

History and Practices of Kabir Panthies in North India: A Sociological Enquiry

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Abstract: Kabir was a leading figure in the Bhakti movement, which revolted against the exploitative social order. It challenged the prevailing hegemony of Brahmins and Mullah and denounced other social evils like religious dogmas, exploitative caste, and immoral practices of the priests and the ruling classes. He criticises not only Hindu and Islamic religious rites that are shallow and superstitious but also the hallowed authority of religious scriptures like the Vedas, Puranas, and Quran. He also satirises high-class people's claims of social superiority, particularly Brahmins and Kazis. After Kabir, his disciples formed Kabir Panth according to their convenience and interpreted his philosophy in their own way. The deviation of Kabir Panthies has been influenced by social setup. This article discusses the philosophy of Kabir and different strands that emerged in the practices of Kabir by different Kabir panthies. Mainly there are two different Math, i.e., Kabir Chaura of Banaras and Dhamkheda of Chhattisgarh. Hence the differences of Kabir Panth across North India, particularly the differences between the Kabir Chaura of Banaras and Dhamkheda of Chhattisgarh, are analysed and discussed in this article.

Keywords: Kabir Panth, Routinisation of charisma, Bhakti, Math, Saguni, Nirguni.

Introduction

Kabir was born in medieval India when there was turmoil in society. Though India is the land of all major religions of the world, the prominent religions of Kabir's time were Hinduism and Islam. India is a plural society where all significant religions and sects coexist. Including a major part of its history in coexistence, with an interrupted period of contradiction among them. Kabir denounced the contradiction among these different religions and sects. Kabir gave a new synthesis, taking good elements of existing religions and

sects. Kabir is perceived differently throughout India, inspired by their socio-cultural beliefs. Kabir Panth (Kabir Path) is a religion (sect) based on the philosophy of Kabir's teachings. It is based on the devotion of one Guru as a route to salvation, i.e., Kabir and his teachings. Its followers come from various religious backgrounds, as Kabir never called for the conversion of religion but rather emphasised their limitations. After the death of Kabir, his followers formed Panth, which later became famous as Kabir Panth after his name. However, his disciples formed *Math* in different parts of the country based on their understanding of Kabir. Therefore, each *Math* varies in its function and traditions. Kabir's philosophy is based only on *Bijak*. However, with time Kabir Panthies deviated from Kabir's core philosophy. Kabir Panthies gave multiple interpretations in their peculiar ways based on their setting. In this context, Weber's theory 'routinisation of charisma'.

Weber stated that the teachings of a prophet are always subjected to the interpretation and rationalisation of his followers. Kabir fits Weber's type of exemplary prophet, who breaks with tradition, and, through his charismatic qualities, gains a following; Kabir was a contemplative mystic, and hence, his teachings have the rarified quality, subjective and at least somewhat detached from society. His followers attempted to reintegrate his teachings with society through rationalisation, involving the routinisation or institutionalisation of charisma, which ultimately resulted in introducing concepts and practices alien to the original teachings.

So, in this context, the organisation of Panth encompassed the routinisation of sectarian movements headed by charismatic authorities. Charismatic authorities are treated as endowed with supernatural power, supermen with extraordinary qualities. Max Weber further states that when identified by sectarian followers, these qualities give it validation. Recognising supernatural power in a charismatic personality leads to complete devotion to the leader (Max Weber 1978: 241-234). So, likewise, Kabir Panth was formed around charismatic imagery of Kabir in the different parts of the world and substituting their faith in Kabir as God or spiritual leader.

Nevertheless, if charismatic authority is a momentary phenomenon, it can take the shape of a permanent organisation or party in due course of time. Therefore, the character of charismatic authority needs to become the means of radical change. Sometimes, charismatic authority cannot remain in its original form; it becomes either traditional, rational, or both with time and space. Many things contribute to bringing changes in authority. The first and foremost reason for alteration was a significant difference of

opinion among the disciples and the party workers towards materialistic things, and the second was the followers' ideological interest. Likewise, in Kabir Panthies after Kabir, there was a sharp division among Kabir Panthies on the lines of ideology, beliefs, and practices.

