

Kabīr: Oral to Manuscript Transitions

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Introduction: Oral and Textual Traditions and Kabīr

The continuous interplay between the oral and written traditions have been identified as a vital aspect of the transmission of the literatures of South Asia (Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986). Contemporary scholarship has drawn attention to the complex interplay between the oral and textual traditions of Kabīr songs. Henry (1995), Lorenzen (1996), and Singh (2002) demonstrated that contemporary oral traditions of Kabīr songs were completely different from those found in manuscript traditions. Linda Hess (2009:51-53) has also studied oral traditions of Kabīr songs in Madhya Pradesh and found a complex interplay between different contemporary oral traditions of Kabīr songs and printed texts of the songs. Indian oral and manuscript traditions show great resilience in their transmission of compositions, in terms of preserving the overall forms of texts through successive recopyings over time, but also normally contain characteristic variations that typify their method of transmission. Compositions transmitted within handwritten textual traditions show characteristic scribal copying errors, such as mistaking one letter for another or missing out or repeating lines. However, compositions transmitted in oral traditions show quite distinct forms of singer's variations, such as inversion of half lines within a verse and the recasting of the dialect of a verse into a new form. The existence of these variations in how oral and manuscript textual traditions transmit their contents raises the possibility of investigating the relationship between oral and textual transmission of texts within traditions of Kabīr's songs.

In this essay, rather than focusing directly on what contemporary oral traditions can tell us about Kabīr songs I will explore how different manuscript traditions from the last five centuries can inform our understandings of how oral traditions of the songs changed over time.

Encountering Kabīr in Varanasi in the 1980s

I first became aware of Kabīr while learning Hindi in the early 1980s in Varanasi. I often heard people quoting sayings of Kabīr when talking about religious matters. I would hear Kabīr songs performed in different contexts ranging from religious gatherings, radio performances, and by wandering singers in the street. You could tell they were by Kabīr as North Indian songs often contain a phrase telling you the author of the song, a kind of signature, such as "Kabīr says" in

their last line, like English sayings such as “as one door closes another opens.” Kabīr’s couplets, short rhymed verses of two lines, called (*dohā*) or witness (*sākhī*) form, part of a body of traditional sayings for Hindi speakers.

For instance, one day I was sitting with a group of people who included a school teacher, a shop keeper, and a retired businessman in a shelter on the shore of the Ganges. We were having a lively discussion about politics. To bring home the point that it would be a mistake to neglect even minor issues, somebody said: “Don’t ever just ignore even a tiny blade of grass, Kabīr says, if it gets into your eye, then the pain is great.”

Another time I was at a poetry function in a school hall, where people were reciting verses ranging from sections of medieval classics such as the sixteenth-century Hindi life of Rām, called the *Rāmcāritmānas*, through to verses of contemporary political satire. When called upon to speak I recited this Kabīr verse which was on the need to look for the divine within oneself: “Everyone knows there are drops in the ocean, but Kabīr says, few are they who realise that there are oceans in every drop.” The instant I started reciting I could sense that the entire audience, civil servants, business people, merchants, students, and teachers all knew the verse and they responded to it as an affirmation of something they all shared in common.

One of the most popular Kabīr songs I heard being performed in numerous contexts was about how the body is a cloth which has been woven finely and needs to be carefully looked after if its true value is to be realized. This song is typical of a longer genre of Kabīr songs called *pada* or *sabda*, which are sung to a range of melodies (*rāg*) set to various metres and typically contain three to six stanzas with an initial verse called the *tek*, which becomes the refrain and a final signature verse called the *bhaṇitā*.

This song also shows how the story of Kabīr’s life as a poor Muslim weaver of Varanasi, forms part of Kabīr’s oral tradition as this verse is made more poignant in performance by the notion that a weaver has taken a part of their daily life practice and used a weaving allegory to create a song about the role of the divine in life. There is a fine version on YouTube by Pandit Jasraj in *rāg ahir bhairav* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GD5bVBH83o>):

Finely, finely has the cloak been woven
 What is the warp? What is the weft?
 With what thread is the cloak woven?
 The īṅlā and piṅgalā veins are the warp and weft,
 the suṣuṃṇā vein is the thread to weave the cloak.
 The eight lotuses are the spinning wheel,
 for the five elements and three qualities of the cloak.
 Ten months it took to stitch,
 the shuttlecock flying back and forth and weaving the cloak.
 That cloak is worn by gods, men and sages,
 all have stained that cloak as they wore it.
 The servant Kabīr has worn it with care,
 and returns the cloak just as it was given.

