are the Morning and Evening *Arti-pujas* (adoration with a lamp or incense), the Pre-meal Chant, and the *Sandhya Path* (evening recitation). In his *Praises to a Formless God*, David Lorenzen has studied the daily rituals of Kabir Chaura *Math* in detail.

Morning Prayer/*Arti*

Morning prayer/*Arti* is a collective worship of Kabir in the morning. The saints and the lay followers present at the *Math* participate in it and recite the following verse which has

been taken from the “Prathana-panchak Se” written by Rameshvarananda Saheb, a prominent Kabirpanthi follower. It is attributed to Kabir as *Guru*:

Gurudev mujhko shanti de, sadbhav de sadbuddi de
Parasparik sahyog de, man hridaya ki parshuddhi de
[O *Gurudev*, give peace; Give worthy feelings, worthy intelligence.
Give cooperation; give purity to my heart.]

Lorenzen describes the ritual of the Morning Prayer in detail⁹²:

The first daily monastic ritual is the morning *arati-puja*, sometimes called the “*samuhik-puja*” (assembled worship) since this is when the sadhus first assemble together. At about 5:00 a.m., one sadhu, who has been chosen as *pujari* (ritual officiant), places flowers on several sacred sites in the monastery courtyard. These include the *samadhi* (burial shrine) of Kabir, the shrine to Kabir *Bijak*, the *gaddi* (throne) of the Mahant, and four *samadhis* of past *mahants*. The other sadhus gradually line up in two lines in front of the *Bijak* shrine. Two or three sadhus bang small gongs while the *pujari* visits each of the mentioned places ringing a small bell and waving a small censer of smoking incense over each of them. Finally, he walks up and down between the two facing lines of sadhus allowing each of them to pass their hands through the incense smoke. The sadhus then chant in unison the “Prathana-panchak se” attributed to Ramesvarananda Sahab....

This chant is followed by a call for “Victory to Satguru Kabir! Victory to the holy Satguru! Victory to the saints and devotee! Victory to Ram, the all-powerful Self!” The sadhus, and any lay *bhagats* who may have lined up with them, then go to offer a greeting to the *mahant*, who all the while has been sitting on his *gaddi*. They squat before the Mahant, with arms extended between their knees and hands cupped together, and repeat three times the phrase “Saheb bandagi.” On other occasions, this same greeting, often shortened to simply saying “Saheb” and cupping one’s hands, serves as the regular salutation between all sadhus and devotees of the Panth. After the “Saheb bandagi”, they touch the foot of the Mahant and then their own foreheads with their right hands. Finally, they do a clockwise circumambulation around the *Bijak* shrine and somewhat randomly greet each other with the same “Saheb bandagi”. (pp. 227-28)

Sandhya Arti

Sandhya Arti is also a collective daily worship of Kabir. It is performed in the evening. During the *Sandhya Arti*, the following *pada* is recited. It is also attributed to Kabir as *Guru*:

⁹² I have included only those details of the rituals which are now in practice at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*.

Jayagurudev dayanidhi, santan hitkari
Prabhu santan hitkari
Bhakt jano ke sankat, bhakt jano ke sankat
Bhav bandhan hari
Jaydev gurudev
 [Victory to the divine *Guru*, the store of mercy,
 A benefactor to the saints,
 Our Lord, a benefactor to the saints.
 The devotees' distress, the devotees' distress,
 He destroys these chains to the world.
 Victory to the king, the divine *Guru*!

Besides this *pada*, the saints and other followers also recite one-twelfth of the *Bijak* every evening. Lorenzen has described *Sandhya Arti* being performed at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* in detail:

The principal daily ritual activity of the sadhus of the Kabir Panth is the *sandhya path* (evening recitation). The *path* begins at about 7:00 p.m. and lasts for 45 minutes. The *mahant* and most of the Kabir Panthi sadhus who happen to be staying in the monastery – together with a few lay persons and visiting sadhus from other sects – sit in facing rows on the raised porch on which Kabir's *samadhi* is located. Each night the recitation begins with a short poem called "Vandan" in praise of Kabir as the Satguru:

I praise the true Kabir
 the blessed, the maker of blessings.
 I beg you to take away the pain of samsara.
 Be a giver of sons, a teacher of boons.

After the introductory hymn, the assembly begins a recitation of one-twelfth of Kabir's *Bijak*, the collection of Kabir's compositions that most branches of the Kabir Panth regard as authoritative. When this is finished, the assembly recites one-twelfth of a small collection of songs and verses by various authors called, like the recitation itself, the *sandhya path*....

At about 8:00 p.m. ... a few sadhus begin to beat the gongs, and the sadhus line up for the evening *arati-puja* or *samuhik-puja*. The ritual is virtually identical to that performed in the morning, except that a small oil lamp is used in place of the incense. In addition, in place of the morning "Prarthna panchak se". The sadhus chant the *Arati-uparanta stuti*, a poem attributed to a Raghavadas and notable for its use of repeating phrases and its increasingly emotional tone....

As in the morning *arati-puja*, the evening ritual ends with the *bandagi* to the *mahant* and the circumambulation of the *Bijak* shrine. This ends the daily round of ritual activities in Kabir Chaura monastery. (pp. 230-37)

It is to be noted that through the verses (which are recited in the Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti*), the Kabirpanthi followers of the *Math* appreciate the greatness of Kabir and

pray to him for their welfare and his guidance and help in fighting all types of evils. Both the compositions are recited in the style of *Arti*-verses attributed to Hindu gods and goddesses. However, they replace all Hindu *Arti*-verses as an alternative to them and express a voice of protest against the Brahmanical tradition of *Arti*. Moreover, during the *Sandhya Arti*, the recitation of the verses of *Bijak* expresses both spiritual and social teachings including his biting criticism of orthodox Brahmanical and Islamic practices.

Annual Ceremonies at Kabir Chaura Math

Kabir Jayanti

The celebration of Kabir Jayanti (birth anniversary) has been the most important occasion for all the sects of Kabirpanth. Kabir Chaura Math first heralded the tradition of celebrating Kabir Jayanti in Kabirpanth. Being the home of Kabir and the place of Kabir's spiritual practices, the celebration of Kabir Jayanti at Kabir Chaura Math has always been most important for the Kabirpanthis of all sects. They treat it as their main place of pilgrimage.

The followers of Kabir Chaura sect and other Kabirpanthi sects start gathering at Kabir Chaura Math three or four days before the main day of Kabir Jayanti. Many of them sing *bhajans* in groups during these days in order to express their devotion to Kabir. The major activities associated with Kabir Chaura Math are organized on two days — the preceding day and the main day of Kabir Jayanti.

Activities of the Preceding day

In the morning of this day, the recitation of Kabir *Bijak* along with *Havan Puja* (a fire ritual) is organized. It is the main ritual of the Kabir Chaura Math associated with Kabir Jayanti. A *Havan Kunda* is made in the middle of the *Samadhi Smarak* which comprises the

samadhis of four saints. Beside it, a portrait of Kabir decorated with flowers is kept. One *Kalas* (pitcher) filled with water covered with an earthen dish is also placed there. The earthen dish contains rice with a small earthen lamp on it. About half a dozen saints from the *Math* recite the entire *Kabir Bijak* and perform the *Havan Puja*. Gopal Das, Firat Das and Byas Muni, the three prominent saints of Kabir Chaura *Math*, often perform this ritual. Some lay followers including women also participate in it. This *Puja* appears quite similar to the *Sanatani Havan Puja*. The recitation of the *Bijak* is also similar to that of the *Ramayana*. However, *Bijak Path* conveys a form of protest against the *Ramayana Path* and other Brahmanical practices of *Path* as Kabir's criticism of Orthodox Brahmanical practices is expressed through the recitation of *Bijak*. It acts as a substitute of Brahmanical practices of *Path* as well.

This recitation and *Havan Puja* continues for about 2-3 hours. At its end, an *Arti* song is recited in group by both the saints and lay followers. This is the same *Arti* song which is recited on the *Sandhya Path* or *Arti* every evening. During this *Arti*, people wave a *thali* with burning camphor in it around the *Havan Kunda* and the portrait of Kabir. After its end, *prasad* is made of different fruits and sweets, and distributed among the people present on the occasion. In the afternoon, a huge *bhandara* (feast) is also organized. All the followers participate in it.

In the evening of this day, *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes⁹³ are held. In the beginning, the *Mahant* gives *pravachan*. After his *pravachan*, both men and women Kabir singers from different places perform *bhajans* and *satsangs*. They sing popular Kabir's verses along with other compositions reflecting Kabir's spirit. Audiences show their deep interests in listening to these *bhajans* and *satsangs*. They perceive them as the actual words of Kabir.

⁹³ *Satsangs* and *bhajans* are always the main attraction of the Kabir Chaura sect and have continuing since Kabir's time.

Main Day of Kabir Jayanti

This day can be described as the day of the celebration of Kabir's *bhajans* and his teachings at the Kabir Chaura *Math*. From the morning till the late evening, the programmes of *bhajans* and *satsangs* continue. There is a huge crowd of the followers of different Kabirpanthi sects and non-Kabirpanthi followers. The followers staying at Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir *Math*⁹⁴ also gather here to celebrate Kabir Jayanti. All the people show their deep interests in *bhajans* and *pravachans*.

It is noticeable that Kabirpanthi singers from different places also perform Kabir in their groups wherever they are present on the campus of the *Math*. The *Khajadi* group singing, especially by the singers of Bihar is very attractive. Different traditions of Kabir-singing can be seen here. There is happiness and joy in every corner of the *Math*.

On this occasion, during the *satsangs* and *pravchans*, not only the *Mahant* and saints preach about the message of Kabir, but also consolidate the position of the panth among the followers of all Kabirpanthi sects. They tell them why Kabir Chaura *Math* is the most important centre of Kabir. They explain why Kabir should be known through his *vanis* which describe his doctrine, principle and philosophy. How to deal with caste discrimination, Brahmanical dominance and other social and religious evils and how to become good human beings by removing individual evils are also emphasized.

Celebration of Guru Purnima

Guru Purnima is an Indian tradition of worship of *Guru*. It is also known as the 'Byas Puja'. In the medieval period, *Gurus* became the part of the life of common people. These

⁹⁴ At Lahartara, Kabir Jayanti is celebrated one day prior to the main day of Kabir Jayanti to be celebrated at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*. It is arranged so so that all followers can participate in both.

Gurus were not Brahmins, but shudras and dalits e.g. Kabir, Ravidas. Unlike Brahmin *Gurus*, they opened and propagated the path of *bhakti* for all.

Across the sectarian traditions, *Guru* is worshipped. His words themselves are religious scriptures for followers. The tradition of *Guru*-worship has become all pervasive in Kabirpanth as well. This is the second major ceremony of the Kabir Chaura *Math*. On this occasion, people from different places arrive at Kabir Chaura *Math*. However, the crowd is not as large as there is on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti. The Kabirpanthis, especially from the neighbouring districts of Varanasi e.g. Jaunpur, Lucknow, Mirzapur, Ghanzipur, Bhadohi, Chandauli, Azamgarh, and Allahabad visit Kabir Chaura *Math*.

It is noticeable that the followers and saints of Shiva sect, Jayguru Dev sect, Radhaswami sect and other sectarian traditions also visit Kabir Chaura *Math* to offer their reverence to Kabir. They also regard Kabir as their *Guru*. In their panths too, the teachings of Kabir are preached. Some of them say that they have strong devotion and attachment to the *bhajans* of Kabir. This testifies to Kabir's popularity and influence among other sectarian traditions as well. On this occasion, Kabir is worshipped by the followers as a Hindu god. The threshold of Kabir *Samadhi* temple is decked with flowers, camphor and other worshipping items.

Guru Purnima is also held at Kabir Chaura *Math* for two days: the preceding day and the main day.

Activities of the Preceding Day

On this day, a *satsang* and *bhajan* programme is held. However, it is not regular. In 2016 and 2018, I did not find any such programme organized by the *Math*. However, the Kabirpanthi followers who came from other places sang *bhajans*.

Main Day of Guru Purnima

This is a special day for all the Kabirpanthis. On this occasion, the Kabirpanthis offer their reverence to Kabir, the present *Mahant* and their own *Gurus* who have given them *diksha*. They also visit and worship the shrines of previous *Mahants* located on the campus of the *Math*.

On this day, about at 9 am the *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes are organized. The singers of different places perform *bhajans* and *satsangs*. In the afternoon of this occasion, a huge feast is given to the followers. They feel blessed after participating in the feast. They treat the food as *Prasad*. They consider it to be a benediction of Kabir showered on them.

Kabir Chaura *Math* which claims that it spreads Kabir's spirit through his verses is not totally free from rituals. In fact, a sect cannot be free from rituals even though it shows itself anti-ritualistic: "Rituals appear in allegories and societies, even those that are nominally anti-ritualistic" (Evan M. Zuesse, p. 414). However, Kabirpanthi rituals have a voice of dissent to hegemonic Brahmanical rituals. Lorenzen rightly observes:

What is particularly interesting in the case of Kabir Panthi rituals is the way in which they are constructed using typical components found in more orthodox Hindu rituals but at the same time are imbued with an iconoclastic and generally egalitarian ideological message that stands in opposition to the basic religious and social ideology of a dominant saguna Hinduism that fosters reverence for the Vedas and Brahmins, image worship in temples and *varnasramadharmas*. (p. 227)

To sum up, Kabir Chaura *Math* is seen as the home of Kabir and the place where Kabir spent most of his life transmitting his spiritual and social teachings among masses. It is therefore considered to be the headquarters of Kabirpanth. At Kabir Chaura *Math*, Kabir is both human and divine figures. With many relics and heritages of Kabir, it has been attracting Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers and exerting a strong impact on them.

Sadguru Kabir Baag Ashram, Lahartara

Sadguru Kabir Baag *Ashram* is located at Lahartara in Varanasi, which is known as the place of Kabir's birth or appearance. It is the most prominent branch of Kharsiya *Acharya Gaddi* (Shri Kabir Dharma Sthan, Kharsiya) which is the headquarters of Dharmadasi *Naadvansha* sect. This *Acharya Gaddi* was founded in 1933 at Kharsiya, Raigarh in Chhattisgarh because of a split from Damakheda, the headquarters (*Acharya Gaddi*) of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. I would like to first shed light on the historical background of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth and Kharsiya *Gaddi* before describing the history and traditions of Sadguru Kabir Baag *Ashram*, Lahartara.



Figure 4: Sadguru Kabir Baag *Ashram*, Lahartara (Dharmadasi Naadvansha Kabir *Math*)

The Dharmadasi Kabirpanth was founded by Dharmadas (also called Dhani Dharmadas). Dharmadas is said to be one of the main disciples of Kabir⁹⁵. His earlier name

⁹⁵ However, scholars do not consider Dharmadas a contemporary of Kabir. Dharmadas lived about a century or so later than Kabir. The followers of Kabir Chaura *Math* claim that he lived about two centuries later than Kabir.

was Judavan Sahoo. He was a wealthy merchant⁹⁶ (belonged to the Kasaundhan Bania caste) of Bandhavgarh (Bandogarh)⁹⁷ which is presently located in Umaria, Madhya Pradesh. Dharmadas was originally a devout worshipper of Lord Vishnu and used to spend most of his time worshipping and visiting different places of pilgrimages in search of salvation.

It is said that Dharmadas first met Kabir in Varanasi⁹⁸ where Kabir scolded him for his strong passion for idolatry and pilgrimages. He met Kabir subsequently at Mathura⁹⁹ when he was again on a pilgrimage. He took a holy dip into the Yamuna and set about preparing his meal. When he looked at the fire, he saw that an army of ants was desperately trying to escape from a burning log. He was filled with compassion and vowed not to eat. He felt that he had committed a sin. He first thought of throwing the meal away, but later decided to give it to a poor person or a *sadhu*. He found an old saint sitting under the shade of a tree¹⁰⁰ at some distance. It was none other than Kabir in disguise. He went to the saint and offered the food. Kabir said to him: "Listen, merchant Dharmadas! When you were cooking this food, millions of ants were killed. Do you want to burden me with all this sin?" As Kabir spoke, all the rice grains on the plate turned into ants and began to crawl back to the ground. Hearing the words of Kabir and seeing the ants crawling, he was shocked and wondered how Kabir came to know about it. He must be a person with great spiritual powers. He fell at the feet of Kabir and apologised to him. He pleaded with him to reveal his identity. Kabir did so

⁹⁶ The followers of Dharmadas say that he was the King of Bandhavgarh.

⁹⁷ A fort in the name of Kabir is built here.

⁹⁸ Westcott mentions, "Dharma Dass, the founder of this section, is said to have first met Kabir at Benares and to have been rebuked by him for worshipping idols. He met him subsequently at Brindaban, but failing to recognise him said, 'Your words resemble those addressed to me by a Sadhu whom I once met at Benaras'" (p. 61)

⁹⁹ K. Dwivedi (1965) has argued that Dharmadas was initiated by a vision of Kabir over one hundred years after Kabir's death.

¹⁰⁰ According to the legend discussed by Lorenzen, Dharmadas took the food into a plate and "went out to find a suitable donee. Just then, Kabir arrived in Mathura. Dharma-das offered the food to Kabir" (p. 59)

and enlightened him with his teachings¹⁰¹. Dharmadas experienced an immediate change in himself and exclaimed with happiness:

*Pichhe pichhe jaiya lok ved ke saath
Aage se guru mile deepak dinho haath
(I ran after the Vedas as other people did;
I met the Guru who enlightened me with the lamp of knowledge.)*

Dharmadas again pleaded with Kabir to visit Bandhavgarh¹⁰². When Kabir accepted his invitation, Dharmadas returned to Bandhavgarh. After a few days, he organized a huge feast. Invitations were sent out in all directions. Kabir also arrived, but in disguise. After the feast was over, Kabir made himself known to Dharmadas. His wife Ameen also became Kabir's devout disciple, but their son Narayan Das refused to become his disciple. Then, Kabir blessed them that they would have another son who would be one with the *paramatanam* (God)¹⁰³ and would become an *Acharya* of the Kabirpanth. Kabir also prophesied that 42 generations¹⁰⁴ of Dharmadas would sit on the *Gaddi* of Kabirpanth as *Mahants*.

¹⁰¹ However, Westcott describes another version of Dharmadas's meeting with Kabir at Mathura: "He met him subsequently at Brindaban, but failing to recognise him said, 'Your words resemble those addressed to me by a Sadhu whom I once met at Benares. On this occasion Kabir adopted stronger measures and threw into the river the idol which Dharm Dass was worshipping'" (p. 61).

¹⁰² Keay mentions a different version of the legend that "Kabir appeared to Dharm Das in Bandhogarh after passing away at Maghar, and instructed him to initiate Kabirpanth" (p. 98).

¹⁰³ Lorenzen describes this legend on the basis of Dharmadasi books: "Dharmadas was told to give Amini Devi a pan leaf with the name of the *paramatnam* written on it. He did so. From this act eventually, a son was born called 'Churamani', who later became the Mahant Muktamani Nam Saheb" (p. 60). Giving a *pan* (betel leaf) with this name written on it by the *Mahant* or *Guru* is called *Pan Parvana* (a passport or certificate as a proof of joining the panth)

¹⁰⁴ Dharmadasi Kabirpanthi is also called *Vansha Bayalish/Grihastha Parampara* of Kabirpanth/*Vanshvali* Kabirpanth. Its *Mahant* is a householder saint. It is said that each *Mahant* will sit on the *Gaddi* (seat) for 25 years and then will appoint his son as the next *Mahant* of the *Gaddi*. According to the sequence, new *Mahant* will adopt one of the following names since the names of the forty-two descendants of Dharmadas who will hold the office of the *Mahant* for this tradition have already been declared. Niranjana Mahavar (2007, p. 443) gives the list of their names:

Churamaninam, Sudarshannam, Kulpatnam, Pramod Guru, Kamalnam, Amolnam, Suratsanehinam, Haknam, Paknam, Prakatnam, Dheerajnam, Ugranam, Dyanam, Grindhmuninam, Prakashnam, Uditnam, Mukundmuni, Ardhnam, Udenam, Gyannam, Hansmuninam, Sakulnam, Ugranam, Rasnam, Gangmuni, Parasnam, Jagritnam, Bhriuguni, Akahnam, Kanthamuni, Santoshmuni, Charitriknam, Dadhinam, Nehnam, Aadinam, Mahanam, Nijnam, Sahebnam, Udhonam, Karunamayanam, Deerganam, Mahamahimnam.

Kharsiya *Gaddi* also adopts the same naming tradition for its *Mahants*. However, the original names of its *Mahants* are different before becoming a *Mahant*.

When Kabir was to depart from Bandhavgarh, Dharmadas prayed to Kabir to tell him the way through which they could remember and worship him. Kabir suggested him a ritual called "*Chauka Arti*". He further asked him to lay the foundation of Kabirpanth and spread his teachings among masses.

