

SECONDARY SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF KABIR AND KABIRPANTH

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The 19th century scholars on Kabir and the Kabirpanth used to prepare lists of works attributed to Kabir and during this period, several seemed to have been unable to push their acquaintance with Kabir any further than this. The earliest reference to Kabirpanth occurs in the ethnographic work of H.H. Wilson,¹ written in the early nineteenth century. Considering Kabirpanth as a Hindu religious sect, Wilson commented on his social composition, organizational form, myths and rituals. He has based his account on some devotional texts, individual interviews, and a few religious scriptures of the panth. Some of the secondary sources directly relate to the history of Kabirpanth. The first historian of Hindi literature, Garcin de Tassy, between 1837 and 1847 composed his famous work,² in which he devotes fourteen pages to Kabir alone. De Tassy seems to have relied largely on H.H. Wilson, who, in 1828 and 1832, had published various Kabirpanthi works in *Asiatic Researches*.

Some Indian scholars also provide us with interesting information about Kabirpanth in the late nineteenth century. Among them Pramatha Nath Bose and J.N. Bhattacharya are foremost. Pramatha Nath Bose,³ in his history of the socio-religious groups active in late nineteenth century Bengal and the United Provinces, noted that Kabirpanth had a sizeable following, mostly belonging to the low castes. Interestingly enough, he pointed out that the Kabirpanthis were not Hindus, as they had broken away from the parent religion, just as the Buddhist and the Sikhs had done before them. J.N. Bhattacharya,⁴ in addition, also highlighted that the Kabirpanthis believed in monotheism which distinguished themselves from most of the other Hindus.

In 1883, Siva Singh in his *Saroj*, the first attempt in Hindi at a *History of Hindi literature*, and in 1888, George Grierson⁵ in his *Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan*, both present lists of Kabir works and offer some brief information on their authors. It would appear that in academic circles towards the end of the 19th century, knowledge of Kabir and

his works was very sketchy. Even his date seems shrouded in uncertainty and the most that Grierson would venture to say was that Kabir would have lived around 1400.

Probably owing to the wide diffusion of the Kabirpanth and the popularity of aphorisms and proverbs attributed to him, Kabir continued to attract the attention of the scholars. The first real critical study was that of G.H. Westcott, *Kabir and the Kabirpanth* published in 1907.⁶ This study is based mainly on the *Bijak*, the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the sectarian literature of the panth. Westcott was the first to take note of the problem of establishing the authenticity of texts, and, in this regard his comment is interesting: "At any rate we have no right to assume that the teaching of Kabir was identical with that given at the present time by the Mahants of the Panth that bears his name."⁷ G.H. Westcott was a Bishop and also a fellow of the Allahabad university. He has largely relied on his own observation to describe the history of two of the Kabir maths in north India. He also consulted Wilson's description of the panth. However, his account is largely based on his own ten years' study of the religious scriptures of the panth, supplemented by his personal observation of the Kabir-Chaura and the Dharmadasi branches respectively at Kashi in the then United Provinces and *Bandhogarh* in the Central Provinces. He concluded that the religious practices of Kabirpanth were 'influenced by Christianity'. His Christian bias is reflected in his estimation of the Kabirpanth.

While the non-Hindi world came to know more of Kabir when Rabindranath Tagore in 1914 published a verse translation in English of a selection of readings assembled by a fellow Bengali scholar, Kshiti Mohan Sen.⁸ The name of Tagore, coupled with a preface by the English religious writer, Evelyn Underhill, gave this small work considerable prestige, but its unscholarly nature soon brought it under criticism. For example the editor and translator of the *Bijak*, Ahmad Shah, a converted Christian, writes; "This translation is supposed to be based on the Hindi text (in Bengali characters) with a Bengali translation by Mr. Kshiti Mohan Sen, who has gathered from many sources a large collection of poems and hymns to which the name of Kabir is attached."⁹ Ahmad Shah has made a careful examination of this translation and finds that it is based not on the Hindi text but upon the Bengali translation which is far from accurate. Kshiti Mohan Sen's collection is in four volumes and contains 341 poems. The one hundred poems translated are taken from the first three volumes, which contain only 264. Of these hundred, there are, according to Ahmad Shah, only five, which in a mutilated form, can be safely attributed to Kabir.