Songs like this also point to the ways in which Kabīr songs are not expressions of what are now seen as typical of Islamic teachings but rather a distinctive kind of spiritual tradition in which aspects of everyday experience, like weaving, are mixed with a kind of mystical symbolism. In the Hindi for the song the threads on which the cloth are woven are related to three subtle veins in the body, the *iṛā*, *piṅgalā*, and the *suṣumnā*, which are part of a kind of yogic symbolism for how the life breath circulates around *cakra*, subtle centres visualized as lying at locations such as the heart within the body.

Seeking to understand Kabīr more I found that it was very easy to buy pamphlet publications of Kabīr songs in the bazaar and I bought various small collections of couplets. It was clear that a major focus of Kabīr songs was a criticism of external religion combined with the idea of the importance of searching for the divine within our selves. One couplet in particular criticized belief in external pilgrimage and used pilgrimage as a metaphor for spiritual enquiry within the body. It was also notable for the way it included an allusion to the yogic symbolism of the tenth door of the body, which is imagined as a subtle opening of the body at the crown of the head (Simh and Simh 2004:262):

The mind is Mathura, the heart is Dwaraka, the body is Varanasi,
The tenth door is the temple, its there you must recognise the light.

When I then asked people to explain such symbolism to me they sent me to visit the Kabīr Chaurā monastery in Varanasi, which was a center for a community of Kabīr's followers to learn more about Kabīr and his teachings. There are some people who are so deeply moved by Kabīr's teachings that they become renunciate followers of Kabīr who form a kind of monastic order and dwell together at different monasteries (*math*) around Northern India. In the 1980s when I first visited Kabīr Chaurā, a notable part of daily life was recitation of a sacred text attributed to Kabīr called the *Bījak*. This word has multiple meanings that derive ultimately from the word *bīj*, which means seed; however, the extended meanings include list, catalog, account book, or even perhaps, I was told, "treasure map." When I stayed at the monastery in the summer of 1984, all the novice monks, and some full monks, would sit together in an open colonnaded hall for about three hours each morning and rapidly independently repeat the *Bījak* in a kind of monotone chant over and over again. The novices had to recite while reading the text of the *Bījak* but the full monks had all learned the complete text by heart. I was told that the novices would spend several years memorizing the entire text of the *Bījak*, and only after they knew it by heart were they regarded as being ready to become full monks in this tradition of the followers of Kabīr. There was also a quite different form of recitation which took place each evening in which sections of the *Bījak* were read out from a text called the Sandhya Paṭh.

Quite who becomes a monastic follower of Kabīr is not easy to determine, as you are not meant to ask an ascetic his former caste or occupation. Indeed, if you ask any Hindi speaker about this issue they may tell you this famous couplet (Kabīr 2001:120):

Don't ask a sadhu his caste, when judging the value of a sword
Kabīr says, why ask about the scabbard?

Despite this it was possible to get an impression that while a very small number indeed were from higher caste trader and Brahman communities, the majority of the followers were from lower caste communities and former untouchable or tribal communities.

To my surprise, when I asked the monks at the Kabīr Chaurā monastery about many of the songs and sayings I had heard being sung and spoken about in everyday life they told me that the majority of them were not genuine. Academic enquiry points to a disjuncture between contemporary oral traditions of Kabīr songs and earlier versions of his songs recorded in manuscripts. Many scholars have now investigated the issue of how it might be possible to infer what the original songs of Kabīr were like (Vaudeville 1993). It is now clear that oral traditions of Kabīr songs have been continuously changing for centuries and new songs have been constantly added to the corpus of Kabīr songs expressing Kabīr's ideas in new ways for new generations.

What perhaps has received less attention in searching for the original Kabīr songs is what the different manuscript, print, and—more recently—recorded traditions of Kabīr's oral traditions tell us about the audiences who have listened to Kabīr songs from the sixteenth century to today. What I would like to examine now is how these sources help us catch glimpses of the audiences for Kabīr songs over the last five centuries in Northern India.

