

Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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