

Is Kabir Anti-women? An Exploratory Study of Kabir's Images among Kabirpanthi Women

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Abstract

Kabir, the great north Indian saint-poet of the 15th-16th century is, scholars claim, a misogynist. These scholars often cite some anti-women verses from his manuscripts in support of their claim. In these verses, Kabir regards woman as an impediment to the spiritual advancement of man. On the other hand, Kabirpanth, a devotional sect based on the teachings of Kabir, continues to attract a large number of women followers to its fold. Many of these women followers have taken to singing and preaching verses of Kabir, spreading his message among the masses. The presence of a large number of women followers in Kabirpanth raises a whole of host of questions: Why do women choose to become followers of Kabir despite his being critical of them? How do they perceive Kabir? What is their response to anti-women verses attributed to Kabir? Does Kabirpanth try to project a women-friendly image of Kabir in order to attract women followers? How are women treated in Kabirpanth? The present paper, based on the fieldwork we conducted among Kabirpanthi women followers in parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar from 2016 to the early months of 2020, seeks to address some of these issues and shows how these women have negotiated with oppressive patriarchal power equations and carved space for themselves both within the Kabirpanth and outside.

Keywords: Misogynist, Kabirpanth, oral tradition, Kabirpanthi women, women singers

Introduction

Kabir, the great north Indian saint poet of the *nirguna bhakti* tradition, composed his verses and songs orally. After his death in 1518¹, his verses and songs remained in the oral tradition for about a century before they were first written down or collected in the major manuscripts such as *Adi Granth* or *Guru Granth Sahib* (1604) of the Sikhs and *Panchavani* (1614) of the Dadupanth. Some verses in these manuscripts are considered interpolations. However, it is difficult to determine which verses are Kabir's and which are interpolations. Some verses in the manuscripts betray a misogynist attitude of Kabir towards women. In these verses, he regards woman as an impediment to the spiritual advancement of man. He equates her with the source of lust which is the most powerful enemy of sainthood. He depicts her as an evil force. For him, woman brings only sorrow, trouble and destruction to man's life.

He warns man to keep away from woman. The following are some of his often-cited verses which reflect his misogyny:

*Nari nasave teeni sukh, ja nar
panse hoi*

*Bhagati, mukati nij gyan mein,
paisi na sakai koi* (Das
1928, p. 79)

(Woman destroys three merits
when she comes near a
man;

Devotion, salvation and divine
knowledge do not enter
his soul.)

*Nari kunda narak ka, birla
thambe baag*

*Koi sadhu jan ubare, sab jag
moovan laag* (Das 1928, p. 79)

(Woman is a pit of hell, rare is the
person who reins in himself;

Only a few persons are able to save themselves; the rest of the world falls into its trap and dies.)

In the first verse, woman is represented as the destroyer of devotion, salvation and divine knowledge. In the second one, Kabir equates woman with “a pit of hell”. There are many other such verses in the manuscripts of Kabir’s poetry in which he portrays woman negatively by equating her with “pains chhuri” (a sharp knife), “kaali nagini” (a black cobra), “maya” (illusion), “bish ki bel” (creepers of poison), “madan talabhari” (a tank of lust) among others. Such verses attest to an anti-woman image of Kabir.

Many scholars have commented on condemnation of women in Kabir’s verses. David Lorenzen (2011) points out that “several of his songs and verses express hostile attitudes to women, although these references can also be taken in a primarily metaphorical sense as reference to Maya and the distractions of everyday life” (p. 37). Peter Gaeffke (1996, p. 359) notes that Kabir condemns women and finds their sexuality inimical to sainthood. David Cook (2007, p. 78) finds a great amount of misogyny in Kabir’s poetry. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (1993) shows that “Kabir’s opinion of women is contemptuous and derogatory” (p. 114). Karine Schomer and Wendy O’ Flaherty also find misogynist bias in his poetry. Schomer (1979) states that “woman is characterized as ‘Kali nagini’ (a black cobra), ‘kunda naraka ka’ (the pit of hell), ‘juthani jagata ki’ (the refuse of the world) and is seen as nothing but an impediment to spiritual enlightenment” (p. 83).

However, Kabir is not the only *sadhak* (spiritual seeker) or early modern saint poet who regards woman as a hindrance to spiritual attainment. Purshottam Agrawal (2009) points out: “This attitude of condemning woman is not limited only to Kabir. Many poets of both the *nirguna* and *saguna* traditions show woman as the door of hell” (p. 56). Charlotte Vaudeville (1987) also underlines the fact that Sants and Vaishnavas have similar misogynist attitude to women. For them, women’s temptations are “main obstacle to spiritual life” (pp. 38-39).