Early Sikh Audiences for Kabīr (ca. 1570 onwards)

*Pandit! What madness has seized you?
Wretch! You'll drown along with your family if you don't chant Ram.
What do you gain by studying the Vedas and Puranas?
You're no more than an ass burdened by a load of sandalwood.
You sacrifice life and say it's for religion, but that's not the practice of religion.
You sit and call yourself a saint while you say that others are butchers.
If you don't understand the darkness in your own mind, then how can you teach others?
For the sake of money you peddle your wisdom and waste your life away.
As Narad and Vyasa said, when Shukdev went to ask them.
Kabīr says! Brother, if you don't meditate on Ram you'll drown without liberation.*

(Callewaert 2000:262)

This song comes from perhaps one of the earliest glimpses of the audiences for Kabīr songs as they were being sung and recorded in the Punjab in the second half of the sixteenth century. This song is found in one of a number of texts called the *Mohan di pothī*. These were manuscripts written from around the 1570s onwards by the followers of Guru Nānak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh tradition, which formed the basis for the Sikh sacred scripture, the *Guru Granth Sāhib*, which was written down in 1603-04. The Sikhs are a major monotheistic Indian religious tradition that follows the teachings established by Guru Nānak, which emphasized the role of the guru in devotion to the divine. After his death the Sikhs were led by a succession of gurus until Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the tenth Sikh guru, declared in 1699 that henceforth the Sikhs' guru would be the sacred text of the Sikhs, the *Guru Granth*

Sāhib. From these collections it can be seen that Kabīr songs were being sung alongside Guru Nānak's own songs, along with those of other saints who were described as the devotees and whose teachings were seen as compatible with Guru Nānak's teachings and, in a sense, as their precursors of his teachings. Kabīr's role was clearly very significant in these collections as he is situated in them as the foremost of the precursors of Nānak.

From this we get a glimpse of how as Nānak and followers traveled through the Punjab and elsewhere they brought with them a corpus of oral traditions which were shared among the early Sikh community. As is the case today these communities were made of people from all walks of society, from court officials to farmers, from urban elites to rural laborers. Among the devotees there was a diverse range of backgrounds; some from various varieties of Muslim backgrounds, like Kabīr from Varanasi and Shaikh Farīd from the Punjab; some were untouchables from the leather working community, such as Ravidās; and in some recensions of the early Sikh scriptures, such as the Kartarpur recension of the *Guru Granth Sāhib* (Mann 2001:115-17), some were also Brahminical Hindus like Rāmānand and Rajputs like Mīrābāī, the famous woman devotee of Kṛṣṇa from Rajasthan.

Two things are remarkable about this: first, these songs were being recorded in written forms as little perhaps as one or two generations after the death of Kabīr; and second, the way they show that oral traditions of his verses had spread rapidly across Northern India and into many sections of society.

Kṛṣṇa Devotee Audiences for Kabīr (ca. 1582 onwards)

She alone knows the pain
 who is struck by the sharp arrow of Ram's love.
 She searches mind and body
 but she never finds the wound.
 She can't find where
 to apply a healing balm.
 All women appear alike to her,
 who knows who is Rām's beloved?
 Kabīr says, she alone is fated
 who knows who will become the bride.

(Callewaert 2000:242)

This song is found in a variety of manuscripts and also in the earliest manuscript from Rajasthan, which contains songs attributed to Kabīr. In this manuscript, written in 1582 from Fatehpur in Rajasthan, we can catch a glimpse of early audiences for oral traditions of Kabīr songs. The manuscript contains mostly songs about Kṛṣṇa composed by Surdās, the most famous Hindi language composer of verses about Kṛṣṇa. However, as in the Sikh collections, in a kind of supporting role here again, Kabīr songs and the songs of other devotees also appear. It can also be argued that within the Fatehpur manuscript there are three different sections, and while the first and last are more clearly focused on devotion to Kṛṣṇa, the middle section, in which Kabīr's

verses appear along with those of Raidās, Nāmdev, and other Sants, tends more towards devotion to the divine without shape or form (Bahura 1982).