Dharmadas laid the foundation of Kabirpanth at Bandhavgarh and donated his property worth 56 million rupees for the propagation of Kabir's teachings. Kabir named him Dhani Dharmadas. In the meanwhile, his younger son Churamani was also born. When he grew up, Kabir asked Dharmadas to make him the *Mahant* of the Bandhavgarh *Math*. Dharmadas did so¹⁰⁵. However, after the death of Dharmadas, a controversy regarding the succession of the *Gaddi* arose between Churamani and Narayan Das. Being the elder son, Narayan Das claimed the *Gaddi* of Bandhavgarh for himself. In order to avoid any further conflict with his brother, Churamani went to Kudaramal/Kudurmal in Chhattisgarh and established another *Acharya Gaddi* there, which was called the main *Acharya Gaddi* of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. However, this *Acharya Gaddi* was also shifted to many places before finally moving to Damakheda, Raipur in Chhattisgarh. Purendu Ranjan highlights the reasons of subsequent shifts of the Dharmadasi *Acharya Gaddi*:

The initial split surfaced in this branch on the question of succession at the *gaddi* of Bandhogarh math. Two sons of Dharmadas — Narayan Das and Churamani Das — had conflicting interests. Churamani Das, the youngest son of Dharmadas finding himself in the weak position in the contest for *gaddi*, set up a separate math at Koogharmal (Kudaramal) in the latter part of the seventeenth century. Narayan Das, the eldest son, remained the Mahant of

¹⁰⁵ Lorenzen describes it:

From time to time Kabir returned to him. On one visit, Kabir told Dharmadas to give the leadership (Acharya-pad) of the Kabir Panth to Churamani. Dharmadas did so and then went with Kabir to Jagnath Puri in Orissa. There Dharmadas died. Churamani, who was at Kudaramal (Bilaspur District, MP.), came to perform his father's last rites and then returned to Kudaramal where, according to the Dharmadasis, he established the first seat (gaddi) of the Kabir Panth. The Dharmadasi claim that all the other branches of the Kabir Panth are offshoots of the Kudaramal gaddi. Dharmadas's elder son Narayan Das is said to have stayed at Bandhogarh. He claimed the gaddi of the Kabir Panth for himself, but few accepted his claim. The Kudarmal monastery still survives, but the chief gaddi of the Dharmadas branch later moved several times before dividing into the current rival centres at Damakheda and Kharsiya. (pp. 58-61)

Bandhogarh math. Following this division, the Dharmadasi branch split into two competitive groups. Till late nineteenth century, the seats of both the headquarters moved from one place to another. In 1880s¹⁰⁶, the headquarters of Churamani group shifted to Damakheda where it continues since then. The headquarters of the Narayan Dasi branch ultimately settled at Uchehara which is presently considered the headquarters of his group. It is said that the adoption of hereditary (*Vansh*) succession of the Mahants at these maths in the Dharmadasi branch had been the root cause of these repeated splits. Moreover, this branch had accumulated huge resources; consequently, the prospect of material advantages associated with the seat of Mahant led to the growth of internal schism among the contending successors. The absence of natural heirs at times, also added to disputed successions resulting in repeated splits in the branch. (p. 46)

The *Acharya Gaddi* at Damakheda was established by Ugranam Saheb, the 12th *Mahant* of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. Ugranam Saheb was the son of the second wife of Prakatnam, the 10th *Mahant* of the sect with its headquarters at Kawardha, Chhattisgarh. However, he already had a son Dheerajnam from the first wife. This again caused a controversy in the sect. K. Dwivedi has shed light on this controversy:

Prakatnam had two wives: one legal wife and one illegitimate wife. Dheerajnam was born of the former wife and Ugranam of the latter wife. From the point of view of scholarship, discernment and prudence, the personality of Ugranam was far superior to that of Dheerajnam. After the death of Prakatnam, a controversy arose between Ugranam and Dheerajnam for the succession of the *Gaddi*. It was finally decided by the Mumbai High court that Dheerajnam was the real successor of the *Acharya Gaddi* on account of his being born of the legal wife. All the properties of Koogharmal and Kawardha were taken into the possession of Dheerajnam. Although the decision was not finalized in favour of Ugranam, he won the support of more Kabirpanthis. Ugranam left Kawardha¹⁰⁷ and in 1894, Dheerajnam Saheb¹⁰⁸ became the *Mahant* of the *Math*. Three years later, in 1897, Dheerajnam died and at the same time, Ugranam was declared the *Mahant* of the *Gaddi*. (p. 176)

Since Ugranam had already settled at Damakheda, he shifted the *Acharya Gaddi* to this place. After his death, Ugranam was succeeded by his son Dayanam Saheb as the 13th *Mahant* of the sect at Damakheda. Dayanam Saheb had three wives but he had no child¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁶ However, Kedarnath Dwivedi suggests that it was shifted to Damakheda about in 1894.

¹⁰⁷ He moved to Damakheda.

¹⁰⁸ Dheerajnam Saheb was the 11th *Mahant* of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth.

¹⁰⁹ The saints of the Kharsiya Kabir *Math* claim that Kabir had also prophesied that the *Vanshavali* tradition would be broken after the twelfth generation and will be succeeded by the *Naad* tradition. They consider their

Dayanam Saheb passed away in 1927. Since there was no successor to sit on the *Gaddi*, it again caused an upheaval in Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. K. Dwivedi writes:

The death of Dayanam Saheb stimulated an upheaval in this branch again. Dayanam had three wives, but no child was born of anyone. The seat of the *Mahant* became empty. For the management of the panth, a huge meeting of the Kabirpanthis was organized at Kudarmal in 1928. In the meeting, Vichardas suggested that the *Vansha* tradition should be converted into the *Naad* tradition by selecting an eligible *Naad Putra* (an unmarried *Mahant/saint*) as the successor of the *Gaddi*. Some Kabirpanthis did not accept this proposal. *Mahant* Anurag Das of Sevali viewed that until one was not chosen as the successor for the *Gaddi*, an eligible Kabirpanthi (*Mahant*) should be appointed as a *divan* (caretaker). Many voices of protest arose. In this difficult situation, a committee consisting of 24 members chosen by all Kabirpanthis present in the meeting was formed for a systematic management of the panth. Just one of them was also to be chosen as the *Adhikari* (Manager). Gusayi Arjun Das from Damakheda, *Mahant* Pancham Das from Mau, *Mahant* Kashi Das from Rosera etc. submitted their claims for this post. *Mahant* Pancham Das won the support of more persons present there, but he happily conferred his post on Kashi Das. In 1929, it was Kashi Das who was declared as the *Adhikari* (successor) of the *Gaddi*. It should be kept in mind that Kashi Das was not appointed as the *Acharya* of the *Gaddi*, but he was chosen just as an *Adhikari* to take care of the management of the *Math*. Therefore, the name of Kashi Das has not been included in the list of the *Acharyas* of the *Math*.

After this issue was resolved, another contention arose. 'Kabir Council' still needed to be formed. Ultimately, a Kabir Council was formed. 21 *Mahants* were made the members of the Head Committee and 60 members were made the members of the Management Committee. After the formation of the Kabir Council, a secret meeting of the Kabirpanthis was organized subsequently at Champa. In the meeting, it was proposed that the 'Kabir Council' be dissolved and a deserving person be chosen as the *Mahant* of the *Vansha Gaddi*, and be given full authority. Many Kabirpanthis strongly opposed this proposal. As a result, the *Naadvansha* was established at Kharsiya. Bajirao Kamte of Gwalior, Shastri Vichar Das, Swami Yugalanand Bihari and Shri Moti Das from Vadodara played a significant role in the whole affair.

While the *Naad* tradition was established at Kharsiya and, the wives of Dayanam Saheb in the meanwhile adopted the son of one Nanhe Saheb born in the lineage of Dharmadas and declared him as the *Acharya* with the name of Grindhmuninam Saheb in 1938. The mothers *Sahibas* took care of the *Math* on behalf of Grinthmuninan Saheb until he became adult in 1953. Grindhmuninam then took the charge of the *Math*. It is noticeable that the *Panja* (a certificate of being the *Mahant*) had been continuing in the name of Grindhmaninam Saheb since 1929. Since he was young, the mothers continued managing the *Math* on his behalf till 1953.

Naad tradition a continuation of Kabir's prophesy that 42 generations of Dharmadas will sit on the *Gaddi* of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth.

Thus, the property of Chhattisgarh branch was divided into two parts. The later branches have been associated with the *Naad Vansha* of Kharsiya or *Vachan Vansha* and some are still attached to Damakheda. However, during the transitional phase of the Kabirpanth, it is difficult to make out which branches are affiliated with Kharsiya Branch and which with the *Vansha Gaddi* of Damakheda. (pp. 177-78)

Thus, the *Naad* tradition of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth started in 1933 with its first *Mahant* Kashi Das who was the seventh *Mahant* of Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*, Rosera (Samastipur, in Bihar). Unlike the *Mahants* of the Dharmadasi *Vansha Gaddi* (*Bind* tradition), the *Mahants* of the Kharsiya *Naadvansha Gaddi* (*Naad* tradition) are ascetics. There have been five *Mahants* of Kharsiya *Acharya Gaddi* since its inception:

1. Kashi Das (Grinthmaninam Saheb): 1933 (1933-1945)
2. Vichar Das Shastri (Prakashmaninam Saheb) (1945-1962)
3. Pandit Narayan Das Shastri (Uditnam Saheb) (1967-1998)
4. Pandit Manohar Das Shastri (Mukundamaninam Saheb) (1998-2007)
5. Vijay Das Shastri (Ardhnam Saheb) (2007-present)
6. Sudharkar Das (Udenaam) — The future Mahant (*Dharmadhikari*)

Today more than 2000 thousands *Maths* are associated with the Kharsiya *Acharya Gaddi*. It has many branches in about 36 foreign counties as well. Among all its branches, Sadguru Kabir Baag *Ashram*, Lahartara, Varanasi is the most prominent one because of its location at Lahartara, the birthplace of Kabir. This branch is also headed by the present *Acharya* of the Kharsiya *Gaddi*. In other words, the *Acharya* of the Kharsiya *Gaddi* is also the *Mahant* of Sadguru Kabir Baag *Ashram*, Lahartara.

History of Sadguru Kabir Baag Ashram, Lahartara

Sadguru Kabir Baag *Ashram*, Lahartara was founded in 1967 by Uditnam Saheb, the third *Acharya* of the Kharsiya *Gaddi*. Before it was developed into the main branch of the Kharsiya, here there used to be another Kabir *Math* headed by Kanhaiya Das who was associated with Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*, Rosera in Samastipur (Bihar). The first three

Acharyas of the *Kharsiya Gaddi* pleaded with Kanhaiya Das to hand the *Math* over to them, but he refused.

In 1948, Uditnam Saheb visited the Lahartara pond which is commonly believed to be the birthplace of Kabir. It is said that Kabir appeared on a lotus flower in the pond. Finding the pond in a miserable condition, he decided to establish a temple of Kabir at the pond. He pleaded with Kanhaiya Das to hand the *Math* over to him, but was refused. A few years later, Kanhaiya Das passed away and his disciple Ganesh Das became the next *Mahant*¹¹⁰. At the constant pleading of Uditnam Saheb, Ganesh Das handed the *Math* over to him.

Uditnam Saheb raised money through donation for developing the Kabir *Math* and founding a temple of Kabir at Lahartara. He bought a piece of land near the pond and built a temple there in 1967.



Figure 5: Lahartara Dharmadasi (Naadvansha) Kabir Temple and Pond

With the establishment of the temple of Kabir at the Lahartara pond, it has come to be perceived as the holiest centre of Kabir¹¹¹ by the Kabir's followers. The temple has a statue

¹¹⁰ The *Samadhis* of both Kanhaiya Das and Ganesh Das are built in the *Math*.

¹¹¹ Beside the temple, a small area of the pond has also been surrounded and preserved by the *Math* as a sign of Kabir's appearance in the tank.

of Kabir on a lotus flower, symbolizing the fact that Kabir was not an ordinary human being born of the womb of a woman.

Tradition of Kabir's Birth at the *Math* and Temple

The Following two verses regarding Kabir's divine birth and form are always popularized at the *Math* and temple. The first verse is said to have been composed by Garib Das who was a *Nirguna* saint and followed Kabir. In this verse, Garib Das claims that Kabir was not born of a woman's womb and perceives him as a divine light to have descended from the sky into the water:

Gagan mandal se utare, sadguru purush Kabir
Jalaj mahi paudan kiye, sab piran ke pir
(*Sadguru Kabir descended from the sky;*
The pir of all pirs appeared in the middle of the water.)

The second verse has been composed by a Kabirpanthi follower, probably of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. This verse also represents Kabir as God:

Pani se paida nahi, swansa nahi sharir
Anna ahaar karta nahi, taka naam kabir
(*He is not born of sperm, he does not breathe and nor does he have a human body.*
He does not take food, his name is Kabir.)

In fact, Damakheda based-Dharmadasi Kabir has played a lead role in establishing Kabir as God who is far superior to all Hindu gods e.g. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. By establishing Kabir as God, Dharmadasi Kabirpanth liberates Kabir from having been born of a virgin or widow Brahmin woman¹¹². On the other hand, it also rejects any Muslim parental association with Kabir. Kabir's association with a Brahmin woman or Muslim *Julaha* parents degrades the image of Kabir. They refuse this association by demonstrating Kabir as God¹¹³.

¹¹² Outside the Kabirpanthi circle, it is popular that Kabir was born of a widow or virgin Brahmin. It is said that she threw Kabir at the pond due to the fear of public shame.

¹¹³ Dharmadasi Kabirpanth has produced a myth of Kabir's appearance in all the four Hindu eras: *Satyayuga*, *Tretayuga*, *Dwaparyuga* and *Kaliyuga*. It claims that Kabir incarnated as Sukrit in *Satyayuga*, Munindra in

Tretayuga, Karunamaya in *Dwaparyuga* and Kabir in *Kaliyuga*. Purodu Ranjan sheds light on the myth of Kabir's incarnation in the *Kaliyuga*, which represents Neeru and Neema as the disciples of Kabir in their previous birth and suggests that Kabir gave them *darshan* as a baby in the pond in order to bless them so that they might be taken to heaven after death:

Kabirpanthi myths also describe Kabir's incarnations in the Kaliyug. It was this epoch during which he narrated the stories of his incarnations in all eras to Dharmadas, one of his closest disciples. According to these myths, in Kaliyug, Kabir had to take human form to liberate the larger number of *jivas* from Niranjana's clutches. But the immediate reason for his reincarnation during Kaliyug was the persistent request of Supach Sudarshan, that his parents, who could not attain liberation due to their ignorance, be liberated by Kabir. Kabir thus was reborn on earth. Supach parents could recognize the unmanifest Kabir. Hence, Kabir ultimately had to take human form.

Supach Sudharshan's parents in his previous birth, Lakshmi and Suhata, were reborn in Kaliyug in a Brahmin family as Kalupati and Maheshwari. Initially, they had no issue. So, Maheshwari became a worshipper of *Surya Devta* (sun god). One day Kabir took the form of a new born baby and appeared on the *anchal* (the lower part of the *sari*) which she had spread while worshipping the sun-god. Maheshwari could not make out what had happened, but brought the baby back home.

Kalupati scolded Maheshwari for bringing a strange infant home. At this point, Kabir assumed his original form and attempted to tell them about the true path of salvation, but to no avail.

After they died, Kalupati and Maheshwari were reborn as Chandan Sahu and Uda. Supach Sudarshan again requested Kabir to liberate his parents from the cycle of birth. This time, Kabir took the form of a baby on a lotus flower in the pond by which Uda used to pass frequently. Uda heard the baby's cry and picked him up. Seeing a baby in his wife's lap, Chandan Sahu was worried about *lok-laj* (people's perception). In spite of Uda's intense desire to keep the baby, she returned him to the pond. So, for the second time, they missed an opportunity to be liberated by Kabir.

Supach Sudarshan's parents had to be reborn again as Neeru and Nima in a weaver's family at Kashi. This time, Nima was a devout practitioner of *Barsait Vrat* which still occurs in the month of *Jyeshtha*. To observe this *vrata*, she went into a pond named Lahartara where Kabir appeared again as a baby on the leaf of *Purain* (lotus). Nima picked up the baby and took her home.

Neeru, her husband, again objected to her keeping the child, but could not compel her to give the baby away immediately. Kabir stayed with them for a while, but was unable to convince them of who he was. Kabir finally decided to reveal himself to the couple, who became his disciples. (pp. 141-43)

Ranjan argues that the aim of the myth of Kabir's incarnation is twofold: to give a super-human character to Kabir and to show Kabirpanth's opposition to Hindu gods — Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh:

The distinctive characteristic of the Kabirpanthi myth has been the attribution of a super-human character to Kabir, and the opposition to the trinity of Hindu gods: Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. In this exercise, on the one hand, Kabirpanthis elevated the role of Satyapurusha, the original form of Kabir, on the other hand, subverted the role and position of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh as given in the Puranic mythology. (p. 253).

In her essay "The Avatar Doctrine in the Kabirpanth" Uma Thukral also writes: "In order to make Kabir a more perfect incarnation, his birth is given a supernatural character. Like the Puranic deities, Kabir's birth is said to have not been from a woman's womb. He is said to have descended onto a lotus flower in the form of a ball of divine light." (p. 225). Shedding light on the aim of *Avatar* theory, Uma Thukral further says:

In fact, the Chhattisgarh branch is an old branch of the Kabirpanth. At the time of its founding, it was seeking a way to spread the Kabirpanth. In the South, for various reasons such as the presence of other sects and the big difference in language, the Kabir Panth had no possibility of establishing a foothold. In the north-central parts of India, a large part of the population was influenced by Vaisnava Dharma. In conformity with Vaisnava dharma were the Kabir Panth's doctrines of truth and nonviolence and its puritanism. Hence, there was a strong inherent possibility of the Kabir Panth's being accepted among the Vaisnava sects. Nonetheless, the proselytization of the Kabir Panth was difficult in the absence of a rich and attractive literature such as that of *saguni* Vaisnavas. Hence, the Kabir Panthi authors, for the sake of attracting converts, appropriated the avatar doctrine of the Puranas, which has proved itself to be so very popular, and created stories with the sort of events and roles associated

Literature Associated with the Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir Math

Damakheda based-Dharmadasi Kabirpanth has produced a large number of books and texts on Kabir, Kabirpanth and its rituals and principles. Many books deal with Kabir as God, and along with Kabir, they give a central position to Dharmadas. Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir Math also popularizes those books. Besides, it has also produced some original books and has reprinted some books of the Damakheda Dharmadasi Kabirpanth with the name of Lahartara Dharmadasi Naadvansha Kabirpanth. During the course of my fieldwork, I found the following books at this Math: *Poonomahatmaya*, *Chauka-chandrika*, *Guru Mahima*, *Mool Bijak*, *Bhajan Muktavali*, *Sanskrit Sahitya Mein Gurutatva*, *Kabir Shabda Ki Vyakhya*, *Kabir Saheb Ka Siddhant*, *Bandagi Vichar*, *Bijak (Tika)*, *Sandhyapath (Tika)*, *Mukti-yatra*, *Sadguru Kabir Saheb aur Unka Siddhant*, *Uditmadhi Muktavali: Bhajan Sangrah*, *Kabir Vani: Amrit Sandesh*, *Sandhya Path/Book of Prayer*, *Sadguru Kabir Saheb Ki Bavan Kasani*, *Kabir Vani Satya Gyanamrit*, *Shri Sadguru Kabir Mahamahima*, *Ankshar Saarshabd Sadhana Paddhati*, *1008 Kabir Vani: Nectar of Truth and Knowledge*, *Anurag Sagar*, *Kabir Mansur* and *Mool Bijak*.

Among these books, the one that occupies the highest place is the *Anurag Sagar*. It is one of the many 'Sagar' books. It has been composed in verse form and consists of the main teachings of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. It is in a dialogue form between Kabir and Dharmadas. It deals with how Kabir took incarnations in all the four Hindu eras in order to

with that doctrine. In these stories, the excellence of Kabir, the Satyapurus and Satyalok was contrasted with the Puranic gods and goddesses, avatars, and cosmology. Whether or not this was successful in exalting Kabir's personality, there is no doubt that by means of these fictions a separate personality was created for the Kabir Panth, and the Kabir Panth was able to find a place in the heart of the common people. It is certain that the Chhattisgarh branch of the Kabir Panth created a widespread organization of its followers and tried to establish Kabir as a supernatural being, but intellectuals never accepted this superhuman form of Kabir. (p. 226)

This myth has really strengthened the hold of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth (based on Damakheda and Kharsiya) among the ordinary masses because they perceive these legends and myths as real stories of Kabir.

bless men and women. This book centralizes the *Chauka Arti* as a way to worship Kabir who takes his followers to heaven after death. Since the followers of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth perceives this book as the main principles of Kabir and also as the one which highlights Dharmadas, the founder of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth, and his *bhakti* to Kabir, they give it priority. However, finding the significance of Kabir *Bijak* as the main *grantha* of Kabir in the other Kabirpanthi sects, it does not reject it completely. The presence of the *Mool Bijak*¹¹⁴ at the Lahartara Kabir *Math* testifies to this fact.

Another important book is *Kabir Mansur*. It was originally written in Urdu and was translated in Hindi by Swami Permanand. It is treated as the *Veda* of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. It has been written on the basis of all other Kabirpanthi books. In other words, it presents a summary of all Kabirpanthi books. It deals with origin of the universe. Dharmadasi rituals, myths, legends all have been discussed. Kabir has been portrayed as God who has incarnated in all four Hindu eras. It subverts the Puranic theory of incarnation of God and also undermines the position of the Holy Trinity e.g. Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. It is also to be noted that this book mentions many women as disciples of Kabir and gives Kabir a woman friendly image.