Max Weber (1978) gave the reason for schism; he said that the succession problem arises within sects over time. Further, he said that with due course of time, material change leads to change in thinking that causes schism; second, he argued that those who led the sect after the death of the charismatic leader also caused fragmentation in the sect, and third, he described that when the diverse group enters into the sect, it leads to confusion and contradiction in the sect.

The customary tendency of divergence and thus split into sects after the demise of the prophets was also seen among Kabir followers, which was also reflected through the varied range of literature of different Kabir Panth sects. Gail Omvedt has stated that there are four major categories of collection of literature, all of which seem to suggest different Kabir. The Adi Granth collection brings us primarily the *Nirguni* Kabir; many of the Rajasthan collections are more *Saguni* and devotional because these reflect the influence of Krishna-based devotion and those associated with Dadu Dayal Panth (Omvedt 2008: 93). A respondent on that note reflected that there might be many versions of Kabir. However, there is an underlying unity in essence and on core principles, viz. love, humanity, and brotherhood in both *Saguni* and *Nirguni* forms of worship. The most popular version of Kabir in the West is Robert Bly's freewheeling translation drawn from the oral Kabir and the romantic mystic presented in Tagore's Kabir, of which scholars take a dim view (Hawley 2005: 267-78). On the other hand, a prominent scholar of Hindi, Hazariprasad Dwivedi (2010), has stressed the Nath Panthies' connections to Kabir and emphasised that his individualism represents the 'Indic' tradition's response to the Muslim challenge.

Kabir cannot abide by any particular traditional school of thought or religion. However, as we know, he was the most learned person of his age. He was well aware of all religious thought and practice as Omvedt (2008) observed that Kabir was as familiar with the ritual of Islam as he was with the popularised Puranic stories of the avatars, the well-known sexual symbolism of the Nath-Siddhas, and the Sufi tradition. Thus, Dwivedi and others read Kabir as standing at the apex of a long Hindu/Indic thought tradition, drawing on the individualistic religious tradition of Nath Panth and Vedantic philosophies, tantric Buddhism, and Siddha traditions. A respondent adds, thus substantiating the same lines of argument that Kabir and *Sahib*

Bandagi draw extensively in the inspiration of its emphasis on individualistic spiritual practice from the Nath Panth. Similarly, he could be seen as standing at the apex of traditions of Islamic mysticism, which by then had become the popular force in a far-reaching global civilisation (Omvedt 2008: 95). The mystic imagery conferred to Kabir has its inspiration from the Sufi tradition.

Kabir probably did not wish to form a sect, particularly not one which deified him. Although he favoured *Satsang* or the companionship of saints, he was against any formal organisation. But the nature of Indian religion is such that a sect inevitably arises around a charismatic figure. A very small group of Muslims regard themselves as followers of Kabir. However, most of the followers of Kabir are members of the Kabir Panth, essentially a “reformed Hindu sect”. That Kabir’s teachings appealed mainly to Hindus, despite his official ties to Islam, is evidence of the more flexible and absorptive quality of Hinduism as opposed to the stricter, more exclusively dogmatic quality of Islam. The Kabir Panth has two main branches discussed in the research paper.

Methodology

The study followed exploratory research. Through the purposive sampling technique, data were collected from 30 in-depth interviews with Kabir Panthies. The interviews were conducted with respondents from two selected Kabir maths, i.e., Kabir Charua *Math* in Banaras and Dhamkheda Math in Chattishgarh. Respondents for this study were mostly followers of Kabir Panth and saints from both *Maths*. Additionally, observation and informal interaction were also done by the researcher. This ethnographic study tried to understand the belief patterns and motives of Kabir Panthies through their life histories. Field notes were also taken during the fieldwork for the study. Secondary data resources are also used in this study, including Kabir, newspaper articles, books, research journal articles, vernacular writings of the *Maths*, etc. The study has a critical philosophical orientation with an inductive approach.