That Kabīr's oral tradition was popular across such different audiences is striking. Furthermore, for the Sikh tradition the divine is beyond description, but within audiences for devotional traditions focused on Kṛṣṇa there was a strong emphasis on the description of the divine as manifested in the life of Kṛṣṇa. However, among both audiences Kabīr's oral tradition was so popular that it appeared alongside such divergent viewpoints and was somehow seen as supporting both teachings. In part this was, perhaps, because each tradition knew only Kabīr songs compatible with, or adapted to, teachings. Thus by 1582 we can see that two very distinct types of audiences were listening to songs from oral traditions of Kabīr, songs which shared some core common elements of Kabīr's teachings but also localized his teachings for very different audiences.

Dādūpanthī and Rajasthanī Audiences for Kabīr (ca. 1614 onwards)

O Ram! If you care about your servant, can you resolve one debate for me?

Is Brahma greater, or that from which he arose?

Are the Vedas greater, or that which produced them?

Is the mind greater, or that on which it is fixed?

Is Ram greater, or the knowing of Ram?

Kabīr stands in despair,

is the sacred site greater, or the servant of Hari?

(Callewaert 2000:147)

This song is found in a variety of manuscript traditions from Rajasthan, the *Guru Granth Sāhib* from the Punjab, and in a version in the *Bījak*. The earliest version of it from Rajasthan found so far is in a manuscript from 1614, which is the earliest manuscript yet discovered of a tradition of collections of songs of five teachers including Kabīr and Dādū Dāyal (1544-1603). In the sixteenth century a number of devotional movements arose in Rajasthan and as part of their activities began to create manuscripts of songs associated with their founders. One such movement was founded by Dādū Dāyal, whose teachings emphasized devotion to the divine without shape or form. Such movements became known as Sant paths as the term *Sant* was used to mean a devotee of the divine without attributes. Like the Sikh tradition in the Punjab and among audiences focused on devotion to Kṛṣṇa, the Rajasthani Sant movements shared in a common rejection of Brahminical rituals and the role of priests as intermediaries between the devotee and the divine. They also shared alike in reflecting the popularity of oral traditions of Kabīr songs and respect for his teachings. The main sacred text of the followers of Dādū Dāyal was called the "five teachings" (*pañca-vāṇī*) and contained songs attributed to Dādū Dāyal, Kabīr, Raidās, the Maharashtrian Sant Nāmdev, and a Rajasthani Sant called Hardās. The songs of each author were presented in a sequence of *rāgs* with the most common *rāgs* typically coming first and then the less common *rāgs*.

Other Rajasthani Sant movements such as the Nirañjanī movement also compiled their own sacred texts and a second popular form of text was called a *sarvaṅgī*, an “all chapters” in which instead of songs being grouped by author and *rāg*, songs were grouped by theme or genre, and then in each theme songs by all teachers on that theme were listed.

However, unlike the Guru Granth Sāhib of the Sikhs, the text of the *pañca-vāṇī* and the *sarvaṅgī* manuscripts were never precisely fixed and from the earliest known copy of 1614 onwards every manuscript had slightly different contents. These seem to reflect a continuous interplay between oral and written traditions in which new songs are constantly making the transition from the oral tradition into manuscript tradition and previously popular songs come and go from the written traditions. The written versions of the songs also show clearly how in the oral tradition the songs were constantly being re-arranged with stanzas, lines, and half lines, in verses changing in order and stanzas appearing and disappearing. In all the traditions the manuscripts reveal a constantly shifting transition of songs from oral traditions into textual traditions and variations in the forms of the songs which reveal snapshots of oral traditions in different times and places.

While these constantly shifting and transforming texts may be frustrating if you are searching for what might be the “original” version of a verse, they vividly depict how the oral tradition was alive at different times and places. One possible feature is that in general individual manuscript traditions kept getting longer. While certainly some modern collections of *bhajans* (“devotional songs”) are shorter than the traditions they are drawn from, the length of manuscripts in genres such as the five teachings’ format gradually grew over time (Callewaert and Friedlander 1992:44). It is possible that this might have reflected changes in scribal attitudes to how comprehensive the manuscripts should be in recording what was current in the oral traditions. However, it is also possible that the continuous inclusion of new songs in the manuscripts reflected the way that new songs were entering the oral traditions and then making the transition to the manuscript traditions.

