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Listening to Kabir: Pluralism, Paradox, and the Kabir Panth

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LISTENING TO KABIR:

PLURALISM, PARADOX, AND THE KABIR PANTH

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. 3

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................... 4

Dedication ............................................................................................................... 6

Introduction .......................................................................................................... 7

Piecing Together Kabir’s Life:  
Legends, Hagiographies, and Other Historical Accounts ................................. 8

Poetic Forms and Paradoxical Language ............................................................... 14

Religious Pluralism in India and the Kabir Panth ............................................... 21

Erasing Cultural Boundaries:  
Kabir’s Denial of Difference .............................................................................. 28

Conclusion:  
Listening to Echoes of Kabir ............................................................................ 35

Bibliography ......................................................................................................... 37

Recommendations for Further Study ................................................................. 40

Appendix A:  
Balancing Identity and Pluralism:  
Sikhism and the Kabir Panth ............................................................................ 42

Appendix B:  
Glossary of Non-English Terms ...................................................................... 44

Appendix C:  
Selected Photographs ....................................................................................... 46
Abstract

The fifteenth century poet-saint Kabir is one of the most prominent figures in Indian history and Hindi literature. Kabir was born to low-caste parents who had recently converted from Hinduism to Islam. However, Kabir grew up to reject both Hinduism and Islam and their claims on absolute truth and instead wrote about a God that transcends all cultural differences. This paper examines the ways in which Kabir challenged traditional norms and transcended cultural and religious boundaries. Kabir was such a venerated figure that an entire sect, the Kabir Panth, emerged after his death to practice and live out Kabir’s philosophy of spiritual oneness. This paper also examines how the Kabir Panth brings together individuals of different religious backgrounds and contributes to religious pluralism and diversity in India today. The findings of this paper are the result of archival research and study as well as interviews conducted at two Kabir Panth monasteries in Varanasi and with members of the sect in Madhya Pradesh. Finally, this paper seeks to piece together India’s rich history of religious pluralism, the formation of the Kabir Panth (which crosses multiple religious boundaries), and Kabir’s message of unity and brotherhood despite caste, religious, and gender differences.
Acknowledgements

Dr. Mary Storm regularly reminds her students to “thank the bridge that carried you over.” As my semester in India comes to a close, I have crossed a bridge supported by many people and institutions. I would like to take this moment to thank all who helped make this semester and project such a success.

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I am humbled and thankful that institutions such as the School of International Training (SIT) exist. SIT provided me with an opportunity that is not available to students in many countries. I cannot take for granted the privilege to choose and complete a study abroad program. In addition, SIT Assistant Director of Admissions Wendy Mason was instrumental in preparing me with the right governmental papers and supplies to enter India.

There are more people in India than I can possibly remember whom I must thank. I am thankful to Prahlad-ji and Savita-ji at SIT for teaching me the necessary Hindi phrases and vocabulary to negotiate with others during my independent study project. In addition, Savita-ji spent several hours translating my interviews from Hindi. At SIT, I must also thank Katherine-ji, Arjun-ji, and Yogesh-ji who gave me the necessary courage and advice to travel alone in India.
met many people who also impacted my project immensely during my travels, including Umesh Das and Sabrat Das (both Kabir Panthis in Varanasi) for granting me multiple, long interviews. Savita-ji introduced me to bhajan musician Prahlad Tipanya and arranged for my stay at his home in Madhya Pradesh. Prahlad Tipanya proved to be one of the most influential persons academically with respect to my project. My academic advisor Dr. Saugata Bhaduri, at Jawaharlal Nehru University, provided extensive feedback on my project by helping me organize, outline, write, rewrite, edit, proofread, edit, and proofread my paper again. I am thankful for his professional, academic advice and attention to detail.

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Dedication

I would like to first thank my parents, Ron and Kim Eudy. I would not be here were it not for their endless emotional, psychological, and financial support. I will forever be indebted to their love and personal support.

Dr. B.K. Sahay and Anju Sahay were unbelievably gracious and hospitable to me. I will never forget the kindness and generosity they and their sons, Ankur and Anshu, showed me during the two months that I lived in their home.

Lastly, my high school English and humanities teacher Tara Rehrig inspired me early on to study other cultures and to not be afraid to question my own culture. It was Ms. Rehrig who first sparked my curiosity and love for the humanities.
Introduction

Over the past five centuries since Kabir is presumed to have lived, dozens of stories and legends have generated and circulated around his life. Today there is wide discrepancy between the solid “facts” and the numerous other stories about his life. For instance, according to devotees of Kabir – members of the Kabir Panth – the mystic poet lived 120 years, from 1398 to 1518. However, most scholars realistically limit Kabir’s life span to only the fifteenth century, but are largely undecided as to his exact dates.\(^1\) Current scholars date Kabir’s life to approximately 1398-1448, but others move the poet’s dates to the second half of the fifteenth century.\(^2\) Indeed, it is difficult to say anything about Kabir’s actual life with much certainty beyond the information and hints that can be gleaned from his poems and an array of legends and hagiographies (which often contradict each other). Even attributing poems to Kabir, who was likely illiterate and whose poems often were not recorded until decades or centuries after his life, can be a tricky process.\(^3\) Despite these questions about his life, Kabir “has been hailed as ‘the father of Hindi literature.’”\(^4\) It is indisputable that his poetry has made an unprecedented impact on Hindu, Muslim, and later Sikh communities in India. Kabir’s message is one of unity, brotherhood, and universalism. His poetry, which was nearly always spread orally or even sung, spoke directly to the deep, shared humanity of his listeners. Both then and now, Kabir’s message resounds loudly and clearly by transcending all the differences that so often divide society, specifically religious, class, caste, and gender differences.

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\(^1\) Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Songs of Kabir*, xix.
Piecing Together Kabir’s Life: Legends, Hagiographies, and Other Historical Accounts

As scholar on Kabir and Hindi literature Linda Hess attests, the facts about Kabir’s life “can be summarized in a few sentences.” These “facts” are that Kabir was born in Varanasi around the beginning of the fifteenth century; he belonged to a low-caste class of weavers that had recently converted to Islam; he was likely the disciple of Swami Ramananda, a Hindu guru; and he became a well-known and influential poet and teacher throughout much of northern India. Beyond this, little can be said in light (or rather, darkness) of this limited information with academic and historic certainty. However, a plethora of stories abound about Kabir’s life. Most of the legends that circulate today are ones concerning Kabir’s birth, early childhood, and death. Other details about Kabir’s life can be culled from his poetry, although it is difficult to determine whether these details are autobiographical or simply anecdotal and metaphorical.

Legends about Kabir’s birth are perhaps the ones most shrouded in mystery and superstitious belief. In addition, many of the stories about Kabir’s birth have a tendency to censor out the Muslim details of his life while amplifying the Hindu aspects. As historian of religions Wendy Doniger points out, many of these stories “attempt to drag Kabir over the line from Muslim to Hindu.” While most historical accounts identify Muslim weavers by the names Neeru and Neema as Kabir’s parents, other legends argue that these Muslim weavers were merely the poet’s foster parents. Neeru and Neema were members of the Julaha, or weaver class, a group that had recently converted to Islam most likely to escape their low status in the Hindu caste system. Kabir was undoubtedly poor, and he ambiguously straddled the line

6 Wendy Doniger, “Preface to *Songs of Kabir,*” vii.
7 Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir*, 12.
between Shudra (the lowest level of the caste system) and mleccha (literally “barbarian”), a term given to all foreigners and non-Hindus in ancient India. The majority of Kabir Panthis (members of the Hindu Panth, a sect devoted to Kabir’s poetry and teachings) are Hindus who believe that Kabir was born (or rather divinely appeared) at Lahartara pond outside of Varanasi. According to Sabrat Das, a Kabir Panthi who resides at the Kabir Bagh at Lahartara, Kabir’s “birth was very mystic. Neeru and Neema were [his] foster parents…. A big ball of light was falling from the sky – a huge ball…. The ball of light did fall and started tossing around. And when it tossed around, all of a sudden, [the couple] saw a small baby.”