Though both the *saguna* and *nirguna* saint poets have demeaned women in the

spiritual realm, the *nirguna* poets seem to be more severe and harsh. All *nirguna* saints from Kabir to Paltu Das condemn women. Paradoxically, most of the *nirguna* saints are householders, but they reject worldly life and refuse space for women in the realm of *bhakti* (devotion). Agrawal (2009, p. 57) suggests that this deprecatory attitude towards women is the result of the influence of Nathpanthis on them.

While Kabir is generally critical of women, it is striking to note his own femininity in his devotional poetry. He often expresses his *bhakti* to God as a woman who is completely dedicated to her husband/lover. In these verses, he imagines himself as a woman and God as her husband:

*Main to tumhari dasi ho sajana,
tum hamare bhartar
Deen dayal daya kari avo,
samarath sirjan har* (Tiwari 1961, p. 10)
(My beloved, I am your slave and you are my husband;
The Saviour of the poor, come to shower your blessings; the almighty creator.)

Robert Bly (1977) also identifies a feminine voice in Kabir: “Kabir sometimes speaks as a man, sometimes as a woman” (p. 66). In his essay “The Erotic to the Divine”, Agrawal (2011) argues, “on the one hand, Kabir exhibits the *sanskar* (culturally-conditioned psyche) of condemnation for woman, and on the other, Kabir himself takes the form of a woman” (p. 56). He further adds: “For Kabir, femininity is a metaphor for the agency of love, for the capacity to be able to love. In order to attain the capacity to love, he takes the form of a female in his poetry and makes the object of his love, ‘loving’ Ram, not the avatar Ram” (p. 65).

However, to assume the form of a woman to offer *bhakti* to God by a male *sadhak* or poet has been one of the main characteristics of medieval *bhakti* poetry. It begins with the Alvars (Tamil poet-saints) in South India between the sixth and tenth centuries. A. K. Ramanujan (2004, p. 291) suggests that in “taking on female personae”, the Alvars were drawing on “classical precedents in *cancam* poetry, where male

poets frequently write in female voices". Hazari Prasad Dwivedi (2014, p. 143) calls this form of *bhakti* "*prem-leela*" (romance with God) and considers it the focal point of *sadhana* (devotion or spiritual practice) of all *bhaktas* (devotees) during the early modern period.

Through the above scholarly views, we find out two contradictory images of Kabir: a "misogynist" Kabir (in his general pronouncements) and a "female" Kabir (in his personal moment of spirituality). The feminine role which Kabir assumes personally in the intense moment of his spirituality does not bring any change in his anti-women attitude. These two contradictory attitudes exist simultaneously in Kabir. The reason of this contradiction is what Agrawal (2011) highlights:

The irony is that despite this understanding to interrogate the hierarchy of the caste system, Kabir doesn't manage to make the same interrogation of the gender hierarchy latent within patriarchal systems. His social criticism thus remains incomplete, and his insistence on condemning woman is the root of this incompleteness. This insistence creates a rift in one's sensibility, and not only the sensibility of Kabir: there are many *sadhaks* like him who never tire of condemning the amorous woman in their *sanskar*-influenced spiritual maxims, but in the realm of poetry and 'mystical', spiritual practice never tire of taking the form of a woman to express their poetic interpretation of love. (p. 73)

In spite of adopting a feminine form, Kabir remains a misogynist. However, a large number of women followers of Kabir can be seen in Kabirpanth, a devotional sect based on the teachings of Kabir. They are completely devoted to Kabir. They live and breathe Kabir. Many of them sing, preach and practice Kabir. They not only popularize his message, but also encourage and inspire others to follow him. To

them, he is a benevolent and benign figure, kindly disposed towards women.

This intimacy of women with Kabir as his followers raises the questions: Why do women follow Kabir despite his being critical of them? How is his anti-women image seen by them? What image of Kabir has the Kabirpanth offered to them? How are women followers treated in the Kabirpanth? The present paper based on our fieldwork addresses these questions.