Main Ceremonies Organized by the *Math*

Ceremonies and rituals organized at Kabir *Maths* are one of the main ways of popularizing the centres, their principles and teachings based on Kabir among masses. These ceremonies and rituals act as a medium to link people with the centres. In fact, these are the ceremonies of the masses as they assemble in order to celebrate them. These masses also reflect the strength of the *Maths* and the power of Kabir's influence on them.

¹¹⁴ The Dharmadasi *Bijak* first came in 1868 in its print version.

The ceremonies and rituals at Lahartara Kabir *Math* become more prominent for the followers of all the Kabirpanthi sects on account of the fact that it is located at the birthplace of Kabir. Like Kabir Chaura *Math*, this centre also performs the following ceremonies and rituals: Daily rituals and annual ceremonies. However, there are a lot of differences between their ways, approaches and the contents which they spread and popularize during these occasions.

Daily Rituals and Ceremonies

As daily rituals, this *Math* also performs Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti*. It has own booklets of the Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti*. Both the rituals begin with the collective recitation of these booklets by the saints and *sadhus* present at the *Math*. The morning recitation is accompanied by the worship of the Kabir and previous *Mahants* and is followed by offering *Saheb Bandagi* to Kabir, present *Mahant* and one another.

The collective recitation of the *Sandhya Arti* booklet is followed by offering *Arti* to the *Mahant* with an *Arti* tribute song. This *Math* often organizes *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes on *Sandhya Arti*, which distinguishes it from Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* where *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes are rarely organized on *Sandhya Arti*.

Annual Rituals and Ceremonies

Kabir Jayanti and the death anniversary of Uditnam Saheb are two main annual ceremonies associated with this Kabir *Math*. However, the celebration of the Kabir Jayanti is more prominent. Around 10-15 thousand Kabirpanthis assemble here to celebrate Kabir Jayanti. It is becoming a major centre of the Kabirpanthis, especially of the Dharmadasi and other sects of the Kabirpanth apart from Kabir Chaura sect.

Kabir Jayanti

Being the birthplace of Kabir, the celebration of Kabir Jayanti at the Lahartara *Math* becomes more important. Generally, here Kabir Jayanti is celebrated for three days. Kabirpanthis start gathering at Lahartara *Math* four or five days before the Kabir Jayanti. The followers of different Kabirpanthi sects and their affiliates from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana, Panjab, Rajasthan, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and other states of India gather here. Majority of the Kabirpanthis come from Bihar.



Figure 6: Celebration of Kabir Jayanti at Dharmadasi Kabir *Math* and Temple

Description of the Celebration

The rituals and ceremonies begin two days before the day of the Kabir Jayanti. On the first day, in the morning around at 9 am, a flag of *Satnam* (representing Kabir's truth) is hoisted at Kabir's temple by the *Mahant* in order to inaugurate Kabir Jayanti. After the flag

hoisting, the *Mahant* worships and offers *Arti* to Kabir and *Samadhis* of other previous *Mahants*. It is followed by *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes. The popular singers of the *Math* and the singers from other places sing *bhajans* and Ardhnam Swami and *Dharmadhikari* (the future *Mahant*) give *satsangs* and *pravachans* (religious discourses). After this programme, *Guru Arti* is offered to the *Mahant* and future *Mahant*. In the evening of the same day, again, a *satsang* and *pravachan programme* is organized. Many singers, especially men singers perform on this occasion. At the end of the programme, *Sandhya Arti*¹¹⁵ associated with this *Math* is performed.

On the second day, the programmes of *satsangs* and *bhajans* are again organized. Many Kabirpanthi followers from different places also sing Kabir with extreme passions wherever they stay on the campus of the temple.

The third day is the main day of the Kabir Jayanti. There is a huge crowd from the *Math* to the temple. In the morning, a *shobha yatra* (procession) is taken out. Most of the Kabirpanthis participate in this grand procession and show their reverence to Kabir and the *Mahant*. Many of them dance and perform many other activities such as swordplay and demonstration of *lathis* during the *shobha yatra* in order to express their deep reverence to Kabir. The *Mahant* sits in a chariot decked with flowers. Before the beginning of the *shobha yatra*, Ardhnam Saheb/Swami, the *Mahant* of the *Math*, visits the *Samadhis* of all pervious *Mahants* and offers *Arti* to them. The *shobha yatra* not only shows the power and strength of Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir *Math* but it also reflects that it has become a common centre for most of the Kabirpanthi sects.

At the end of this grand procession, the *satsang* and *bhajan* programme is organized and it continues till the evening. Hundreds of *Mahants* from Dharmadasi and other

¹¹⁵ Each Kabirpanthi sect has its own versions of Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti*.

Kabirpanthi sects gather here. This occasion reflects a powerful association of Kabirpanth. The celebration of Kabir Jayanti unites most of the Kabirpanthi sects with this *Math* as their followers perceive it as the place of Kabir's birth and as their own. At this centre, Kabir dissolves all differences among them as all of them look at it as the 'Mother centre' of Kabir.

After the end of this programme, *Chauka Arti* (the principal ritual of Dharmadasi tradition) is organized. Many singers perform Kabir *bhajans* and other types of *bhajans*. Most of the *bhajans* are dedicated to *Guru*. In 2017, I recorded the performance of Triveni Sahu, a woman Kabir singer, from Chhattisgarh who performed Kabir in the *pandavani* style. This programme continues late in the night along with *Chauka Arti*.

At about 8 pm, the performance of *Chauka Arti* starts. This atmosphere looks like Diwali. There is a long queue of the followers for offering coconuts and betel to the *Mahants*. This ritual is called *Pan Parvana*. Two or three saints of the *Math* encourage the lay Kabirpanthis to offer coconut for their welfare and spiritual benefits. The *Chauka* ritual¹¹⁶ grants an authoritative position to the *Math* among the followers of most of the Kabirpanthi sects as they participate in this ritual and accept it as a medium to worship Kabir.

¹¹⁶ Hess (2015) rightly says: "Like all organized religions, the Kabirpanth has found ritual indispensable in maintaining itself institutionally. Ritual creates solidarity, distinction, authority. It provides symbols and concepts that are easy to understand, even if there are also claims of deeper meanings. It gives people something to do" (p. 342).



Figure 7: Performance of *Chauka Arti* at Kabir temple on the occasion of Kabir Jayanti 2017

My Observation

Lahartara Dharmadasi Naadvansha Kabir *Math* has come up as a very strong and organized Kabir *Math*. It is emerging as the most prominent centre for the followers of all the sects of the Kabirpanth. Both the temple of Kabir and the pond strengthen it and attract more Kabirpanthis to this *Math*. They give more importance to it as being the birthplace of Kabir. This *Math* unites all the Kabirpanthi sects apart from the Kabir Chaura sect¹¹⁷.

The *Chauka Arti* of Lahartara Dharmadasi *Math* becomes more significant as it is held at the birthplace of Kabir. All participate in the *Chauka* ritual as a sign of devotion to Kabir and the present *Mahant* of this *Math*. Kabirpanthis worship the present *Mahant* as God.

¹¹⁷ There is a competitive relationship between Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir *Math* and Kabir Chaura *Math*. Since Vivekdas rejects all types of rituals in Kabirpanth and declare them against the principles of Kabir, the *Mahants* and saints of the Dharmadasi tradition perceive him as their opponent.

However, I find that lay Kabirpanthis do not fall into the politics of both the *Maths*. In spite of their mutual controversies between Dharmadasi and Kabir Chaura traditions, lay people visit both the places. Since both are the prominent places associated with Kabir, lay Kabirpanthis from different sects also want to see and know about Kabir from both the places. They become familiar with Dharmadasi and Kabir Chaura traditions of beliefs and rituals and the ways of celebrating Kabir Jayanti at both the places.

They feel that whatever rituals and principals the *Mahant* tells them in *pravachans* will do their welfare. It also attracts many non-Kabirpanthis to become Kabirpanthis.

The *Chauka* ritual also becomes a source of income for this *Math* as people offer money to the *Mahant* in order to express their devotion to him.

To sum up, Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir *Math* along with its Temple and Pond situated at the birthplace of Kabir is now recognized as one of the most prominent places associated with Kabir. Both the temple of Kabir and pond strengthen it and attract more Kabirpanthis. Most Kabirpanthis now show more devotion to this place. Here, Kabir is represented only as God.

Maghar Kabir Math

Maghar¹¹⁸ is renowned as the Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* (the place of Kabir's death). It is situated near the Ami river in Sant Kabir Nagar, Uttar Pradesh¹¹⁹. There are two shrines of Kabir here: Kabir *Mazar* and Kabir *Samadhi*. Kabir *Mazar* has always been in the hands of a Muslim weaver family of Maghar while Kabir *Samadhi* has been the part of Maghar Kabir *Math* which is the most prominent branch of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*¹²⁰. Both the shrines adjoin each other and together they make this place a unique Kabir centre which attracts people from not only India but also other countries. In addition to Kabirpanthi followers, a large number of non-Kabirpanthi Hindu and Muslim followers of Kabir visit Kabir's shrines

¹¹⁸ (I) It is said that the previous name of Maghar was Marghar. There used to be dense forests around Maghar. The road to Ayodhya, Kushinagar, Lumbani and some other places of pilgrimages passed through these forests. Here, robbers plundered the belongings of all the passers-by and it was therefore named Marghar. Later, it became popular as Maghar.

(II). Maghar was made a notified area council (*Nagar Panchayat*) in 1992. After Banaras, it is the second most prominent place associated with Kabir.

¹¹⁹ Maghar was earlier in the Basti District, but it is now in the Sant Kabir Nagar District formed in 1997, which is 16 miles away from Gorakhpur.

¹²⁰ Westcott points out the first arrival of the *Acharya* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* at Maghar on the basis of the Basti Gazetteer: "It is stated in the Basti Gazetteer that a Hindu *Mahant* first arrived at Maghar in 1764 AD. According to Kabir Chaura tradition, the first four *Mahants* were buried at Maghar" (p. 57).

at Maghar. It is significant to note that the coexistence of both the shrines develops a syncretic relationship between the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar (this aspect will be studied in detail in the fifth chapter).



Figure 8: Kabir *Mazar* (left side) and Kabir *Samadhi* at Maghar

Kabir in Legends at Maghar

Connected with Maghar, there are about half a dozen legends of Kabir popular among Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers including Muslims. The main legend of Kabir associated with Maghar is that of Kabir's death. The other popular legends are complementary to the main one.

a) Kabir's Departure from Kashi to Maghar

It is said that in his declining years, Kabir had left Kashi (Banaras) and settled at Maghar. The legend¹²¹ goes as follows: Once a hermit arrived at Maghar. He was thirsty and

¹²¹ I also recorded another version of this legend from a few people of Maghar. According to this version, Kabir's death was destined at Maghar. To escape from death, he did not want to come to Maghar. The god of

was searching for water. He came across a few young herdsmen and asked them for water. Those herdsmen were mischievous and instead of giving him water, they filled his pot with dust and pebbles. It annoyed him. He cursed them that they would also suffer from thirst; there would be no water at Maghar.

The curse of the hermit came true. Maghar was attacked by a fierce drought. It did not rain for twelve years. The river, ponds and wells all dried up. One by one, the people of Maghar began to die of hunger and thirst. Nawab Bijali Khan Pathan, the ruler of Maghar, was extremely worried at the plight of Maghar. He met many pandits, Sufi saints and fakirs and pleaded with them to tell a way to end the drought at Maghar. A Sufi saint told him that it was only Kabir who could end the drought at Maghar. Nawab Bijali Khan Pathan at once left for Banaras. He met Kabir and invited him to Maghar to end the drought. Kabir accepted his request and came to Maghar.

However, Kabir's purpose in going to Maghar was twofold. Besides the drought, he had to challenge a long-standing superstition propagated by the Brahmins of Banaras: dying at Banaras took one straight to heaven or salvation while dying at Maghar led one to hell or a rebirth as a donkey. When Kabir's followers came to know of his decision to leave Kashi for Maghar, they earnestly pleaded with him not to leave Kashi:

Maghar mare se gadaha hoye, kashi mare so mukti pave
(One who dies at Maghar is reborn as an ass; one who dies at Kashi gets salvation.)

At this, Kabir uttered the following verse¹²² to enlighten them with the truth:

Kya kashi kya usar maghar, Ram hridaya base mora
Jo kashi tan tajai kabira, to ramai kaun nihora
(There is no difference between Kashi and the barren land of Maghar if Ram dwells in my heart;
If Kabir leaves his body in Banaras, what credit will it be to Ram?)

death took the form of a horse and approached Kabir. Kabir had amputated his hands and legs so that he could not be taken to Maghar, but the horse picked him up on his back and carried him away to Maghar.

¹²² This verse is very popular among the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar.

To prove the Brahmanical superstition false and to end the twelve-year long drought from Maghar, he accompanied Nawab Bijali Khan Pathan to Maghar.

This legend reflects Kabir's unwavering and unflinching faith in God in taking his decision to go to Maghar. By departing from Kashi to Maghar, he challenged the Brahmanical hegemony of Kashi that dying here is a way to heaven. Agrawal also suggests that Kabir removed all differences between Maghar and Kashi. He (2009) writes, "Kabir considered Kashi and Maghar alike" (p. 196). In fact, Kabir provided a respectable status to the people of Maghar, who were mostly poor shudras and Muslims¹²³.

b) Kabir Dhooni Temple and Gorakh Talaiya

Kabirpanthi saints of the Maghar *Math* claim that before entering Maghar, Kabir decided to stay at a place which is now called Kabir Dhooni. It is situated at Kashroul in the Gorakhpur district on the NH (National Highway)-28 (going from Gorakhpur to Lucknow)¹²⁴. Kabir chose the place¹²⁵ to invoke the rain in order to end the drought at

¹²³ (I) Both the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar assert that they are proud of being the citizens of Maghar.
(II) There was no original upper caste population at Maghar. However, about 10-12 families of the Srivastava caste, 7-10 Brahmin families and one family of the Thakur caste have now settled at Maghar.
(III) Vaudeville sheds light on the original people of Maghar and why Maghar was disdained by Brahmins:
Magahar is an ancient site, reputed to have been seat of the Buddhist hierarches for some time after Kapilvastu was destroyed. Many Buddhist antiquities are to be found in the area. According to the local traditions, the first inhabitants of Magahar were a non-Aryan tribe belonging to the Dom race and called Domkatars. Now Magahar has a large Muslim population, the main group being that of Julahas, who in that area are either weavers or cultivators. The Hindus of Kashi therefore held Magahar in contempt; moreover, according to popular belief, whilst those who died in holy Kashi reached salvation through the god Siva's grace, those who died in Magahar were reborn as asses. Magahar's ill repute, especially in Kashi, a stronghold of orthodox Brahmanism, is easily explained, as noted by Mohan Singh, by 'the prominent association of the place with Buddhism, with Doms, low-caste Sudras, and also with Musalmans among whom first came Julahas. In Brahmanical eyes, impure Magahar was the very antithesis of holy Kashi: a place of perdition as against a place of salvation. But it is easy to surmise that the Julahas themselves, who had a stronghold in Magahar, held the opposite opinion. (p. 45)

¹²⁴ However, Khadim Hussain Ansari, the present *Mutvalli* of the Kabir *Mazar*, and his brothers reject the legend of *Kabir Dhooni* and *Gorakh Talaiya* and claim that Bijali Khan Pathan brought Kabir to his home, who stayed in an adjoining cottage built there and ended the drought. Khadim Hussain showed me an old cottage and told that Kabir lived in the cottage and wove clothes. He also showed me a mat (*aasani*), a Muslim cap and a stick. According to him, Kabir used to sit on the same mat; wear the same cap and walk with the help of the stick.

¹²⁵ Here, a Kabir Dhooni Smarak Temple was built in 1958 by Sant Shri Kauleshwar Das '*Pujari*'.

Maghar. According to the legend, when the people of Maghar, Jogis, Naths and saints from other places came to know that Kabir was coming to Maghar, they became very happy. Keshar Das, a saint who lived at Kabir Dhooni organized a huge *bhandara* in order to celebrate the arrival of Kabir. A large number of Jogis, Naths, saints and other common people gathered at this *bhandara*. Gorakhnath/Gorakshnath (the then head of Gorakhnath temple was also called by the name of Gorakhnath)¹²⁶ also reached there. In the meanwhile, Kabir accompanied by Bijali Khan, Ravidas, Gurunanak, Veer Singh Baghel and other disciples and devotees reached there. After the feast was over, all present there prayed to Kabir to end the drought at Maghar. At this, Kabir asked them to first plead with Gorakhnath to produce water since it was the region of Gorakhnath. Gorakhnath took it as a challenge and firmly pressed his right toe into the ground there. Consequently, a stream of water emerged from there, which took the shape of a small tank. It was known as *Gorakh Talaiya*¹²⁷. However, when the people saw the small tank, they said to him that it would not serve their purpose. Gorakhnath replied that this was all that he could do. He could not produce more water. Then, they prayed to Kabir to resolve the calamity. On their behest, Kabir sat in meditation. Soon, it began to rain heavily. All the fields, wells and tanks along with the Ami river were filled with water. The drought of Maghar ended. The people started acclaiming Kabir. However, Kabir's purpose was not yet fulfilled. He had to challenge the Brahmanical prejudice. He decided to stay at a mound in Maghar. A cottage¹²⁸ was made for him on a mound at Maghar by Bijali Khan. Kabir started living there¹²⁹.

¹²⁶ However, it is later invention. It was previously said that Gorakhnath himself had come. There are many legends popular in Kabirpanth, in which Gorakhnath himself was defeated by Kabir, but they were not historically contemporaries of each other.

¹²⁷ It exists no longer. It was levelled for the construction of the NH-8 passing through it while Kabir Dhooni has been preserved. A new pond as '*Gorakh Talaiya*' is now being prepared just behind the Kabir Dhooni temple.

¹²⁸ The saints of the Maghar *Math* claim that the cottage was made at the place where there is presently the Kabir *Samadhi* Temple.

¹²⁹ However, the caretakers of the *Mazar* reject it.

This legend presents Kabir with divine powers, whose devotees and followers were not only saints, sages and common masses but also kings and emperors. It also shows him superior to Gorakhnath. On the basis of the same legend, Kabirpanthis also consider themselves superior to Nathpanthis. I have observed that such legends of Kabir impart Kabirpanthis a kind of moral and psychological strength.

c) Kabir Cave: A Place of Solitude

According to the legend, Kabir lived in the cottage built on the mound and used to give *satsangs* and *pravachans* among his followers visiting him. Soon, there used to be huge gatherings at his cottage to listen to his *satsangs* and *pravachans*. Kabir felt disturbance in his *sadhana* because of regular huge gatherings. He asked Navab Bijali Khan Pathan to build a cave for him so that he could practise *sadhana* with no disturbance. Bijali Khan got a cave¹³⁰ dug up and Kabir started practising his *sadhana* there.

The cave is situated behind the *Samadhi* temple and has been renovated. A small statue of Kabir is placed inside the cave. It is interesting to note that on the platform of this cave, there is also a small temple of Sati Mata (mother or local goddess)¹³¹. Along with Kabir, she is also worshipped by the followers of Kabir.

¹³⁰ However, Khadim Hussain (*Mutvalli* of the *Mazar*) and his brothers reject the Kabirpanthi claim that it is the cave of Kabir. According to them, it is just about 100-150 years old and used to be the dwelling of a Kabirpanthi saint named Ranchhor Das. He used to be the *pujari* of the Kabir *Samadhi* temple. He fell in the company of an ill reputed woman and therefore, the then *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* dismissed him from the position of the *pujari* and turned him out of the *Math*. Ranchhor Das had a piece of land behind Kabir *Samadhi* temple. He made a small cave and began to live there. Kabirpanthis who knew him continued to meet him.

The Archaeological Department of Uttar Pradesh took over Kabir *Mazar* and Kabir *Samadhi* in 1967. It appointed a gardener at Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* in 1968. The gardener had two young sons. When Kabirpanthis and non-Kabirpanthis visited Kabir *Mazar* and Kabir *Samadhi*, they asked them if there was anything else associated with Kabir there. They used to take those followers to Ranchhor cave and tell them that Kabir used to practise his *sadhana* here. This is how the place gained in importance. Kachha Saheb is the present caretaker of the cave.

¹³¹ The *Mahant* (caretaker) of the cave says that she was burnt alive along with the corpse of her husband long before Kabir started practising his *sadhana* here. There were brutal cruelties and injustices against women perpetrated by patriarchy. Widows used to be voluntarily or forcibly immolated alive on the pyres of their husbands. Only after the intervention of Ram Mohan Roy in 1829, this practice was abolished. According to the Kabirpanthi tradition of the cave, Kabir had also opposed this practice.

K. Dwivedi also mentions this cave: “Here, there is a *bhoomidhara* (a pit or hole) in the ground. The people of that place believe that Kabir used to mediate here” (p. 165). This cave has now become famous as Kabir *Gufa* (the Cave of Kabir), a place of Kabir’s *sadhana* and attracts a large number of Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers. According to Khadim Hussain, the importance of the cave has increased more than Kabir’s shrines as Kabirpanthi followers perceive it as the main place of Kabir’s *sadhana*.



