



SONGS OF KABIR

TRANSLATED BY
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PREFACE BY
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Songs of Kabir

Kabir, the North Indian devotional or bhakti poet, was born in Benares (now Varanasi) and lived in the fifteenth century. Next to nothing is known of his life though many legends surround him. He is said to have been a weaver, and in his resolutely undogmatic and often riddling work he debunks both Hinduism and Islam. The songs of this extraordinary poet, philosopher, and satirist, who believed in a personal god, have been sung and recited by millions throughout North India for half a millennium.

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Songs of Kabir

Translated and with an introduction by
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Preface

In the half millennium since Kabir is generally presumed to have lived, many stories have been made up to account for the mixture of Hinduism and Islam in his work. Sometimes it is said that Kabir was a Brahmin in a former life, or that he was of divine origin but adopted by Muslim weavers, or that he was adopted by Brahmins who had been forced by some foreigners (perhaps Muslims) to drink water from their hands, making them lose caste and become weavers.^[1] All of these stories attempt to drag Kabir over the line from Muslim to Hindu. He once described the two religions disparagingly in terms of the animals that Hindus offered to the goddess Kali and Muslims killed at the end of a pilgrimage: "One slaughters goats, one slaughters cows; they squander their birth in isms."^[2] Not surprisingly, both groups attacked him during his life; more surprisingly, both claimed him after his death. The story that Arvind Krishna Mehrotra tells, of the Muslims wanting to bury him and the Hindus to cremate him, may have been inspired by the poem in which he says:

Cremation turns you to ashes,
Burial into a feast
For an army of worms.
Your athlete's body's only clay,
A leaky pot,
A jug with nine holes.
KG 68

Many of Kabir's poems mock the various false dichotomies, beyond cremation versus burial, that people impose upon that jug. His very existence made nonsense of the line between Muslims and Hindus, and he imagined himself erasing both that line and the line between men and women when he said:

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 Turk's, I read the kalma...

The line between high and low castes also fell away as he sang:

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
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.
KG 182

Many of the sants (North Indian bhakti saints) who straddled Hinduism and Islam were both low-caste and rural, such as Ravidas who was a paria leatherworker (Chamar), Dadu a cotton-carder, Sena a barber. [3] Not all bhaktas (passionate devotees of individual gods) were of low caste, [4] but Kabir was, and many stories are told about his challenges to the caste system. For instance:

One day Kabir and some other disciples of Ramananda arrived at Totadari leading a buffalo that carried their blankets and cooking materials. Ramanuja's spiritual descendants at Totadari were all Brahmans and were very careful to observe the rules of caste purity in bathing, cooking, and eating. If even the shadow of an Untouchable fell on their cooking places, they would not eat. They accepted that Kabir should eat with them but wanted him to sit in a separate line (pangat). Since to insist on this would be impolite, they devised a pretext to exclude him: "Whoever can recite the verses of the Veda should sit and eat in our line; whoever cannot recite the Veda should sit apart." Since low-caste persons have no right to recite the Veda, this should have solved their problem. All the Brahmans recited a few verses from the

Veda. Finally it came Kabir's turn. He put a hand on the head of the buffalo and said, "Listen, buffalo! Hurry up and recite well some of the Veda!" The buffalo began to recite. Everyone was astonished and begged Kabir to forgive them.[\[5\]](#)

The strongest testimony to Kabir's attitude to caste comes from his own poetry for he regarded caste as irrelevant to liberation.[\[6\]](#) But Kabir was not revolutionary in any political or even social sense. Iconoclastic, yes; anti-institutional, to be sure; poor and low in status, you bet—but not concerned about putting an end to poverty. His goal was spiritual rather than economic or political liberation: "Only she who's free from delusion" is truly free.[\[7\]](#) For the dichotomy that Kabir strove most to erase was the illusory line between the true god "without qualities" (nir-guna in the Sanskrit terminology, nir-gun in Hindi) and the vision of a god with perceptible qualities (sa-guna or sa-gun), a vision that the true god himself projected among us through his power of illusion (maya). (Sufi mysticism, which heavily influenced the North Indian tradition, may have taught Kabir, or at least encouraged in him, the emphasis on the abstract aspect of god.[\[8\]](#)) Thus, though Kabir calls his god Rama (significantly, not Allah), his Rama is not the sa-guna Hindu Rama who marries Sita and kills Ravana or has any of the features or adventures that the Hindu Rama has; he is simply god. The perceptible qualities (gunas) are things that the leaky jug is made of. The sa-gun god is in the details,[\[9\]](#) which envelop the indescribable nir-guna god and thus reveal him, as the invisible man could only be seen when he was dressed in a hat and coat. The human details, the metaphors and images from the lives of the worshippers that animate Kabir's poems, are all around the god but not of him.