A decade was to elapse before the next study appeared. In 1920 Ayodhya Singh Upadhyay 'Hariaudh', working under the guidance of Shyamsundar Das, published a text with some general information on Kabir's thought.¹⁰ Later on Shyamsundardas himself brought to light two remarkable manuscripts which he published in 1928.¹¹ One of these manuscripts carried the date 1504 and the other 1824. It was certainly an important finding, and Shyamsundar Das recorded his satisfaction in these words: "After looking over these two copies, it is evident to me that if we take all the works now attributed to Kabir on one side, we would find a good nine tenths of them in these two."¹² A more sober look at the abundant variants amongst manuscripts and traditions which eventually came to light, led scholars to a more critical view of the material published by Shyamsundar Das in 1928. However, his *Kabir Granthavli* remained the standard text for the next thirty years and, is, still regarded by some scholars, as the best available. Shyamsundar Das uncovered that real textual problem of studies on Kabir, but, apart from publishing manuscripts, he engaged in no notable textual criticism.

F. E. Keay's study,¹³ originally written as a doctoral thesis submitted with the London University, is even more useful for us, as he described the origin of Dhanauti and Bidupur maths, which have been two main headquarters of the Kabirpanth branches, yet not mentioned in details in previous English works. F.E. Keay's work was published three years after Shyamsundardas' *Kabir-Granthavali* without apparently his knowledge of its existence. This, comments Charlotte Vaudeville, exemplifies a kind of divorce between the old school of British scholars-cum-missionaries and the new 'native' scholarship.¹⁴ In the Punjab region, a very significant contribution in the study of Kabir and Kabirpantha was made by Mohan Singh in his *Kabir: His Biography, Kabir and the Bhagti Movement*, 1934.

This is one of many valuable studies done on Kabir's thought and allied subjects of which the forerunner was P.D. Barthwal's the *Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry*.¹⁵ Into the 1940s and 50s, some followed the study of the background of Kabir's religions, but textual criticism remained the neglected child in Indian academic circles.

Among the notable scholars on Kabir towards the closing years of the colonial rule, Hazari Prasad Dvivedi's name is worthy of special mention. In 1942 he published *Kabir*, a critical study of various aspects of Kabir's thought, with revised and enlarged editions following later.¹⁶ As F.E. Keay prior to him, he made commendable attempts to disengage Kabir's thoughts

from the mass of Kabirpanthi teachings which had overgrown it, but his work suffered from the serious defects of overlooking the importance of authenticity of texts. Divedi seems to have relied almost entirely on the compilations of poems made by Kshiti Mohan Sen, and this disregard for textual scholarship is still found in the 1971 edition of his book. However, some of his insights into Kabir's life and thoughts are of great significance.

One feature of the development of interest in Kabirpanth has been the extraordinary popularity of the *Bijak* which has gone through thirty-two editions in the last hundred years and continues to appear in popular editions. In late 1970s, Shukdev Singh began to prepare what is the first critical edition of *Bijak*.¹⁷ And very reputable scholars like Charlotte Vaudeville are of the opinion that the importance of the *Bijak* should not be overlooked and that it may, in the long run, prove to be closer to the original Kabir text than any other texts.¹⁸

Among other Kabir texts commonly accepted in academic circles is the Kabir section of the *Guru Granth-Sahib*, published by Ramkumar Varma. Varma also published a study of Kabir mysticism entitled *Kabir Ka Rahasyavad*.¹⁹ Kabir has been an important figure in the Sikh tradition. He is regarded by many as having been Nanak's spiritual mentor. When the fifth Sikh guru, Arjandev was compiling the *Adi Granth*, completed in 1604, he included verses attributed at that time to Kabir, and thus, these have been preserved unchanged to what constitutes the oldest and most authentic tradition of Kabir's verses. There is reason to think that at about the same time as the compilation of the *Granth Sahib*, the *Bijak* also must have been compiled or composed. While describing different versions of the *Bijak*, F.E. Keay writes- "This is the probable account of the *Bijak*. The compiler may have been Bhagwan Das, and the compilation perhaps was not made till somewhere about 1600."²⁰

The most striking feature of the *Bijak* is that while Kabir is claimed as its author, it shows little evidence that he would have been primarily an exponent of bhakti and, for this reason, the author is more probably a Kabirpanthi disciple. The centuries that followed must have seen a flourishing of the spurious Kabir literature much of which is still popular in the panth.

