

# Kabir in the Guru Granth Sahib: An Explanatory Essay

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## PART I

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**A COMPARISON OF THE KABIR traditions preserved in the Guru Granth Sahib with those preserved elsewhere can shed light on the unique features of Sikhism and on the broad current of religious belief and practice subsumed under the headings *nirguna bhakti* or *sant* religion.**

Historians of Indian religion have tended to oversimplify the medieval religious situation by classifying all important figures, movements and literatures as representative of either *saguna bhakti* or *nirguna bhakti* - devotion to God in the form of one of his incarnations, or devotion to the God who is beyond all form. But a religious sensibility is based on much more than doctrines and definitions of the nature of God. In the words of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, religion is experienced as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men. ...”<sup>1</sup>

The label ‘*saguna bhakti*’ obscures the important differences at the symbolic and affective level between the Krishna lila as sung by the poet Surdas and used in the ritual life of the Vallabha sect, and the story of Rama as retold by Tulsidas in his *Ram-Carit-Manas* and cherished throughout North India regardless of sectarian affiliation. **Likewise, the label ‘*nirguna bhakti*’ fails to distinguish between the religious vision and utterances of the solitary individuals who were the medieval *santas*, and the doctrinal and other literature of the various organized sects or *panths* developed by their followers.** However, even a preliminary examination of the corpus of Kabir utterances included in the *Guru Granth Sahib* reveals some noticeable differences between Kabir the mystic and the organized Sikh Panth which claims him as a spiritual ancestor.

The Sikh tradition itself does not officially recognize these differences, viewing Kabir as one of the many *bhagats* (*bhaktas*) who were precursors of Guru Nanak in the preaching of devotion to the God who is beyond all form. Some of the later *janamsakhis* even claim that Guru Nanak met Kabir in the course of his visit to Banaras<sup>2</sup> - a clear impossibility unless the life span of 120 years traditionally attributed to Kabir is accepted as factual.<sup>3</sup> While understanding the emotional value for the Sikh religious community of a sense of spiritual linkage with a great religious figure of the past such as Kabir, we may yet question whether his vision was in fact indistinguishable from that of the Sikh Gurus. The inclusion of some of his utterances in the *Guru Granth Sahib* is not automatic proof of an absolute identity of “moods and motivations” between him and the compilers of the *Granth*.

### Tradition and Texts:

The official compilation of the *Guru Granth Sahib* (hereafter SGGS) by Guru Arjun took place in 1604, and was based on an earlier collection made by Guru Amar Das. If the *bhagat-bani* (utterances of the bhagats) were indeed included in the earlier collection, the SGGS tradition of Kabir can be said to go back to the third quarter of the 16th century, and is the only one for which an early and precisely dated manuscript exists.<sup>4</sup> 1604 is however a

late enough date to allow for a broad diffusion of Kabir's utterances throughout northern India. The two other principal manuscript traditions of Kabir (the Eastern or Kabir-Panthe tradition and the Rajasthani or Dadu-Panthe tradition) may have originated in the same period, and contain much material not present in the SGGS. Moreover, it is impossible in the present state of Kabir studies to dismiss the voluminous manuscript traditions of uncertain provenance and the yet more voluminous living oral traditions.<sup>5</sup> Unless conclusive evidence to the contrary is forthcoming, we must conclude that the SGGS corpus of Kabir utterances cannot possibly represent the sum total of what was accessible to the Sikh gurus at the time of compilation. A selection must have been made, and made on the basis of conformity to the "moods and motivations" of the Sikh religious community at that particular stage in its development.

In order to define the principles of selection which were involved, a comparison between this whole vast corpus and the utterances preserved in the SGGS would be required. As most of this material has been hardly touched by scholars so far, the project must remain a long-range hope. In the meanwhile, a small step in this direction may be taken by comparing the SGGS tradition with the Dadu-Panthe tradition, which is rich, close to the SGGS in many ways, and has been more critically studied than any other. Comparison with the Kabir-Panthe tradition preserved in the various manuscripts of the *Bijak* would be less useful at this point because there is little overlap between the *Bijak* and the SGGS Kabir corpus.