Visitors to the monastery at Lahartara are given a complimentary booklet that illustrates and tells about Kabir’s life. The booklet suggests that Neeru and Neema came across the baby Kabir by sheer happenstance while washing their hands at Lahartara pond. According to the booklet, Neema heard the baby’s cry, looked around to locate the sound, and “was enchanted when she saw a beautiful baby boy resting on a lotus flower.” Soon after adopting the child, Neeru and Neema arranged for a naming ceremony for their new son. Pandits and Quazis attended the ceremony at the couple’s home. While the Hindu Pandits thought of a name, the Muslim Quazis “opened the Book (Koran) and found the name ‘Kabir’ which means ‘The Great.’ The Quazis opened the Book again and again and, to their amazement, the same name appeared as many times as they opened the Book.” At that moment, the baby (who was only a few days old) spoke that he had already named himself Kabir. This miraculous self-proclamation sealed the decision. It should be noted that Kabir’s name is an Islamic one: it is

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8 Ibid.
9 Sabrat Das (resident Panthi at Kabir Bagh at Lahartara), in interview with the author, 05 November 2012.
10 Jagdish Das Shastri Saheb, Glimpse of the Life of Sadguru Kabir, 17.
11 Ibid., 18.
one of the ninety-nine titles attributed to God (or *Allah*) in the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{12} Not only that, the name Kabir comes from the same Arabic root as *Kubra, Kibriya*, and *Akbar*.\textsuperscript{13} Akbar was the name bestowed on the great sixteenth century Mughal emperor who strove to unite Hindus and Muslims under one empire in India over a hundred years later. (There is little doubt that Akbar was familiar with the poetry of Kabir.) All of these details about his name, like the miraculous story of his birth as a sort of divine descent to the earth, bolster Kabir’s legacy as a divine (or at least a semi-divine) figure in Indian history. However, Kabir’s divine qualities find root in both Muslim and Hindu mythologies.

While the booklet from Lahartara includes the background story of Kabir’s Islamic name, there are plenty of other stories that ignore this detail. For instance, one legend rejects Kabir’s divine birth and instead insists that he was born of a Brahmin woman. The legend posits that the infant Kabir was born “from the palm of its mother’s hand…. This legend enables the Hindu section of the Panth to explain the name of Kabir as a corruption of Kar-Bir or the hero (born from) the hand (of a Brahmin woman).”\textsuperscript{14} However, this legend is much less common.

Interestingly, the booklet from Lahartara omits any details about Neeru and Neema’s Muslim faith, but it especially concentrates on Kabir’s initiation by Swami Ramananda. Near Lahartara, Umesh Das, a young Panthi who resides at the Kabir Chaura Math in Varanasi, confirmed (despite shaky evidence) that Kabir was a disciple of Swami Ramananda. However, he highlighted the irony that Kabir, who was raised by Muslims, sought out a Hindu guru. The story is conversely complicated by the irony that Swami Ramananda ultimately accepted Kabir as his disciple despite his Muslim upbringing, something that was very rare for Hindu gurus at

\textsuperscript{12} Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir*, 39.
\textsuperscript{13} Westcott, G.H. *Kabir and the Kabir Panth*, 4.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 3.
that time.\textsuperscript{15} Umesh Das lamented the fact that Muslims and Sufis often try to claim Kabir was a 
Sufi, Sikhs try to claim he was a Sikh (even though he pre-dates Guru Nanak, the founder of 
Sikhism), and of course that many Hindus try to claim Kabir as their own. However, according 
to Umesh Das, “what is happening [is that] people just modify [Kabir’s life] because of their 
own selfishness. But Kabir never would think like that.”\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, Kabir never claimed to be a 
Hindu or a Muslim (or a Sikh for that matter!). Kabir saw all of these religious identities as 
superficial labels that stood in the way of forming a deep, personal relationship with the Supreme 
Being. In the final lines of one his most famous poems, Kabir draws on sacrificial imagery to 
disparage both religions by quipping that, “One slaughters goats, one slaughters cows, / they 
squander their births in isms.”\textsuperscript{17} 

Legends about Kabir’s death decisively tie the knot between the Hindu and Muslim 
aspects of Kabir’s life. The Kabir Chaura Math in Varanasi is the headquarters of the Kabir 
Panth and marks the spot where Kabir Panthis believe Kabir grew up and lived the majority of 
his life. Nevertheless, it is almost universally accepted that Kabir did not die in Varanasi. 
Rather, Muslims and most Hindus believe that the low-caste weaver-poet died at Maghar, in 
modern-day Uttar Pradesh. According to local traditions, non-Aryan tribes as well as Buddhists 
have inhabited Maghar, and today it is the home to mostly \textit{Julahas}, weavers like Kabir and his 
parents.\textsuperscript{18} Scholar of medieval Indian literature and religion Charlotte Vaudeville explains the 
orthodox Hindu opinion of Maghar: “The Hindus of Kashi [ancient Varanasi] held Maghar in 
contempt; moreover, according to popular belief, whilst those who die in holy Kashi reach

\textsuperscript{15} Umesh Das (resident Panthi at Kabir Chaura Math), in interview with the author, 04 
November 2012.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, \textit{The Bijak of Kabir}, 51, #30.
\textsuperscript{18} Charlotte Vaudeville, \textit{A Weaver Named Kabir}, 61.
salvation through Lord Shiva’s grace, those who die in Maghar are reborn as asses!... In Brahmanical eyes, impure Maghar was the very antithesis of holy Kashi: a place of perdition as against a place of salvation.” Kabir makes many references to Maghar in his poetry, and he is critical of the superstitious belief that by simply dying in Kashi one will receive salvation. Take for instance this poem:

He who dies in Maghar becomes an ass –
so, have you lost all faith in Ram?
Dying in Maghar, you will not know death,
dying elsewhere, you’ll put Ram to shame!
What is Kashi? What is the barren land of Maghar,
If Ram dwells in my heart?
If Kabir dies at Kashi,
what homage will he render Ram?

If Ram – Kabir’s preferred symbolic term for God or Supreme Being – presides within the heart, then why does it matter where one is buried? For Kabir, God and salvation were not found in the external world but rather inside the human soul.

The story of Kabir’s death becomes more complicated and mystified by what happens next – namely, what happens to his body after his death. Kabir’s death in Maghar is not a complete concession to Islamic authority. Although Kabir’s body was not cremated and his ashes not thrown into the Ganga at Varanasi, neither was his body buried at Maghar. Both Hindus and Muslims wanted to take Kabir’s body after his death. While Muslims and Hindus quarreled over who should take the body (which was supposedly lying under a large cloth in Maghar), Kabir supernaturally appeared to the two rival parties and told them to raise the cloth. There they found a heap of flowers. According to the Kabir Panth, “the Hindus removed half and burnt them at Banares [or Varanasi], while what remained were buried at Maghar by

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19 Ibid., 61-62.
20 Ibid., 63.
Muhammadans.”21 A commemorative Samadhi, or tomb, is located at Kabir Chaura Math in Varanasi, while another empty tomb is located in Maghar.22 This widely accepted myth gives neither Hindus nor Muslims the final say on Kabir’s life. When asked if he believes the story, Panthi Umesh Das replied,

How much it’s real, I don’t know. People used to say that, and I have also studied it, and it can be true. I think so, because we are living in the scientific era, we used to think: How can a body disappear? We used to think that, but I think so. What was there, we don’t know.23