We carried out fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar from 2016 to the early months of 2020. We chose Kabir centres at Banaras, Sant Kabir Nagar, Jaunpur and Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, and Saran, Patna and Samastipur in Bihar for our fieldwork. Lahartara² and Kabir Chaura³ are two major centres in Banaras, and Maghar⁴ in Sant Kabir Nagar. Kabirpanthi followers from all over India regularly visit Lahartara and Kabir Chaura in Banaras, especially on the occasion of *Kabir Jayanti* (Kabir's birth anniversary) in *Jyeshtha* (May-June) every year, and Maghar on the occasions of *Khichadi Mela* (this fair is held from 12-18 January every year) and *Kabir Nirvan Divas* (Kabir's death anniversary) in *Maagha* (January-February) every year. Samastipur, Bihar has two major centres of Kabir: Bagicha *math* (monastery) at Rosera (where there is a large congregation of devotees, followers and even laymen and women on the occasion of *Kabir Jayanti*) and Mahadev *math* at Rosera (which people visit in large numbers on the occasion of the death anniversary of *Mahant Ram Jivan Saheb*⁵). The annual Harihar *Mela* [a month-long fair which is held in *Kartik* (October-November)] is a famous Kabir centre at Sonepur in Saran. Different Kabirpanthi sects, especially of Bihar, organize their respective *satsang* and *bhajan* programmes along with *bhandaras* (feasts) for three days in the beginning of the fair. During this period, the Kabirpanthi followers from all over Bihar congregate here.

We interviewed many Kabirpanthi men and women followers at the above centres. During our interaction with women followers including *sadhvis* (women saints), householders, and singers, we observed that they have a positive perception of Kabir. Through our in-depth interviews with many of them, we found that the Kabirpanth not only accords women a respectable status but also

acknowledges their significant role in spreading the message of Kabir. As preachers and singers of Kabir, many women followers are breaking the constraints of the traditional roles assigned to them by patriarchy. In fact, their *bhakti* based on Kabir has proved to be a liberating force for them in relation to the politics of gender.

Women Disciples and Followers of Kabir

Did Kabir (who is called anti-women) have women disciples during his lifetime? How long have there been women followers of Kabir in Kabirpanth? There is no historical evidence to discover these facts. The oral tradition of Kabir is the only source of information. The oral tradition reveals that there has been a significant presence of women in all sects of Kabirpanth since their inception. These sects can be broadly described into two major traditions: *Bind* and *Naad*. In the *Bind* tradition, the *Mahant* (Head) of the sect is a householder and generally, his son becomes the next *Mahant*. The wife of the *Mahant* is called *Guru Mata*. She is held in as much reverence as the *Mahant* himself. The *Bind* tradition was initiated by Dharmadas Kabirpanth with its present headquarters at Damakheda near Raipur, Chhattisgarh. The Dharmadas Kabirpanth was established in the early seventeenth century by Dharmadas, a prominent follower of Kabir. Gopal Das, the Manager of Kashi Kabir Chaura *math*, and Arvind Das, a saint from Maghar Kabir *math*, tell that Ameen, the wife of Dharmadas, was the first woman follower of Kabir in this tradition. Both Dharmadas and Ameen spread the messages of Kabir and drew many men and women followers into the Dharmadas Kabirpanth. At present, thousands of women singers and women saints associated with this tradition are spreading and popularizing the message of Kabir. They command a great deal of respect among the Kabirpanthi followers.

The *Naad* tradition is always headed by a celibate *Mahant*. Kashi Kabir Chaura *math* based-Kabirpanth is its pioneer. The *Naad* tradition has admitted women followers since its establishment. There has been a significant presence of women followers including householders, singers and *sadhvis* in the sects of this tradition as well.

Both the *Naad* and *Bind* traditions associate Kabir with some women disciples. They claim that Kabir was a celibate saint who had women disciples in his lifetime. Kamali,

Loi, and the wife of Veer Sing Baghel, the then King of Banaras, Ameen etc. were his disciples. The following couplet, which is believed to have been uttered by Kamali, attests to her association with Kabir is very popular in both the traditions:

Ghar Kabir ka shikhar par, jahan salehali gail

Panv na tikai pipilika, khal ko lade bail (Singh 1972, p. 146)

(The dwelling of Kabir is on the peak, the way is very narrow and slippery;

Where even an ant is not able to set its foot, the arrogant person is trying to reach there with a book-laden ox.)

Both the traditions believe that Kamali spoke it to teach a lesson to a proud and stubborn South Indian Brahmin scholar, Suratigopal who had come to Kashi to have a *shastrarth* (debate) with Kabir. As the legend goes, having lost the *shastrarth*, Suratigopal became a disciple of Kabir and subsequently established the Kabir Chaura *math* in Kashi and became its founder *Mahant*. Kabirpanthi *Mahants*, saints and followers hold Kamali in great respect.