Figure 9: Cave of Kabir at Maghar

d) Kabir and Ami River

The popular legend goes as follows: previously, the Ami river¹³² flowed about one kilometre away to the east of Kabir’s cottage. The people of Maghar and Kabir’s disciples had great difficulty in fetching water from there. Some disciples pleaded with Kabir to make the river flow near Maghar. Kabir stood on the bank of the river and asked the river to follow

¹³² The Ami river is the border line between Sant Kabir Nagar and Gorakhpur. To the east of the river, there is Gorakhpur and to the west is Sant Kabir Nagar.

his footsteps. The river began to follow his steps when he walked towards his cottage. The river began to flow by the cottage of Kabir.

According to another version, Kabir had to go to the river to take water for his daily ablutions. One day he took a dry mango twig and drew a winding line¹³³ on the ground with it. The Ami river at once changed the course of her flow and began to flow by the cottage of Kabir. This version is more popular among both the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar. This legend also shows divine powers of Kabir.

e) Kabir's Death

The legend¹³⁴ of Kabir's death is one of the most popular Kabir's legends. It goes as follows: Kabir told his Hindu and Muslim disciples that his death was close at hand. Hearing this, his disciples and followers began to weep and pleaded with him not to leave them alone. Kabir preached that one who is born must die. Therefore, they should not weep. He was going inside his cottage and would recite the name of Ram. If the recitation stopped, they should understand that Kabir had died. Kabir went inside his cottage and began to recite the name of Rama. After a while, the recitation stopped, all present outside the cottage came to know that Kabir had passed away.

However, a controversy regarding the cremation of Kabir's dead body ensued between Kabir's Hindu and Muslim followers. Bijali Khan and other Muslim followers claimed that Kabir's body would be cremated according to the Islamic rites, but Veer Singh Baghel and other Hindu followers insisted on cremating Kabir's body according to the Hindu rites. The situation became so tense that they were to fight each other over the issue of the

¹³³ At Maghar, the shape of the river really surprises us. It first flows from the south to the north direction. Then, making a curve, it flows around 500-1000 meters away to the south. Then again, making a curve and passing by the cottage of Kabir, it flows to the north direction.

¹³⁴ Keay (1931) describes this legend in detail. However, there are a few differences in his version. For example, there is no mention of the prediction in his version.

burial. Just as both the armies were about to attack each other, there was a prediction from the sky:

Kholo parda hain nahī murda
Yuddha mitthya tum kar dali
(Remove the curtain, there is no dead body;
You have brought a war-like situation in vain.)

When they heard the prediction, they opened the door of the cottage. They found a heap of flowers and a blanket in place of the body of Kabir¹³⁵. The Hindus took the flowers; cremated some of them according to the Hindu rites and they buried the ashes of those flowers in the cottage of Kabir. The Muslims took the blanket and buried it at a little distance to the left of Kabir's cottage according to the Islamic rites. Bijali Khan got a *Mazar* built on the grave of the blanket¹³⁶ while Veer Singh Baghel and Surati Gopal got a *Samadhi* built over the ashes of the flowers.

This legend reflects that Kabir was popular among both the Hindus and Muslims. Agrawal (2009) also suggests that the significance of this legend lies not in showing Kabir as a miraculous figure, but in the fact that Kabir had a strong influence among both the Hindus and Muslim rulers and other people. Up to that time, Kabir had become a powerful personality.

Kabir Rauza/Mazar

According to the caretakers of the Kabir *Mazar*, Bijali Khan built a *Rauza* (cenotaph) over the Muslim *Mazar* (shrine/tomb) of Kabir in 1520¹³⁷. It was renovated in 1567 by

¹³⁵ However, there is no consensus regarding the number of flowers and blanket. The number keeps varying in different versions.

¹³⁶ However, the caretakers of the *Mazar* reject this legend. They claim that Kabir's real body was buried in the *Mazar*. Keay (p. 32), K. Dwivedi (pp. 164-65) and Vaudeville (p. 32) are also of the opinion that *Mazar* is the main shrine of Kabir at Maghar.

¹³⁷ However, in *Monumental Antiquities and Inscriptions in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (1891)*, A. Fuhrer writes: "To the east of the town, on the right bank of Ami river, there is the cenotaph (*rauza*) of the famous reformer Kabir Das, or Kabir Shah, erected in A. D. 1450 by Bijli Khan and restored in A. D. 1567 by Nawab Fidai Khan. A little further stands another shrine, dedicated to Kabir Das, and frequented by Hindus

Nawab Fidai Khan¹³⁸ “who was garrisoned at Magahar with an imperial force” (Vaudeville, p. 32). Above the door of the *Rauza*, ‘*Mazar Kabir Saheb*’ has been inscribed both in Hindi and in Urdu. On the platform of the *Mazar* is built a small tomb of Kamal¹³⁹. In the courtyard of the Kabir *Mazar*, there is a small tomb of Bijali Khan who is said to have been buried there.



Figure 10: Tomb of Bijali Khan who invited Kabir to come to Maghar

Khadim Hussain, the present *Mutvalli* of the *Mazar*, claims his family to be a descendant of Nawab Bijali Khan's¹⁴⁰. According to him and the saints of the *Math*, since the death of Kabir, his family has been serving the *Mazar*. There have been 13 generations as the *Mutvallis*¹⁴¹ of the *Mazar* till now. Khadim Hussain has no record of the names of all the

only” (p. 224). Vaudeville too writes: “It is said that Kabir’s cenotaph was built by Nawab Bijli Khan in 1450, two years after the saint’s death”. (p. 32). Their descriptions show Kabir’s death in the year 1448.

¹³⁸ The Kabirpanthis of the *Math* claim that Nawab Fidai Khan belonged to the third generation of Nawab Bijali Khan. Khadim Hussain rejects the fact that it was renovated by Fidai Khan. According to him, it was Muhammad Siraj-ud-Daulah who renovated it.

¹³⁹ Khadim Hussain and his brothers regard Kamal as the actual son of Kabir, while Kabirpanthis believe him to be a disciple of Kabir. The Kabirpanthi legend goes as follow: One day, Kabir and Sheikh Taki were walking on a bank of the Ganga at Banaras. Sheikh Taki was always jealous of Kabir’s popularity and spiritual power. All of a sudden, he saw a corpse being floated in the Ganga. He challenged Kabir to revive it. Kabir accepted his challenge and through his spiritual power, he revived the corpse. Seeing this, the people present there were astonished and applauded Kabir saying that Kabir had done a wonder (Kamal). Therefore, the young boy whom he made alive was called by the name of Kamal. Kamal started living with Kabir at Kabir Chaura.

¹⁴⁰ They address him as Nawab Ali Bijali Shah and claim that he was not a Khan, but was a *Julaha*. Through this claim, they try to establish their association with Nawab Bijali Khan.

¹⁴¹ E. F. Keay, Kedar Nath Dwivedi and Parshuram Chaturvedi say that the main *Mutvalli* of the *Mazar* is called by the title of ‘Gani Karan’, but Khadim Hussain denies any such tradition.

Mutvallis. He told me the names of only three previous *Mutvallis*: Abdul Gani Saheb and Rasulan Bibi¹⁴² (died in 1953), Mansurulhak (died in 1974), and Sabir Hussain (died in 2015). They are also buried in the courtyard of the *Mazar* and their tombs are situated nearby the tomb of Bijali Khan.

Gayasuddin Hussain Ansari, the younger brother of Sabir Hussain, is still alive and has two sons: Ali Hussain Ansari and Sahil Hussain Ansari. Khadim Hussain and Shaida Hussain are the sons of Sabir Hussain. Under the supervision of Khadim Hussain (*Mutvalli*), Shaida Hussain, Ali Hussain and Sahil Hussain also take care of the *Mazar* in part time.



Figure 11: From left Ali Hussain, Shaida Hussain, Khadim Hussain and Sahil Hussain

They regard Kabir as a Muslim *Pir* or *Wali* and address him as Kabiruddin Shah or Baba Kabiruddin Shah. They receive and give the Kabirpanthi greeting “Saheb Bandagi” when Kabirpanthis visit it. Like Kabirpanthis, they also prohibit the consumption of any

¹⁴² Rasulan Bibi was the only child of her parents. Therefore, she became the *Mutvalli* after her father and took the charge of the *Mazar* with her husband Abdul Gani.

alcohol and non-vegetarian food. They spread the message of Kabir and instruct all to follow the teachings and *vanis* of Kabir. They also cite popular verses of Kabir among the followers of Kabir.

Kabir *Mazar* is visited alike by both Hindus and Muslims. Shaida Hussain Ansari claims that thousands of Muslim and Hindu followers are associated with *Mazar* and the *Mutvalli* through the Islamic *Muridi* tradition. In a way, it is a Muslim Kabirpanth. G. H. Westcott (1907) and K. Dwivedi (1965) also perceive it as a Muslim Kabir *Math*.

Kabir Samadhi Temple

The saints of the Maghar Kabir *Math* claim that just after the cremation of the flowers, a temple over Kabir *Samadhi* was built by Veer Singh Baghel and Surati Gopal. They reject the fact that it was built later. The Kabir *Samadhi* temple was renovated in 1898 by *Acharya* Guru Prasad, the then *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*. In 1953, Keshav Bhan Badhel, a Kabirpanthi follower from Gujarat, built the concrete floor of the temple. In 2012, the saints and *bhagats* (lay followers) of Kabir from Gujarat encased the shrine with silver. In the same year, Prakashmuninam Saheb, the present *Acharya* of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth gifted a pair of *khadaus* (clogs) of silver at both Kabir *Samadhi* and Kabir *Mazar*. Like Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, many popular *sakhis*¹⁴³ of Kabir have been inscribed on the walls of the Kabir *Samadhi* temple¹⁴⁴.

¹⁴³ Many *sakhis* have also been inscribed on the walls of Maghar Railway Station which is situated 750 meters from Kabir's shrines. According to Shaida Hussain, the younger brother of Khadim Hussain, the building of the Railway Station is the first concrete ceiling at Maghar. When it was built, it collapsed repeatedly. Then, Kabir was prayed and structures like those of the both shrines were built on the roof of the Railway building. Consequently, it did not collapse. Later, these *vanis* of Kabir were written on the walls of the Railway Station building.

¹⁴⁴ It is to be noted that all Kabir *Maths* associated with Kabir Chaura sect highlight Kabir's verses. There are more exposures of Kabir's *vanis* in the Kabir Chaura tradition than the Dharmadasi tradition.

There were 15-20 rooms adjoining the *Samadhi* temple for the stay of Kabirpanthi followers during their visits¹⁴⁵. However, up to early 1990s, only one Kabirpanthi *pujari* permanently lived at the Kabir *Samadhi* temple. He was appointed by the *Acharya* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*. The *Acharya* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* also used to be the *Mahant* of Maghar Kabir *Math*. He along with other saints of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* used to visit Maghar *Math*, especially on the occasion of Kabir Nirvana Divas¹⁴⁶.

After 1987, with the setting up of Maghar Mahotsava, the significance of the Maghar Kabir centre increased¹⁴⁷. It started attracting more Kabirpanthi saints. These saints were from Balua Kabir *Math*, Kashroul (I shall discuss it below) which is a branch of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*. Vichar Das was the *Mahant* of this *Math*. He was also made the *Mahant* of Maghar Kabir *Math* and the future *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* by Ganga Sharan Shastri, the 23rd *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*¹⁴⁸. In 1990s, Vichar Das accompanied by some saints started living at Kabir Maghar *Math*. According to Shanti Das, the present *pujari* of the *Samadhi* temple, the major development of the Maghar Kabir *Math* is the contribution of Vichar Das.

¹⁴⁵ There were also a few rooms built in the courtyard of Kabir *Mazar*. Westcott (1907) sheds lights on the accommodation in both the courtyards: "There are at the present time two *Maths* at Maghar, one for Muhammadans, containing the shrine, and another for Hindus.... Each of these *Maths* which adjoin one another has accommodation for 50 sadhus, though as a rule only one Fakir or Sadhu lives in each" (pp. 57-58). Apart from one room, all the rooms of Kabir *Mazar* were demolished in 1987 for beautification by the Archaeological Department of Uttar Pradesh. The remaining single room of the *Mazar* courtyard and those of the *Samadhi* courtyard were also demolished in 2020. Now both the shrines have been surrounded by an iron fence.

¹⁴⁶ Being the place of Kabir's death, the *Acharya* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* celebrated Kabir Nirvana Divas at Maghar.

¹⁴⁷ Maghar Mahotsava (I shall discuss below) was initiated in 1987. Political leaders and bureaucrats also started visiting both the shrines. The large ground and fields outside Kabir's shrines were filled with earth and levelled together by both the Hindus and Muslims of Maghar. Besides Kabirpanthis, more non-Kabirpanthi people also started visiting Kabir's shrines.

¹⁴⁸ After the death of Amrit Saheb, the 22 second *Acharya* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* in 1989, Ganga Sharan Saheb became the 23rd *Acharya*. During his time, he appointed Vichar Das his successor and the *Mahant* of Maghar Kabir *Math*. It aroused a controversy between Vivekdas, the present *Mahant* (*Acharya*) of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, and Ganga Sharan Saheb and Vichar Das.

Balua Kabir *Math* and Keramua Village

It is said that Nawab Bijali Khan donated a five-hundred *bigha* piece of land each to Suratigopal Saheb, the first *Mahant* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, and the then *Mutvalli* of Kabir *Mazar*. The piece of land given to Surati Gopal is situated at Balua, Sahjanva in Gorakhpur district. It is three kilometres away from Maghar. Here, later on, a Kabir *Math* was established on behalf of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*.

The piece of land given to the caretaker of the *Mazar* was situated at Keramua village near Khalilabad in the Basti district (now in Sant Kabir Nagar district). It is seven kilometres away from Maghar. However, this land was sold. I found a few Hindus of Maghar criticizing the caretakers of the *Mazar* for selling the land.

Kabir in Books at Maghar Kabir *Math*

Maghar Kabir *Math* has many books (including those of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*) on Kabir through which it spreads Kabir's life, messages and teachings. The popular books of this *Math* are *Sadguru Kabir Tirtha: Maghar Parichaya*, *Sadguru Kabir Saheb: Kashi se Maghar*, *Shri Kabir Sant Bhajanavali* and *Kabir Amrit Vani*. Besides, the library of the *Math* has hundreds of books written by the *Mahants* and saints of different Kabirpanthi sects¹⁴⁹.

Sadguru Kabir Tirtha: Maghar Parichaya and *Sadguru Kabir Saheb: Kashi se Maghar* are small books which shed light on Kabir's life and his journey from Banaras to Maghar. They also deal with different legends of Kabir associated with Maghar.

Shri Kabir Sant Bhajanavali is edited by Harisharan Das Shastri. It is a collection of 544 popular *padas* which are sung in the name of Kabir, especially in the eastern Uttar

¹⁴⁹ During my fieldwork at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* in 2016, I also found many books of the different Kabirpanthi sects there, but Vivek Das have now removed them in order to highlight only the books of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*.

Pradesh. However, many of these *padas* are not of Kabir. Harisharan Das Shastri often sings many of the *padas* from this book in Kabirpanthi programmes. I have also recorded Seva Das, a woman singer from Gorakhpur, singing many *padas* from this book. It is to be noted that many verses which are not of Kabir, but express his spirit, are being transmitted in the name of Kabir. This book is now getting popular among the Kabirpanthi followers associated with Maghar Kabir *Math* and others. Harisharan Das Shastri says: "I collected the *bhajans* to transmit the message of Kabir among a large number of audiences. The people from different states of India demand this book."

Kabir Amrit Vani edited by Shanti Das Pujari is a small collection of the couplets of Kabir. It consists of Kabir's verses inscribed on the walls of the *Samadhi* temple and Maghar Railway Station building. It has also many other Kabir's couplets.

Kabir in Ceremonies and Rituals at Maghar Kabir Centre (Kabir Mazar and Kabir Samadhi)

Daily Rituals at Both Shrines

Since Maghar Kabir *Math* is the main branch of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti* as at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* are performed respectively in the morning and evening¹⁵⁰. At the end of both the daily rituals, the saints and ordinary followers present at *Math* circumambulate the *Samadhi* temple and offer *Saheb Bandagi* to Kabir¹⁵¹. Then, they offer *Saheb Bandagi* to one another.

However, no similar Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti* are performed at Kabir *Mazar*. The *Mutvalli* comes early in the morning and cleans the Kabir *Samadhi*, the enclosure of Kabir *Rauza* and the courtyard of the *Mazar*, then offers flowers; burns incense sticks and

¹⁵⁰ However, unlike the saints of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, the saints of the Maghar Kabir *Math* do not recite the verses of *Bijak* during the *Sandhya Arti*.

¹⁵¹ At Kashi Kabir Chaura, the *Bijak* Temple is circumambulated.

reads *fatihā* (prayer) at the *Mazar*. He performs it alone. At about 7 pm, the *Mutvalli* offers evening *fatihā* and goes home which is located at the Karam Kabir (gift or blessing of Kabir) Mohalla¹⁵² of Maghar. He does not stay at the Kabir *Mazar* in the night.

Annual Ceremonies and Rituals

The following annual ceremonies are organized at Maghar Kabir Centres: Kabir Nirvana Divas, *Urs*, *Khichadi Mela*, Guru Purnima and Kabir Jayanti.

Kabir Nirvana Divas (*Bhandara* at Kabir *Samadhi* and *Urs* at Kabir *Mazar*)

Being the place of Kabir's death, Kabir Nirvana Divas is the most important occasion associated with both Kabir *Mazar* and Kabir *Samadhi*. However, this occasion is celebrated in different ways on different days at both the places (I will discuss the tradition of *Urs* at Kabir *Mazar* and *Khichadi Mela* in the fifth chapter).

Celebration of Kabir Nirvana Divas at Kabir *Samadhi* Temple (Kabir *Math*)

For Kabirpanthis, Kabir Nirvana Divas is the second most sacred occasion after Kabir Jayanti. It is celebrated on the eleventh day of the bright fortnight of *Maagh* (January-February) every year. Kabirpanthi followers from different parts of the country start gathering here 3-4 days in advance. The celebration of this occasion continues for two days. In the morning of the first day, the flag of *Satnam* is hoisted by *Mahant Vichar Das*. It is followed by *Bijak Path* (recitation of *Bijak*) along with *Havan Puja*. It continues for about 2-3 hours. This ritual ends with *Arti* song and waving a lamp at Kabir's portrait followed by the distribution of holy *Prasad* made of different fruits and sweets among all the followers

¹⁵² According to Khadim Hussain, after Kabir came to Maghar from Kashi, he lived here. It is said that many children of Maghar died just after birth. When Kabir came to know about it, he ended the curse through his blessings. Therefore, it was named Karam Kabir Mohalla.

present there. In the afternoon and evening of this day, *satsang* and *pravachan* programmes and *bhandara* are organized.

In the morning of the second day, *shobha yatra*¹⁵³ is taken out in the town of Maghar¹⁵⁴. It is followed by *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes in which the *Mahant Vichar Saheb* and other saints from the *Math* and other places give *pravachans*. Many singers perform *bhajans* and *satsangs* on this occasion. All the people present there listen to *pravchans* and *bhajans* with great interests as they believe them to be the words of Kabir.

It is striking to note that in the evening about between 8 and 9 pm, the ritual of *Chauka Arti*¹⁵⁵ is organized at the *Samadhi* temple by *Mahant Vichar Saheb*. Kabirpanthi singers perform *bhajans*¹⁵⁶ during this ritual. It continues for about two to three hours¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵³ *Shobha yatra* has been a tradition of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth, which Maghar Kabir *Math* has also started for a couple of years.

¹⁵⁴ Both the Hindus and Muslims respect this procession.

¹⁵⁵ *Acharya Vivekas* has prohibited this ritual at Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* and its other branches. The performance of this ritual at the *Samadhi* indicates towards a conflictual relationship between Vivekdas and Vichar Das.

¹⁵⁶ Generally, they sing the *padas* of Kabir ending with his signature line. These songs are different from those songs sung during a Dharmadasi *Chauka* ritual. During the Dharmadasi ritual, most of the *Mangal* songs attributed to *Guru/Sadguru* are sung. The songs at Maghar are sung by the singers associated with the tradition of Kabir Chaura sect or who are influenced by Kabir Chaura. Since Kabir Chaura sect lays emphasis on Kabir's *vanis* ending with Kabir's signature line and therefore, the songs sung by them are mostly those which end in his signature line or show Kabir's spirit.

¹⁵⁷ The Dharmadasi *Chauka* ritual is more elaborate and continues longer than it.



