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

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forthcoming from Oxford University Press

Chapter list

Preface
1. “You Must Meet Prahladji”
2. Oral Tradition in the Twenty-first Century: Observing Texts
3. True Words of Kabir: Adventures in Authenticity
4. In the Jeweler’s Bazaar: Malwa’s Kabir
6. A Scorching Fire, A Cool Pool
7. Fighting over Kabir’s Dead Body
8. Political/Spiritual Kabir

Book abstract

Bodies of Song is the first scholarly work in any language that studies the poetry and culture of Kabir—a great and still popular fifteenth-century religious poet of North India--through the lens of oral-performative traditions. It draws on ethnographic research conducted over a ten-year period, mainly in Malwa, Madhya Pradesh, as well as on the history of written collections. First it focuses on texts--their transmission by singers, the dynamics of textual forms in oral performance, and the connections between texts in oral forms, written forms, and other media. Second, it attends to context, reception, and community. Chapters 1-4 draw a portrait of a leading Kabir folksinger of Malwa; demonstrate how texts work in oral-musical performance; analyze discourses of authenticity; and represent a repertoire of Kabir songs as they might be heard in Malwa in the early 2000s. Chapter 5 is transitional, considering theories of “orality.” Chapters 6-8 emphasize social perspectives, examining communities of interpretation including a religious sect, the Kabir Panth; a secular educational NGO, Eklavya; and urban fans of Kabir. Kabir’s poetry lends itself to rich discussions on topics that range from cultivation of subtle inner states to political argument and activism. A persistent theme is the relation between religious-spiritual and social-political dimensions. An iconoclastic mystic who criticized organized religion, sectarian prejudice, caste, violence, deception and hypocrisy, Kabir also speaks of self-knowledge, deep inner experience, confrontation with death, and connection with the divine. Ambiguously situated among Hindu, Muslim, Sufi, and yogic traditions, he rejects religious identities and urges fearless awakening.

Keywords: Kabir, oral, written, texts, media, music, political, social, religious, spiritual
Chapter abstracts

Preface
The preface introduces the figure of Kabir, the concepts of oral and written traditions, and the placement of oral and written in the wider category of media. Oral tradition for the purpose of this book is defined as text transmitted in live performance where performer and audience are physically in the same space. The preface sets forth an overarching argument for more embodied study of literature that lives in performance. It asks: How would our understanding of text, author, and reception change if we took cognizance of the nature and history of oral transmission, its interactions with written and recorded forms, and the paramount importance of context in creating the words and meanings of texts? How far can we go in treating texts as embodied?

Keywords: Oral transmission, live performance, embodied, text, context

Chapter 1. “You Must Meet Prahladji!”
The book’s main themes are introduced through the story of a village singer, Prahlad Singh Tipanya. Emerging from a poor Dalit (former “untouchable” caste) family with no musical tradition, Prahladji became a highly honored singer and interpreter of Kabir, constantly performing in rural and urban spaces. The chapter also presents core concepts in discussions of Kabir, including nirgun and sagun; subtle sound; spiritual and political. It shows the forms and contexts of Kabir singing in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh and argues that to know Kabir in oral tradition, one must know people. In contrast with written knowledge, oral knowledge unfolds through embodied experience and relationship. The author joins the family (by ritually becoming Prahladji’s sister); travels with him and his group; learns songs; observes who invites him, how he relates to audiences and other singers, and issues that arise in his life and representation of Kabir.

Keywords: Prahlad Tipanya, oral tradition, nirgun-sagun, sound, caste, Dalit

Chapter 2. Oral Tradition in the Twenty-first Century: Observing Texts
In oral tradition, texts are brought into being again and again in the matrix of interactions between performers, listeners, readers, media, and circumstances as well as across history and geography. Texts become relatively fluid when sung in live spaces, in contrast to their fixity in written or recorded form. Phrases, lines, and passages easily migrate from one song to another. The chapter gives many examples of how these processes occur in present-day Kabir oral traditions. It argues that distinct “Kabirs” can be recognized in textual and cultural eco-regions. For example, along with local manuscript traditions and the marks of regional languages, religious sects may rub shoulders in a particular area. Kabir texts may then become inflected with the language of the Nath Yogis or the Sufis, and Kabir the poet may become interchangeable with the poets of those traditions.