The Organization of the Panth

Math plays a significant role in performing religious duty, protecting the ideology, and controlling the religious behaviour of followers. *Math* is the centre of religious organisation and the sacred place for the follower. It is

organised in a formal, stratified, and hierarchical manner. They hire trained and educated newcomers to do the work in *Math*. The *Math* chief (*Mathadhish*) plays a crucial role in maintaining and propagating religious ideology, values, and practice. He enjoys enormous religious, political, and social power, which flows unidirectionally from the chief *Math* to *sub-Math* from the chief of the eclectic order to common followers. The chief (head) of the *Math* accompanied by many scholars, including his disciples and various functionaries, organised the meeting for religious instruction. They also perform religious service and receive a gift from the chief of *Math*. With time, ideological differences have come among them so that they deviate from their parent *Math* and establish their *Math* according to their interest.

The history of the Kabir Panth can be traced long back to the seventeenth century. In the initial time, *Surti Gopal* and *Dharmdas* were immediate disciples of Kabir. These two disciples of Kabir established their Panth following Kabir's teaching; the first of which is the inherited seat founded by Dharamdas at Chhattisgarh, also known as *Vansh gaddi*, and the second is known as *Tyagi* (Kabir Chaura) *Math*, established by *Surti Gopal* at Banaras.

Many sources consider *Surti Gopal* and *Dharamdas* as Kabir's contemporaries by tradition. However, other sources based on Kabir Panthies texts do not substantiate it. There is also an assumption regarding the burial of *Surti Gopal* and *Dharamdas*. It is said that both of these pupils of Kabir were buried in Odisha's Jagannath Puri, which is a prominent Vaishnava pilgrimage centre where a Kabir shrine still stands. Although they are occasionally represented iconographically with Kabir, no author or book claims that the two were intimately acquainted. However, it is highly doubtful that Kabir founded any sect even though he allowed disciples informally. Some scholar estimates that the formation of the Kabir Panth occurred after one hundred fifty years after Kabir's death.

Kabir Chaura Math of Banaras

One respondent narrated the story about *Surti Gopal* that a Brahmin scholar named *Shri Sarbanada* of Southern India was famous for his knowledge among the groups of *Pandits* of his region. He learned many religious scriptures and became arrogant with his knowledge. Among many, he was also famous as *Sarvajeet*, because no one was there to challenge his knowledge. Once his mother told him that he would be a real scholar and

intelligent if he won a debate (*Shashtrarth*) with the great Saint Kabir. After this, he came to Kabir Chaura of Banaras with many scriptures to debate (*Shashtrarth*) with Kabir, but after an hour-long logical debate with Kabir, he realised and agreed that his knowledge was trivial, and finally, he became a disciple of Kabir.

After that, he became popular with the new name of Surti Gopal Saheb, and after the death of Kabir, he formed *Math* at Banaras after his name. Banaras Math is known as the Surti Gopal section because of its founder. It is distinguished by its emphasis on asceticism, which is unsurprising given its location in Banaras, India's sadhu capital. Surti Gopal Das, believed to have been a disciple of Kabir but had lived a short time, was the organiser and first guru of this branch of the Panth. There is a tradition of belief that the installation of Mahant *Gaddi* started in 1559 A.D. After that, there has been an uninterrupted series of gurus.

Sadhus of the Panth are celibate; the position of Mahant is not hereditary. The community of *Sadhus* elects the *Mahant* (head of Math), who is in charge of the *Math* arrangements. In addition to Mahant, there are other office-bearers like *Divan*, who manages all the routine work of *Math*, another office-bearer, *Kotwal*, is responsible for keeping everything systematic and orderly way and the other is *Pujari*, who leads worship. The Kabir Chaura has a majority of Brahmin chief officers. This is particularly intriguing in light of Kabir's anti-Brahminical ideas, and it indicates a trend toward the Hinduisation of the sect. However, people from all castes are invited to Bhandara.

Dhamakheda Math of Chhattisgarh

Another prominent section of the Kabir Panth is located at a place known as Dhamakheda, which falls under the present Raipur district of Chhattisgarh. This section is known as the Dharamdas section. Dharamdas is the founder of this section of Kabir Panth. He was a wealthy merchant from Bandogarh, which was once the capital of Baghel rulers. By caste, he belonged to the Kasaudhan Baniya. He established the Bandogarh *Math* of Kabir Panth. At a different time, the importance of Maths shifted from Kadarmal to Kawardha and finally to Dhamakera Math of Raipur.