Figure 12: *Mahant Vichar Das performing Chauka Arti at Maghar Kabir Math*

The performance of *Chauka Arti* shows the increasing influence of Dharmadasi rituals in Kabir Chaura sect. I have also discovered Vichar Das and few saints of Maghar Kabir *Math* organizing *Chauka Arti* at the homes of their followers. According to Arvind Das, a saint from Maghar Kabir *Math*, many followers of the Kabir Chaura sect want *Chauka Arti* to be performed. This shows how the Dharmadasi ritual is attracting and influencing the followers of the Kashi Kabir Chaura sect. In fact, the sects or branches which are organizing *Chauka Arti* appear more popular among Kabirpanthi followers. Perhaps this factor also affects some of the branches of Kabir Chaura and other sects of Kabirpanth. Peter Friedlander rightly observes: “Traditions which traced their origins back to Dharmadas’s version of Kabir’s teachings were very successful in attracting followers and appear to have become one of the most popular branches of the Kabirpanth” (2010, p. 3).

The *Chauka* ritual performed at Maghar Kabir *Math* also creates a space for the Dharmadasi Kabirpanthis as well. I have found that the relationship of Maghar Kabir *Math* is harmonious with those of Dharmadasi sect. The *Mahants* and saints from the Dharmadasi sect often come and stay here. It has also been a Kabir centre where the *Mahants*, saints and ordinary followers of all Kabirpanthi sects interact with one other. However, at Banaras, Kabirpanthis appear to be divided between two groups of Kabirpanth through Kabir Chaura *Math* and Lahartara Dharmadasi *Math*.

Guru Purnima

At Maghar Kabir *Math*, the occasion of Guru Purnima is celebrated for one day. The celebration begins with the recitation of *Bijak* along with *Havan Puja* performed by the saints of the *Math*. After the *Havan Puja*, *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes are organized. It is followed by *bhandara* (feast). On this occasion, the Kabirpanthis, especially the local Kabirpanthis and non-Kabirpanthis arrive here and offer their reverence to Kabir, the *Mahant* of the *Math*, *Mutvalli* of the Kabir *Mazar* and the *pujari* of the Kabir Cave. It is interesting to observe that any occasion celebrated at the Kabir *Samadhi* (Maghar Kabir *Math*) also becomes the part of Kabir *Mazar* since Kabir's followers offer their reverence to Kabir equally at both the places.

Kabir Jayanti

Maghar Kabir *Math* has also been celebrating Kabir Jayanti for a couple of years¹⁵⁸. It is also celebrated for two days. On the first day, the flag of *Satnam* (Truth) is hoisted. The *Mahant* also offers a blanket at the *Mazar* of Kabir and flowers at the *Samadhi*. It is followed by the recitation of *Bijak* along with *Havan Puja*, *Satsang* and *bhajan* programmes, and

¹⁵⁸ However, it was previously not celebrated here. On the occasion of Kabir Jayanti, the *Mahant* and saints of the Maghar Kabir *Math* used to go to Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* since it is the *Acharya Gaddi* of the Maghar *Math*. On the other hand, Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, has also started Kabir Nirvana Divas for a couple of years. Previously, the *Acharya* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math* used to go to Maghar to celebrate it, but now, he does not go.

bhandara are also organized. On the second day, *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes, and *bhandara* are again organized. In the evening of this day, *Chauka Arti* is also performed. Kabirpanthis, especially the local Kabirpanthis gather here to participate in the celebration of the Kabir Jayanti. Shanti Das says that local Kabirpanthi also want Kabir Jayanti to be celebrated here. They have to go to Varanasi to celebrate Kabir Jayanti. So, according to their convenience and comfort, they want to celebrate here¹⁵⁹.

Thus, being the place of Kabir's death, Maghar is the second holiest Kabir centre after Banaras. However, in the context of Kabir's decision to leave Kashi and settle at Maghar, Maghar becomes more significant than Banaras. Although Maghar Kabir *Math* is a branch of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, it has earned the significance of an *Acharya Gaddi* for all other sects of the Kabirpanth.

The legend of Kabir's death at Maghar is also seen as a crucial point to prove Kabir God. It validates the legend of his appearance in the Lahartara pond also. Kabirpanthis claim that Kabir's turning his body into flowers is the proof of his appearance on a lotus flower. If he had not descended on a flower in the pond, he would have not turned into flowers at the time of death. From this point of view, Maghar *Math* becomes very significant for Kabirpanthis.

Politically too, this place has gained in more importance. Each political party uses this place as an opportunity to seek votes from Kabirpanthis and Muslims. Leaders and bureaucrats often visit this place. In this process, Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* has also received many advantages and has become a site of a great importance. Each government pays grants for its development. Ms. Mayavati, a former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, formed the

¹⁵⁹ Shanti Das says that a compromise between Vichardas and Vivekdas has been made. According to this compromise, Kabir Jayanti will also be celebrated at Maghar *Math*.

district 'Sant Kabir Nagar' in the name of Kabir. Through the contribution of Mr. Mulayam Singh Yadav, another former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, it receives 25 million rupees from the local government every year for the Maghar Mahotsava. Under the supervision of Mr. Narendra Modi, the present Prime Minister of India, Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* is being developed into an international tourist place. A Kabir Research Institute is also under construction. Such attempts to promote Kabir have extended Kabir's spread even among those who did not know Kabir. A large number of non-Kabirpanthi followers also visit this centre.

The coexistence of Kabir *Samadhi* and Kabir *Mazar* not only make Maghar a unique centre of Kabir for both the Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers of Kabir. Here, Kabir appears more a non-sectarian figure popular among both Hindus and Muslims of Maghar and other places.

Lakshmipur Bagicha Kabir Math, Rosera

Apart from the first four *Acharya Gaddis* of Kabirpanth e.g. Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, Damakheda Kabir *Math*, Bidupur *Math* and Dhanauti Kabir *Math*, one of the other most popular Kabir *Maths* about which I heard from many Kabirpanthi followers of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar is Lakshmipur Bagicha Kabir *Math*. Lakshmipur Bagicha Kabir *Math* is located at Rosera in Samastipur in Bihar. This *Math* has a strong following in Bihar, Kolkata, Sikkim, Assam, Gujarat etc. Many followers from Nepal and Myanmar and Bhutan are also associated with this *Math*. This *Math* has a strong presence in Bihar on account of the tradition of the celebration of Kabir Jayanti and also on account of the fact that it is the

richest and most prosperous Kabir *Math* in Bihar¹⁶⁰. Due to its prosperity, it has continuously served the poor and helpless with free meal, who arrive at this *Math*.

The *Math* is spread over an area of four *bighas* and is popularly known as Bagicha *Math*¹⁶¹. It is about 400 years old¹⁶². There have been 12 *Mahants* of this *Math* since its establishment: Khedi Das, Prem Das, Khushyal Das, Kishun Das¹⁶³, Isari Das, Tulsi Das, and Govind Das. Kashi Das, Awadh Das, Ganesh Das, Thakur Das and Deep Narayan Das (Present *Mahant*). Deep Narayan Das became the *Mahant* of Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math* in 2001. It follows the *Naad* tradition according to which the present *Mahant* selects his successor from among his disciples¹⁶⁴.

According to Deep Narayan Das, this *Math* was founded by Khedi Das and Prem Das. However, Purendu Ranjan does not mention the name of Prem Das as the founder of the *Math*. Ranjan sheds light on the establishment of this *Math*:

The first math of the Dharmadasi branch seems to have been formed at Rosara which was another trade centre in present Samastipur district. It is said that the math, presently known as Lakshmipur Bagicha math, was formed by Ishwar Das and Khedi Das who visited the area with a group of sants during the late seventeenth century. They had probably arrived in Rosara as itinerant preachers. In Parshuram Chaturvedi's estimation, Bagicha math was founded almost 300 years ago. Chaturvedi based his estimation on the dates of the *guru* of Ishwar Das and Khedi Das at Bandogarh in Chhattisgarh, (one of the newly formed states), the then headquarters of Dharmadasi branch. Both were the disciples of Pramod Nam Sahib¹⁶⁵, the fifth *Mahant* of Bandogarh math. The prevailing tradition says that the visiting *sadhus* found large tracts of unoccupied land covered with bhang plants in Rosara. They considered these tracts fit for establishing a math, and immediately took a vow to clear the land. Soon they cleared the occupied portion and formed a math there. Khedi Das

¹⁶⁰ In *Kabir and Kabirpanth*, K. Dwivedi (p. 184) says that there is 150-*bigha* land under the possession of this *Math*. There are 60 different shops along the concrete fence of the *Math*. The shopkeepers pay rent to the *Mahant* of the *Math*. It also has a litchi orchard spread over an area of 20 *bighas* at some distance from the *Math*. The farming, litchi business and rent received from the shops are the main sources of income for the *Math*.

¹⁶¹ There used to be many trees of mango and jackfruit here.

¹⁶² It is also said that Kabir himself had visited this place. However, it appears a strategy to popularize the *Math* and its traditions.

¹⁶³ Scholars such as K. Dwivedi and Ranjan do not include the name of Kishun Das.

¹⁶⁴ According to Deep Narayan Das, the *Mahant* can be of any caste.

¹⁶⁵ K. Dwivedi says that this *Math* situated at the Rosera village in the Dharbhanga district was probably founded during the period of Pramod Guru Balapir.

later received a donation of ten *dhur*¹⁶⁶ plot adjoining the math's courtyard. In the following years, Bagicha math, emerged as one of the richest maths in the region. It then established its sub-branches in various parts of the region. (pp. 41-42)

Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math* was previously associated with the Damakheda Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. However, Bagicha *Math* broke its affiliation from it and is now an independent *Acharya Gaddi*. K. Dwivedi sheds light on the fact: "This branch was previously associated with the Chhattisgarh Branch of the Kabirpanth, but after the death of Daya Nam, due to a mutual controversy, it broke away its affiliation from the Chhattisgarh branch and declared itself independent. All its religious and social doctrines are equal to those of the Chhattisgarh branch" (p. 184). On the other hand, Ranjan considers the repetitive shifts of the Dharmadasi headquarters to be the main reason of this break up and further says that Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math* shifted its affiliation to Dharmadasi Naadvansha Kharsiya *Acharya Gaddi*¹⁶⁷:

It is noteworthy that Bagicha math was initially affiliated to the Dharmadasi branch. Following repeated shifts of the Dharmadasi headquarters from one place to another, Bagicha *math's* affiliation finally changed in the early 20th century, and since then it has remained affiliated to a splinter group of Dharmadasi branch, which formed its headquarters at Kharsiya in Chhattisgarh during the early 20th century. Kashi Das, the seventh Mahant of Bagicha math, was selected as the first Mahant at Kharsiya math¹⁶⁸. (p. 45)

¹⁶⁶ 20 *dhurs* of a land-plot make a *katha* and 20 *kathas* make a *bigha*. An acre land is slightly more than the area of a *bigha* of land.

¹⁶⁷ However, Deep Narayan Das says that both Dharmadasi Damakheda *Acharya Gaddi* (*Bind* tradition) and Dharmadasi Kharsiya *Acharya Gaddi* (*Naad* tradition) are respected in the tradition of Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*. He further says: "We follow Dharmadas. We are from Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. We worship him. Our tradition is based on him. We follow the practices of Dharmadas."

¹⁶⁸ Since Kashi Saheb was already the *Mahant* of Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*, Deep Narayan Das suggests that in a way, Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math* should be the *Mool Gaddi* in place of the Kharsiya *Gaddi*. He gives the following account:

This *Math* was associated with Damakheda. Kabir had blessed Dharmadas that his 42 generations would hold the Dharmadasi *Acharya Gaddi* as its *Mahant*. However, after the 12th generation, this tradition was broken. Thereafter, a committee was organized there and it was decided that Kashi Saheb would be the *Mahant* of the *Math*. At the same time, it was also decided that Kashi Saheb would also have to take care of three *Mai Sahibas* (the wives of Daya Naam Saheb, the 12th *Mahant* of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth). However, Kashi Saheb refused to become such a *Mahant*. During one of his visits, he went to Kharsiya and established the Kharsiya *Gaddi* and became its first *Mahant*. The *Mahant* of Lahartara Kabir Math claims it to be his *Acharya Gaddi* but its first *Mahant* was Kashi Saheb from

Although Ranjan talks about its later affiliation with Kharsiya Kabir *Math*, it itself has become a prominent *Acharya Gaddi*. There are a large number of Kabir *Maths* associated with Bagicha *Math*. K. Dwivedi writes: “This *Math* has many sub-branches at different places in Dharbhanga, Munger, Muzaffarpur, Purnia, Saharsa, Nepal etc. However, it has its largest expansion in Bihar” (p. 180). Deep Narayan Das told me that it has 365 *jhopadas* (branches) at different places in India and outside.

Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers are also attracted to an old temple situated in the courtyard of the *Math*. It was built by *Mahant Kashi Saheb*¹⁶⁹. In the enclosure of the temple, there are the tombs of the first two *Mahants* of the *Math*: Khedi Das and Prem Das. It is said that they were voluntarily buried alive. They were *Guru bhais* (disciples of the same *Guru*). When they were to enter the grave, other saints asked them how they would come to know that they had passed away. Both asked them to plant a Tulsi plant. If the plant withered away, they should understand that both had passed away.

The *Samadhis* of later *Mahants*¹⁷⁰ are situated to the left of the temple in the courtyard and behind the *Math*. The portraits of some *Mahants* are hung on the front wall of the temple. There are also the portraits of Kabir, Bhagwan Das (one of the four main disciples of Kabir) and Ardhnam Saheb (*Acharya* of Kharsiya Kabir *Math* and *Mahant* of Lahartara Dharmadasi *Math*) on the wall.

Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*. In a way, the *Acharya Gaddi* of the Kharsiya *Acharya Gaddi* is Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*. Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math* is the *Mool Gaddi* of Kharsiya *Acharya Gaddi* and other *Maths* associated with it.

Deep Narayan Das further establishes the connection of the Bagicha *Math* with the Lahartara Dharmadasi *Math*. He claims that at Lahartara, there used to be a branch (*Math*) of Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math* before it was developed as a prominent branch of Kharsiya *Gaddi* by Udit Muni Nam Saheb, the third *Mahant* of Kharsiya *Gaddi*. Kanhaiya Das who was a saint of Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math* was the *Mahant* of that *Math*. After the death of Kanhaiya Das, his disciple Ganesh Das became its *Mahant*. In his declining years, Ganesh Das gave this *Math* to Uditmuni Nam Saheb.

The *Samadhis* of both Kanhaiya Das and Ganesh Das are built in the Lahartara *Math*. Deep Narayan and other saints of *Math* claim that in a way, the *Acharya Gaddi* of Kharsiya *Math* and Lahartara *Math* is Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*. It is their *Mool Gaddi*. However, Ardhnam Saheb, the present *Acharya* of Kharsiya *Gaddi* and *Mahant* of Lahartara Dharmadasi *Math*, denies it.

¹⁶⁹ According to Deep Narayan Saheb, the credit to spread this sect on the level of the entire India goes to *Mahant Kashi Baba* followed by Awadh Saheb.

¹⁷⁰ There are five *Samadhis* in the courtyard.

This *Math* has a huge building. It has the accommodation for more than 100 Kabirpanthi followers. More than half a dozen students also live at this *Math*. They do not have to pay for their stay and food. They only need to contribute to cleaning and serving the *Math* regularly. Sometimes, they also perform daily rituals of the *Math* when the *Mahant* and *Pujari* are not present at the *Math*.

It is interesting to note that like the *Maths* of Kabir Chaura sect, many popular *sakhis* of Kabir printed on flex boards are installed on the walls of the *Math*. Deep Narayan Saheb says: “The main composition (*mool grantha*) of Kabir is *Bijak*. I studied it myself. I chose some verses from them and got them printed so that the followers who visit the *Math* may learn some messages of Kabir from here.” However, the followers of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth, especially based on Damakheda, give prominence to the *Anurag Sagar* in place of the *Kabir Bijak*. I have observed that both the *Bijak* (Kabir Chaura tradition) and the *Anurag Sagar* (Damakheda tradition) are followed by many of the *Maths* of Bihar. Since both are prominent traditions of the two main sects of Kabirpanth, they follow them to validate their own traditions.

What may surprise one most is the presence of a statue of Lord Hanuman built on the wall of *Math* in front of the temple. Deep Narayan Das and Sonelal, a *Mahant* of one of the branches of Bagicha *Math*, give the following account about the establishment of this statue, which shows Kabir as the *Guru* of Lord Hanuman:

Lord Hanuman is said to be a disciple of Kabir. In the *Saguna* tradition, one is not free from the circle of life and death, but in our sect, one receives salvation. Lord Hanuman studied many Hindu scriptures e.g. the *Gita*, the *Ramayana* to discover the path to salvation, but he did not find it. Then, he took *Chauka Pan* from Kabir and went to the heaven. Therefore, the statue of Lord Hanuman is also built here. We also offer him *Bandagi*.

Thus, along with Kabir and other *Mahants* of the *Math*, Lord Hanuman is also worshipped¹⁷¹. During my first visit at this *Math* in 2020, I recorded another version which tells that during the construction of the *Math*, there used to be a huge pipal tree under which there was a statue of Lord Hanuman. It was decided that the statue should be preserved as it was. However, Deep Narayan Das and Sonelal Das reject this version.



Figure 13: Statue of Lord Hanuman at Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*

The worship of Lord Hanuman also reflects a Brahmanical influence on this *Math*. Kashi Das and Awadh Das were Brahmin *Mahants*. The presence of the Brahmin *Mahants* has also softened the approach of this *Math* in spreading Kabir's aggressive critique of Brahmanism. It is very clear when I argued with Deep Narayan Das and Sonelal Das that

¹⁷¹ I have also found a statue of Hanuman at the Kabir *Math*, Khajuri in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, I also found a Vishnu temple at the Kabir *Math* near Gorakhpur. There is a Lord Siva Temple at the Kabir *Math* headed by Gyansarovar Maharaj who is very critical of Brahmanism. According to Ram Prasad, the *Mahant* of Khajuri Kabir *Math*, it was the wish of his *Guru* that the statue of the Hanuman should be preserved. Gyansarovar Maharaj says that the local people wanted it to be preserved when the *Math* was being constructed although she wanted it to be removed. On the occasion of Shivaratri, a fair is held here. On the same day, Gyansarovar Maharaj also organizes the programmes of *satsangs* and *pravachans* in which she invites hundreds of Kabirpanthi followers.

At these centres, the *Saguna* and *Nirguna* traditions of *bhakti* interact with each other. The presence of Lord Hanuman's statues also indicates a connection between the Kabirpanth and the Ramanandi sect or a connection between Kabir and Ramananda.

Kabir criticized the statue worship and Brahmanism, Sonelal said that Kabir did not criticize *Saguna* worship and Brahmanism. He criticized only those Brahmins who propagated the practice of *jiva*-sacrifice (beheading animals) at religious places. He further says that *Saguna* represents body and *Nirguna* soul; life is not possible without both. Although Deep Narayan Das cited many verses of Kabir based on Kabir's biting criticism of Brahmanism, both appeared to have an ambivalent attitude towards *Saguna* worship and Brahmanism.

Kabir in Books at Lakshmipur Bagicha Math

The popular book of this *Math* is *Ganga Sangrah Shabdavali* which consists of different verses based on its *Acharya Parampara*, *Chauka rituals* etc. It is written in verse form and is also an important source of knowing the tradition of the *Math*. It has dealt with the ceremonies and rituals which are celebrated at the *Math*. It also plays a significant role in increasing the popularity of the *Math*. However, this *Math* has not many books. Deep Narayan Das says that some more books of this *Math* are to be published.

Ceremonies and Rituals at Lakshmipur Bagicha Math

Like all Kabirpanthi *Maths*, Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math* has its daily and annual rituals and ceremonies.

Daily Rituals

At about 4 am, the *Mahant* visits the *Samadhis* of the previous *Mahants* and offers *Bandagi* at them. The saints who are present here also offer *Bandagi* to *Mahant* Deep Narayan Das and one another. It is followed by the collective recitation of the *Guru Vandana* (prayer song attributed to *Guru*):

Guru ke sharan lijiye bhai
Jasi jiva narak nahi jayi

(Embrace the feet of *Guru*,
It will not let *jiva* go to hell.)

Then the *Mahant*, saints and students clean the *Math*. Having bathed, the *Mahant* and others recite the verses of *Bijak* edited by Abhilash Das¹⁷² who was a prominent *Mahant* of Parakhi Kabirpanth¹⁷³. However, Parakhi Kabirpanth rejects the Dharmadasi principles of Kabirpanth.

Sandhya Arti

In the evening at 7 o' clock, the ritual of the *Sandhya Arti* is performed. A lamp is waved before the portrait of Kabir and *Samadhis* of the previous *Mahants*. It is followed by the collective recitation of the following verses:

Guru se lagan kathin hain meri
(My devotion to *Guru* is difficult.)

Sandhya sumiran, arti bhajan bharose das
Mansa vacha karmana jab lag ghat mein swans
Swans swans swans mein naam le, vritha swans mat kho
(The slave is dependent on Evening Prayer and *Arti Bhajan*.
With heart, words and duty until there is breath in body.
Recite the name in each breath; do not waste breath uselessly.)