These details often resonate with traditional Indian literary and religious tropes. The husband and wife who are in the same bed but don't meet (KG 11) provide a natural metaphor for our inability to recognize the god who is always with us, but it also draws upon a classical trope of Indian erotic and religious poetry: the unloved wife, the abandoned lover. The idea that a person is "walking / Mosque" (KG 129) is a Muslim version of the belief expressed by the South Indian Hindu sect of Virashaivas, from the twelfth century on, that there is no need for temples since the worshipper is all the temple that the bhakti god requires. "The tricky customer" (KG 19) echoes the Telugu poems set in the mouths of courtesans whose customer is god, and a tricky god at that.[\[10\]](#) The "ropes of maya" (KG 52) are often mistaken for serpents in Indian philosophy. "Hari, the thug, / Has thugged us all" (KG 49) is an anachronistic reference to the nineteenth-century Thugs, worshippers of Kali who garroted their victims; but here the thug is maya, and once you catch him out he no longer deludes you. "Even death's bludgeon / About to crush your head / Won't wake you up" (KG 62) evokes the assertion by some Indian philosophers that we must awaken from the dream that is the material world, and the assertion by others that the goal of enlightenment is simply to realize that we cannot possibly awaken from the dream. The equine metaphor—

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.
KG 81

reworks an idea expressed in the Katha Upanishad, several centuries BCE, that the senses must be harnessed, yoked, like horses.

Think of the self as a rider in a chariot that is the body; the intellect is the charioteer, and the mind the reins. The senses are the horses and the paths around them are the objects of the senses. The senses do not obey a man who cannot control his mind, as bad horses disdain the charioteer; such a man continues to be subject to reincarnation. But the senses obey a man whose mind is always under control, as good horses heed the charioteer; such a man reaches the end of the journey.[\[11\]](#)

Other images take off in an entirely new direction. The son of a widow (KG 64) is the lowest sort of bastard in Indian culture, since widows are not supposed to remarry; and the son of a barren woman is the standard philosophical trope for logical impossibility (if she has a son, she is not barren). But Kabir does not merely borrow this image; he transforms it into a special poetic trope of something impossible, called twilight language or upside-down language, as in the poem that mentions, amid other upside-down images, “a mother delivered / After her son was” (KG 116). Mehrotra includes four poems specifically in this genre (KG 116, KG 120, KG 137, KG 138), which conjure up for us predominantly animal images: a lion keeping watch over cows, a cat carrying away a dog, pregnant bulls, barren cows, jackals that play with lions, and a buffalo sitting on a horse.

There are also other upside-down images with older philosophical lineage such as:

A tree with its branches in the earth,
Its roots in the sky;
A tree with flowering roots.
KG 116

This image is taken straight from the Katha Upanishad: “Its roots above, its branches below, this is the eternal banyan tree.”[\[12\]](#) And it is quoted in the Bhagavad Gita: “They say the banyan tree is imperishable, its roots above, its branches below.”[\[13\]](#) The banyan in reality is an upside-down tree, which grows branches that return down to the earth again and again and become the roots and trunks of new trees with new branches so that eventually you have a forest of a banyan tree, and you no longer know which was the original trunk. The Upanishad uses the image of the banyan to represent the divine substance

(brahman) from which all living creatures take root. Kabir puts the banyan into new context to represent his god who is as ineffable, as nir-guna, as the god of the Katha Upanishad but also a god with qualities (sa-guna) that one can, indeed must, love.

Kabir similarly transforms the ancient Hindu image of the mare who lives deep in the sea and holds in her mouth the fire that will emerge at doomsday to destroy the universe. In one more or less right-side-up poem, Kabir uses this image simply to express the soul burning for god: "There's a fire / Raging in the ocean" (KG 9). But in the upside-down poems, the statement that "Water catches fire" (KG 137) or "The sea's ablaze" (KG 138), now regarded as a logical impossibility, is explicitly said to be part of a "Topsy-turvy Veda" (KG 137).