Umesh Das’s openness to the myth, coupled with his reluctance to take a firm stance on whether or not it is a “true” and “factual” story, represents much more than his commitment to the teachings of the Kabir Panth. His willingness to pass down this mythological story – one that truly defies the “scientific era” – is also a testament to his devotion to the central message of Kabir, which is one of brotherhood and connectedness. What matters is not whether Kabir’s body actually disappeared from the earth, or much less whether Hindus or Muslims took possession of his dead body. In the words of Umesh Das, “Kabir taught [others]… not to quarrel with each other. Just believe in brotherhood.”24 After all, Kabir regularly referred to the body as “only clay / A leaky pot, / A jug with nine holes.”25 Ultimately, what matters is the shared heritage of Kabir’s poetry amongst people of all different faiths in India. Vaudeville beautifully explains Kabir’s uniqueness in relation to religious, social, and national identities in India throughout the centuries:

In Indian religious history, Kabir is unique: to the Hindus he is a Vaishnav bhakta, to the Muslims a pir, to the Sikhs a bhagat, to the sectarian Kabir-panthis an avatar of the Supreme Being. To modern patriots, Kabir is the champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, to

21 Westcott, G.H. Kabir and the Kabir Panth, 14.
22 Umesh Das, in interview with the author, 04 November 2012.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
neo-Vedantists a promoter of the Universal Religion or the ‘Religion of Man,’ he who steadfastly opposed the superstitious beliefs and empty ritualism of orthodox Hindus as well as the dogmatic pride and bigotry of orthodox Islam. In modern, progressive circles today, Kabir is held in high esteem as a social reformer, a bold enemy of untouchability and all forms of social discriminations…. To modern India, Kabir appears as a symbol of nonconformity, of all that is free, noble and challenging in the Indian tradition.26

This shared heritage of Kabir reflects a deeper “sharing” that Kabir ardently pushed his listeners to open up to and accept. This particular “sharing” is the acceptance of God’s omnipotence and omnipresence in the lives of all individuals – men, women, Hindus, Muslims, Brahmins, Shudras, untouchables, and all others. During his lifetime, Kabir was fiercely independent in his attitude toward the Supreme Being, but he was equally clear about the connectedness of all humanity that transcends whatever social differences and boundaries we may construct.

Poetic Forms and Paradoxical Language

Kabir’s poetry has been preserved and recorded in three major collections, each of which was compiled in different regions of north India years after Kabir’s life. The oldest collection, the Guru Granth (or Adi Granth), is from Punjab and is the sacred book of the Sikhs. While this text contains utterances and couplets from many saints and Sikh gurus, it also contains hundreds of couplets attributed to Kabir. The second text is the Pancvani (literally “Words of the Five”). This collection consists of the sayings of five saints who are revered by the Dadu Panth and is most popular in Rajasthan. The third text, the Bijak, contains only work attributed to Kabir, and it is the holy scripture of the Kabir Panth. The Bijak was composed in modern-day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in eastern India.27 It is important to note that Kabir’s poems and utterances were not

26 Charlotte Vaudeville, A Weaver Named Kabir, 11-12.
converted into written form until after Kabir’s life. Prior to its canonization, Kabir’s poetry was
primarily sung in the form of bhajans (devotional music or hymns). According to tradition,
Kabir was illiterate, and even in his own songs Kabir professed, “I don’t touch ink or paper, / this
hand never grasped a pen. / The greatness of four ages / Kabir tells with his mouth alone.”28 The
tradition of singing Kabir continues today throughout much of northern and central India.
According to the famous bhajan singer and Kabir Panthi Prahlad Singh Tipanya, who lives in
Maksi, Madhya Pradesh, in order to “see” Kabir, one must first “listen” to Kabir.29

Scholars are unsure about the language in which Kabir originally sang his poems into
existence. He definitely spoke an early dialect of Hindi, one that Vaudeville describes as a
“rough and earthy idiom of old Hindi.”30 He may have spoken Bhojpuri, the regional dialect of
Gorakhpur district, near Varanasi.31 Regardless, Kabir composed his poems in the vernacular,
not Sanskrit, in order to connect with a broad audience that spans the entire caste system. His
poems are short and straightforward; their meaning is intended to be easy to grasp. Furthermore,
Kabir’s poems generally took one of two forms: the popular song-like shabda (or pada) or the
lyrical, couplet-form sakhi. Kabir typically used the longer shabda to redress political
grievances and religious hypocrisies. Through the shabda, Kabir also articulated his message of
unity and brotherhood. The sakhi served a much more personal purpose, as it was a primary
meditative tool for yogic practitioners and Kabir Panthis. Kabir often alluded to the guru-
disciple relationship in his sakhis. Another, less common form is the ramaini, a long and rather
prose-like poetic form in which Kabir typically refuted religious orthodoxy. There are very few

28 Ibid., 3.
29 Prahlad Singh Tipanya (bhajan musician from Madhya Pradesh), in interview with the author,
10-11 November 2012.
30 Charlotte Vaudeville, A Weaver Named Kabir, back cover.
ramains attributed to Kabir. There are plenty of other folk-form poems that do not fall into one of these three groups, but these are generally not found in the three main texts that include Kabir’s work. This paper will focus on the *shabda* and the *sakhi*, as these are Kabir’s most common and recognizable poems.

The first form, the *shabda* (or *pada*), is Kabir’s most famous poetic form, and it is often sung. The *shabda* is the most philosophical of Kabir’s poetic forms, and it serves as Kabir’s primary medium for communicating his message. *Shabda*, which means “word” or “verbal testimony,” is an important element in Hindu philosophy, and it “implies both divine word or inspiration and the word of a trustworthy person.”

However, Kabir was clear that the “word” could not be found within the Vedas or the Qur’an (or within temples or mosques for that matter). Rather, *shabda* is reached through introspection and cultivating a deep relationship with God. Take this *shabda*, for example:

Running up minarets,  
Calling out to the faithful  
Five times a day,  
What’s your problem, muezzin?

Can’t you see you’re a walking  
Mosque yourself?  
You mind’s your Mecca;  
Your body the Ka’aba  
That you face when you pray;  
Anything you say  
Is an utterance from heaven.  
Cut the throat of desire,  
Not a poor goat’s, if you must.

Kabir says, I’m possessed,  
Just don’t ask me how  
It happened or when. 

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32 Muhammad Hedayetullah, *Kabir*, 211.  
33 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Songs of Kabir*, 30, KG 129.
Kabir mocks the *muezzin* (and ultimately, the listener) for not realizing that God resides within the heart as much as any physical place (in this case, in the *Ka’aba* in Mecca). According to Kabir, we all are at least part divine, since we are created by God and our words are “from heaven.” Sacrifice and other empty rituals will not bring us any closer to God. In another *shabda*, Kabir addresses the “Word” more explicitly, and he invokes the Upanishadic concept of negation, *neti neti* ("not this, not this"), when he describes the “word.”

O how may I ever express that secret Word?
O how can I say He is not like this, He is like that?
If I say that He is within me, the universe is ashamed:
If I say that He is without me, it is falsehood.
He makes the inner and the outer worlds to be invisibly one;
The conscious and the unconscious both are his footstools.
He is neither manifest nor hidden, He is neither revealed nor unrevealed;
There are no words to tell that which He is. [34]

Kabir’s *shabdas* have a reputation for being satirical and abstruse. They often address and satirize what Kabir saw as religious hypocrisies and corrupt societal structures. While the *shabda* tends to be less straightforward than Kabir’s other poems, their meaning is often derived through moments of revelation that come at the end of the poem in which “Kabir says” the point of his message. Kabir’s message is often a twist or a reversal from the listener’s traditional understanding of whatever topic Kabir is addressing. In effect, his message conveys a reversal or counter to religious dogma and traditional social structures.

