

Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in Northern India

Linda Hess, Stanford University

i. Introducing Kabir

Kabir, who lived in fifteenth-century Varanasi, North India, is known as one of the great poets of Hindi literature. He is also a revered figure in religious history, an iconoclastic mystic who bore marks of both Hindu and Muslim traditions but refused to be identified with either. Stories about his life come to us as legends, most of them unverifiable. Everyone agrees that he grew up in a family of Muslim weavers and practiced the weaving craft himself. He is widely believed to have had a Hindu guru, and his tradition has many links with Hindu lore. In the early sixteenth century he was adopted as one of the exemplary devotees whose poetry was inscribed in the sacred book of the nascent Sikh religion. Meanwhile some of his admirers turned him into a divine avatar and took to worshipping him in a sect called the Kabir Panth. His own poetry subverts and criticizes religious identities and institutions, but such subversion has never stopped religions from co-opting their critics. Kabir also has a life beyond established religions, his couplets taught to school children all over India, his poems and songs appreciated by people of all classes and regions. Such people may think of themselves as religious, spiritual, secular, or atheist, but they all have their reasons for liking Kabir.

Kabir's compositions have a uniquely powerful style, expressing his own spiritual awakening, urging others to wake up, observing delusion in individuals and society. His voice is fearless, direct, anti-authoritarian. Kabir was of a "low" social status, and most of his sectarian followers belong to communities now called Dalit (former "untouchables"). His poetry has a vivid streak of social criticism, making trenchant observations on caste prejudice, religious sectarianism, hypocrisy, arrogance, and violence. At the same time it is profoundly inward-looking. It examines the nature of mind and body, points out the tangle of delusions in which we live, urges us to wake up and cultivate consciousness. The imminence of death and the transiency of all things are frequently invoked. The journey within is permeated with the imagery of yoga--its map of a subtle body made of energy, lotus-centers, coursing breath-streams, sound and light. A key word associated with Kabir's spiritual stance is *nirgun*--"no quality"--indicating an ultimate reality that can't be visualized in form or described in language. While invoked negatively, it conveys simultaneously emptiness and fullness.

ii. Oral tradition and this book

Kabir is usually studied through collections of poetry attributed to him. But he was an oral poet who never wrote and probably couldn't read. His words, or words believed to be his, live on in oral-performative as well as in written forms. From the beginning his poems have been sung, spreading across the northern half of the kite-shaped subcontinent, taking on the colors and styles of local folk traditions, as well as entering the repertoires of classical singers. We can't know with any certainty what the original Kabir actually composed. But he has a distinct profile, a flavor, a voice, which shape his identity and importance in religious and social history.

Written texts are convenient for scholars to work with, so we tend to treat Kabir as a literary figure. How would our understanding of text, author, and reception change if we took cognizance of the nature and history of oral transmission, its interactions with written and recorded forms, and the paramount importance of context in creating the words and meanings of texts? How far can we go in treating texts as embodied?

Letting the words rise up off the written page creates a cascade of consequences. First we attend to the dynamics of oral traditions, the forms of recorded text with which they interact (handwritten, print, audio, video, internet), the conditions of performance. We discover how meanings change when music is wedded to words. All this transforms our way of understanding text, which is a big thing. But it is not the only thing. The words--their forms and meanings--also live in communities. They are enmeshed in people's aspirations and choices, organizations and rituals, ways of striving for power. Thus we study "Kabir" through singers, listeners, music, performative circumstances, the fluidity and stability of texts, communities, and the interpretations produced by religious, social, and political contexts.

A persistent theme is the tension, or connection, between the religious-spiritual and the social-political. There is a mystic Kabir who speaks of inner sound and light, who urges meditation, devotion, and nonattachment, who reminds us relentlessly of death and the transitory nature of all relationships. There is a social critic/satirist Kabir who reminds us of the injustice of caste, the omnipresence of greed, the stupidity of puffed-up authority and hypocritical religiosity. We study how different constituencies appropriate, negotiate and argue about these Kabirs.

The manuscript will be completed in 2011, with support from a Guggenheim fellowship. It is based on fieldwork done since 2002, largely in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh in north-central India, as well as on textual research.

iii. Summary of Chapters

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to all the themes in the book through the story of a singer. Chapters 2-3-4 focus on texts in live situations, on poetry and music with their vibrant meanings, and on theories and practices of "orality."

Chapters 5-6-7 emphasize the presence of text/performance in communities, turning toward the social and political, while continuing to listen to poetry and music and to examine the connections between inner and outer worlds.

Chapter 1. "You Must Meet Prahladji!"

The book's main concerns are illuminated first through the portrait of a renowned Kabir folksinger from a small village in Malwa. Emerging from a poor family of "low" caste status and no musical tradition, Prahlad Singh Tipanya became an honored and beloved singer/interpreter of Kabir, constantly performing in both rural and urban spaces. His life story, family, ways of performing and interpreting Kabir come forth in the narrative. I join the family (by ritually becoming Prahladji's sister), travel with him and his group, learn songs, observe who invites him, how he relates to audiences and other singers, the issues and debates that arise in his life and representation of Kabir.