They are followed by the collective recitation of the main *Arti* song attributed to

Guru:

Guru dukhit tum bin rahat dware

¹⁷² He was a Brahmin Kabirpanthi *Mahant* and headed a *Math* at Sulem Sarai, Allahabad. His followers claim this *Math* to be an *Acharya Gaddi* of Parakhi Kabirpanth. However, the first Parakhi Kabirpanth is said to be initiated in the nineteenth century by Puran Saheb. He was a prominent saint and scholar of Kabir. He wrote *Trijya*, a significant commentary on the *Bijak*. It is said that he lived at Kawardha (Chhattisgarh), the headquarters of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth and was a disciple of Paknam Saheb, the then *Mahant* of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. Puran Saheb had an influential personality which attracted many followers to become his disciples. They took initiation (*dikhsa*) from him although he was just a saint there. It was against the rule of Kawardha *Acharya Gaddi*. He was opposed. Puran Saheb had to leave Kawardha. He went to Burhanpur and established a new *Acharya Gaddi*, popularly known as Kabir Niraya Mandir, Burhanpur (K. Dwivedi, P. 180). However, Ram Prasad Das, a Kabir singer from Gorakhpur says that Puran Saheb was saint from Danauti Kabir *Math* of Bihar. He left the *Math* due to some controversy and settled at Burhanpur in Madhya Pradesh.

¹⁷³ The Parakhi Kabirpanth propagates the message that only *Jiva* is true and so, only *Jiva* should be served.

Pragat darshan dijiye
(Guru, we are in the courtyard and are sad without you.
Appear and give *darshan* to us.)

The *Arti* song is recited to the accompaniment of bell-ringing. After this recitation is over, all present on the occasion offer *Bandagi* to the *Mahant* and one another. At about 9 pm, they take dinner together. When the *Mahant* puts the first morsel of food in his mouth, other saints and followers come to him and receive *Prasad* (from the remaining food of the *Mahant*) from his hand. Here, unlike most of Kabir centres, the *Mahant* always participates in the *pangat* (taking food together) with all the saints and common followers.

Annual Ceremonies and Rituals

Kabir Jayanti

The celebration of *Kabir Jayanti* at this *Math* is very popular. This celebration begins two days prior to the main day of the *Kabir Jayanti*. Thousands of Kabirpanthis from Bihar, Assam, Sikkim, Kolkata, Nepal and other places start gathering at the *Math* three or four days in advance. For Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers, a huge *bhandara* is also held on these three days.

The *satsang* and *pravachan* programmes begin from the evening of the second day. At about 4 pm, the *Manch* (dais) is inaugurated by either a prominent *Mahant* or a minister. All *Mahants*, saints, *sadhvis* and ordinary followers gather there. A list of preachers and singers is prepared. Deep Narayan Das is the chairperson. Then, one by one, the preachers give *pravchans* and singers sing *bhajans*. It is striking that a large number of women singers come here to perform Kabir *bhajans*. They are encouraged to perform *bhajans* and *satsangs* here by Deep Narayan Das and Sonelal, a *Mahant* of one of the branches of Lakshnipur Bagicha *Math*. The programmes of *satsang* and *bhajan* continue the whole night and end at 5

am next day (the main day of the Kabir Jayanti) with a collective *Parati bhajan* (a verse sung in the early morning):

Bilmi rahal kevanē desh videsh piya
Bilmi rahal kavane desh
(In which country does the cruel husband live?
In which country does the cruel husband live?)

At about 9 am, the ceremony of *Jhandatolan* is performed. A white flag in the name of *Sadguru* Kabir is unfurled. It begins with the following *Mangal* song:

Lahar lahar laharayi ho satnam ka jhanda
Yah jhanda to kashi se aaye
Lahar lahar laharayi ho satnam ka jhanda
[Flying, flying, the flag of *Satnam* will remain flying.
This flag has been brought from Kashi.
Flying, flying, the flag of *Satnam* will remain flying.]

A large number of *Mahants*, saints and followers are present at the ceremony. The hoisting of the flag is followed by the performance of five *Mangal* songs (devotional songs desiring happiness and welfare of all). Then, *Arti* is performed. Deep Narayan Das waves a lamp before the portrait of Kabir and *Samadhis* of the previous *Mahants*.

From 10 am onwards, the *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes start. The main day of the Kabir Jayanti is the grand celebration of Kabir's spirit more through Kabir *bhajans*, *satsangs* and *pravachans*. A large number of men and women singers sing *bhajans* of Kabir and other *bhajans* reflecting Kabir's spirit. These programmes continue till 11 pm. It is followed by the performance of *Chauka Arti*, the main ritual of the *Math*. *Chauka* ritual is accompanied by the performance of *Mangal* songs and various other songs attributed to *Guru* and Kabir. It continues till 5-6 am next day.

Description of the Chauka Ritual on Kabir Jayanti at Bagicha Math

Chauka design (square) and its paraphernalia are prepared. The *Mahant* bathes and wears the *Chauka* attire e.g. white clothes and *Seli* cap¹⁷⁴. He accompanied by his assistants goes to the place where *Chauka* design is made. The bells are rung and trumpets are blown. The *Mahant* sits cross-legged at the *Chauka* design facing the east direction and starts mediation with his eyes closed. He continues it for one to two hours. With the meditation of the *Mahant*, the singers also start singing *Mangal* songs. The performance of minimum five *Mangal* songs is necessary. Apart from the *Mangal* songs, Kabir's *padas* ending with his signature line and other *bhajans* are performed throughout the ritual.

When he breaks his mediation, the ceremony of *Nariyal Morana/Morayi* (the breaking of coconuts), *Pan Parvana*¹⁷⁵ and *Tinaka Todana/Torayi* begins. This ceremony is the main attraction of the *Chauka* ritual at Bagicha Math. One by one followers start offering coconuts to the *Acharya Mahant*. The *Mahant* breaks the coconuts on a piece of stone placed before him or to his right hand. Then, *Mahant* gives each follower a betel leaf, called the *Pan Parvana* (betel passport), an important symbol of Kabir. He writes some holy words on the leaf. It is believed that *Pan Parvana* ensures one's salvation. It is followed by the step of *Tinaka Torayi*. There is a thin piece of wood or grass. It is broken and thrown behind the follower. It signifies that a *jiva* is now liberated from 84 (the cycle of rebirth). Finally, the *Mahant* chants some holy words or *mantras* into each *jiva*'s ears¹⁷⁶. *Tinaka Torayi* is accompanied by the performance of the following verse:

¹⁷⁴ On this day, the *Mahant* keeps fast and bathes two times in the morning and evening.

¹⁷⁵ Lorenzen describes it as the fifth stage of *Chauka Arti*: 'The fifth stage of the *Chauka* ritual is the *nariyal morana* (breaking the coconuts). The *Mahant* picks up each coconut and waves over it a betel leaf which he has first dipped in the glass of *Panchamrit*. Then he waves the coconut over the *jyoti* flame and finally smashes it on the stone slab placed to his right. At this time, the *bhagats* and *sadhus* sing the "*Nariyal morne ka sabda*" (songs of breaking the coconuts)' (p. 244).

¹⁷⁶ Deep Narayan Das says that *Jiva* is instructed to give up all evils e.g. excessive indulgence in lust and *Maya*, consumption of alcohol and non-vegetarian food etc. He or she is also instructed to practice *bhakti* regularly

Jamuniya ki daal saheb tod dijiye
Ek jamuniya ki chaudah daal, saar shabd se to tod dijiye.
Jamuniya ki daal saheb tod dijiye
Guru hamare gyan johari heera padarath tol dijiye
Jamuniya ki daal saheb tod dijiye
Yah sansar vishaya ras mate, bharam kevadiya khol dijiye
Jamuniya ki daal saheb tod dijiye
 [Saheb, break the branch of the blackberry tree.
 There are 14 branches of the blackberry tree, break them with *Saar Shabda*.
 Saheb, break the branch of the blackberry tree.
 Our *Guru*, the jeweller of knowledge, weigh the diamond (life).
 Saheb, break the branch of the blackberry tree.
 This world is full of lust, break the door of hallucination.
 Saheb, break the branch of the berries.]

Finally, the saints and ordinary followers take *Prasad* of coconuts and other fruits from the *Acharya*¹⁷⁷. The saints and *Mahants* who want to depart just after the ceremony are given clothes and some money as farewell by the *Acharya*. Those who stay there on that day are given *bhandara*.

Death Anniversary of Thakur Das

The second important occasion which is celebrated at this *Math* is the Death Anniversary of Thakur Das, the eleventh *Mahant* of the *Math*¹⁷⁸. It is celebrated on 1 May. The morning begins with the recitation of *Bijak* along with of *Havan Puja*. It continues for 2-3 hours. A large number of *Mahants*, saints and ordinary followers participate in this ritual as

freeing himself or herself from earthly activities etc. According to him, the followers need to follow some strict rules of behaviour. Since *Pan Parvana* is a path leading to heaven, it needs a lot of sacrifices.

This is one of the most significant factors that distinguish the *Maths* and sects (which organize *Chauka* ritual) from those (which do not perform this ritual). It strengthens their hold on followers and attracts them more. Those *Maths* and sects which do not perform *Chauka* ritual also convey such messages during their *satsang* and *pravachan* programmes. However, these messages accompanied by *Chauka* ritual appear to influence Kabirpanthi followers more profoundly.

¹⁷⁷ Lorenzen calls it the ninth stage of *Chauka Arti*: "The ninth and final stage of the *Chauka* is the distribution of the *Prasad*. The singing stops and all the sadhus, bhagats, and guests come up one by one and receive from *Mahant* a handful of the cut-up fruits, a coconut meat, and sweets" (p. 248). Lorenzen describes nine stages of *Chauka Arti*, but according to *Chauka Chandrika*, a Dharmadasi Kabirpanthi book, there are sixteen stages in *Chauka* ritual.

¹⁷⁸ The Major development of the *Math* is the contribution of Thakur Das. He got a school started in the adjoining property of the *Math*. The school "Sant Kabir Mahant Thakur Das Children Academy" is named after Thakur Das.

audiences. This ritual is followed by a huge *bhandara* in which not only the Kabirpanthi followers but also the local non-Kabirpanthis participate.

About at 3 pm, *satsang* and *pravachan* programmes are held. A large number of *Mahants* and saints give *pravachans* and many singers perform *bhajans*. Then, the *Mahants*, saints and ordinary followers pay their reverence to Thakur Das by offering flowers at his *Samadhi*. It is followed by the performance of *Sandhya Arti* in which all present there participate. The Death Anniversary is concluded with the evening *bhandara* (feast) to all the followers.

This *Math* has also been contributing to the spread of the Kabirpanth in the Harihar Mela of Sonapur (will be discussed in the next section) for five days every year.

Thus, Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math* occupies a significant position among all Kabirpanthi sects in Bihar and outside. The importance of the celebration of Kabir Jayanti is not less than that organized at Banaras. In fact, the celebration of Kabir Jayanti has been one of the main reasons of its popularity in Bihar and outside. With all its 365 branches, it has emerged as a prominent *Acharya Gaddi*.

Mahadev Math-1

Mahadev *Math-1* is another very popular Kabir *Math* at Rosera. It is also called Satya Kabir Vachan Vanshiya Mool Gaddi Mahadev *Math* or Vachan Vanshiya/Vanshi Acharya Mool Gaddi. It is claimed to be an independent *Acharya Gaddi* of Kabirpanth. It was founded in 1806 by Krishna Karakh, an inhabitant of Rosera¹⁷⁹. He was a Vaishya and belonged to the Suri caste. He used to visit nearby villages and hawk rice and pulse laden on an ox. During

¹⁷⁹ According to Suresh Saheb, the present *Mahant* of the *Math*, when the Dharmadasi *Vansha Bayalis* was broken after the 12th generation, Kabir gave *darshan* to one Krishna Karakh Saheb who was an inhabitant of Lakshmipur Mohalla of Rosera. Some of the followers associated with this *Math* claim that Krishna Karakh Saheb was an incarnation of Dharmadas. In Purendu Ranjan's version, the followers of this *Vachan Vanshi Gaddi* reject the belief that Kabir had not authorized *Vansha Bayalis* to be the *Mahants* after Dharmadas:

his visits, he would sing *bhajans* of Kabir to the accompaniment of a *Khajadi* or a pair of *manjiras* (cymbals). He became popular among the local people. Many of them became his disciples. It is said that later, Kabir himself appeared at Rosera and gave him *darshan* and instructed him to initiate a panth¹⁸⁰. According to the tradition of this *Math*, Kabir Saheb gave him 'Vachan' (sacred words) or 'Pan Vachan'¹⁸¹, as *diksha*. This is why the *Gaddi* of Krishna Karakh is called "Vachan Vanshiya/Vanshi" and his sect is called "Kabir Vachan Vansha".

I also recorded a different version about the establishment of Mahadev *Math* from the followers of Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*. According to Deep Narayan Das, the *Mahant* of Bagicha *Math*:

There used to be one Kishun Das here (Bagicha *Math*). Previously, during the periods of *Mahant* Awadh Das and Kashi Das, 70-75 saints lived here (at Bagicha *Math*). There was poverty in those days. Many people used to become saints... It is said that here the puffed rice was served to them as the morning meal. The *pangat* used to be organized only one time in the evening. The *Mahant* and the saints used to sit together to take dinner. One day, Kishun Das sat in the *pangat*. In those days, Awadh Das was the *Mahant*. It was a rule that people sitting in the *pangat* would start eating their food after the *Mahant* drank water kept in a glass. However, Kishun Das started taking food before Awadh Das drank water. Awadh Das punished him by saying that he could not live here any longer. Kishun Das had to leave the *Math*. There used to be a market of the Suri community at Rosera. He began to wander in the market singing Kabir's verses to the accompaniment of a *Khajadi*. He further adopted the name Krishna Karakh Saheb and founded the Mahadev *Math*.

Thus, according to the narrative of Deep Narayan Das, Krishna Karakh was previously attached to Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*¹⁸². Ranjan describes three versions of the establishment of the Mahadev *Math*. In one of his versions, Krishna Karakh left Bagicha

They (the followers of Vachan Vansha and the followers of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth) tend to deny to each other the status of being a true Kabirpanthi branch. Vachan Vanshi branch stresses the point that Kabir's real panth originated from the *Vachan* (words), given first to Dharmadas and later to Krishna Karakh. According to them, Kabir did not authorize any of the sons of Dharmadas to lead the panth. (p. 114)

¹⁸⁰ A picture of Kabir giving *darshan* and *diksha* to Krishna Karakh who is with his ox has been inscribed on a wall of the *Math*.

¹⁸¹ A certificate or an order to initiate a branch/*Math*.

¹⁸² Suresh Saheb rejected any association of Krishna Karakh with Lakshmipur Bagicha *Math*. He said that the home of Krishna Karakh was situated at the Lakshmipur Mohalla.

Math due to the increasing dominance of Brahmanism at Lakshmiipur Bagicha *Math*. The following are his versions:

Another Acharya Gaddi was founded at Rosara in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Its founder was Krishna Karakh Das, an inhabitant of Rosara.... He was the son of Braj Mohan Karakh and was a *grihastha* (married man with a family). His wife had died after his marriage and, then, he had started to live with his brother's widow.

Some disciples said that Krishna Karakh was initially a disciple of Bagicha math, Rosara; but his uncommon lifestyle, and his aversion to the growing Brahmanical dominance at Bagicha math, compelled the then Mahant of this math to disown him as his disciple. In their version, Krishna Karakh, was in fact, the leader of a Kabirpanthi group which broke off its relation with the then authorities of Bagicha math. Krishna Karakh was one of the eminent disciples who did not get as much respect from the authorities there as he deserved. Consequently, Krishna Karakh and his supporters were quite unhappy about the increasing arrogance of the upper caste Mahants at Bagicha math till then. Krishna Karakh's supporters further wanted that Krishna Karakh should be chosen as the next Mahant, but their attempts were foiled by the concerted counter-measures taken by the Bagicha math's authorities, most of whom came from upper castes. Frustrated, Krishna Karakh initiated another Kabirpanthi branch in Rosara in 1814¹⁸³. To legitimize the foundation of his math, he chose one of the Mahants from Orissa as his guru who, in turn, authorized him to run a math. It is presently known as Krishna Karakhi Vachan Vanshi Mahadeo math at Rosara.

Another version tells us a different story. According to it, Krishna, the first part of his name was the name of the widow¹⁸⁴ with whom he was living. She used to accompany him even at market places, where Karakh Das used to go as a seller of rice and pulse. Both were famous *bhajan* (devotional song) singers as well and often used to perform at public places. His growing popularity, as a singer and a devotee, helped him in attracting large crowds. Subsequently, he founded Mahadeo math at Rosara, encouraged by these admirers.

Whatever be the fact, the followers and Mahants associated with the Krishna Karakh branch do not accept the above versions about their *adi* Acharya. They narrate the story in a different way. According to them, Krishna Karakh was a true devotee of Kabir and in an hour of deep meditation, Kabir found in him love and devotion equal in measure to that attained by Dharmadas who was Kabir's immediate disciples.¹⁸⁵ So, Kabir gave Krishna Karakh the *Vachan Pranam* to begin a new branch for the *panth*. Thereafter, Krishna Karakh formed an independent branch which came to be known as Krishna Karakhi *Vachan-Vanshi* branch centred at Rosara. They do not agree to the belief that Krishna Karakh was ever related to Bagicha math. (pp. 42-44)

¹⁸³ However, according to the list of the *Mahants* published by the Mahadev *Math*, it was established in 1806.

¹⁸⁴ It is said that the wife of Krishna Karakh had died shortly after his marriage and, then, he had started to live with his brother's widow.

¹⁸⁵ However, Suresh Das says that Kabir physically appeared before him.

Ranjan supports the first version and considers the reaction against the Brahmanical dominance to be the main reason of the foundation of Mahadev *Math*.

The foundation of the Krishna Karakhi branch, however, had much to do with the growing dissensions in the Dharmadasi branch in the early nineteenth century, particularly the resentment against the upper caste dominance at Bagicha math. A group of lower caste followers, under the leadership of Krishna Karakh, objected to the neglect of Kabirpanthi principles by the upper caste Mahants. Their resentment took the form of a split; and the rebel group, whose arguments were not properly attended to by the then Mahant, decided to separate from the Dharmadasi branch itself, to which the Bagicha Math was associated. Thus, an independent Kabirpanthi branch called Krishna Karakhi Vachan Vanshi under the stewardship of Mahadeo math came into existence. (p. 91)

The claim of Ranjan appears right because when Krishna Karakh left the Bagicha *Math*, Awadh Das who was a Brahmin was its *Mahant*. Awadh Das was preceded by Kashi Das, another Brahmin *Mahant*.

At Mahadev *Math*, all *Mahants* come from castes like Suri, Goala, Koiri and Kurmi, intermediate castes. There have been 12 *Mahants* of the Mahadev *Mool Gaddi* since its establishment: Krishna Karakh Sahib (1806-1838), Dambar Sahib (1838-1862), Jhakari Sahib (1862-1875), Guru Palat Saheb (1875-1886), Ram Bharosh Saheb (1886-1902), Akal Sahib (1902-1910), Tahal Saheb (1910-1922), Baldev Saheb (1922-1972), Jivaksh Saheb (1972-1983), Yadu Saheb (1983-1988), Rajnarayan Saheb (1988-2017) and Suresh Saheb (2017-Present). The *Samadhis* of all the previous *Mahants* are built at the *Math*. The portraits and photos of some *Mahants* are also hung there.

Krishna Karakh had four prominent disciples who founded many branches of this *Math* at several places in Bihar. In his *Kabir and Kabirpanth*, K. Dwivedi mentions four prominent disciples who played a great role in spreading Kabirpanth at many places in Bihar: “Khushiyal Das, Qadir Das, Devi Das¹⁸⁶, Sanfuldas established their *Maths* respectively at

¹⁸⁶ Devidatt Das.

Hardiya¹⁸⁷, Vishanapur, Nisihara (these three are situated at Dharbhanga) and Neola¹⁸⁸ (in Bhagalpur). Later, a large number of sub-branches of these branches were founded, which contributed to spreading the *Mool Acharya Gaddi* to a large extent. There may be Muslim followers in this branch. Qadirdas was a Muslim himself” (p. 186).

Vachan Vanshi sect is now getting more prominent in Bihar. It has introduced some new aspects, which have attracted a large number of Kabirpanthi followers in its fold. Like the Dharmadasi Damakheda Kabirpanth¹⁸⁹, it has also initiated a tradition of establishing or giving recognition to the *Maths* headed by married saints with a few variations:

[T]he largest number of *maths* in this region seem to belong to the Krishna Karakhi branch which introduced a new, easier mode of *maths*’ formation in Kabirpanth. The Krishna Karakhi Acharya Gaddi, also known as *Vachan Vanshi*¹⁹⁰, at Rosera, under its programme for expansion, began a new tradition, which allowed *Grihastha* (household) disciples also to declare their family house as a math. In fact, the permission for a householder to be the Mahant of a Kabirpanthi math had earlier been prevailing in the Dharmadasi

¹⁸⁷ Now in Samastipur district.

¹⁸⁸ Now in Saharsa district.

¹⁸⁹ The tradition of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth is *Bind Vansha/Vansha Bayalis*. The *Maths* associated with Damakheda Dharmadasi Kabirpanth are called *Vansha Dori Maths* while the *Maths* associated with *Vachan Vansha* are called *Vachan Vanshi*. There are differences between both, largely related to their ideologies and practices:

1) *Mahants* of the *Vansha Dori Maths* base their claims to legitimacy on descent from the kinsmen of Dharmadas, as these *Maths* are sub-branches of the *Acharya Gaddis* led by the kinsmen of Dharmadas, presently centred at Damakheda in Chhattisgarh. On the other hand, the *Vachan Vanshi Mahants* believe that after the death of Dharmadas, the words (*vachan*) given to him by Kabir was transferred to Krishna Karakh by Kabir himself and so, the centre of real Kabirpanth exists at the Mahadev *Math*, Rosera.