The *sakhi* is Kabir’s other famous poetic form. *Sakhis* are short couplets that deliver a punch of wisdom to the listener. Most of the *bhajan* singer Prahlad Singh Tipanya’s songs are

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iterations of Kabir’s *sakhis*. These aphoristic poems are intended to be memorized and stored in the heart like “spiritual gems.” Here is one example:

> Darkness disappears when the sun arises  
> and ignorance goes away by the Guru’s wisdom;  
> Good intellect is lost because of greed,  
> and devotion is lost because of ego.

*Sakhis* such as this one serve as reminders not to allow worldly attachments (or *maya*) to distract oneself from a deep connection with God. Indeed, *sakhis* are like a burst of “light” that awakens the reader or listener to the “Inner Sound” that dwells within us all. The *sakhi* is a spiritual tool and meditative device for Kabir Panthis. Whereas *shabdas* serve a more broad and political purpose by speaking to religious communities and redressing normative structures of society, *sakhis* serve a more personal purpose. The *sakhi* is central to the devotional practices of Kabir Panthis and many other religious persons, and it helps to reinforce the importance of the guru-disciple relationship. As implied above, having a guru was viewed as essential for anyone seeking spiritual awakening from ignorance. In another *sakhi*, Kabir says:

> The madman without a guru  
> blindly rushes around,  
> douses the fire on the garbage heap  
> and burns his own house down.

Nevertheless, the *sakhi* is a necessary tool for any spiritual disciple hoping to open his/her eyes to the Supreme Being. *Sakhi* means “witness,” and plenty of Kabir’s couplets speak about opening ones “eyes” to the inner “wisdom” that dwells within us. One *sakhi* speaks explicitly about this goal.

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35 Prahlad Singh Tipanya, in interview with the author, 10-11 November 2012.  
37 Ibid, 8  
38 Ibid, 5  
The sakhi is wisdom’s eye –
look in your heart, understand.
Without the sakhi the struggles
of the world will never end.\(^{40}\)

Ultimately, the sakhi and the guru-disciple relationship aim toward obliterating ignorance and the illusions of the material world in an effort to awaken the disciple to the God who dwells within the heart. As Kabir proclaimed, “I am neither Hindu nor Moslem, but this body is made of five gross elements (earth, water, fire, air, ether), and I am the Divine who is dwelling in it.”\(^{41}\)

In an interview, Tipanya referred to this inner divinity as the “sixth” element. This element represents “ultimate reality” as compared with the other five elements that constitute \textit{maya}.\(^{42}\)

One of the most intriguing aspects of Kabir’s poetry is his signature technique known as \textit{ulatbamsi}, or “upside-down language.” This name is somewhat misleading, because it assumes that there is one, “right-side-up” from which to read the poems with this language; therefore, this aspect of Kabir’s poems is also referred to as “twilight language.” Poems of the \textit{ulatbamsi} type are intriguing because “they are absurd, paradoxical, crazy, impenetrable, and yet they purport to be meaningful.”\(^{43}\) Linda Hess has extensively researched and analyzed the puzzling, paradoxical language in Kabir’s poetry only to conclude that there is no right way to read and interpret his upside-down language. Hess asserts that “[u]pside-down language should make you feel like a fool: that is part of its function.”\(^{44}\) Below is one of Kabir’s most famous upside-down poems.

\begin{quote}
Brother, I’ve seen some
Astonishing sights:
A lion keeping watch
    Over pasturing cows;
A mother delivered
\end{quote}

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 131, #353.
\(^{42}\) Prahlad Singh Tipanya, in interview with the author, 10-11 November 2012.
\(^{44}\) Ibid.
After her son was;  
A guru prostrated  
   Before his disciple;  
Fish spawning  
   On treetops;  
A cat carrying away  
   A dog;  
A gunny-sack  
   Driving a bullock-cart;  
A buffalo going out to graze,  
   Sitting on a horse;  
A tree with its branches in the earth,  
   Its roots in the sky;  
A tree with flowering roots.

This verse, says Kabir,  
   Is your key to the universe.  
If you can figure it out.\(^{45}\)

The images in this pada all seem impossible when first digested. However, these impossible images slow the reader and puzzle the listener, forcing each to think about what Kabir is saying. Arvind Mehrotra Krishna has translated hundreds of Kabir’s padas, and in one of his translations he informs the reader that “language in this disruptive, oppositional fashion goes back a few thousand years and encompasses many forms: nonsense verse, children’s rhymes, riddles.”\(^{46}\) Whereas most riddles end in a more-or-less direct answer, Kabir’s poems end with a revelation that is open to many interpretations – an “Aha!” moment for the Kabir Panthi. In The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense, Michael Heyman calls Indian nonsense verse such as Kabir’s upside-down language (which finds its earliest precedents in the Vedas and Tantric texts) the “tenth rasa.” According to Heyman, Kabir’s “nonsense” verses and upside-down language are the basis for absurd, paradoxical, opaque and possibly symbolic texts [that] have usually been seen as either deep, meaningful puzzles to be solved, or pure nonsense. Perhaps they are, in a

\(^{45}\) Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Songs of Kabir, 3, KG 116.  
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 4.
way, both. They turn on Kabir’s conception that the mystery of reality is ineffable and can never be communicated; that it is the ‘untellable tale,’ the ‘akatha katha.’ In poem after poem, Kabir rejects the possibility that formal, linear discourse can lead to enlightenment. In his view, only the abrupt leaps and seismic shocks of the ‘upside-down language’ can provoke such transformative shifts of consciousness. This is the cornerstone of his teaching method.\(^47\)

The upside-down and nonsense images that permeate many of Kabir’s shabdas and sakhis may not seem so nonsensical when viewed from a new perspective. Kabir provokes the listener in an attempt to wake him/her up and to reevaluate religious claims toward reality and truth from a perspective that is not so linear, formal, or traditional. Kabir’s poetry cuts the curtain of maya, thus shocking the listener by the realization that perhaps the whole world is an illusion. The playful and disruptive images reflect a trickster quality in Kabir’s poems. Just as Kabir routinely tricked religious pundits during his lifetime – from tricking the reluctant Swami Ramananda to “giving him a mantra of initiation” to tricking the Muslims and Hindus who quarreled over who should take his dead body – so too does his poetry trick his listeners.\(^48\) Kabir tricks the listener (with good reason) to shed his social ego and instead submit to the “mystery of reality.” This is undoubtedly a difficult move, but it is necessary for salvation and liberation. For all these reasons, as soon as the Kabir disciple thinks he has “got it,” Kabir admonishes: “Friend, / You had one life, / And you blew it.”\(^49\)

Religious Pluralism in India and the Kabir Panth

From most Western perspectives, India is imagined as famously plural. Wendy Doniger succinctly summarizes the reasoning behind this perspective in the following:

\(^{47}\) Michael Heyman, *The Tenth Rasa*, 3.
\(^{49}\) Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Songs of Kabir*, 79, KG 60.
If they can tolerate all those gods (the argument goes), with all those heads and all those arms, if they can entertain all those different concepts of divinity, they must be able to tolerate the different concepts of divinity expressed in different religions. Should not many heads have many minds?50

But this perspective glosses over the cultural pervasiveness (and at times violent “hegemony”) of Hinduism in India’s history and the fact that today, nearly four out of five Indians is a Hindu.51

As the famous line from the Rig Veda reads: “Truth is one; sages call it by various names.”52

However, does this quote apply to all religious concepts of truth, or only Vedic (and later, Hindu) concepts? Kabir’s India was very different from Vedic India (1700-500 BCE). Not surprisingly, religious life in India has changed immensely since Kabir as well. Still the question remains: What is to account for India’s reputation of religious pluralism?