In one poem, Kabir poses a sharp metaphysical question:

Who's it you call husband?
Or call wife?
Who's it you call son?
Or call father?
KG 49

These questions are somewhat reminiscent of Arjuna's apology to Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, after he has seen the god's terrifying cosmic form and says, "I was so stupid to call you my pal, Krishna of the Yadavas." [14] But they are even more strongly evocative of the scene in the Bhagavata Purana when Yashoda, the mother of Krishna (who is here just a small boy), looks into his mouth and sees "the whole universe, with the far corners of the sky, and the wind, and lightning and the orb of the Earth with its mountains and oceans, and the moon and stars and space itself; and her own village and herself." Then she becomes frightened and confused, thinking, "Is this a dream or an illusion fabricated by God? Or is it a delusion in my own mind? For God's power of delusion inspires in me such false beliefs as, 'I exist,' 'This is my husband,' 'This is my son.'" [15]

Not only does Kabir turn conventional images into upside-down images, but upside-down images also pervade the corpus of his more conventional poetry. Consider this poem:

Chewing slowly,
Only after I'd eaten
My grandmother,
Mother,
Son-in-law,
Two brothers-in-law,
And father-in-law
(His big family included)
In that order,
And had for dessert
The town's inhabitants,

Did I find, says Kabir,
The beloved that I've become
One with.
KGG 3.25

What does it mean to say that the poet has eaten all these people? On the human level, it is unthinkable, upside down. But on the divine level the idea of devouring one's in-laws echoes the Bhagavad Gita, in which the god Krishna reveals himself in an epiphany as the gaping mouth of doomsday, devouring everyone, and Arjuna cries out, "I see your mouths with jagged tusks, and I see all of these warriors rushing blindly into your gaping mouths, like moths rushing to their death in a blazing fire. Some stick in the gaps between your teeth, and their heads are ground to powder." [16] (That's when he says, I'm sorry I called you my papa, Krishna.) And there is a South Indian myth in which the god Shiva appears in disguise to demand that his devotees cook and eat their son with him (they kill and cook the child but Shiva restores him before they eat him). [17] On both levels, the human and the divine, the cannibalistic image is a shock, and this is Kabir's intention: to shock us into changing our lives. [18]

Upside-down language also takes the form of incomprehensible riddles and unanswerable riddles rather like Lewis Carroll's ("Why is a raven like a writing desk?" [19]):

The question that's killing me, says Kabir,
Is whether the pilgrim
Or the pilgrim town is greater?
KG 27

Riddles in Hinduism are not child's play but the serious, sometimes fatal business of religion. The Rig Veda (the most ancient Sanskrit text, c. 1500 BCE) abounds in serious riddles, often in upside-down language, such as "Seven sisters call out to the place where the seven names of the cows are hidden. Who saw the newborn one, the one with bones who was brought forth by the boneless one?" [20] The tradition continues throughout the history of Indian literature. It is at the heart of the series of riddles that a forest deity asks of the heroes in the Mahabharata (such as, "What is swifter than the wind?" "The mind" [21]); four of the brothers fail to answer and die, and the fifth answers the riddles and revives his brother. Life-or-death riddles drive the basic plot of the collections of the Sanskrit and Hindi tales called Twenty-five Tales of the Vampire (also known as Vikram and the Vampire [22]), also a matter of life and death. Mehrotra's wonderful phrase "killing me" therefore has both a figurative and a literal meaning, the latter made possible by the slang.

Slang, neologisms, and anachronisms in Mehrotra's translations are a brilliant means of conveying much of the shock effect that upside-down language would have had upon Kabir's fifteenth-century audiences. I have in mind such phrases as "Smelling of aftershave" (MK 41); "I'm handcuffed to death" (KG 44); "you ble

it,” “sticky spunk,” and “death already / Has you by the balls” (KG 60); “Should be in Sing Sing” (KG 64); “to screw up your life” (KG 73); “Headed for Deathville” (KGG 3.53); “wipe the bootlicker’s smile / Off your face” (KG 77); Ram as “the chemical on your tongue” (KG 78); “dreadlocked rastas” and “Faber poets” (KG 85); “What’s your problem, muezzin?” (KG 129); “I’m the only / Dimwit in town” and “extra chromosome” (KGG 1.146); “bedroom eyes” (KG 138); and, finally, “bullshit” (KG 179). Mehrotra here is reinventing an upside-down language (upside down in time—how could Kabir have known about chromosomes?) to say what cannot otherwise be said about god and caste and Hindu-Muslim conflict. In this he is doing something like what Toni Morrison and Judith Butler did to reinvent English in order to say what could not otherwise be said about racism and about sexism. All three are revolutionaries, challenging the very heart of darkness of all prejudice: language.