Equally important event in modern studies on Kabir is undoubtedly the publication in 1961 by Parasnath Tiwari of Allahabad University of his textual work to which he gave the title of *Kabir Granthavali*.²¹ Tiwari applied the criteria of the science of textual criticism to all the available manuscripts and printed texts purporting to have Kabir as their author, and eventually

arrived at a sizeable body of verse which he claims to be the closest we can come in the present stage of Kabir research to the original Kabir verses. However, even this achievement has not met with unquestioning approval from all scholars. For example, Sarnamsingh Sharma²² has offered a very stringent criticism of Tiwari's work, less scholarly and Charlotte Vaudeville, too, while admitting the value of Tiwari's work and basing her own English version of Kabir largely on it, has pointed out flaws in it.²³ For all this it has to be admitted that Tiwari's *Kabir Granthavali* is the only attempt to claiming Kabir's authorship.

This fragmentary sketch of studies on Kabir and Kabirpanth over a long period is intended to give rough idea of the ups and downs of interest pertaining to his thought. It does not give a full picture of the development in this field or of the discovery of Kabir in Europe or his rediscovery in India. Some interesting figures in this drama have been omitted mainly because their work had no lasting effect. Mention could, however, be made of the Italian Capuchin missionary, *Padre* Marco della Tomba, who spent nearly twenty years in or around the town of Bettiah in northern Bihar in the middle of the eighteenth century. He recollected his contacts with a sect he called *Cabiristi*,²⁴ and actually translated that Kabir was the preceptor of Alexander the Great. It was possibly the difficulty of distilling history out of such fantasies that drove the English scholar, H.H.Wilson, to doubt whether Kabir ever existed.²⁵

Parashuram Chaturvedi's study of the *sant* tradition in North India²⁶ deals with Kabirpanth in details. He relied mainly on the religious scriptures of the panth and the then unpublished research of Kedarnath Dvivedi on Kabirpanth. Dvivedi had been one of his students. We have a detailed account of the premiere maths in Bihar in these two studies. Kedarnath Dvivedi²⁷ has conducted extensive field-work to delineate the spread of kabirpanth. In his work, oral tradition has given primacy over religious texts. The antiquity of a math is judged on the basis of the *Guru-pranali*.

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend to study Kabirpanth on the basis of oral data. Baidyanath Saraswati's paper²⁸ on the socio-religious aspects of the panth, Mohd.Sahabuddin's unpublished Ph.D. thesis on Kabirpanth²⁹ and R.L Khandelwal³⁰ study of the social composition of Kabirpanth in north India are some prominent examples. The books of David N.Lorenzen³¹ on religious developments within Kabirpanth in north India deserve special mention. He has supplemented his field observations with available material in printed sources. He has also worked on the political involvement Sadhus and Mahants of some popular maths.

Apart from these works, two scholars have focused exclusively on the myths of the panth. David Scott³² has collected some of these myths and has attempted to situate them in the socio-religious conditions prevailing at the time of Kabir. Uma Thukral's book³³ and articles on Kabirpanthi myths have also been valuable. Equally valuable has been the work on Kabir of Vinay Dharwadkar in 2003, written in a literary perspective, with a valuable overview of scholarly works on Kabir coming from various sources.³⁴ In addition, *Akath Kahani Prem Ki, Kabir Ki Kavita Aur Unka Samay*, by Purshottam Aggrawal³⁵ offers us fresh insight into the study of Kabir as well as Kabirpanth. Making use of almost all the works published in the last centuries on Kabir and Kabirpanth, he has successfully attempted at reassessing them in a fresh perspective hinging on the emerging knowledge of the India society and tradition.

Anthropological and sociological works too help in dealing with the sociological and symbolic order of the panth. In addition, historical works of various regions enable one to locate the growth of Kabirpanth in the prevailing socio-religious conditions of the respective regions in the past. Historical works on the political inclination of religious organizations in the modern period have been of great help in understanding the political involvement of the Kabirpanthis in different regions.

Most of these works have relied on oral evidence, primarily due to the absence of written records related to the panth. Lack of written documents has perhaps dissuaded scholars from studying Kabirpanth in the historical perspective. At best, some of these studies have attempted to present its history on basis of the traditional belief about the formation of its main branches. There is no attempt on their part to describe the spread of the sub-branches of a particular region in a chronological sequence. There is neither much discussion of the organizational form nor the manner of functioning of the panth in the existing historiography.

However these works offer an overview on the early history of Kabirpanth as preserved in popular memory. These make it clear that Kabirpanth has drawn its following predominantly from the intermediate and lower castes wherever it has succeeded in exerting its influence. They also mention that there exists considerable similarity in the myths, rituals, organizational network, the status of the Mahant, and even the pattern of internal feuds in Kabirpanth all over north India.

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