Many scholars attribute religious pluralism to the numerous instances of overlap in the formation of religious identities and communities in India. Whereas traditionally scholars have perceived communities “as clearly defined, both with regard to their identity and also to their boundaries,” today more scholars view the boundaries of communities as much less stable and identity as “not a fixed, but a relational category.”53 Likewise, assessing a particular community always involves defining that community in relation to other communities. In India, religious interaction has long been the norm on nearly all levels of society because “religion in India is not a discrete element of everyday life that stands wholly apart from the economic or political concerns of people.”54 Rather, religion impacts Indian society beyond the specific religious practices of individuals. With religion so present in the public and secular realms of society, it is inevitable that different religious views constantly come into contact and mix in peculiar ways.

51 T.N. Madan, “Religions of India: Plurality and Pluralism,” 42.
52 Pravrajika Vrajaprana, Vedanta, 53.
54 T.N. Madan, “Religions of India: Plurality and Pluralism,” 43.
Pluralism is further implicated by the fact that Hinduism is not at all a homogenous religion in India. Doniger describes how Hinduism has internally coped with its own multiplicity of religious concepts through her definition of *eclectic* pluralism, which is a kind of cognitive dissonance in which one person holds several different beliefs more or less simultaneously, drawing upon one on one occasion, another on another…. It internalizes a kind of “tool-box” approach characteristic of Hinduism. Multiple myths co-exist peacefully, sometimes in one open mind and sometimes in a group of people whose minds may be, individually, relatively closed. In either form, this approach supports religious diversity, and we do have good examples of the co-existence of many contradictory ideas in one mind, throughout Indian history. A pivotal example of such eclectic pluralism within the religion can be found in a text that is central to Hindu religious law, the *Laws of Manu*, which argues, within a single chapter, passionately against and then firmly for the eating of meat. Eclectic pluralism between religions is more cautious, but it does allow an individual – such as a Hindu who worships at a Sufi shrine – to embrace one tradition in such a way as to make possible, if not full engagement with other faiths, at least full appreciation and even admiration of their wisdom and beauty.\(^{55}\)

This “cognitive dissonance” within Hinduism also exists when Indians blend Hindu concepts with concepts from other religions, though as Doniger notes, this process is much “more cautious” because it bends and questions the solidarity of religious identities. Thus, pluralism makes religious distinctions (i.e., what it means to be Hindu versus Muslim) much more fluid and ambiguous. While the mixing of religious beliefs has sometimes produced violent consequences, it has also produced new, syncretic forms of religious beliefs and practices that blur the boundaries between the respective religions. This is particularly true for Sikhism, which developed in the sixteenth century as a result of the revelations of Guru Nanak, a figure that some claim (despite lack of evidence) was a disciple of Kabir. Kabir is highly revered by Sikhs, and Sikhs attend his pilgrimage sites in droves each year. Some Sikhs even claim that Kabir was a precursor to Sikhism.\(^{56}\) Both Sikhs and Kabir Panthis occupy interesting positions


\(^{56}\) Umesh Das, in interview with the author, 04 November 2012.
in which they have forged their own distinct identities while still upholding religious tolerance and pluralism. For a short analysis of this relationship, see Appendix A.

It is also fruitful to examine religious pluralism amongst the movements that have taken place within particular religions, for there are some movements with powerful ideological stances that uphold and advocate religious tolerance and even affirm the truth claims of other religions. Primary among these are the Bhakti (literally “love” or “devotion”) movement and Sufism, both of which greatly impacted Kabir (and both of which Kabir greatly impacted). The Bhakti movement was an originally Hindu movement, and Sufism is a mystical sect of Islam, but both religious movements influenced people in India beyond the members of the respective religions in which they are based. Central to both movements was love for God: “[t]he Sufis and the Bhaktas had really fallen in love with the Divine, and [it is] this love that binds the two socio-religious movements.” As Sufism and the Bhakti movement spread across India in the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries, the two movements led to cultural and linguistic interaction between Hindus and Muslims. These interactions introduced a new slew of Persian and Arabic into Indian languages. Above all else, the two movements stood as revolutionary countercurrents toward caste struggle, communal hatred, violence, and religious fundamentalisms. Instead the movements served to “bind people together. Their message also imbibes in itself the concepts of peace, equality, fraternity, and cultural pluralism.”

One of the greatest artistic contributions of these two religious movements was their rich outpouring of poetry. Kabir is regarded as one of the most famous members of the Sant tradition of spiritual teachers or “saints” during the Bhakti movement. In fact, Kabir is part of a long lineage of Bhakti poet-saints, including Ravidas, Dadu, Sena, Guru Nanak, and Mirabai, but

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57 Karan Singh, “Sufism and Bhakti movement as Part of Great Indian Culture,” 2.
58 Hamid Hussain, “Preface to Sufism and Bhakti Movement,” ix.
Kabir is one of the most famous of the bhaktas. Kabir is popularly referred to as Sant Kabir, but some other common names for the poet are Guru Kabir (guru means “master” or “teacher”) and Kabir Das (das means “servant,” and many Kabir Panthis attach this term to their own names). Kabir gained widespread popularity during and after his life because he “presented a simple form of bhakti and spirituality which was appealing to the people.” Kabir, who strongly opposed the caste system, was able to connect with a wide audience partially because of his low status in Indian society, to which many could relate, but also because of his articulation of a union with God that stressed the importance of personal experiences with the divine. Kabir presented a vision of God that was accessible to all of humanity – not just Brahmin priests.

Nevertheless, the themes and motifs of Kabir’s poetry, as well as his message, were not new or spontaneous creations. Kabir “draws on several traditions and makes a variety of similes,” which can be easily traced back to their Sufi, Bhakti, and Tantric sources. His devotional, worshipful tone and insistence on monotheism are common staples of the Bhakti movement and Sufism. Vaudeville has also pointed out that “the traditions that nourished his thought and provided him with his esoteric vocabulary are largely those of Tantric yoga.” This is particularly true of his “upside-down” language, which counters all kinds of orthodox understandings of nature and reality. For example, take the following images: “the lotus which blooms without flower,” and “the fire raging in the Ocean.” As Vaudeville suggests, “[s]ometimes Kabir is a Bhakta talking the language of Yoga, sometimes he is a Yogi speaking

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 103.
Indeed, Kabir wears many hats, from Bhakta, Sufi, and Yogi, to Guru and Das.

Kabir’s message, while revolutionary, has a history that can be traced to the various religious realities of his context. What is most interesting for the comparative study of religion is the way in which Kabir combined and pieced together the streams of religious thought that ran throughout India during his time. Kabir resembles the structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s concept of the bricoleur, one “who uses ‘the means at hand’” (bricolage) to construct a new mythological or religious worldview. While Kabir did not purport to create a new “religion,” he did recycle pieces and concepts of other traditions to communicate a religious message that was something unmistakably new. Kabir’s metaphors and language may at specific times appear Hindu or Islamic (or Tantric or Sufi), but his overall message cannot be attributed to any one religion. His poetry also contains many weaving metaphors since he was a weaver by profession. One Kabir Panthi, in reflecting on Kabir’s poetry at large, prefers to reiterate the weaving metaphor when he says that Kabir “sang as he weaved.” When one steps back and views Kabir’s tapestry – the collection of his poetry – in its totality, she will see a masterpiece that is remarkably unique yet distinctly Indian.