Many stories narrate the life of Dharamdas and how he got inspired to establish Kabir *Math*. Some stories narrate that he was a contemporary of Kabir, but no historical evidence substantiates this claim. According to a

story, Dharamdas was a follower of Kabir even though he was practising many customs and rituals of Hinduism and used to visit the pilgrims of Hindu deities. Once, he went to visit and worship the temple in Mathura; while worshipping the statue, according to the story, Kabir appeared to Dharamdas and asked him to follow the true path of devotion. He realised it might be his confusion. The next time he visited Banaras to worship the statue, he saw Kabir while worshipping again. According to legend, Kabir taught Dharamdas that those whom you are searching for and worshipping are not real God; Kabir gave instances of epic Ramayana and Mahabharata and said they had adopted the inhuman means to conquer their opponent. They are a symbol of violence and hatred. Eventually, Dharamdas and his wife became the disciple of Kabir. Chhattisgarh's Panthies section of literature has attributed many poems to Dharamdas and plays a vital role in describing the relationship between Kabir and Dharamdas. As can be seen, by this poetry attributed to him, Dharamdas was a prominent figure in Kabir's deification.

O Master, look on me.

I look to Thee, Thou lookest not on me:

Thy heart is hardened.

On others, some have set their hopes:

My hope is set on Thee alone.

Spread for my mind a bed of bliss in the heavens:

That rising I may give thee thanks.

Dharamdas prays with clasped hands:

O Lord, Kabir, lose me from bondage.

(Shah & Ormerod 1925: 32)

After establishing the *Math* in Bandogarh again, Kabir appeared to Dharamdas and told him to form a sect. Kabir predicted to Dharamdas that your future descendants would be head of *Math (Acharya Gaddi)* for 42 generations, and each Guru's wife would be with Guru until she gave birth to a son, after which she would also become an ascetic. Each Guru would serve for twenty-five years and twenty days, after which he would hand over to his son and leave the *Acharya Gaddi*. This method of succession clears that all Gurus are Dharamdas' offspring, ensuring his charisma is maintained.

According to another legend, Dharamdas established Kabir *Math* in Chhattisgarh. He used to live in Bandhograh, from where he formed Kabir Panth. He had two sons, Narayan and Muktamani. Narayan refused to accept him as a disciple of Kabir. Over time, for some reason, Muktamani moved to Kudurmal in the district of Bilaspur, where he organised another Kabir *Math*. As for mythical belief, he was seated on the *Gaddi* (throne) of Kabir Panth by Kabir himself. After sitting on the throne, he also propagated that Kabir had foretold that his descendants would be head of Math (*Acharya Gaddi*) for the next 42 generations. After sitting on *Vansh Gaddi* (hereditary seat), Muktamani assumed a new name, Churamani. As per the instruction of Kabir, the head of Math (*Acharya Gaddi*) had to marry and live with his wife till a son was born. Therefore, both husband and wife were to become ascetic. It was further dictated that each Acharya (chief of the hereditary seat) should hold office for 25 years and 20 days and, after that, offer the seat to his son as a successor on a similar line as of his father, Dharmadas.

Nevertheless, all these things were never followed in essence. Instead, many Acharyas deviated from the successor rule of Kabir, practised polygamy, kept *Dasis* (maidservants as concubines), and captured the *Gaddi* for their entire life. The eldest son of the Acharya succeeds him, while other male members of the family are called Guru Gosains.

In 1894, Praghat Nam, the eleventh guru, died, and the *Acharya Gaddi* was split between Ugra Nam and Dhiraj Nam. Ugra Nam was born to a low-caste woman, while Dhiraj Nam had an excellent lineage. After the death of Praghat Nam dispute erupted over the succession of *Acharya Gaddi* of Kawardha, and a case was filed in the Bombay High Court. The court verdict favoured Dhiraj Nam because he had a valid lineage. Ugra Nam, on the other hand, remained popular among the people and established a new Math in Dhamakheda. While Dhiraj Nam was unpopular, and he died soon after the verdict. His descendants still live in a *Gaddi* near Kawardha, but he had few followers. On the other hand, the “illegitimate” Dhamakheda dynasty appears to have received much of the authority and influence and has become the official line.