The Dadu Panth is a sect within the *nirguna bhakti* current of religion which has flourished primarily in Gujarat and Rajasthan, and is known among other things for having developed an order of armed ascetics who played an important role as retainers of the Jaipur rajas.<sup>6</sup> Unlike either the Sikh Panth or the Kabir Panth, it placed a strong emphasis on asceticism and celibacy, and has in general preserved a much more esoteric character than the other two *panths*.<sup>7</sup> Included in its literature are compilations known as *Pancavani*, in which utterances of five important sants (Dadu, Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas and Haridas) are preserved. This tradition is now available in the *Kabir Granthvalia* (hereafter KG), a critical edition of Kabir by P.N. Tiwari of the University of Allahabad.<sup>8</sup> This important work is an attempt at a reconstruction of Kabir's original utterances, but is in fact overwhelmingly biased towards the *Pancavani* manuscripts, and therefore represents most clearly the Dadu-Panthe tradition of Kabir.

What I shall be attempting here is a comparison between the SGGS corpus of Kabir and the KG in terms of religious themes which appear to be given prominence in one and not the other. Until careful stylistic studies of Kabir enables us to determine more reliably what is genuine Kabir and what is clearly spurious, we cannot claim that either textual tradition most clearly preserves the original Kabir. For the present study, the assumption is that the KG collection's wider and more representative sampling of Kabir's utterances has as much claim to genuineness as the smaller SGGS collection. If this is the case, our comparison can indeed elucidate which themes present in the Kabir were congenial to the Sikh Panth and which were not.

### **Literary Form and Organization:**

In order to make this thematic comparison, we must first be comparing types of utterances which are genuinely comparable, and secondly be able to clearly determine the presence of prominent themes. Both the SGGS and the KG clearly distinguish between the three different types of utterances of Kabir which have been preserved: the couplet or *doha*

(called *sakhi* in the KG and *salok* in the SGGS), the short lyric or pada (called *Sabad* in the SGGS), and the *ramaini*, a verse from similar to the caupai of Tulsidas' *Ram-Charit Manas*. In the case of the SGGS, however, it is difficult to determine within these categories what religious themes are prominent, because the overall organization of the text is not a thematic one. The *sabads* are organized in the traditional manner under the different *ragas* in which they are to be sung, as a result of which Kabir's utterances of this kind are scattered throughout 16 different sections which have not internal thematic sub-divisions. Similarly, his *shalokas* are gathered together in one long un-differentiated list near the end of the SGGS.

The KG, however, following the general trend in the various manuscripts of the Rajasthani tradition of Kabir, organizes both the *padas* and the *sakhis* under subject headings which provide a quick index to the themes which this tradition considered important.<sup>9</sup> The total number of headings is 16 in the case of the *padas* and 34 in the case of the *sakhis*. Since both of these numbers are considered by Indian tradition to have a mystical significance, it would be a mistake to treat the headings as a complete and systematic doctrinal presentation: thematic categories may have been expanded or reduced to fit the meaningful numbers. Regardless of what one chooses to make of mystical numbers, the subject headings bring out clearly the wide variety of religious themes touched upon by Kabir as preserved in the Dadu-panthi tradition: *sataguru mahima* (the greatness of the divine guru), *prema biraha* (separation from the beloved), *sumirana* (remembering the Lord's name), *sadhu mahima* (the greatness of saints), *paraca* (the mystical experience), *sukhima marag* (the subtlety of the path of devotion), *kala* (death), *jivanamrta* (living as if dead), *saca canaka* (true asceticism), *niguna nara* (worthless men), *bikhai bikara* (sensuality), *karani kathani* (doing versus saying), etc.