The Kabir Panth (or Kabir “Path”) formed largely out of this milieu of religious movements and attitudes toward pluralism in the century after Kabir’s death. While the Panth is its own religious sect, it spans the boundaries of many different religions. The Panth consists mostly of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, and has a population of roughly five to ten million within

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64 Ibid.
India. The Panth also includes both men and women in its ranks. There are two kinds of Panthis: those who live in their own homes and carry out their own lives as part of society, and those who renounce the world and join a monastery belonging to the Panth. Most Panthis fall into the former category, and those who fall into the latter are known as Bairagis. According to Nandlal Borna, a Kabir Panthi and civil engineer from Indore, “the direction of India changed because of Kabir.” He also noted that this new “direction” and transformation stem directly from Kabir’s songs that have been sung continually for centuries. He says that, “the essence of Kabir’s poems and songs is being lived out by his followers today.”

The Kabir Panth has two main divisions: one is known as the bap (or “father”) with headquarters at the Kabir Chaura Math in Varanasi, and the other is known as mai (or “mother”) with headquarters in the Chattisgarh district in central India. There are dozens of branch monasteries throughout India in places such as Maghar, Delhi, Puri, and Amarkantak. The Kabir Panth is not a very uniform sect because the religious beliefs and customs at each of these places are very localized. Nevertheless, there are some features that tend to be constant throughout the whole of the sect. G.H. Westcott, expert on the Kabir Panth, has identified the following requirements for membership in the Panth:

All… who desire to become members of the Panth are required to renounce polytheism and to acknowledge their belief in only one God (Parameshwar). They must also promise to eat no meat and drink no wine; to bathe daily and sing hymns to God, both morning and evening; to forgive those who trespass against them up to three times; to avoid the company of all women of bad character and all unseemly jesting in connection with such subjects; never to turn away from their house their lawful wife; never to tell

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67 Umesh Das, in interview with the author, 04 November 2012.
68 Nandlal Borna (Kabir Panthi and engineer from Indore, India), in interview with the author, 10 November 2012.
69 Ibid.
70 Westcott, G.H. Kabir and the Kabir Panth, 57.
lies; never to conceal the property of another man; never to bear false witness against a neighbor or speak evil of another on hearsay evidence.\textsuperscript{71}

Furthermore, the creation and spread of the Kabir Panth was largely a response to growing opposition toward the caste system, an aspect of Hindu culture that the Panth vehemently denounced. As a result, “few but Shudras, whose cause it champions, have associated themselves with the movement.”\textsuperscript{72} Prahlad Singh Tipanya (who was born to a Dalit, or “untouchable,” family) summed up the Kabir Panth best when he said that the “Kabir Panth is the bounding together [of individuals] to think, to sing, and to remember [Kabir].”\textsuperscript{73} Caste and class differences have no room in a religious community such as this.

Erasing Cultural Boundaries: Kabir’s Denial of Difference

As should be evident by this point, Kabir was remarkably contrarian and unorthodox in his views toward the cultural structures that divided people in his time. Cultural dichotomies or binaries (i.e., Hindu/Muslim, upper-caste/lower-caste, man/woman) were highly problematic for Kabir because they always subjugated a population of people. Activist Riki Wilchins postulates the connection between binaries and power: “it should surprise no one that binaries are about power, a form of doing politics through language. Binaries create the smallest possible hierarchy of one thing over another. They are not really about two things, but only one.”\textsuperscript{74} Cultural barriers – the kind that slot people into restrictive dichotomies and hierarchies – are exactly what Kabir tried so loudly to sing his listeners out of. By breaking down social and cultural hierarchies, Kabir sought to liberate people by uniting them together spiritually. As Kabir sang,

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{72} Westcott, G.H. Kabir and the Kabir Panth, 62-63.
\textsuperscript{73} Prahlad Singh Tipanya, in interview with the author, 10-11 November 2012.
\textsuperscript{74} Riki Wilchins, “A Certain Kind of Freedom: Power and the Truth of Bodies,” 43
“only she who is free from delusion” is truly free.\textsuperscript{75} Another translation of this line from the same \textit{shabda} reads, “only he who has no taint of Maya.”\textsuperscript{76}

Indeed, Kabir saw religious, caste, and gender barriers as “delusions” or “illusions” (\textit{maya}) that tie people down and prevent spiritual liberation. For this reason, much of Kabir’s poetry mocked and called out religious pandits, mullahs, and others who maintained cultural and social barriers as a means to retain their own power in society. Kabir’s ambiguous religious heritage and existence (Is he a Muslim? A Hindu? Both? Neither?) made “nonsense of the line between Muslims and Hindus.”\textsuperscript{77} For Kabir, religious distinctions were ultimately illusions because they only maintain the differences that exist between people; they allow no space for unity and solidarity between members of different traditions whom Kabir saw as worshiping the same Supreme Being. Thus, Kabir saw religious dogmas and rituals (such as \textit{sutee}, animal sacrifice, idol worship, and circumcision) as distractions from the reality of God (the complete antithesis of \textit{maya}). Overcoming cultural boundaries is the principal path toward cutting through and exposing the \textit{maya} of the world in which these false dichotomies are grounded.

Amartya Sen, the Indian economist who was awarded the 1998 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, has spoken at great length about how obsessions over religious identities (and differences) has subsumed the myriad of other distinctions by which we each construct our individual identities. According to Sen:

\begin{quote}
In partitioning the population of the world into those belonging to “the Islamic world,” “the Western world,” “the Hindu world,” “the Buddhist world,” the divisive power of classificatory priority is implicitly used to place people firmly inside a unique set of rigid boxes. Other divisions (say, between the rich and the poor, between members of different classes and occupations, between people of different politics, between distinct
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{75} Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, \textit{A Touch of Grace}, xxi.
\textsuperscript{76} Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, \textit{The Bijak of Kabir}, 55, #41.
\textsuperscript{77} Wendy Doniger, “Preface to \textit{Songs of Kabir},” viii.
nationalities and residential locations, between language groups, etc.) are all submerged by this allegedly primal way of seeing the differences between people.\textsuperscript{78}

In his poetry and songs, Kabir peeled back the layers of the “divisive power classificatory priority” to reveal a common link to all of humanity: love and unity. Kabir was anti-institutional to his very core, and while he did not criticize the various ways in which people constructed their identity \textit{per se}, he did criticize the ways these cultural constructions were used to wield power and subjugate different populations by placing them in “rigid boxes.” However, Kabir’s denunciation goes far beyond Sen’s political argument. Kabir’s radical message in fact denied \textit{all} differences. This denial of difference would later be reflected in Guru Nanak’s denunciation of what he saw as hypocrisies promoted by Hindus and Muslims, Akbar’s creation of the “Divine Faith” (\textit{Din-e Ilahi}), and even the twentieth century spiritual teacher Ramana Maharshi’s claim that, “There are no others.” Religious barriers were just one layer of the fraudulent taxonomies that Kabir strove to obliterate. Ultimately, Kabir was only interested in what lies beneath these layers of labels.

As noted, caste was another illusion for Kabir, and like many other low-caste poet-saints, Kabir was intent on erasing the line between upper-caste and lower-caste members of society. For instance, take the following satirical \textit{shabda} in which Kabir claims “[n]obody’s lower-caste.”

\begin{quote}
Were the Creator
Concerned about caste
We’d arrive in the world
With a caste mark on the forehead.

If you say you’re a Brahmin
Born of a mother who’s a Brahmin,
Was there a special canal
Through which you were born?

And if you say you’re a Turk
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{78} Amartya Sen, \textit{Identity and Violence}, 11.
And your mother’s a Turk,
Why weren’t you circumcised
Before birth?

Nobody’s lower-caste;
The lower castes are everywhere
They’re the ones
Who don’t have Rama on their lips,

Kabir says.\(^7^9\)

Kabir re-appropriates the label of low-caste, turning it into a label for the spiritually bankrupt who have no personal relationship with God. In doing so, Kabir highlights the emptiness of caste differences. The metaphor of having “Rama on their lips” draws attention to the symbolic connection between God and breath. During interviews, Prahlad Singh Tipanya repeatedly spoke about the “Supreme Power” as being “inside all living beings” just as breath moves through all living bodies. According to Tipanya, “breath is the essence of the gods of all different religions.” Symbolically speaking, “breath is the soul.”\(^8^0\) Understanding this universal truth renders caste obsolete.