One mechanism by which such new songs were appearing was clearly that songs were re-attributed to new authors. In the early twentieth century the discovery of manuscripts of Buddhist Siddha songs from the tenth or twelfth century CE revealed that some famous verses associated with Kabīr had close antecedents that dated back centuries before his time (Dasgupta 1976:416-19). These same verses, or rather perhaps it would be better to say these collections of images and themes, are also in some cases found attributed to other Sants, such as Nāmdev, Nānak, and Shaikh Farīd, and seem to reflect the way that the signature verse of a particular teacher could become attached to a verse that was regarded as reflective of that teacher’s teachings.

Another feature in the different versions of verses that appears to reflect changing views over time is a gradual shift away from a more strident critical tone and the adoption of a warmer approach to devotion in all its forms and a softening of criticism of Brahminic tradition.

From the oral traditions of Kabīr songs recorded in the manuscripts, we see how they were part of the transmission of ideas about spirituality. In this process sometimes older songs could shift in attribution from one teacher to another and entirely new songs could enter a song repertoire attributed to the teachings of well known teachers. The key issue was that the

teachings in songs were seen by different audiences within their own devotional beliefs as representative of their understandings of a particular teacher's teachings.

Eastern Audiences for Kabīr

Bees fly up, cranes come to roost,
 night goes by, days pass away.
 Wretched creatures stand and tremble,
 not knowing where their beloved is.
 An unbaked pot doesn't hold water,
 when the swan flies the body withers.
 The crow flies from outspread arms,
 Kabīr says, this is the end of this story.
 (Śāstrī 1982:265)

This song is found in Rajasthani and Sikh sources and also as *sabda* verse 106 from the *Bījak*. This points to a mystery facing those trying to understand Kabīr and the oral traditions of his songs, which is what happened in the East, in Varanasi, in Uttar Pradesh, and in Bihar after the death of Kabīr. The followers of Kabīr, who call themselves Kabīr Panthī, “followers of the way of Kabīr,” maintain that an oral tradition that lay behind the *Bījak* was maintained from Kabīr's time till the first recorded manuscripts were written down. However, despite the best efforts of scholars and saints in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, no manuscripts of the *Bījak* older than the eighteenth century have ever been found.

The Eastern oral traditions of Kabīr songs found in the *Bījak* are clearly very different from those found in the Punjab and Rajasthan. The songs show none of the accommodation with devotion to Kṛṣṇa found in the Western, that is Punjabi and Rajasthani, traditions and instead contain much more strident criticism of Brahminical ritual and an emphatic rejection of temple worship and the doctrine of *avatārs* (“salvific incarnations”) of Viṣṇu.

The way that the *Bījak* is organized tells us something important about its audiences. The songs are, like the Western Indian collections, arranged into sections. However, in addition to sections devoted to *pad* lyrics, called *sabda* and the couplets, called *sākhī*, there are also several other genres. These include a longer form of lyric called a *ramainī*, a kind of narrative form in which longer verses are created by combining a meter called *caupāī* and *dohā*. Verses in the *ramainī* format are also found in the other Kabīr traditions but it is only in the *Bījak* tradition that it is identified as a distinct genre of Kabīr verses. In addition, a whole range of verse forms are specifically based on different sorts of seasonal folk songs. One way to explain the differences between Western and Eastern Indian traditions is to consider possible differences between Western and Eastern audiences. Is it possible that Western Indian traditions reflect more how Kabīr songs were sung at the monasteries of Sant movements in Rajasthan while the Eastern traditions might reflect how the songs were sung among rural followers of Kabīr gathered together in informal community locations? Among such audiences gathered in villages, under trees in fields and in the compounds of the lower caste communities, perhaps Kabīr songs were

sung alongside the seasonal folk songs that formed part of everyday life away from urban centres.

By around the end of the nineteenth-century collections of non-canonical Kabīr songs called *śabdāvalī* (“song collections”) began to appear alongside the *Bījak* from various sources, including the Kabīr Chaurā branch of the Kabīr Panth. These were based in part on manuscripts and in part perhaps directly on oral traditions. The earliest of these *śabdāvalī* from the Kabīr Chaurā branch of the Kabīr Panth was that published by Bīśundās (n.d.), a prominent later nineteenth-century ascetic of the Kabīrcaurā tradition of the Kabīr Panth, in perhaps the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (Tivārī 1989:50).

One feature of these *śabdāvalī* collections is that they are the earliest known sources in many cases for the songs that now form the majority of the current oral traditions of Kabīr songs for those outside the Kabīr Panth. In fact in a counterintuitive way they seem to be the origin of many of the popular songs of Kabīr in the oral tradition. This I would suggest is a continuation of the pattern found earlier in manuscript traditions where there is a constant interweaving between oral and written traditions of Kabīr songs.