At Dhamakheda, the Guru lives a very comfortable life. They possess an elephant and a car. A big fair is called at Dhamakheda in the month of Magha (February) every year when the Guru sits on his *gaddi* and receives obeisance. The present Acharya of Vansh Gaddi (Hereditary throne) of Dhamakheda is Prakash Mani Nam Saheb.

Dhamakheda Section of Chhattisgarh and Kabir Chaura Banaras: A Comparative Analysis

A few distinctions in the character of these two branches can be summed up here. The Dharamdas section has its organisation, and the Benares branch does not recognise it; they question each other's veracity. The Kabir Chaura, with its more ascetic bent, disapproves of married males serving as Gurus in Chhattisgarh. Similarly, the literature on the Dharamdas section generally ignores the Banaras section. On the other hand, Gurus and laypeople from Chhattisgarh pay visits to the Kabir Chaura and the shrines in Maghar. While the Banaras segment is mainly confined to Uttar Pradesh and the Dhamkheda section is mostly Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, there are few areas where the two cohabit. In Rajasthan, for example, where the number of Kabir Panthies is minimal, those associated with the Kabir Chaura are referred to as *Mul* (original), while those associated with the Dhamakheda gurus are referred to as *Vachan Vansh* (stem of the world). The former belongs to higher castes, whereas the latter belongs to lower castes.

The Kabir Panth appears more visible as a sect in Dhamakheda than in North India (Banaras). The Kabir Panth is one of two major sectarian movements in Chhattisgarh, with the Satnamis being the other. It is just one among several sects in Banaras. Another explanation is that the Kabir Panthies in Chhattisgarh are predominantly from the *Panka* caste. On the other hand, the Kabir Panthies in Banaras have many Sadhus and lay members from various castes. In addition, Chhattisgarh has more Panth members than the Banaras division and has generated more literature. Therefore, the number of Kabir Panthies in both categories is exceedingly unreliable. The two sections are almost identical in belief and ritual, suggesting a common origin and contact in the early years.

Conclusion

The Kabir Panth has its emergence against the exploitative social order. It challenged the orthodoxy of the religious dogmas, extreme caste practices and supremacy of the priestly classes, which inhibited people of some castes from temple entry and education, among various disabilities imposed on them. They denounced the established social system built on oppression, suffering, and exploitation. At the same time, the Panth offered an alternative envisioned with the establishment of an egalitarian, democratic, and humanist society. In this Research paper, an attempt has been made to put people's

resistance in the form of the popularity of Kabir Panth. The Kabir Panth might be seen as a late manifestation of these movements, by routinisation of charisma based on Kabir preaching in North India. There are two prominent sub-sects: the Dhamakheda section of Chhattisgarh and the second Kabir Chaura Banaras. Banaras' *Math* is predominantly ascetic, while the Chhattisgarh section is predominantly householder. The leadership of the Banaras section is dominated by Brahmins, whereas low castes dominate the leadership of the Chhattisgarh section. The Banaras section attracts a wide range of castes, but the Chhattisgarh section mostly appeals to a single weaving caste.

A relatively large amount of literature has been produced by the Kabir Panthies, much of it divergent from the original teachings of Kabir. The Kabir Panthies have devised a complex cosmological scheme which extends and mythologises Kabir's concepts of God and Maya. They have also developed an elaborate system of soteriology. This development so far paved the way for establishing an organised sect based on the doctrine given by the spiritual leader, charisma made around the persona of Kabir, as seen in any form of faith. Although a separate group, the Kabir Panthies do not differ substantially from other Hindus. Therefore, there is a need for the teachings of Kabir to be evaluated in a new light and the prevailing social situation. Especially in light of the crisis of increased hatred, stratification based on caste, communal differences, and increased social alienation. Kabir's philosophy today has unparalleled relevance. Kabir's idea of universal brotherhood, underlying unity among people, love, compassion, and unity of God will be the guiding light. Therefore, Kabir was not only the most distinguished religious preacher of all time but also the most prominent social reformer in the history of human civilisation.

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