Gender was another dichotomy that Kabir often sang about. In some poems, Kabir quite literally blurred the rigid line between men and women when he sang about becoming a woman.

Below are some excerpts from a poem in which Kabir takes on the poetic voice of a woman:

Tell me, wise one,
How did I become
A woman from a man?

... 
In a Brahmin’s house,
I become a Brahmin’s wife;
In a yogi’s, a lay yogini;

In a Turk’s, I read the kalma
And do as Turkish women do;

\(^7^9\) Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Songs of Kabir*, 28, KG 182.

\(^8^0\) Prahlad Singh Tipanya, in interview with the author, 10-11 November 2012.
And yet I’m always alone
Without a place to call home.
Listen, saints, Kabir says,
This is my body. 81

The transgender metaphor of becoming the opposite gender is very common in the poetry of Indian saints. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra draws attention to this pattern in his translations of Kabir’s poetry and cites A.K. Ramanujan, who, in his essay “Men, Women, and Saints,” calls saints the “third gender.” Ramanujan points out that, “just as the male saint-to-be drops his caste, wealth, and intelligence, he finally drops his masculinity, becomes a woman, so that he can be open to the lord. The male saint yearns to achieve a woman’s state in his society, so he can yearn for and couple with god – to accept the feminine side of himself, as Jung would say, shedding his machismo.” 82 The same gender reversal is also true for women saints. In the context of Kabir’s poetry, occupying another gender also highlights Kabir’s belief that the body is nothing more than a container – a “jug with nine holes” – for the soul. Thus, gender differences only serve as distractions from the hidden divinity inside our bodies.

While Kabir was undoubtedly vocal in his opposition to discrimination based on religion, caste, and gender, these societal issues were not his primary concern. Kabir was not a revolutionary in the political or economic sense in the same way that he was in the spiritual sense. In Doniger’s illustration of Kabir’s life, he was “[i]conoclastic, yes; anti-institutional, to be sure; poor and low in status, you bet – but not concerned about putting an end to poverty.” 83 Kabir understood that simply alleviating poverty, eliminating the caste system, and empowering the downtrodden would not spur the spiritual awakening that he was after. More so than

81 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Songs of Kabir, 50, KG 160.
83 Wendy Doniger, “Preface to Songs of Kabir,” x.
anything else, Kabir strove to extinguish the illusory line between the god “with qualities” (sa-
gun) and the god “without qualities” (nir-gun). When Kabir draws on religious metaphors and
symbols to describe the Supreme Being, he is well aware that the details “are all around the god
but not of him.” Similarly, when Kabir cries out to Rama, he is not referring to Sita’s Rama
who kills Ravana. Rather, he is referring to the Supreme Being that is indescribable and without
qualities. Thus, Rama serves as a double symbol in Indian mythology and Kabir’s poetry for
both the personal anthropomorphic god of the Ramayana and – most importantly – the divine
power that resides in and energizes all living beings. This Rama is the very “breath” on our lips.

None of Kabir’s poems strike at this paradoxical double quality of the Supreme Being
better than his upside-down poems. Kabir’s upside-down language challenges the way we think
about simple objects and natural processes. Each of these challenges draws into question just
how clearly we see the world, God, and ourselves. In effect, these poems suggest that perhaps
the mind is the greatest illusion of all. For example, take the following upside-down poem and
Linda Hess’s subsequent explanation of the shabda:

How do you,
Asks the chief of police,
Patrol a city
Where the butcher shops
Are guarded by vultures;
Where bulls get pregnant,
Cows are barren,
And calves give milk
Three times a day;
Where mice are boatmen
And tomcats the boats
They row;
Where frogs keep snakes
As watchdogs,
And jackals
Go after lions?

84 Ibid., xi.
Does anyone know
What I’m talking about?
Says Kabir.\textsuperscript{85}

Hess illuminates the underlying meaning of this poem in her explanation that the poem states, in its oblique way, that the mind cannot solve the problem since the mind is the problem. It is like making a vulture the watchman over a meat-strewn city. It is like appointing a snake as protector of frogs. In such a town can we even talk of a sheriff to round up criminals? Who could be sheriff? Kabir shoots the question at us, following it with a rapid-fire series of impossible images, then bringing us up short, before we have had a chance to note how many times our heads have whirled.\textsuperscript{86}

The successive images certainly do cause the head to whirl. Approaching the poem rationally or linearly will not uncover its meaning. As a result, it is nearly impossible to find what Kabir is “talking about.” However, Kabir’s sudden conclusion suggests that there is some deeper meaning to his poem. Instead of trying to flip Kabir’s upside-down poems around until they finally make any rational sense, Kabir prods the listener/reader to alter his/her own mind and thought processes until they become in sync with the poetry. In another poem, Kabir warns that “The mind’s a knot, says Kabir, / Not easy to untie.”\textsuperscript{87} Kabir’s poetry offers a new perspective from which to view social and religious problems. This perspective forces us first to look at ourselves and realize that many of our problems are our own creations.

Kabir’s cacophony of upside-down and nonsense images induces an epiphany in the listener that goes far beyond the literal meanings of the images themselves. This revelation is what historian of religions Mircea Eliade has coined “hierophany,” that is, a manifestation of the “sacred.” Eliade has described this revelation, or \textit{revealing}, as a “mysterious act – the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our

\textsuperscript{85} Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, \textit{Songs of Kabir}, 8, KG 120.
\textsuperscript{86} Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, \textit{The Bijak of Kabir}, 154.
\textsuperscript{87} Arvind Krishna Mehotra, \textit{Songs of Kabir}, 13, KG 93.
world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world.”

Eliade’s categories of the “sacred” and the “profane” formed what he saw as the central dichotomy of religions. Whereas the “profane” represents only mundane and individual, worldly concerns, the “sacred” represents all beliefs, practices, and experiences that are forbidden and radically foreign to this world. Unlike the “profane,” the “sacred” is not of this world. Many symbols and images may point toward and approximate the “sacred” – the Supreme Being – but these images and physical qualities (gunas) should not be mistaken for being the actual Supreme Being. All attempts to describe God ultimately fall short. Kabir takes mundane images and turns them inside out in his upside-down poems, thereby removing the stubborn obstacles of the “profane” world from the minds of his listeners. As a result, Kabir’s upside-down poems shock the listener into “a reality that does not belong to our world.” For Kabir, overcoming the God “with qualities” and embracing the God “without qualities” is the key to salvation and spiritual liberation.

Conclusion: Listening to Echoes of Kabir

Despite the obvious differences between Kabir’s India and the realities of India today, India is still dealing with many of the same kinds of problems – from violence between Muslims and Hindus to social injustice to gender inequality. Similar problems plague other nations around the globe as well, and Umesh Das and Prahlad Singh Tipanya stressed in interviews that Kabir is as relevant today as he was during his lifetime. Umesh Das also alluded to new dichotomies, such as that between faith and reason (or science), which have further divided

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89 Umesh Das, in interview with the author, 04 November 2012.
90 Prahlad Singh Tipanya, in interview with the author, 10-11 November 2012.
people and shaped views toward religion in the modern world. It is against these stubborn, evolving systems of thinking in terms of difference, binaries, and hierarchies that Kabir’s poetry offers the strongest countercurrent. Kabir’s transcendence of difference “offers us one possible way through the culturally creative but ultimately unbelievable dualisms that we are struggling through now (faith/reason, sacred/secular, traditional/modernity, East/West, Christian/Muslim, Hindu/Muslim).”