For twilight language is shocking, the medieval equivalent of slang, a strong vernacular, and obscenity in our day. Where Kabir dug down into the past of his own traditions to find images that he then transformed in shocking ways, Mehrotra tries to push the poems as far as he can toward Americanese, in the direction of the language that comes most naturally to him (“speeding to Chinook,” as in the epigraph to poem KGG 3.6), also in shocking ways. It makes for a most exhilarating mix. And so, in addition to all the other good reasons for using contemporary language, which Mehrotra lays out so elegantly in his introduction, here is another reason. The banal quality of slang, its banal and specific power in both colloquial language (“make ends meet” in KG 12) and vocabulary (“borax” in KG 18), when juxtaposed with Kabir’s stark metaphysical speculations, replicates his juxtaposition of everyday sa-guna details with nir-guna abstractions. The colloquialisms keep jerking the reader into the familiar only to be jerked back into the unfamiliar world of Kabir, and then back again. The extraordinary range of registers in Mehrotra’s poetic language re-creates, in our day, the shock effect of Kabir’s upside-down language in the fifteenth century.

—WENDY DONIGER

[1] David N. Lorenzen, *Kabir Legends and Ananta-Das’s Kabir Parachai* (Albany: SUNY, 1991), 26-27.

[2] Linda Hess, *The Bijak of Kabir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1983]), 51, #30.

[3] Amartya Sen, foreword to Kshiti Mohan Sen, *Hinduism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1983]), xix, citing K.M. Sen, *Medieval Mysticism of India* (London: Luzac, 1936), 146-52.

[4] Guru Nanak (one of the founders of Sikhism) was a Kshatriya, and Mirabai was a Kshatriya princess. Sants from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries in Maharashtra were drawn from all castes. Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [2004]), 142.

[5] Lorenzen, 65, citing Paramananda-das’s *Kabir Manshur*.

- [6] Flood, 145; Hess, 55, #41.
- [7] ~~A Touch of Grace: Songs of Kabir, trans. Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), xxi.~~
- [8] Flood, 144.
- [9] As both Gustave Flaubert and Mies van der Rohe are said to have said of got tout court, though it is attributed to Anonymous in the sixteenth edition of Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, ed. Justin Kaplan (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002).
- [10] A.K. Ramanujan, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and David Shulman, *When God Is Customer* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).
- [11] Katha Upanishad, 3.3-6.
- [12] Katha Upanishad, 6.1.
- [13] Bhagavad Gita, 15.1.
- [14] Bhagavad Gita, 11.41.
- [15] Bhagavata Purana, 10.8.21-45; Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 109-10; Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 218-21; Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010 [1998]), 16-17.
- [16] Bhagavad Gita, 11.25-29.
- [17] David Shulman, *The Hungry God* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- [18] Like Rilke's image of the archaic torso of Apollo that says to the observer "Du muss dein Leben ändern."
- [19] Carroll knew a lot about Indian philosophy; see O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities*, 248-50.
- [20] Rig Veda, 1.164.3-4, in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 76.
- [21] Mahabharata, 3.297.40.
- [22] *Vikram and the Vampire*, trans. Sir Richard F. Burton (London, 1870).

Introduction

I

Very little is known about Kabir outside what can be culled from his poems or from hagiographies and legends. According to the latter, Kabir lived for 120 years, from 1398 to 1518. Modern scholars, however, take a more realistic view but are divided over whether he was active in the first or the second half of the fifteenth century. Kabir (whose name is a Qur'anic title of Allah meaning "great") was born in Benares in a Muslim family recently converted to Islam. The family belonged to the Julaha—or weaver—caste, and it is safe to assume that the chief reason for the conversion was its low status in the Hindu social system.

There are occasional references to the family profession in Kabir's poems. In one poem in particular,[\[1\]](#) addressed to his anxious mother, he talks of dismantling his loom because, he says, he cannot both thread the shuttle and hold the thread of that supreme reality, which he called Rama or Hari, in his hand. Someone who is the lord of three worlds, he says, is not going to let them starve. Kabir was married and had a son and daughter; perhaps two sons and two daughters.

Kabir's hagiographers, who have been around since c. 1600, approve neither of his marriage (they would prefer him to be celibate) nor, indeed, of his low origin, and over the years various accounts of his life were concocted to provide him with, among other things, a better pedigree.[\[2\]](#) The legends, however, ended up highlighting precisely what they were meant to conceal. In one of them, a Brahmin widow once accompanied her father on a pilgrimage to the shrine of a famous ascetic. To reward her devotion, the ascetic prayed that she be blessed with a son. The prayer was answered but there was one problem—Brahmin widows are not supposed to get pregnant—and she had to abandon the infant. The wife of a weaver, who was passing that way, discovered the child and took him home. The child was Kabir.