2) There are married and celibate *Mahants* in both the tradition. Apart from the *Acharya* of *Vansha Dori* (Prakashmuninam Saheb, the present *Acharya*), no married *Mahant* can establish new *Maths*. Only celibate *Mahants* are allowed to found new *Maths* although the *Mahants* of the new *Maths* may be married or celibate. However, *Vachan Vanshi Maths* do not maintain such restriction, and, so *Vachan Vanshi* branch has a large number of married *Mahants*. The religious legitimacy of forming household *Maths* has increased the number of *Vachan Vanshi Maths* considerably.

3) The manners of offering *Bandagi/Saheb Bandagi* in both are also different. All Kabirpanthi sects have formed their distinctive manners of performing *Bandagi*, which differentiate them from one another. Through the *Bandagi* performed by a disciple, one can identify which sect he or she is affiliated to. Dharmadasi followers sit on their feet with hands held forward in begging posture and seek blessings from seniors who keep sitting crossed-leg meanwhile. They repeat it three times looking at their faces and uttering the phrase *Saheb Bandagi* each time. In the *Vachan Vansha*, a disciple has to touch the feet of seniors by the nodal point of his nose three times. He keeps his fingers around the senior’s foot and touches it with his nose. In this branch, a senior is also expected to do the same to his juniors in *Bandagi*, but rarely does so.

¹⁹⁰ According to Purendu Ranjan, “on dismissal, Krishna Karakh made his own following. With the support of his initiates, he founded Mahadeo *Math* and declared it an Acharya Gaddi, differing from Bagicha math in certain principals. Karakh’s Acharya Gaddi came to be known as the *Vachan Vanshi Acharya Gaddi*, whereas Bagicha *Math* remained the Acharya Gaddi of *Vansha Dori maths*” (p. 89).

branch, but only as a successor in a *nirvan math*. In the latter, however, after becoming a Mahant, s(he) had to drop family connections. Krishna Karakhi branch is said to have relaxed this tradition further by allowing a householder to declare his/her family house itself as the centre of a separate math without renunciation of family life. As a result of this relaxation, a large number of Krishna Karakhi disciples came forward to seek '*Vachan Praman*' (certificate) in order to form a Kabirpanthi math. These *maths*, run by a householder Mahant, came to be known as *Pariwarik* (family-based) maths¹⁹¹; these are also known as '*sthan*' in certain parts in the panth.

In addition to these *Pariwarik* maths, many *Virakta/Nirvan* maths in the Krishna Karakhi branch also came into existence at several places. Some of these have been running since the mid-nineteenth century. (Ranjan, pp. 51-52)

Unlike other Kabirpanthi sects, there are *Aguas* in *Vachan Vanshi* tradition, who play an important role in spreading it, especially in villages. A *Vachan Vanshi Mahant* deputed one of his senior disciples as an *Agua*, belonging to the same village. The *Agua*¹⁹² acts as a mediator between the *Mahant* and disciples in the village. He is assigned two tasks. First, he initiates novices into the panth. He keeps looking for potential members who can be inducted in the Kabirpanth. He conducts the first stage of their initiation. Second, he has to keep an eye on all disciples. He leads all the rituals of disciples in the absence of *Mahant*. In case of any lapse on the part of a disciple, he brings it to the notice of the *Mahant*. On his report, a disciple can be ousted from the Kabirpanthi community or punished for his lapse. It is expected that a disciple should always keep in touch with his *Agua*.

I have also observed that the *Acharya* and *Mahants* of Krishna Karakh sect spend most of the days of every year performing rituals like *Chauka Arti* and *Guru Puja* at the homes of their disciples and followers and spreading their panth among the masses. Suresh Saheb, the present *Acharya*, claims, "I continue to visit my disciples and spreading the panth

¹⁹¹ Among *Pariwarik Maths*, as the *gaddi* of *Mahant* is hereditary, it goes to a son or a kinsman. Generally, a kinsman is considered only when the *Mahant* has no son. The formality observed in such cases is to gather some *sadhus* and the *Acharya* of the *Vachan Vanshi* sect. If the *Acharya* himself is not free, he sends one of his senior disciples to the meeting. In the meeting, the outgoing *Mahant* announces the name of the new *Mahant*. The *Acharya* or his representative places a white *Pagadi* (turban) on his head. After that, some rituals follow and the tenure of the new *Mahant* begins.

¹⁹² At a *Math*, an *Agua* has high status and he sits close to the *Mahant*. Sometimes, *Mahants* are selected from among these *Aguas*. At the village level, if there is any dispute among disciples, the *Agua* takes a leading role in resolving the issue. In a village, disciples lead their religious life under the command of their *Agua*.

almost for 330 days in a year. *Satsangs* and *pravachans* are organized every day in Bihar¹⁹³. Many become my disciples”.

Unlike the *Acharyas* of Kashi Kabir Chaura *Math*, Kharsiya/Lahartara, Damakheda, and the *Mahant* of Maghar *Math*, I find the *Acharyas* of the *Maths* like Mahadev *Math* (*Mool Gaddi*), Vachan Vanshacharya *Gaddi Mahadev Math* (a splinter *Math* of Mahadev *Math*), and Bagicha *Math* more active in spreading their respective sects. One can also find an economic factor behind it. Since Lahartara, Kabir Chaura, Maghar are directly associated with Kabir's life and relics, and Damakheda with Dharmadas, the second most popular figure after Kabir, Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers regularly visit these centres. They also offer some money to *Mahants*. Resourceful followers of Kabir regularly give them a handsome sum of money for the development and spread of the panth. This becomes a source of earnings for their *Mahants/Acharyas*. I do not find the *Acharyas* of these *Gaddis* as active in spreading Kabir and Kabirpanth as the *Mahants* of their affiliated *Maths* and major and minor new independent *Gaddis*.

In case of other Kabirpanthi sects and *Maths*, the Kabirpanthi followers visit them especially on the occasions like Kabir Jayanti and others. So, the regular visits of their *Mahants* at the homes of their followers become the main source of earnings to run the *Maths* and for its other expenditures¹⁹⁴. Followers are encouraged to organize the rituals like *Chauka Arti* and *Guru Puja* and the recitation of *Bijak* accompanied by *Havan Puja* at the homes and on these occasions, the *Acharyas* or *Mahants* visit their homes and perform these rituals.

¹⁹³ Vidyanand Saheb, the *Mahant* of Mahadev *Math-2*, also comments: “*Satsangs* and *pravachans* are always performed in every corner of Bihar. *Satsang* programmes in such larger numbers do not take place anywhere else.”

¹⁹⁴ A Kabirpanthi *Math* has mainly two types of expenditure: first, on the maintenance of a *Math's* buildings and hospitality to its regular residents and visitors; second, in organizing religious festivals. Generally, a resourceful *Math* has a larger building and more residents than less propertied *Maths*. Some of the resident *sadhus* take part in agricultural work and in attending to visitors. A *Math* also feeds all those who attend the celebrations at Kabir Jayanti and others. Every *Math* has to organize these festivals, and arrange for free accommodation and serve meals for two or three consecutive days without charge.

These rituals also extend Kabirpanth by attracting new converts in the sects. In this process, the *Acharyas* and *Mahants* of Krishna Karakhi tradition have also established a large number of *Maths*¹⁹⁵ in Bihar.

The largest number of *Maths* in Samastipur and its neighbouring districts are now affiliated to the Krishna Karakhi *Vachan Vanshi Math*. As noted above, this branch was initiated in 1806. In spite of its foundation later than the earlier sub-branches of Jagudasi, Bhagodasi, Kabir Chaura and Dharmadasi¹⁹⁶, it has become more popular. Its popularity and expansion may be ascribed to some of the relaxations introduced in the rules of *Math's* formation¹⁹⁷.

Ranjan relates the reason of the spread of *Vachan Vansha Gaddi* to the favourable conditions provided by the modern reformist associations (which were getting active roughly around the same time) in the colonial period:

The intensive phase of the Kabirpanthi expansion, particularly of the Krishna Karakhi *Vachan Vanshi* branch, may be attributed to certain developments in the colonial period, and to the enthusiasm common in a newly formed organization. As pointed out earlier, the Krishna Karakhi branch probably had just four or five maths around the mid-nineteenth century but in the following decades, it saw the formation of a number of maths a strong indicator of the enthusiasm flowing. During these decades, reformist organizations such as, Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and some other local reformist associations had also begun to open their centres. Their activities seem to have given fillip to the expansion of sects like Kabirpanth. (p. 57)

¹⁹⁵ Vidyanand Saheb comments on the role of the *Mahants* in spreading the panth in connection with Bihar and Madhya Pradesh: "Bihar and Madhya Pradesh have the largest numbers of Kabirpanthis. There are followers of Kabir in whole India, but these two states have the largest number. The main reason of this is that the spread of the influence of the *Acharya Gaddis*. Many are made *Mahants* who spread Kabirpanth."

¹⁹⁶ Purendu Ranjan says: "It appears that Kabir Chaura, Jagudasi, Bhagodasi and Dharmadasi branches lost their earlier vigour towards the end of the nineteenth century. I noted that very few maths of these branches were established during the 20th century. It seems that the Krishna Karakhi branch assembled the initiative to establish new maths more than the other branches in Kabirpanth" (p. 56).

¹⁹⁷ According to *Vachan Vanshi* followers, while every disciple in the panth has the right to form a *Math*, only *Vachan Pranam* has to be sought from a *Mahant* before one opens a *Math*. A *Vachan Pranam* is a form of certificate, which is issued by a *Mahant*. However, preference is given to the one who has been an *Agua* or a *Guru* for a considerable period of time.

Kabir in Books at Mahadev Math-1

This sect has been significantly contributing to the spread of Kabir's messages and its own version of Kabirpanth through books. It has sought to produce and enrich its literature so that it can be measured up to a Kabirpanthi sect. Krishna Karakh himself was believed to be a great scholar. K. Dwivedi points out, "He must have been a great scholar. Many books are said to have been written by him. Among them, the *Panji Panth Prakash* occupies a special place" (p. 186). The following are the popular books of this Math: *Panji Panth Prakash*, *Sampurna Kabir Bijak*, *Shabdarnit*, *Sampurna Kabir Jivan Darshan*, *Sampurna Sandhya Path*, *Kabir Bhajan Sagar*, *Sadguru Kabir Saheb Ki Seekh* etc.

The *Panji Panth Prakash* is believed to be a collection of the *vanis* and teachings given to Krishna Karakh by Kabir. The followers of Krishna Karakhi sect claim it to be an invaluable treasure. It includes an essence of the messages of Kabir and Kabirpanth propagated in the books of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. It also sheds light on all the main principals of Kabirpanth highlighted by Jagu Dasi sect, Bhagu Dasi sect and Kabir Chaura sect. It has also included the principles of the Parakhi Kabirpanth. Thus, this book forms a synthesis of the religious principles of all Kabirpanthi sects. Carrying the messages of all prominent Kabir sects, this book establishes this sect as one having the authority of Kabir as well as makes it acceptable among all Kabirpanthi followers.

The *Panji Panth Prakash* is written on the pattern of the *Anurag Sagar*, the most important book of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. Like the *Anurag Sagar*, it is in a verse form and is written in a dialogue form between Kabir and Krishna Karakh. Therefore, it is also called '*Kabir-Krishna Dialogue*'. The stories of Kabir's incarnations and *Chauka* ritual have also been equally given prominence. However, it competes with the *Anurag Sagar* in significance, especially in Bihar and replaces Dharmadas with Krishna Karakh validating and establishing

the authority and influence of Krishna Karakh sect among the followers of all Kabirpanthi sects.

Since the *Bijak* is considered to be the main composition of Kabir in most of Kabirpanthi sects, the *Vachan Vansha* has also its own version of the *Bijak* along with a commentary, known as the *Sampurna Kabir Bijak*. Suresh Saheb says: “The *Kabir Bijak* is the *mool grantha* of Kabir Saheb. We must follow it. I follow the *vanis* of Kabir and preach others to follow them.” However, unlike many Kabir centres, the recitation of the *Bijak* along with the *Havan Puja* is not performed here. Suresh Saheb considers it to be a Brahmanical practice and prohibits it. Purendu Ranjan also writes: “The recital of *Bijak*, however, is not accorded much importance in the Krishna Karakhi branch. The contents of *Bijak* are considered important as these are the utterances of *Satguru* Kabir, but they argue that the ritual recitation of the text is like the *Ramayana Path* (recital of the Ramayana) prevalent among Ramanandis in the area. Therefore, they eschew such a practice. (p. 164)

I found another important book entitled *Shabdarnit* edited by Raj Narayan Saheb, the 11th *Mahant* of Mahadev *Math-1* (*Mool Gaddi*). It is also written in the verse form. It includes those verses which are recited here as the Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti*. It is interesting to observe that it has three Nepali *bhajans* attributed to Kabir, which shows its spread in Nepal. This *Math* has a strong following in Nepal, Bhutan, Burma, Tibet and also Bangladesh.

Ceremonies and Rituals at the Mahadev Math

Like all Kabirpanthi sects, *Guru Puja*/Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti* are performed respectively in the morning and evening. The Morning Prayer is accompanied by a collective meditation and performance of *Guru Vandana*. The *Sandhya Arti* is performed in the evening and is accompanied by a *Mangal Arti* song.

Annual Ceremonies and Rituals at Mahadev Math

The following are the important annual ceremonies of this *Math*: Kabir Jayanti, Death Anniversary, and Kabir *Sant Sammelan* (religious gathering of Kabirpanthi saints).

Celebration of Kabir Jayanti

At this *Math*, Kabir Jayanti is celebrated for three days. The followers of this sect from Bihar, Nepal, Burma, Bhutan, Bengal etc. start gathering at this *Math* 3-4 days before the Kabir Jayanti. The main programmes are held for two days. On the preceding day, *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes are organized. The main day of Kabir Jayanti begins with the ceremony of *Jhandatolan* (the hoisting of a white flag in the name of Kabir). It is followed by the *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes. Like Bagicha *Math*, many singers also perform Kabir *bhajans* and *satsangs* here. Suresh Das also supports the performances of Kabir *bhajans* by women singers. On this day, the evening *bhandara* begins from 6 pm onwards. It is followed by the performance of *Chauka* ritual.

Death Anniversary of Raj Narayan Das and Kabir *Sant Sammelan*

Raj Narayan Das was the 11th *Mahant* of Mahadev *Mool Gaddi*. He is said to have played a great role in spreading this panth in the entire Bihar and outside. His death anniversary¹⁹⁸ is celebrated on 26 November. Kabir *Sant Sammelan* is organized once every five years. There is no fixed day for this. Like Kabir Jayanti, on the occasions of the death anniversary of Raj Narayan Das and Kabir *Sant Sammelan*, main rituals and ceremonies are held for two days. The main rituals are *satsang* and *pravachan* programmes, *Guru Puja* and *Chauka* ritual accompanied by *bhandara*. Mainly, the *Mahants*, saints and lay followers associated with the *Acharya Gaddi* and its branches gather at the *Sant Sammelan*.

¹⁹⁸ I found a common practice that the present *Mahants* of many *Math* celebrate the Death Anniversary of his *Guru Mahant*.

Huge gatherings of disciples during celebrations tend to impress and arouse in outsiders an interest in Kabirpanthi activities. Many of them also come to see the gatherings of Kabirpanthi *sadhus* and lay disciples on these occasions. Performance of *bhajans*, *pravachans*, *Chauka* ritual and *bhandara* in these celebrations inspire many participants to join the fold in due course. Suresh Das says that during the performance of the *Chauka* ritual, many new members are also initiated in the panth.

Vachan Vanshi Mool Gaddi has earned the significance of a prominent *Acharya Gaddi* and has developed its strong network, especially in Bihar by establishing and developing many *Maths* at its different places. Krishna Karakh, the founder *Mahant*, is seen as an incarnation of Dharmadas. The legend of Kabir's appearing at Rosera and giving *darshan* to Krishna Karakh Saheb appeals to the followers. The introduction of the aspect of *Aguas* and the tradition of establishing *Pariwarik Maths* distinguish it from other Kabirpanthi sects. It has also been a strong voice of protest against Brahmanism as it is believed to have been established as the reaction to a Brahmanical discrimination against Krishna Karakh at Bagicha *Math*. Since it has also been a strong voice of protest against Brahmanism, it has attracted more people of lower castes from Bihar in its fold.

Mahadev Math-2

Mahadev *Math-2* is a splinter *Acharya Gaddi* of *Vachan Vanshiya Mool Gaddi*. It was founded in 1934¹⁹⁹ by Ram Jivan Saheb, a prominent saint of the *Vachan Vansha Mool Gaddi*, who had a large following. He was a disciple of Tahal Saheb, the seventh *Acharya* of *Vachan Vansha Mool Gaddi*. After the death of Atal Saheb, on account of the controversy regarding the headship of the *Acharya Gaddi*, he left it and a few years later, he laid the

¹⁹⁹ However, Ranjan describes that it was founded in 1960s. He points out: "In 1960s, however, the Mahadeo math itself split. While the supporters of the breakaway math attributed the disputed selection of the Mahant as the main reason, the Mahant and some disciples of the old Mahadeo math held the unconditional practices of Ram Jivan Das, the founder of the splinter group math, responsible for his dismissal from their math" (p. 108).

foundation of a new *Acharya Gaddi* at a distance of about 200 meters from the Mahadev Vachan Vansha Mool Gaddi. This new *Acharya Gaddi* is known as Satya Kabir Vachan Vanshacharya Gaddi (Mahadev *Math-2*) and has attracted a large number of followers from Bihar, Assam, Sikkim, Kolkata, Jammu and Kashmir etc. in India and from many places in Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar (Burma), Bangladesh and Tibet.

Ram Jivan Saheb died in 1976 and was succeeded by his disciple Vidyanand Saheb²⁰⁰ who has led and enriched his legacy. He is the present *Mahant* of the *Math*²⁰¹ and has been contributing significantly to the spread of his panth. He says: "I always visit my disciples in Nepal, Bhutan, Assam, Bengal, Sikkim, Bihar, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir etc. I spend most of my time in spreading Kabirpanth and Kabir's messages among people.... Many new people become Kabirpanthis." He claims that millions of followers are associated with this *Math*.

The followers from Nepal and Bhutan have also been attracted to this *Math* on account of Purna Yogeshwari Das, a woman disciple of Ram Jivan Saheb. Yogeshwari Das was the wife of J. B. Pradhan, the Commissioner of Southern Bhutan, and was the sister of King Mahendra Singh of Nepal. Many followers from Nepal and Bhutan inspired by her strong *bhakti* of Kabir joined the Mahadev *Math-2*.

On the behest of Purna Yogeshwari Das, Vidyanand Saheb has built a temple at the *Math*. She contributed 1400 rupees for the construction of this temple and pleaded with Vidyanand Saheb to install a statue of Ram Jivan Saheb with her seeking blessings from Ram Jivan Saheb with the folded hands in the temple. A picture of Kabir giving *diksha* (initiation) to Krishna Karakh Saheb (who has his ox with him) and another picture demonstrating

²⁰⁰ Vidyanand Saheb is a scholar of Kabir and has his Ph.D. on "A Comparative Study of *Kabir Bijak* and *Gita*".

²⁰¹ Vidyanand Saheb has renovated the *Math*.

Kabir's birth in the Lahartara pond have been inscribed on the walls of the temple. This temple attracts the followers of all Kabirpanthi sects from Bihar and outside.

Satya Kabir Vachan Vanshacharya Gaddi (Mahadev *Math-2*) has most of the principles and doctrines similar to those of the Mahadev *Acharya Gaddi*. It also has popularized two couplets relating to Krishna Karakh. The first one describes how Krishna Karakh Saheb used to do his business. The second one sheds light on his family and how Kabir appeared at Rosera and enlightened him with his teachings:

Karun vyapar hridaya dharidheera, rosera gram gandika teera
Naam hamar krishna hai bhai, pad hain karakh kahe samujhai
(I do my business with patience at Rosera village situated on the bank of the Gandak.
O brothers, my name is Krishna Karakh; Karakh utters and explains this verse.)
Brijmohan Karakh ke puta, matunam lakshmi sanyuta
Prakat bhaye sahib yahi thama, kinha updesh satyakehi nama
(I am the son of Brijmohan Karakh, Lakshmi Sanyuta is the name of my mother.
Here appeared Saheb and peached and enlightened me with truth.)

This *Math* also gives prominence to the *Panji Panth Prakash*. However, it contains the name of Vidyanand Saheb on its cover page and an interpolation of the names of Ram Jivan Saheb and Vidyanand Saheb has also been made in the chapter describing the *Vanshawali* (lineage) of the *Mahants/Acharyas*. The following are the *Acharyas* included in the *Vanshawali*: Krishna Karakh Sahib, Dambar Sahib, Jhakari Sahib, Ram Bharosh Saheb (fifth at the *Mool Gaddi*), Tahal Saheb (seventh at the *Mool Gaddi*), Baldev Saheb (eighth at the *Mool Gaddi*) and Vidyanand Saheb (present). This version also includes an Introduction written by Ram Japi Sharma, a follower of this *Math*.