Keywords: text, media, fluid, fixed, region, sect
Chapter 3. “True Words of Kabir”: Adventures in Authenticity

Once we have seen the fluidity and complexity of oral tradition, does the old question of authenticity have any meaning? Though deconstruction and reception theory have undermined old-fashioned notions of author and authenticity, more subtle and multi-layered notions are still interesting. Either “Kabir” is a vast undifferentiated mishmash of everything ever associated with his name in the last 600 years, or some process of clarification is possible. This chapter reflects on ways of imagining such a process.

Various discourses of authenticity are observed: historical manuscript study; immersion in oral tradition with a folklorist’s lens; intertextuality between oral and written sources; social history with no intention of discovering authenticity. Should these approaches remain separate, or can they talk to each other?

Keywords: authenticity, manuscript, folklore, intertextuality

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

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

Keywords: repertoire, theme, song, translation


“Orality” has been central to many studies of literature, performance, and communication since 1960, starting with landmark works like Albert Lord’s The Singer of Tales and Marshall McLuhan’s The Gutenburg Galaxy. Some distinguish sharply between “oral” and “literate,” then slide to “essential” differences between orality and literacy, ear and eye, pre- and post-literate cultures. If one tries to update these views, does anything of the old orality theory remain? With more sophisticated understandings of media, can the category of “oral-performative” stand? When we understand that the senses do not operate separately, can we say anything about the differences between hearing and reading? In light of current neuroscience and communication studies, does “orality” exist?

Keywords: orality theory, media, sound, communication, neuroscience

Chapter 6. A Scorching Fire, A Cool Pool

Is Kabir a blazing social revolutionary or a promoter of detached spiritual quietism? Is he both? Or neither? In the 1990s, Eklavya, an educational NGO, created a platform for Kabir singers in Malwa, foregrounding the social-political, rational, and secular impulses in his works. They called it a stage for singing and discussing (Kabir bhajan evam vichār manch). The all-night sessions they hosted every month for eight years left a strong mark on the Kabir culture of the area. They brought village performers into dialogue with each other and with city-educated activists. The religious/ social/ political aspects of Kabir were examined and debated. NGO workers and traditional singers listened to and learned from each other. Through all the meetings and serious conversations, the spirit of music and the joy of singing kept the energy flowing.
Chapter 7. Fighting Over Kabir’s Dead Body

Two competing lineages of the sectarian Kabir Panth have differing views as to the divinity of Kabir and the Panth gurus. Each criticizes the other and claims to be the original, authentic Panth. Institutional structures, traditions of guru worship, social attitudes, and uses of Kabir texts are observed. A dramatic story unfolds in which Prahlad Tipanya (central to chapters 1 and 6) becomes a Kabir Panthi mahant and guru, presiding over a controversial ritual that he helped to debunk during Eklavya’s forum. Through the local and personal lens of this story, processes in the history of religion are revealed: institutionalization of a radical charismatic figure, battles over ownership of the “founder’s” story, uses of ritual, tensions between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian tendencies, between organized religion and mystical knowledge. We see debates raging over Prahladji’s decision, his own grappling with the situation, and the surprising outcome.

Keywords: religion, ritual, institutionalization, authority

Chapter 8. Political/Spiritual Kabir

This concluding essay reviews the tendency to split Kabir along political/spiritual lines—a theme that has recurred throughout the book. Some people valorize one side and reject the other, while some try to embrace both. The scope widens to include urban intellectuals, activists, artists. Ancient Indian debates about social responsibility vs. world renunciation are cited. The story of Lenin’s conversation with Gorky about Beethoven’s Appasionata, and a reply in the 2006 German movie, The Lives of Others, contemporize the discussion. Can too much music, too much beauty and bliss, wreck your revolutionary spirit? Does turning inward make you forget the world’s harsh realities? If you use Kabir’s social messages for your own purposes and push the spiritual ones away with distaste, are you enacting a crude and misguided political appropriation? What do music, spiritual practice, and self-knowledge have to do with politics? What is at stake in asking these questions?

Keywords: political, spiritual, bliss, revolution