Other legends presented Kabir as a die-hard rebel. It is said that Kabir chose to spend his last days not in Benares, the holiest of holy Hindu places, a city that promises salvation to all who die there and where he had lived all his life, but in an obscure town called Maghar, which from ancient times has been associated first with Buddhists, and later with Muslims and the lower castes. "He who dies in Maghar is reborn as an ass," Kabir says in one poem, expressing a popular belief. The move to Maghar has a clear message: the place of one's death is of no consequence; salvation can be found anywhere. It was Kabir's last act of defiance.

In his distaste of humbug, Kabir can remind you of Diogenes. He was born in a Muslim household, but poured scorn on their qazis, or lawgivers, at every opportunity. He had Hindu followers, but reserved his sharpest barbs for pundits. In the end, he slipped through the fingers of both Islam and Hinduism. A famous story about Kabir tells how, following his death, both Hindu and Muslim mobs laid claim to his body. The Hindus were adamant to cremate and the Muslims to bury him, but when they removed the shroud they found instead of the cadaver a heap of flowers. The two communities peacefully divided the flowers and performed Kabir's last rites, each according to its custom. But the legends do not end here. When Kabir arrived in heaven, he was received by the four great Hindu gods: Brahma, Siva, Vishnu, and Indra. Delighted to see him, they asked him to make himself at home. Indra even got up from his throne and offered it to Kabir. "Vishnu said: 'My heaven is yours. Live here forever. This is my wish.'" [3] And so it was that the crackpot weaver of Benares who had derided Hindu religious practices all his life was on the road to being deified himself.

Kabir is part of the larger devotional turn known as the bhakti movement. Described as a "great many-sided shift...in Hindu culture and sensibility," [4] its distinguishing feature was an inward love for the One Deity, in disregard of, and often in opposition to, religious orthodoxies and social hierarchies. The degree and nature of opposition varied, but it was never wholly absent. The antagonists could at times be to one's family, if it stood in the way of the devotee's union with God. As Janabai, the thirteenth-century poet-saint from Maharashtra, says, "go my darling / do me a favor and kill my mother-in-law." [5]

Bhakti began in South India, in the country of the Tamils, in the sixth century CE but over time acquired a pan-Indian character. It moved to Karnataka in the tenth and Maharashtra in the twelfth centuries, but it was in North India, between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, where it found perhaps its fullest expression. Bhakti favored the informal over the formal, the spontaneous over the prescribed, and the vernacular over Sanskrit. In a well-known verse Kabir compared Sanskrit, the language of the gods and the preserve of Brahmins, to kupa jal, the stagnant water of a well, and bhasha (vernacular, in which the bhakti poets sang) to the running water of a stream.

With bhakti, it has been said, a "new kind of person or persona [came] into fashion...: a person who flouts proprieties, refuses the education of a poet, insists that anyone can be a poet—for it is the Lord who sings through one." [6] This new person, the poet-saint, could be a king or prime minister or a low-caste cobbler, tailor, barber, cotton-carder, boatman, or weaver. Not content to worship God from a distance, he wants to taste Him, that "chemical called Rama," on his tongue. The poet-saint could, of course, also be a woman, as Janabai, who was a maidservant, was. Bhakti is derived from the Sanskrit root bhaj, and one of its meanings is "to serve, honor, revere, love, adore." The bhakta, the "devotee" or "lover of God," looks upon God with a certain intimacy. It was a relationship based not on ritual but romance, and it had its sensual, erotic side: [7]

Lying beside you,

I'm waiting to be kissed.
But your face is turned
And you're fast asleep.
KG 19

Of all bhakti poets, of whom there were many (“they seem to appear in drove in interacting groups of three or four in these early times” said A.K. Ramanujan referring to the Tamil poets of the sixth and seventh centuries [8]) and who wrote in different languages (Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati, Kashmiri, Assamese, Oriya, Avadhi), Kabir is the most outspoken. He is ever ready to engage the reader, to harangue him, to—if it comes to that—wrestle him to the ground and shout in his ear:

Friend,
You had one life,
And you blew it.
KG 60

Those who are not
Devotees of Rama
Should be in Sing Sing
Or have been stillborn.
KG 64

Try though you may,
Neither punditry
Nor penance
Nor telling beads will bring you
To the four-armed god.
KG 77

A Kabir poem has no time to waste; it hits the ground running. And yet, despite the thousands of poems ascribed to Kabir, not one can be attributed to him with certainty. His is a collective voice that is so individual that it cannot be mistaken for anyone else's.