In spite of the similarities of some doctrines and principles, Mahadev *Math- 2* differs from the *Vachan Vanshi Mool Gaddi* on certain grounds. Unlike the *Mool Gaddi*, the recitation of the *Bijak* accompanied by *Havan Puja* is practised here. More respect towards Dharmadas and the principals of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth is seen here. Suresh Das, the *Acharya* of the *Mool Gaddi*, says that they are not from Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. However,

Vidyanand Shastri says that the ritualistic practices of Dharmadasi Kabirpanthi are followed here. One of the reasons of its inclination towards Dharmadasi Kabirpanth, which I discovered, is that Ram Jivan Das used to have a strong relationship with Uditnam Saheb, the third *Acharya* of Kharsiya *Gaddi* and had accompanied him in the fund-raising movement of establishing the vast temple of Kabir at Lahartara in Banaras. The influence of the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth has passed into this tradition from Uditnam Saheb and Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir *Math*. On the other hand, following Ram Jivan Saheb, Vidyanand Saheb has also tried to preserve the composite nature of his panth so that it may be more acceptable among Kabirpanthi followers of all sects.

Rituals and Ceremonies at Mahadev Math-2

The rituals and ceremonies organized at this *Math* are popular among the followers of different Kabirpanthi sects. Like all other Kabirpanthi *Acharya Gaddis*, it also has daily and annual rituals. Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti* are performed respectively in the morning and evening. During the Morning Prayer and *Sandhya Arti*, the verses which are recited at Lahartara Dharmadasi *Math* are also recited here. However, unlike the Dharmadasi tradition, *Sandhya Arti* songs are also followed by the collective recitation of the verses of the *Bijak*, which shows the influence of Kabir Chaura sect. This is to be noted that the Kabirpanthis of Satya Kabir Vachan Vanshacharya Gaddi follow a mixed tradition of both the Kabir Chaura and Dharmadasi sects in order to wield authority and influence among Kabirpanthi followers of different Kabirpanthi sects.

Annual Rituals and Ceremonies at Mahadev Math-2

Kabir Jayanti and the Death Anniversary of Ram Jivan Saheb are the two main ceremonies which are celebrated at this *Math*. The Death Anniversary of Ramjivan Saheb, the founder *Mahant*, is a more significant celebration at Mahadev *Math-2*. It has popularized

and extended the influence of this *Math* among the followers of all Kabirpanthi sects. It is celebrated on the fifth day of *Agrahayana* (November-December). It is celebrated for two days. The Kabirpanthi followers of this sect and other Kabirpanthi sects start gathering at this *Math* three-four days before the main day. On the preceding day, *satsang*, *pravachan* and *bhajan* programmes are formally organised. Many *Mahants* and saints give *pravachans*. Kabir singers perform *bhajans* and *satsangs*. A large number of women singers also gather here to perform *satsangs* and *bhajans*. According to Vidyanand Saheb, hundreds of women singers come here.

The *satsang*, *bhajan* and *pravachan* programmes also continue on the main day. In the morning of the Death Anniversary, *Bijak Path* (the recitation of the *Bijak*)²⁰² along with *Havan Puja* is organized. It is followed by the *satsang* and *pravachan* programmes which continue till late evening. From 6 pm onwards, the evening *bhandara* is held. At its end, the performance of *Guru Puja* and *Chauka Arti* takes place. The *Chauka* ritual is the main attraction of the Death Anniversary. Like Bagicha *Math*, thousands of people participate in the *Chauka* ritual.

Vidyanand Saheb tells that a large number of Kabirpanthi followers who come to visit the Sonapur *Mela* also come here to participate in this celebration. Visit of Kabirpanthi followers from the Sonapur *Mela* makes this *Math* more prominent and associates it with the followers of other Kabirpanthi sects as well. According to Vidyanand Saheb, since the early 1990s, this celebration has become more elaborate and grander.

Mahadev *Math-2* is now as prominent as Mahadev *Mool Gaddi*. The large number of followers associated with this *Math* highlights its increasing popularity in Bihar and

²⁰² The recitation of the *Kabir Bijak* along with *Havan Puja* is also the main ritual of Jagudasi and Bhagudasi sects of Kabirpanth. They avoid and criticize the practice of *Chauka* ritual.

outside. The synthetic tradition of Mahadev *Math-2* borrowing from Kabir Chaura, Jagudasi, Bhagudasi, Dharmadasi and Krishna Karakhi Mool Gaddi itself makes it more acceptable among the followers of Kabir.

Harihar Mela, Sonapur

Harihar *Mela* (fair) has been a prominent Kabir centre where thousands of Kabirpanthi followers, especially from Bihar, gather and spread Kabir's *vanis*, messages and teachings among the masses attending the fair. Harihar Mela²⁰³ is held on the occasion of *Kartik Purnima* (the full moon day) over the month of *Kartik* (November-December) near the bank²⁰⁴ of the Gandak (also called Narayani river) at Sonapur in the Saran district of Bihar. It is also known as Harihar Kshetra Mela or Chhattar Mela and attracts visitors from all over Asia. During the *Kartik Purnima*, millions of people take a holy dip in the river here²⁰⁵ and show their reverence to Hindu gods Vishnu and Shiva at the Hariharnath Temple. This is the only temple in the whole world, which has a common *Linga* having the symbols of Lord Vishnu (Hari) and Lord Shiva (Har). The legend²⁰⁶ regarding its establishment goes as

²⁰³ It is one of the largest Cattle Fairs of Asia. It is also one of the oldest fairs held in India. It is said that Chandragupta Maurya (340-297 BCE) used to buy elephants and horses from this fair.

²⁰⁴ It is said that there used to be the confluence of the Ganga and Gandak here, but the Ganga moved back five kilometres away to the south of this bank.

²⁰⁵ This place is also famous as the sight of the battle of Gaj-Grah. It is also called the Gajendra Moksha Sthal. The legend goes as follows: one day, an elephant named Gajendra entered the river to drink water. A crocodile named Grah caught one of the feet of Gajendra and began to pull him into the deep water. They fought for many days. In spite of his best effort, Gajendra failed in releasing his foot. Finding himself close to death, he prayed to Lord Vishnu to save him. Lord Vishnu immediately reached the scene and saved him by killing the crocodile. It is believed that the holy dip in the river on the occasion of *Kartik Purnima* fulfils the wishes of devotees.

²⁰⁶ I also recorded another version of this legend which tells that Lord Brahma himself had established this *Linga*. According to this legend, there used to be a beautiful mountain here. Its name was Shah. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva were attracted to the beauty of the mountain. They decided to perform a *Yajna* here. Lord Vishnu adopted the role of a Brahmin and Lord Shiva of his assistant. Brahma became a *Jajman* (host). Brahma had two wives. The elder wife was to accompany him in the worship. However, she could not come in time. The younger wife had already reached there. Lord Vishnu said that after the auspicious time passed, the performance of the *Yajna* would be meaningless. So, Brahma along with his younger wife started the *Yajna*. In the meanwhile, the elder wife also reached there and seeing Brahma with his younger wife, she became very angry and demanded an explanation. Brahma said that Vishnu and Shankar had done all this. She cursed both Vishnu and Shiva to be turned into stones. Brahma established them into one common *Linga*. Vishnu and Shiva pleaded that they should be at least worshipped by people here. She blessed that people would worship them by offering holy water of the Gandak river over the *Linga*. The wishes of the people who offered the holy water, would be fulfilled. This version is more Brahmanical and is narrated by Brahmin priests of the temple.

follows: there often used to be controversies between Shaiva and Vaishnava sects. Both claimed their superiority over each other. Some wise saints from the both the sects organized a religious meeting here in order to remove these controversies. It was preached that both Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva were one. As a result, a *Linga* containing both gods together was established. Later, a temple was built over the *Linga*.

The region in which this temple is situated is popularly known as Harihar Kshetra²⁰⁷. On the occasion of *Kartika Purnima*, millions of followers from Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions, especially from Bihar gather at Sadhu Gachhi²⁰⁸, one of the regions of Harihar Kshetra. They start gathering here 4-5 days prior to the day of *Purnima*. Kabirpanthi, Ramanandi, Arya Samaji, Shikhpanthi, Dariyapanthi sects etc. organize their respective camps of *satsang* and *pravachan* programmes accompanied by *bhandaras*. However, there are more camps of Kabirpanth at Sadhu Gachhi which appears to be replete with Kabir's spirit and Kabirpanthi ambience during these days.

Kabirpanthi Camps at Sadhu Gachhi

More than a dozen Kabirpanthi sects from Bihar set up their camps 2-3 days prior to the *Kartik Purnima* and continue till two days after the *Kartik Purnima*. The following are some of the main Kabirpanthi sects which organize their camps: Acharya Peeth Vidupur, Vaishali (Jagudasi sect), Bhagtahi Acharya Gaddi, Dhanauti (Bhagudasi), Lakshmiipur Bagicha *Math*, Rosera, Acharya Rampriya Saheb Kabir *Ashram*, Sonapur, Fuhiya Kabirpanth Vansha Gaddi, Samastipur, Mustafapur Sadguru Kabir Dharm Pracharak Kabir *Ashram*, Vaishali, Kabir *Math*, Chakaushan, Vaishali, Kabir *Math*, Chhaurahi, Begusarai, Kabir *Math* Bagaha, Champaran etc. Vidupur, Dhanauti, Fatuha and Bagicha sects have established their

²⁰⁷ According to Shiva Singh, an inhabitant of Sonapur, Harihar Kshetra is spread over an area of 10 square kilometres.

²⁰⁸ Kabirpanthi *Mahants* who hold their camps have demanded this region to be renamed as "Sant Kabir Nagar Sadhu Gachhi".

permanent branches there and the *Acharyas* of some sects have bought land there, but have not yet established their branches. The *Acharyas* of some sects hire land for their camps during these days.

Acharya Rampriya Saheb Kabir *Ashram*, Sonapur is an *Acharya Gaddi*. Sindhumuninam Saheb is its present *Acharya*. He follows the tradition of the Lahartara Dharmadasi/Kharsiya *Acharya Gaddi*. Most of the local Kabirpanthis belong to *Acharya* Rampriya Saheb Kabir *Ashram*. Twenty eight Kabir *Maths* situated in Sivan district and its neighbouring districts are linked with this *Gaddi*.

Inauguration, Rituals and Other Ceremonies of the Kabirpanthi Camps

The inauguration ceremonies of the different camps are significant as the multiple forms of Kabir can be seen at one place. I shall discuss here the activities of three prominent camps including their inauguration ceremonies: Dhanuati *Gaddi*, Bagicha *Math* and *Acharya* Rampriya Saheb Kabir *Ashram*, Sonapur. The Dhanauti camp starts with the *Guru Puja* in which the *Acharya Mahant* is worshipped. It is followed by the procession (*shobha yatra*) which is taken out in the *Sadhu Gachhi* region. Then, the *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes are organized and they continue for two more days after the *Kartik Purnima*.

At Rosera camp, *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes start two days prior to the *Kartik Purnima*. However, it is formally inaugurated in the morning of the preceding day. About 25-30 *Mahants* from different Kabirpanthi camps are invited. They are offered flower garlands and blankets which are put across their shoulders. A lamp is lit before a portrait of Kabir by Deep Narayan Das. Some of the *Mahants* also accompany him in the lighting ceremony. Then, one by one, all the *Mahants* give their *pravachans*.

The camp of Rampriya Saheb is inaugurated with *jhandatolan* (the hoisting of the flag of *Satnam* in the name of Kabir) by Sindhumuninam Saheb, the *Acharya* of the *Math*. Then, *Guru Arti* is performed. The *Mahants*, saints and ordinary followers of this *Gaddi* wave a lamp before the *Acharya* and *Samadhi* of Rampriya Saheb. It is followed by *satsang* and *pravachan* programmes. In the morning of *Kartik Purnima*, a huge procession accompanied by flags of *Satnam*, urns and performance of *bhajans* is taken out in the *Sadhu Gachhi* from Gaj-Grah Chauraha to Kali Ghat (the name of a bank of the Gandak). The procession is followed by *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes which continue till the late evening. Then, the *Chauka* ritual is performed. It is accompanied by the performance of a large number of *Mangal* and Kabir songs.

The *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes at all the Kabirpanthi camps continue almost the whole day and night except for a break between 6 and 9 am.

Significance of the Harihar Mela from a Kabirpanthi Perspective

What is significant to observe is that in all the Kabirpanthi camps, there is a major focus on spreading Kabir's *vanis*, messages and teachings among people more through *satsangs*, *pravachans* and *bhajans*. A kind of competitive zeal is also seen among the Kabirpanthi sects to present Kabir in the best way. However, on this particular occasion, in spite of their mutual differences, all Kabirpanthi sects present a unified image of Kabir. It is really a grand celebration of Kabir's *vanis*, messages and teachings.

During these days, all the Kabirpanthi *Mahants* regularly organize *bhandaras* at their camps. Both Kabirpanthis and non-Kabirpanthis participate in them. Besides Kabirpanthis, more non-Kabirpanthis also stay at these camps than at other camps belonging to different other sects. Many of them who are influenced by the cultures of these Kabirpanthi camps also

join Kabirpanth. These programmes also become a source of earnings for the respective sects as people offer some money to all the *Mahants* as their devotion to Kabir.

It is interesting to observe that these *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes also give opportunities to women singers and preachers to perform among the masses attending the fair. They break the patriarchal prejudice that women are destined to keep themselves within the four walls of homes. A large number of women singers and preachers gather here to perform *satsangs* and *bhajans*. These women singers perform at most of the Kabirpanthi camps one after another. They receive a lot of respect from all *Mahants*, saints and lay Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers. They sit on the dais with the male *Mahants* and saints. Some of the Kabirpanthi camps even publish and announce the upcoming programmes of popular women singers. I have observed that audiences, especially women audiences want to listen to them more²⁰⁹. More audiences gather at their performances than at those of men singers. It is to be noted that the performances²¹⁰ of these women singers makes them acceptable not only among Kabirpanthi audiences but also among a large number of non-Kabirpanthi people.

During the first week of the fair, Sadhu Gachhi also becomes a centre of interaction among different *Saguna* and *Nirguna* traditions. From the religious point of view, this fair is

²⁰⁹ Sonclal Das, a Kabirpanthi *Mahant* also comments on the demand of women's performances:

Many women have become Kabir singers. As they sing well, people demand them more. They want to listen to them more. They, especially women audiences, demand that they should invite Renu Bharati, Heera, Koyali.... The women singers who sing well become dearer to audiences. Women audiences demand that they should be allowed to sing more. They are singing well. There are also men singers. They also sing well, but they say that they should be asked to leave dais. Their performances should be stopped. According to the demand of the time, we stop their (men's) performances. If women are allowed to perform, they will continue singing the whole night. They are also showered with money. Audiences donate 10-20 rupees to them. Women audiences especially want their performances more.

²¹⁰ These performances also give them opportunities to make earnings. They are showered with money by some of the audiences during their performances. They are also given gifts such as money and clothes as farewell by the *Mahants* of the respective camps. This aspect has encouraged many women singers of Bihar to take to Kabir-singing full time and become financially independent in family and society.

dedicated to *Saguna* gods: Vishnu and Shiva. The holy bathing in the Gandak river is also a *Saguna* practice. Although Kabir has attacked *Saguna* gods, worship and holy bathing, many Kabirpanthis can be seen following *Saguna* practices during these days. The boundary between *Saguna* and *Nirguna* is diluted here.

Through the surge of the people during these 4-5 days at the Sonapur fair, Kabirpanth seeks to establish its influence and authority among non-Kabirpanthi masses as well. It strongly registers its presence among them through processions, *satsangs*, *pravachans*, *bhajans* and *bhandaras*.

Conclusion

To sum up, Kabirpanth based on Kabir's teachings is a religious group of *Acharya Gaddis* and their branches located at different places in India and other countries. Kabirpanth forms a network of these *Acharya Gaddis* and their branches. Through this network, an *Acharya Gaddi* further develops a Kabir community which includes an *Acharya*, *Mahants*, saints and lay followers. They are all interconnected.

The followers of Kabirpanth generally come from intermediate (shudra) and dalit castes. The lower caste people, especially dalits, who join the panth find the ideologies and principals of Kabirpanth favourable to their communities which have suffered from the religious and social discrimination based on caste, *varna* etc.

In the Kabirpanthi community, the message of human equality is transmitted. People of lower castes are not treated as inferior beings; dalits are not untouchables. They have a feeling of self-respect. Seeing changes in their lives, other dalits are also encouraged to join the panth. The following verse sung by Shivam Das, a Kabirpanthi singer from Gorakhpur, shows why people join Kabirpanth:

Darbar mein sachhe sadguru ke dukh dard mitaye jate hain
Duniya ke sataye log yahan sine se lagaye jate hain
Darbar mein sachhe sadguru ke dukh dard mitaye jate hain
[In the court of the true *Sadguru*, sorrows and pains are removed.
The people oppressed by the world are embraced here.
In the court of the true *Sadguru*, sorrows and pains are removed.]

Kabir *Maths* continue to serve people religiously and socially through Kabir's teachings, rituals and legends. At Kabir Chaura and Maghar, the myths and legends are associated with the life of historical Kabir, which starts from Banaras and ends at Maghar. They present Kabir as God or a saint or an ordinary *Julaha* but with extraordinary spiritual powers, who always fights against social, religious and political injustices perpetrated against the poor and weak. These legends establish Kabir superiority over Brahmins, Emperors, Kings, Mullahs, Sufi teachers and, Gorakhnath. They show him as an iconoclastic critic questioning and challenging the orthodox Brahmanical and Islamic religious and social practices which are considered to be an obstacle to the path of humanity. He is also shown as one ridiculing scholastic pride and arrogance and promoting love, equality, and other humane values among people.

On the other hand, at Lahartara Dharmadasi Kabir *Math*, Bagicha *Math* and Mahadev *Math*, besides the myths and legends popularized by Kabir Chaura *Math* and Maghar Kabir *Math*, there are many legends and myths which are related not only to Kabir's historical life but also to his incarnations in the Hindu eras: *Satyayuga*, *Tretayuga*, *Dwaparyuga* and *Kaliyuga*. These legends and myths represent him only as God who is superior to Kal Niranjan and the Holy Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh). They show Kabir as Satyapurush (God) in contrast to Kal Niranjan and the Holy Trinity who entangle *Jiva* into the cycle of birth and death. Kabir liberates *Jiva* from this cycle and therefore, he is a liberator. In order to liberate *Jiva* in all the Hindu eras, he took incarnations as Sukrit, Munidra, Karunamaya and Kabir respectively. These myths and legends reject the Puranic

concept of *Avatar* regarding Brahmanical gods and also the concept of rebirth. They subvert the role and position of the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh as given in the Puranic mythology and also liberate Kabir from the facts that he was born of a Brahmin woman's womb or was son of a Muslim weaver couple.

The construction of these myths and legends is also associated with proving Dharmadas to be a contemporary of Kabir and validating the foundation of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth. In order to establish Dharmadas's connection with Kabir, he has also been given a mythical character. As a result, he is shown to have incarnated as Sahteji, Bankeji, Chaturbhuji and Dharmadas respectively in *Satyayuga*, *Tretayuga*, *Dwaparyuga* and *Kaliyuga*. In all the eras, he was the disciple of Kabir and worshipped him through *Chauka* ritual²¹¹. Kabir is said to give salvation to the followers who worship him through this ritual. As we have already noted that during *Chauka Arti*, the performances of 'Nariyal Morana' 'Pan Parvana', 'Tinaka Torayi' are considered to be a direct passport to heaven (salvation).

Kabirpanthi rituals and legends manifest the ideology of the poor and powerless, not the rich and powerful. Therefore, the lay followers are attracted to Kabirpanth. Such legends and myths appeal to their spiritual and social aspirations and give them happiness, satisfaction and a psychological relief. In Kabir legends, Kabir's superiority over his rivals also helps them overcome their inferiority complex instilling confidence in them. It develops their strong bond with Kabir.

²¹¹ I argue that the inception of *Chauka Arti* is the result of a strategy to attract people in the fold of Dharmadasi Kabirpanth and make earnings. Since Kabir Chaura *Math* and Maghar *Math* occupy most of the heritages and relics of Kabir, their *Mahants* and saints do not actively attempt to attract followers in their folds. These places themselves socially connect the followers with Kabir and become a source of earnings for their *Mahants* as people offer some money to them as their devotion to Kabir. However, *Mahants* and *saints* of Dharmadasi tradition and many other later dependent and independent sects of Kabirpanth have been actively engaged in spreading Kabir's messages and attracting the followers in their folds. This *Chauka* ritual has been the main source of their connection with followers for their *Mahants* and saints.

Thus, Kabir Centres play a key role in transmitting Kabir and his teachings among the masses by catering people's spiritual and social aspirations. Although Kabirpanthi rituals can be seen as a betrayal of Kabir's radical iconoclasm and his insistence on inner faith and moral integrity, they are embedded with an opposition to many of the accepted religious and social norms of more orthodox Hinduism.