Dharmdāsī Kabīr Panthī Audiences for Kabīr

There were major changes in Eastern Kabīr Panthī traditions during the eighteenth century that have had enormous impacts on oral traditions of Kabīr songs, introducing whole new genres of songs, and many entirely new songs reflecting completely new ideas previously unconnected to Kabīr. These changes occurred when a teacher called Dharmdās came into prominence in the Kabīr Panth. Exactly when this happened is unclear, but there are arguments that it might have been in the early eighteenth century. Dharmdās was from an affluent merchant community and a devotee of Kṛṣṇa. However, while on a pilgrimage to Mathura he had visions of Kabīr in which Kabīr revealed new teachings to Dharmdās. According to the followers of Dharmdās he was a contemporary of Kabīr, but scholars such as Paraśurām Caturvedi have argued that the accounts of how he saw Kabīr in visions suggest that he lived some time after Kabīr (Friedlander 2011). It is also apparent in verses attributed to Dharmdās that his language seems to be much more modern than that found in early Kabīr songs from the West or in the *Bījak*, and is closer to Hindi from the mid-eighteenth century, as found in the works of Sants such as Carandās (1703-1782).

In order to understand the impact of Dharmdās on oral traditions of Kabīr songs it is also essential to consider some aspects of his teachings. These included several major innovations. Notably that Kabīr was an incarnation of God and the world was constantly locked into a battle between a false god of death called Kāl Nirañjan and the ultimate god, the true being, (*satyapuruṣ*), of whom Kabīr was an *avatār*. In a study of how the teachings of the Kabīr Panth changed over time, Dvivedī (1965:225) argued that perhaps these changes were aspects of internal struggles between different sections of the Kabīr Panth. Dharmdās also taught that Kabīr had revealed that 42 generations of his descendants would form a hereditary lineage of leaders of the Kabīr Panth. His teachings also came with a new form of oral tradition in that they were revealed as dialogues between Kabīr and Dharmdās in a genre of composition called *sāgar*

(“ocean”) composed as a narrative in the *ramainī* verse form. Accompanying the new teachings was also a whole new form of ritual practices called *caukā*, which David Lorenzen has argued appear to be parallel to forms of Satyanārāyaṇ rituals current among low caste communities in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Friedlander 2010).

From the latter part of the eighteenth century onwards there seem to have been two distinct oral traditions of Kabīr songs circulating in Northern India. One was associated with the followers of the Kabīr Chaurā tradition and the second associated with the new traditions linked to Dharmdās. However, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a continuous interaction between the two oral traditions of Kabīr songs and how to understand Kabīr and his teachings.

Two prominent reformers in the Dharmdās tradition from around the beginning of the twentieth century were also highly influential in transforming the literatures of the Kabīr Panth. One of these was an ascetic from near Gorakhpur in Northern Uttar Pradesh called Yugalānanda Bihārī (ca. 1873-1963) who devoted his life to collecting manuscripts of Kabīr songs. He was also influenced by his elder contemporary Śambhudās, who was an influential Kabīr Panthī Abbot from Indore (Śambhudās 1948). Together they organized a great Kabīr Panthī gathering in 1903, at which several hundred thousand followers of Kabīr met to try to determine, on the basis of manuscripts and oral traditions, what were the authentic teachings of Kabīr (Bihārī 2004:31, 256).

Śambhudās wrote a number of books including a collection of sung Kabīr verses called the *Śrī Kabīr Bhajanamālā*. The original publication date of this collection of Kabīr *bhajans* (“devotional songs”) is unclear, but, from the style of Hindi in the introduction, I would date it as being from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Like other followers of the Dharmdās branch of the Kabīr Panth, Śambhudās believed that for a song to be a genuine Kabīr song it should be in the form of a dialogue between Kabīr and Dharmdās. His collection of songs starts out as a series of verses addressed by Dharmdās to Kabīr and Kabīr’s responses to Dharmdās. He also included prose links in the text between the *bhajans*, like the kind of phrases a *bhajan* singer might say between songs explaining how the songs relate to each other. This shows how such *bhajans* as this were being employed by Kabīr Panthī *bhajan* singers as part of a living tradition of performing Kabīr songs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The collection starts with invocatory verses (*maṅgalācaraṇ*), the second of which is in the form of a *bhajan* sung by Dharmdās. This is then followed by the first prose link which situates the *bhajans* in the context of the life story of Dharmdās and how he sought for a vision of his master, Kabīr (Śambhudās 1948:3):

After the master gave a vision of himself in Mathura to Dharmdās then when for many days the True Guru did not grant his vision to Dharmdās he prayed to him in this manner.