Chapter 2. Studying Oral Tradition in the Twenty-first Century

This chapter takes up the meaning of "oral tradition" and "orality" with reference to the present study of Kabir. We learn how texts are brought into being again and again in the matrix of interactions between performers, audiences, media, and circumstances. Kabir is sung and performed, written and rewritten, recorded in new media—with all forms of text interacting in dynamic ways. We see how these processes occur in present day Kabir oral traditions, among singers, speakers, listeners, readers. We observe the complex mix of media: oral, written, printed, recorded, visual, digital, cyber. We consider theories of orality, including recent ones that claim similarity between oral-performative transmission and the internet, concluding with a discussion of what is unique to oral transmission.

Chapter 3. "True Words of Kabir": Adventures in Authenticity

Once we have seen the fluidity, immensity, and creative complexity of oral tradition, does the old question of authenticity have any meaning? Do any "Kabir" texts have more right than any others to be called genuine? Though deconstruction and reception theory have undermined old-fashioned notions of author and authenticity, more subtle and multi-layered notions are still interesting. Either "Kabir" is a vast undifferentiated mishmash of everything ever associated with his name in the last 600 years, or some process of clarification is possible. This chapter reflects on ways of imagining such a process. We notice various discourses of "authenticity" and see where they lead.

Chapter 4. In the Jeweler's Bazaar: Malwa's Kabir

A collection of songs from Malwa repertoires, organized under thematic categories that can be seen separately but that also interpenetrate each other. Many songs are translated, discussed, and shown in performative contexts.

Chapter 5. A Scorching Fire, A Cool Pool

Is Kabir a blazing social revolutionary or a promoter of detached spiritual quietism? Is he both? Or neither? In the 1990s, Eklavya, an educational NGO, created a platform for Kabir singers in Malwa, foregrounding the social-political, rational and secularist impulses in his works. They called it a stage for singing and discussing (*Kabir bhajan evam vichar manch*). The all-night sessions that they hosted every month for eight years left a strong mark on the Kabir culture of the area. They brought village performers into dialogue with each other and with city-educated activists. The religious/ spiritual/ social/ political aspects of Kabir were examined and debated. NGO workers didn't just push their agenda on the traditional singers but listened to and learned from them. Through all the meetings and serious conversations, the spirit of music and the joy of singing kept the energy flowing.

Chapter 6. Fighting Over Kabir's Dead Body

We enter the world of the sectarian Kabir Panth, where Kabir is claimed as an avatar of the Supreme Being, and sect gurus are claimed as avatars of Kabir. Their institutional structures, traditions of guru worship, social attitudes, and uses of Kabir-attributed texts are observed. We follow a dramatic story of how Prahlad Tipanya, introduced in the first chapter, radicalized in his thinking in the Eklavya forum (as discussed in the fourth chapter), decides to become an authority figure in the Panth, taking on the role of a "*mahant*" and guru, presiding over a controversial sectarian ritual that he helped to debunk in the days of the forum. Through the local and personal lens of this story, we examine processes in the history of religion:

institutionalization and iconization of a radical and charismatic figure, battles over ownership of the “founder’s” story, uses of ritual, tensions between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian tendencies, between organized religion and the quest for mystical insight. We see the debates that rage over Prahladji’s decision among his family and peers, his own grappling with the situation, and the surprising outcome. (Already published: *From Ancient to Modern: Religion, Power, and Community in North India*, ed. Ishita Banerjee and Saurabh Dube. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.)

Chapter 7. Political/Spiritual Kabir

Here the theme of political and spiritual, which has threaded through the whole book, is taken to new levels. We examine the tendency to split Kabir along these lines and the convictions that lead different kinds of people (rural, urban, religious, secular, activist, sectarian) to valorize one side and reject the other, or to try embracing both. The scope widens. We talk to urban intellectuals, activists, artists. We invoke debates in ancient India about social responsibility as opposed to world renunciation. The story of Lenin’s conversation with Gorky about Beethoven’s *Appassionata*, and a reply in the form of the 2006 German movie, *The Lives of Others*, sharpens and contemporizes the discussion. Can too much music, too much beauty and bliss, wreck your revolutionary spirit? Does turning inward make you forget the harsh realities of our world? If you use Kabir’s social messages for your own purposes and push the spiritual ones away with distaste, are you enacting a crude and misguided political appropriation? What do music, spiritual practice, and self-knowledge have to do with politics? What is at stake in asking and answering these questions?

iv. Method, argument, new knowledge

On one hand the academy praises interdisciplinarity; on the other, it asks irritably, *But what is your method?* In my work, the methods of textual study and ethnography must be present together. One of my major arguments is about method. To know Kabir (as well as other poets in India, perhaps elsewhere), we must know texts as oral-performative, and we must consciously bring this knowledge into relationship with our automatic tendency to study text as written/recorded. In addition, to know Kabir we must know people and the worlds in which they create Kabir. I seek to imagine text and transmission anew. I intend to shake up perceptions, dislodge habits, draw new maps. More particular motifs and arguments run through the chapters. But there is also an implicit argument to leave a space in our humanities research and writing that is not governed by the relentless discipline of arguing. I want to share with readers the new worlds that I have discovered. I want them to meet remarkable people, enter unexpected spaces, be moved by poetry and touched by music, ponder questions not easily answered, taste wonder and joy.