II

If the historical Kabir is elusive, the authentic Kabir text is even more so. Since no manuscript of Kabir's poems dating from his lifetime has ever been found, the Kabir corpus, necessarily, is about not a single text but families of texts, of which there are three: the Bijak or “eastern” tradition, the Rajasthani or “western” tradition, and the Punjabi tradition centered around the Adi Granth, the sacred book of the Sikhs. With the exception of the Bijak, which is considerably smaller

all the texts associated with these traditions are Norton-sized (and Norton-like anthologies, drawing on the work of more than one poet.

The Pancvani, or “Songs of the Five,” is an early collection from the “western tradition. It is found in several recensions, of which the earliest we know is from 1614. The Pancvani has over one thousand songs—by Dadu (1544–1603), Kabir Namdev (c. 1270–1350), Raidas (c. 1450–1520), and Hardas (floruit c. 1600?)—clustered around different ragas. The Kabir padas in the recensions vary in number from 348 to 393.^[9] The same ones do not recur in all the recensions, and even when they do there are variations between them. Some padas, like KG 6 (“Easy, friend. / What’s the fuss about?”),^[10] are found in all three traditions—the Bijak, the Rajasthani, and the Adi Granth. Its Bijak and Adi Granth versions, however, have only one line in common.^[11] This is not unusual, but it has made Kabir’s textual history a minefield, “one of the most complex to be associated with a single author in world literature.”^[12]

Two distinct translation practices have emerged from that minefield. The first is that of the scholars, pioneered by Charlotte Vaudeville, whose Kabir was published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1974, followed by Linda Hess, Nirmala Dass, and Vinay Dharwadker. Their translations closely follow the printed text. “In each rendering,” Dharwadker writes in a translator’s note, “one verse-paragraph in English represents one verse in the original.”^[13]

The other, older practice of translation is one that, if not always wittingly, responds to and illuminates the performative improvisatory tradition out of which the songs arose and by which they have been transmitted. These are the translations best known to the general reading public, the Kabir of Ezra Pound, Tagore, and Robert Bly. Pound’s Kabir, ten poems that first appeared in Ramananda Chatterjee’s *The Modern Review* in 1913, comes out of literary versions provided by Kali Mohan Ghose, and Bly’s comes out of Tagore’s widely read *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, which was first published in 1914 and has been in print since.

The story I will now tell helps to illuminate the complicated and suggestive way by which Kabir’s songs have been communicated even in relatively recent times. In Allahabad where I live, there are two crumbling gateposts opposite the university senate house, their red bricks showing and several of them missing, with a rusty semicircular sign above them on which Belvedere Printing Works is written in barely visible letters. An unpaved lane leads from the road to a colonial bungalow at the back. One part of it houses the printing works; in the other the current owners live. In the 1880s, Belvedere House stood in what was then a much more extensive compound. Kipling lived in Belvedere House in 1888, when the house belonged to his friends Edmonia Hill and her husband, Samuel Alexander Hill, a professor of science at Muir Central College, and some of his most famous stories, among them “Baa Baa, Black Sheep,” were written there. In “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi” he describes its “large garden, only half cultivated, with bushes as big as summer-houses of Marshal Niel roses, lime and orange trees, clumps of bamboos, and thickets of high grass.” Kipling, incidentally, was also familiar with Kabir, whom he associated with religious tolerance, and composed a song in his

Now the white road to Delhi is mat for his feet,
The sal and the kikar must guard him from heat;
His home is the camp, and the waste, and the crowd—
He is seeing the Way as bairagi avowed!

He has looked upon Man, and his eyeballs are clear
(There was One; there is One, and but One, saith Kabir);
The Red Mist of Doing has thinned to a cloud—
He has taken the Path for bairagi avowed!

Around 1903 the Belvedere Press was set up on the grounds of Belvedere House by Baleshwar Prasad. Prasad is an obscure figure. His descendants still run the Belvedere Printing Works, but not even they know when he was born or when he died, though he appears to have been active some time between 1876 and 1916.[\[14\]](#) He was a teacher in Benares, a Hindi journalist, and a translator of Shakespeare's plays into Urdu, before moving to Allahabad and becoming a publisher. Prasad brought out a series of collections of North Indian poet-saints, and an initial selection of Kabir in 1907 was followed by eight more. Clearly they found a ready market, and though it is a hundred years now since they first appeared they remain in print.