This is followed by five songs in the form of entreaties (*vinitī*) calling on Kabīr to grant a vision of himself to Dharmdās. This acts as an introduction to the famous Kabīr song “Where are you searching for me my servant?” (*mo ko kahaṁ dūṇḍe bande*) contextualized as a *bhajan* sung by Kabīr in response to a Dharmdās song about how he has searched in vain for Kabīr. The close

relationship between Dharmdās' song and Kabīr's can be seen in this translation (Śambhudās 1948:5):

Bhajan—to the tune of *prabhātī*

Chorus: I searched and searched yet I failed, O true guru! I didn't see your vision.

O World Lord! Rameshwaram, Dwarika, Badrinath, Kedarnath,

Kashi, Mathura and Ayodhya, I searched them all.

North, South, East, West, I wondered the whole world.

I went to all the 84 pilgrimage sites, over and over again for a vision.

I practiced endless chants, austerities, fasts, penances, self restraint and fortitude.

Lord, I could not even meet you in dreams, such was my fate.

I could neither rest by day nor sleep by night, my whole body was wracked with pain. Now grant a vision to Dharmdās and ferry me over the ocean of existence!

In this way when Lord Dharmdās had prayed so hard to Kabīr then the True teacher manifested himself in front of him and showed him his vision and sang this *bhajan*.

bhajan—to the tune of *rāg śyāmkalyāṇ*

Chorus: Where do you search for me? Servant, I am near you.

I am not in pilgrimage sites nor in images, nor in dwelling alone.

I am not in temples nor in mosques, not in Kashi nor in Kailash.

I am not in chants nor in austerities, nor in fasts and penances.

I am not in performing rites, nor in yoga or renunciation.

I am not in the life force, nor in the body, nor in space or the sky.

I am not in the cave of the bee [the *trikuṭī*], in the breath in all breaths.

Search for me and you will find me straight away, in an instant of searching.

Kabīr says, listen brother *sādhūs*! It is in faith that I am found.

After gaining a vision of the True Teacher the Lord Dharmdās expressed his welcome in this way.

Today is my supreme fortune, welcome to you please come, having graced me with a vision grant me the good fortune to touch your feet!

The song "Where are you searching for me?" also appeared in Kabīr Chaurā *Śabdāvalī* texts from around the same time and is today one of the most popular of all Kabīr songs. But, in the Kabīr Chaurā understanding of the song, and in most modern peoples' understanding, the song is God addressing Kabīr, while Śambhudās' understanding is that it is Kabīr, who is God, addressing Dharmdās.

Perhaps one thing we can draw from is that within oral traditions of Kabīr songs it is not only the text of the songs that matters, but also the context, as the entire meaning of a song can alter dependent on the perspective of the audience of the song.

There are also interesting variations in the text of the song in its two major versions. The Kabīr Chaurā version has a reference in it to how God is not found in the *kābā* the Islamic sacred site, while the Dharmdāsī tradition has instead *kāśī*, which is another name for Varanasi, a Hindu sacred site. Is it possible that this variation was because the Kabīr Chaurā audience might have included more Muslims, but the Dharmdāsī audience contained fewer Muslims, which might have led to the reference to the *kābā* being dropped as not being of interest to the audience? Or

might it just have reflected the preferences of the singers of the two versions? Likewise, the Kabīr Chaurā version also contains more references to yogic practices and ends by saying that the divine is to be found in the breath, but the Dharmdāsī version says that the divine is not to be found in yogic practices related to the breath and is to be found through faith (*viśvās*). Such differences may be indicative of the ways in which oral traditions contextualized Kabīr songs for the different Kabīr Panthī audiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

New Indian and Transnational Audiences for Kabīr

At the end of the nineteenth century new audiences started to emerge for Kabīr songs. These included audiences in Hindu reform movements, such as the Radhasoami movement, which was active among the emerging Hindi speaking middle class communities in Uttar Pradesh employed as civil servants and teachers and newly affluent merchant communities. In addition new Bengali audiences emerged among middle and upper class groups who formed part of the cultural renaissance associated with Rabindranath Tagore. These developments have been examined in some detail (Friedlander 2011, 2012).