Above all else, Kabir beautifully showed us how to articulate a worldview that does not perpetuate social dichotomies that are not productive toward reaching our individual, spiritual goals. In unique and untraditional ways, Kabir exemplified how “to draw on the symbolic and ritual resources of a tradition without being slavishly bound to it, to love a religion and to be deeply, publicly critical of its lies, … even to imaginatively internalize and unite the depths of other religious traditions in one’s own mystical and erotic energies.”

In one of his shabdas, Kabir reminds us that no religion will save us; only we can take the reins and forge our own path through a loving relationship with God. Drawing on equestrian imagery, Kabir says:

Listen carefully,  
Neither the Vedas  
Nor the Qur’an  
Will teach you this:  
Put the bit in its mouth,  
The saddle on its back,  
Your foot in the stirrup,  
And ride your wild runaway mind  
All the way to heaven.

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92 Ibid.  
93 Arvind Mehotra Krishna, Songs of Kabir, 14, KG 81.
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While I met several Kabir Panthis from Hindu and Muslim communities, I did not meet any from Sikh communities. However, each person I interviewed agreed that Kabir is highly revered by Sikhs. Future students may find it worthwhile to study the relationship between the Kabir Panth and Sikhism. As I analyze in Appendix A, these two communities share many characteristics with regard to identity, community, and pluralism. I recommend doing a comparative study between the two religious communities.

Several of the Kabir Panthis I interviewed exhibited levels of disdain and distrust toward “outsiders” studying the Kabir Panth. One Panthi in particular was very vocal in his opinion that one of the scholars whose translations I relied on is “corrupt.” I did not pay too much credence to this attitude, and instead I tried to balance my academic scholarship with writings by and interviews of Kabir Panthis. However, future students may want to study the politics of “outsiders” studying and analyzing another person’s religion in India.

Lastly, while I touched on “eclectic pluralism” and the *bricolage* or “tool-box” approach toward mixing different religious beliefs and customs, a future student may want to further expand on this pattern in Indian religious life. I have found this liberal attitude toward religion very common India, but that is not to say that plenty of religious violence and bigotry has resulted from religions coming into contact with each other. I recommend examining more concrete examples of this kind of religious “mixing” and expanding on its social outcomes.

Below I have included some important contact information for some of the people I met with and interviewed:
Prahlad Singh Tipanya
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Phone: 09425494525 (Vijay, Prahladji’s son, speaks some English)

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Appendix A: Balancing Identity and Pluralism: Sikhism and the Kabir Panth

While Sikhism draws heavily on Hindu and Islamic beliefs and rituals, it also constitutes a distinct religious community in India. Sikhism is much more than a simple synthesis of Hinduism and Islam. The Guru Granth contains numerous examples of religious-political posturing to distinguish – and set apart – Sikhs from their Hindu and Muslim counterparts. For example, in the sacred Sikh text Guru Arjan proclaims, “I am neither Hindu nor Muslim.” This proclamation echoes Kabir’s earlier renunciations of Hindu and Islamic orthodoxies, such as in the Guru Granth when he sings, “I have renounced the path of both the Pandit and the Mullah. / I weave and weave, to make my own way, / And I sing of the Supreme Being to empty the self.” These utterances reflect the complex construction of religious identity amongst Sikhs – an identity with its own distinct “path” or “way,” but one that is always defined in relation to religious “others” in India.

Guru Nanak and Kabir disdained organized religion, but the followers of both individuals ultimately started the religious movements that created Sikhism and the Kabir Panth, respectively. Religious scholar Diana Eck has pointed out the irony that Kabir’s followers created a sect devoted to Kabir, despite his obvious disdain for organized religion of all kinds. Though despite the sectarian nature of both Sikhism and the Kabir Panth, both exhibit attitudes of religious tolerance and inclusivism. Prahlad Singh Tipanya highlighted the universality of Kabir’s message when he said, “Kabir’s philosophy is for everyone on earth, not just for Kabir

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95 Ibid., 57.
96 Ibid.
97 Diana Eck, *Banaras*, 87.
Panthis or the people who sing his songs.” Tipanya’s liberal outlook reinforces Kabir’s anti-authoritarian and unorthodox views toward religion. However, as another Kabir Panthi has pointed out, Kabir was not anti-religion; he was simply against what he saw as “hypocrisy masquerading as religion.” Both Kabir Panthis and Sikhs have found sophisticated ways of maintaining their religious identities while respecting and valuing other religions. Indeed, no religious community is exempt from this interplay between forming a distinct identity and relating back to other religious identities, but Sikhism and the Kabir Panth provide vibrant examples of this interplay as it pertains to religious pluralism.

98 Prahlad Singh Tipanya, in interview with the author, 10-11 November 2012.
99 Charandas Mahant, The Relevance of Kabir, 1.
Appendix B: Glossary of Non-English Terms

*Allah*: Arabic term for God in Islam.

*Adi Granth*: Also, *Guru Granth*; the earliest sacred text in Sikhism; contains poetry by Kabir.

*Bhajan*: An Indian devotional song or hymn.

*Bhakti*: In Hinduism, religious devotion toward a deity or the divine expressed through love.

*Bijak*: Best-known compilation of Kabir’s poems and a sacred text within the Kabir Panth.

*Brahmin*: Highest *varna*, or level, of the caste system; consists primarily of priests.

*Dalit*: Also, untouchable; lowest *varna*, or level, of the caste system; a suppressed population in Indian society.

*Das*: Literally “servant” or “slave;” a term added to the names of disciples in Indian religion.

*Guru*: Spiritual master and teacher.

*Julaha*: A low-status class of weavers in India that converted to Islam in the fourteenth century.

*Panth*: Literally “path;” a religious community.

*Maya*: Translated as “illusion;” refers to the ephemeral and fleeting nature of the universe.

*Nir-gun*: A conception of god or divinity that views the divine as being ineffable, unknowable, and beyond human description.

*Pada*: Literally “foot;” another term for Kabir’s poems.

*Pandit*: A scholar or teacher who has mastered the four Vedas under the supervision of a Guru.

*Ram*: In Hinduism, the seventh avatar of Vishnu and hero of the *Ramayana* epic. Also, Kabir’s preferred term for the Supreme Being.

*Shabda*: Literally “sound,” “speech;” the poetic term for Kabir’s longer poems and hymns.

*Sa-gun*: A conception of god or divinity that views the divine as being grounded in the concrete, artistic images and symbols that cultures develop to invoke god.

*Sakhi*: Literally “witness;” the poetic term for Kabir’s couplets.
Samadhi: A tomb or mausoleum to commemorate the death of an important religious figure.

Sant: Literally “saint;” a term often ascribed to bhakti poets.

Shastra: Term for the Hindu books of learning, including those of scripture and myth as well as law.

Shudra: Second lowest varna, or level, of the caste system; consists primarily of unskilled laborers.

Ulatbamsi: Term referring to Kabir’s paradoxical, “upside-down” language, which is at once absurd and meaningful.

Yogi: A practitioner of Yoga and/or Tantric practices.
Appendix C: Selected Photographs

Center of the Kabir Chaura Math complex in Varanasi

100 Kabir Chaura Math. Varanasi, India. Taken by Parker Eudy. 04 November 2012.
Kabir Mandir near the home of Prahlad Singh Tipanya in Maksi, Madhya Pradesh. 

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101 Kabir Mandir. Maksi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Taken by Parker Eudy. 11 November 2012.
Prahlad Singh Tipanya and the author after an evening of improvising together on sitar and violin\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{102} Prahlad Singh Tipanya and Parker Eudy with instruments. Maksi, Madhya Pradesh, India. Taken by Santi Tipanya. 11 November 2012.