Tagore's translations were based on Kshiti Mohan Sen's four-part compilation of 1910-11. There are, in the Sen compilation, 341 Kabir poems in all. Apart from providing the Hindi original, Sen gives each poem also in the Bengali script followed by a paraphrase in Bengali. Sen had collected the poems on his own, but he was also familiar with the printed editions, including Prasad's. Almost all the poems in Tagore's One Hundred Poems of Kabir are also found in one form or another in two of the Belvedere Press Kabir volumes. In his preface, Sen says that he compared the poems he came across in Prasad and in other printed sources with the oral versions and handwritten notes of singers on which he had been working for many years, first in Benares and later at different places in North India. "From my different readings," he writes

I chose those that accorded most with what were being sung by the practitioners and which they and I judged to be true to the tradition. I need hardly add that from the variety of advices I got, I had to choose. The sadhaks [adepts] often articulate things that fit their own times. And the same poems have different versions, and sometimes there are versions that could be understood easily only at the times when they were composed. I had to take note of all these concerns in making my edited collection of Kabir's poems.[\[15\]](#)

Prasad, for his part, provides few details of his sources. Various Kabir Panth mahants, or the superiors of monasteries of the sect devoted to Kabir, sent him

old manuscripts from cities in the Punjab. He may have also consulted a few undated modern manuscripts in Benares. Another of his sources was the oral tradition, sung variants of verses in the Bijak.

Both editors, in any case, true to the devotional and improvisatory origins of the songs, make choices, as Sen rightly says they had no choice but to, and these inevitably reflect their own interest in and understanding of the tradition. As a member of the Radhasoami sect, which believes in the supremacy of a living guru, Prasad replaced the words used for addressing God—Kabir's Rama and Hari—with guru and gurudev. Sen's edition lacks the guru words, instead including one for love. Sometimes it is impossible to tell whether a change—the same stanza, for example, will appear in both editions but in different orders—reflects different sources or the editor's individual preference, in Sen's case the primacy he accorded the oral tradition, the songs "sung by the practitioners."

Be that as it may, it was the Sen edition that Tagore drew on and that later became the source of several European- and Asian-language translations of Kabir, one of them made by Czeslaw Milosz into Polish and subsequently translated back into English by Milosz and Robert Hass.[\[16\]](#) The English mystic Evelyn Underhill introduced Tagore's translation, which she is credited with having helped to prepare, with the assurance that Sen

has gathered from many sources—sometimes from books and manuscripts, sometimes from the lips of wandering ascetics and minstrels—a large collection of poems and hymns to which Kabir's name is attached, and carefully sifted the authentic songs from the many spurious works now attributed to him. These painstaking labours alone have made the present undertaking possible.[\[17\]](#)

Separating the authentic from the spurious in Kabir is a hopelessly tangled affair and Underhill may have somewhat missed the point. While it is obviously important now to have the substantially more authoritative editions, beginning with Parasnath Tiwari's landmark Kabir-granthavali of 1961, on which I have based my own translations, there is a sense in which there can be no authoritative edition of the work of this supremely anti-authoritarian master, who is present in the many manifestations of his work through a kind of infinite regress.

III

As with the Kabir text, so with this Kabir translation; it is made keeping the text's inclusive genius in mind. Though not from the Pancvani, the poem beginning *tohī lagi kaise chutte* is from the "western" tradition. It is also one of only three Kabir poems in Sen that are found in the pre-1700 Kabir manuscripts. Given below are its opening lines in three translations:

How could the love between Thee and me sever?

As the leaf of the lotus abides on the water: so thou art my Lord, and I am Thy
servant.

As the night-bird Chakor gazes all night at the moon: so Thou art my Lord and
am Thy servant.

(Tagore)[\[18\]](#)

Why should we two ever want to part?

Just as the leaf of the water rhubarb lives floating on the water,
we live as the great one and the little one.

As the owl opens his eyes all night to the moon,
we live as the great one and the little one.

(Bly)[\[19\]](#)

Separate us?
Pierce a diamond first.

We're lotus
And water,
Servant
And master.
My love for you
Is no secret.

I'm the grub
To your ichneumon fly...
(KG 18; my translation)[\[20\]](#)

The difference between Tagore's translation and mine is explained by our source texts. There is no grub and ichneumon fly in Sen, and no moonbeam-eating chakor bird in Tiwari. The same idea is being expressed in both poems, but they don't use the same metaphor to express it in.

Bly's translation and Tagore's differ in precisely the way that Sen's and Tiwari's originals do. When he changes "Chakor" to "owl" and "lotus" to "water rhubarb," Bly is approaching Tagore as an anonymous medieval singer would approach a *pada*. For the singer, the *pada* was not something whose words had unalterably been fixed, to be slavishly followed while singing, but something that was provisional and fluid, a working draft, whose lines and images could be shifted around, or substituted by others, or deleted entirely. As with the blues, another example of "collective creation," the lines could be "altered, extended, abridged, and transposed."[\[21\]](#) During this process, as it passed from performer to performer, traveling from eastern Uttar Pradesh to western Rajasthan or circulating within the same region, the *pada* acquired new features, at the same

time remaining faithful to a “pronounced literary physiognomy”[\[22\]](#) (recognizable even in Kipling’s sui generis “Song”) which we have come to know as Kabir’s.