What is perhaps most striking in relation to the intersection between the oral, manuscript, and new print traditions in the early twentieth century is the ways that they reveal aspects of how audiences for Kabīr songs were diversifying. The Radhasoami movement collections were made based largely on Kabīr Panthī manuscripts. The forms of the songs collected in these early print editions reflected the manner in which they were performed at devotional gatherings. The meters and verse structures were those that would be best suited to memorization among non-literate communities. The Bengali script collections by the influential Bengali scholar, and close associate of Rabindranath Tagore, Kshitmohan Sen (1880-1960) reveal how the songs were performed to quite different audiences. It is possible that the song texts as recorded in the Bengali versions reflect a kind of performance style in which fragments of songs were relocated into new types of discourses more typical of literate higher caste Hindu religious gatherings called *pravacan* (“teachings”) and then directly recorded as written notes.

The Bengali script collections then led to the next transformation in audiences for Kabīr songs, this time to the West in the early part of the twentieth century. The central figure in transmitting Kabīr songs to the West was Rabindranath Tagore. He was the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, which was awarded to him in 1913 for his English translations of a collection of his own verses called *Gitanjali*. It could be argued that these verses are not a translation but more a form of “transcreation” by Tagore of his original Bengali verses; however, there is no indication that Tagore objected to their description as “prose translations” on the title page of the original edition (Tagore 1913). These verses are reminiscent of Tagore’s translations of Kabīr and both formed the centre of attention for audiences listening to him performing his works during his visit to London in 1912-13. Typical of such events were gatherings in Hampstead at the house of the art patron William Rothenstein where Tagore would sing songs in Bengali and W. B. Yeats would read out English translations of the songs (Som 2009:107).

It was also during this period in London that Tagore, in collaboration with the English Christian mystic Evelyn Underhill, translated a collection of one hundred Kabīr songs into

English, such as the following (Tagore 1917:92):

There is an endless world, O my Brother!
 And there is the Nameless Being, of whom naught can be said.
 Only he knows it who has reached that region:
 It is other than all that is heard and said.
 No form, no body, no length, no breadth is seen there:
 How can I tell you that which it is?
 Kabīr says: “It cannot be told by the words of the mouth, it cannot be written on paper: It is like a
 dumb person who tastes a sweet thing—how shall it be explained?”

These translations have been continually in print since they were first published in 1913 (Friedlander 2011). A further testament to their influence in the West is that they formed the basis for popular retranslations into contemporary American English by Robert Bly from the 1970s onwards (Bly 2004).

This transition of Kabīr songs from oral and manuscript traditions into written English translations in print meant that they then reached entirely new audiences who would previously have never imagined that they would listen to the songs of a fifteenth-century weaver from Varanasi singing about the nature of the divine.

Conclusion: Kabīr Today

It is a remarkable testimony to Kabīr that his name is so widely known today and his songs are seen to be representative of how India engages with spiritual inquiry.

In the century since Tagore and Underhill’s translations to Kabīr’s verses drew international attention, his verses have been translated from English into many major languages. Tagore’s translations have also been repeatedly translated—it would be better to say recreated—into contemporary forms of English. In a sense, echoes of Kabīr songs have now become part of Western oral traditions of performance poetry.

In India the performance of Kabīr songs has continued to be part of the lived experience of oral traditions. Scholars such as Shabnam Virmani, the director of the Kabīr project, have filmed and documented as many forms of contemporary performance as they could find from Madhya Pradesh to Rajasthan and the Punjab (<http://www.kabirproject.org>). Academics from the international community, such as Linda Hess, have researched leading contemporary singers of Kabīr songs such as Kumar Gandharva and investigated the ways in which oral traditions of Kabīr songs still flourish in India today.

This essay has shown that the study of Kabīr and his songs allows a glimpse into how oral traditions have kept his teaching relevant and contemporary. An understanding of Kabīr requires an appreciation of the role oral traditions play in the contemporary transmission of Indian cultures.

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