In a larger study, it would be illuminating to compare the whole of the KG with the whole SGGS Kabir corpus in terms of these themes, but this exploratory essay will examine only the couplets. To avoid confusion, the neutral term *doha* will be used rather than the terms *sakhi* or *salok*, which are unique to their particular text. This decision to focus on the *dohas* is not an arbitrary one. The *dohar* is a type of utterance which has an unusual importance in the medieval literature of the Hindu area.<sup>10</sup> It is crucial for our purposes to understand how it differs from the *pada* and the *ramaini*, not only in form but also in function. In the study of any poetic texts, it is wise to avoid being narrowly tied to the printed words on the page. This is especially true in the case of Indian religious texts such as the ones being discussed here, which are repositories of oral compositions that derive their meaning as religious literature only when orally performed. The common tendency to treat Kabir's three different types of utterances as undifferentiated statements expressing a similar thought content is misleading. The *padas* or *sabad* are meant to be sung, and thereby to create a sustained mood, often around a theme stated in the refrain and gradually reenforced in the verses. The *dohas* on the other hand are succinct and sharp. In Kabir, they are forceful statements of an experience, a belief, or a strongly held opinion. The term *sakhi* (Skt *saksin*) used to refer to them in the KG points to their nature as Kabir's "testimonial" to the truth he has experienced. As to the *ramanis*, they are problematic and considered spurious by several scholars. As a literary form, however, they are more discursive, and serve a function of instruction rather than "testimonial" or devotion.

By choosing to examine the *dohas*, we are focusing on Kabir's most succinct and immediate kind of utterance. In the *dohas*, the statement of experience or perceived truth is neither embellished by lyrical elements nor diluted by the requirements of exposition. The

*dohas* by their vary nature enable us to penetrate more directly the heart of Kabir's thought and religious sensibility than can either the *padas* or the *ramanis*.



[End of Part I]

- To be concluded

### References

1. Clifford Geerts, "Religion as a Cultural System", in Machael Banton ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1966, p.4.
2. The episode is first found in the *janamsakhi* of Sodhi Meharban (1581-164). Referred to in Harbans singh, *Guru Nanak and the Origins of the Sikh Faith*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969, p. 122.
3. For a discussion of Kabir's dates, see Charlotte Vaudeville, *Kabir*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, pp. 36-39.
4. The original manuscript of the SGGS, the so-called "*Kartarpur bid*", is still in existence even though not presently accessible to scholars. W.H. McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, Oxfore: Clarendon Press, 1976, pp. 60-61.
5. The Kabir-Panthe tradition is embodied in the *Bijak*, whose compilation is believed to have begun around the turn of the 17th century, and which presently exists in two major recensions. The Dadu-Panthe tradition is embodied in the so-called Pancavani manuscripts, which form the basis for the critically edited *Kabir-Granthavali* (KG); the tradition is believed to go back to the last quarter of the 16th century, though at present no manuscript earlier than 1774 has been discovered. Vaudeville, *Kabir*, pp. 56-59. P.N. Tiwari indicates in the preface to his critical edition of the KG that his search through manuscripts and printed texts alone yielded a total of 1600 *padas*, 4500 *dohas* and 134 *ramanis*. P.N. Tiwari, ed., *Kabir-Granthavali*, Allahabad: Hindi Parishad, 1961, preface. This represents only a fraction of the as yet totally unexplored oral tradition of Kabir.
6. For an account of the Nagas or armed ascetics of the Dadu Panth, see W.G. Orr, *A Sixteenth Century Mystic*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1947, pp. 199-208.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 191-198.
8. See footnote 5.
9. See Tiwari, *Kabir-Granthavali*, pp. 261-274 for a discussion of this thematic ordering of the material.
10. The earliest literature considered to be in a form of proto-Hindi is the *doha* literature of the Buddhist Siddhas, one text of which (Saratha's *Doha-Kosa*) goes back to the 8th century. The *doha* thereafter becomes a characteristic form of the utterances of *yogis* and *sants*. It is used in various Sufi love narratives and in Tulsidas' *Ram-Charit Manas* to summarize periodically the import of the narrative. It is also found in ballad literature such as the *Dhola-Maru ra Duha* of Rajasthan, and in the courtly poetry of the 17th and 18th century, where it is used for clever polished epigrams.
11. For example:  
*Kabira jakau khotate, paio soi thauru*  
*soi phiri kai tu bhahia, jakau kahata auru* [SGGS salok 87]  
(Kabir, him whom I sought  
I found right whom I am:  
He has again become 'Thou'  
whom before I called 'Another'!)  
All quotations of Kabir from the SGGS here are taken from Ramkumar Varma's *Sant-Kabir*, 4th ed., Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan, 1957, a compilation in the Nagari script of all the utterances of Kabir included in the SGGS.