In certain pockets, that tradition is still alive, continuing to add padas, some of them incorporating “modern” material, to the open-ended Kabir corpus. A Kabir song recorded in Rajasthan in the mid-1990s compares the body to an anjan (engine), the soul to a passenger, who, his taim (time) on earth being short, advised not to lose his tikat (ticket). One lain (line) will take the passenger to Immortal City; the other to the City of Death. When asked how Kabir could have been familiar with the railways, to say nothing of English words like “engine,” “time,” “ticket,” and “line,” the singer, Bhikaramji Sharma, looked “most hurt” and replied that Kabir, being a seer, knew everything.[\[23\]](#)

Seen in this way, the Songs of Kabir is both a work of translation based on the best available critical editions and, like Bhikaramji’s song, a further elaboration of the Kabir corpus, taking its place alongside those that have already been in existence for hundreds of years. Here, too, in these poems, Kabir knows everything, including in one pada, as we have seen above, the name of a New York State correctional facility. Meanwhile, in the manuscript section of Indian libraries, over endless cups of milky tea, the core group of padas sung by the historical figure that goes by Kabir’s name continues, as it ought, to exercise scholars.

—Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

[\[1\]](#). KG 12; see p. [57](#).

[\[2\]](#). For a comprehensive account of the birth and other legends surrounding Kabir, see David Lorenzen, *Kabir Legends and Ananta-Das’s Kabir Parachar* (Albany: SUNY, 1991), 3-69.

[\[3\]](#). Lorenzen, 127.

[\[4\]](#). A.K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 103.

[\[5\]](#). Arun Kolatkar, *Collected Poems in English*, ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2010), 301.

[\[6\]](#). Ramanujan, 164-65.

[\[7\]](#). For an extreme form of the erotic divine, see A.K. Ramanujan, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and David Shulman, *When God Is a Customer* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

[\[8\]](#). A.K. Ramanujan, “Men, Women, and Saints,” in *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 281.

[\[9\]](#). Winand M. Callewaert, with Swapna Sharma and Dieter Tailleu, *The Millennium Kabir Vani* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), viii.

[\[10\]](#). See p. [80](#).

[\[11\]](#). Callewaert, 6-7.

[\[12\]](#). Vinay Dharwadker, *Kabir: The Weaver’s Songs* (New Delhi: Penguin Books

2003), 32.

[13]. Ibid., xiv.

[14]. I am grateful to Peter Friedlander for sharing with me the manuscript of his forthcoming book, *A Fountain in Mid-Air: Kabir Traditions and Tagore Translations*. My information on Prasad is gleaned from it.

[15]. I am grateful to Amartya Sen for drawing this passage to my attention and for providing the translation.

[16]. See S. Mitchell, ed., *The Enlightened Heart* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989), 167.

[17]. Rabindranath Tagore, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (London: Macmillan Co., 1945 [1915]), xliii.

[18]. Ibid., 40.

[19]. Robert Bly, *The Fish in the Water Is Not Thirsty* (Northwood Narrows, NH: Lillabulero Press, 1971), n.p. For a discussion and ecstatic defense of Bly's translations, see John Stratton Hawley, "The Received Kabir: Beginnings to Bly" in *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in Their Times and Ours* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[20]. The complete translation is given on p. [49](#).

[21]. Luc Sante, *Kill All Your Darlings* (Portland, OR: Yeti Books, 2007), 180.

[22]. D.D. Kosambi, "The Quality of Renunciation in Bhartrihari's Poetry," in *Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings*, ed. Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 703.

[23]. Bahadur Singh, "Problems of Authenticity in the Kabir Texts Transmitted Orally in Rajasthan Today," in *Images of Kabir*, ed. Monika Horstmann (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002), 195-96.

Source Texts

KG: Parasnath Tiwari, editor, Kabir-granthavali (Allahabad, 1961).

KGG: Mata Prasad Gupta, editor, Kabir-granthavali (Allahabad, 1969).

KV: Jaydev Singh and Vasudev Singh, editors, Kabir-vangmay (Varanasi, 1981).

MK: Winand M. Callewaert et al., editors, The Millennium Kabir Vani: A Collection of Pad-s (New Delhi, 2000).

The number following the abbreviation indicates the number of the poem in the edition.

Songs of Kabir

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