The *Bind* tradition has popularized a myth which connects Kabir with four women as his disciples. This myth describes Kabir to have taken incarnations in four eras: *Satya Yuga*, *Treta Yuga*, *Dvapara Yuga* and *Kali Yuga*⁶. He was born as Sukrit in *Satya Yuga*, Munindra in *Treta Yuga*, Karunamaya in *Dvapara Yuga* and Kabir in *Kali Yuga* respectively. As Sukrit, he appeared in Mathura and blessed Khemsari, a milkmaid. As Munindra, he went to Lanka and blessed Mandodari, the wife of Ravana. As Karunamaya, he went to Girnar Garh and blessed Queen Indramati, the wife of King Chandra Vijaya. The King forbade her from showing any adoration and dedication to Kabir (Karunamaya), but she remained steadfast in her devotion. She was a Ramanandi follower, but under the supervision of Karunamaya, she became his follower. He saved her from her premature death, and by his grace, she and her husband were taken to heaven. In the *Kaliyuga*, Kabir appeared in Banaras and blessed Ameen, the wife of Dharmadas.

It is paradoxical that Kabir himself rejected the concept of incarnation, but the Kabirpanth has constructed the myth of his incarnation. However, this myth dispels Kabir's misogynist image and enhances the respect of women in the Kabirpanth. It is quite popular among the Kabirpanthi men and women of Bihar, Chhattisgarh etc. It attracts women to Kabirpanth and strengthens their faith in Kabir. We discovered that having a strong faith in this myth, male followers in the Dharmadasi tradition encourage their women to pursue Kabir's *bhakti*.

The *Mahants*, saints and singers (especially of Dharmadasi tradition) popularize this myth in their *satsangs* and *pravachans* (spiritual discussions and discourses). It prepares an atmosphere conducive for women in the Kabirpanth. We found that of the four women disciples associated with Kabir, Indramati is the most popular. There are many songs dedicated to Indramati, sung especially by women singers. We have also recorded songs attributed to other three women disciples. Both men and women singers sing them. Dukhani Dasi from Nalanda, Bihar sang to us the following song that is based on Kabir's incarnations and his interactions with Khemsari, Mandodari, Indramati and Ameen:

*Aayilan ho charo jugava mein
Sahib
Satjug mein Sahib Mathura
padhare
Khemsari Nari ke chetayalan ho
Aayilan ho charo jugava mein
Sahib
Treta mein Sahib Lankagarh
padhare
Are Mandodari Maiya ke
chetayalan ho
Aayilan ho charo jugava mein
Sahib
Dvapara mein Sahib Girnargarh
mein padhare,
Indramati Maiya ke chetayalan ho,
Aayilan ho charo jugava mein
Sahib
Kalijug mein Sahib Bandhavgarh
mein padhare,
Ameen Maiya ke chetayalan ho,
Aayilan ho charo jugava mein
Sahib,*

*Dharmadas guru se karabo
arajiya,
Guru ke charaniya laptaybo ho,
Aayilan ho charo jugava mein
Sahib*

[Sahib incarnated in all the four eras.

In the *Satya Yuga*, he appeared in Mathura.

He enlightened Khemsari.

Sahib incarnated in all the four eras.

In the *Treta*, he arrived in Lanka.

He enlightened Mother Mandodari.

Sahib incarnated in all the four eras.

In the *Dvapara*, Kabir arrived in Girnargarh.

He enlightened Mother Indramati.

Sahib incarnated in all the four eras.

In the *Kali Yuga*, he appeared in Bandhavgarh.

He enlightened Mother Ameen.

Sahib incarnated in all the four eras.

I submit prayer to *Guru Dharmadas*.

I wish to hold the feet of the *Guru* (spiritual teacher).

Kabir incarnated in all the four eras.]

More importantly, these four women, especially Khemsari and Indramati, are associated with the popular Kabirpanthi ritual "*Chauka Arati*". Khemsari is said to be the first person to have organized *Chauka Arati* ritual at Mathura (Uttar Pradesh) under the supervision of Kabir (Sonelal Das). The origin of this ritual being associated with a woman, it creates respect for the women followers among the male followers and makes Kabirpanth compatible for them.

Mangal geets (auspicious songs attributed to Kabir/*Guru/Sadguru* [*Guru* of all *gurus*]) sung on the occasion of *Chauka Arati* are often replete with the metaphors from the female world. Majority of women singers of Kabir from Bihar and Chhattisgarh sing these

mangal geets. These songs bring both the female singers and audiences close to Kabir.

This myth is also now proliferating and getting popular among the followers of the *Naad* tradition. Arvind Das, *Sadhvi* Gyansarovar Maharaj and many other followers of the *Naad* tradition testified to this phenomenon. We found them highlighting this myth in their conversations about Kabir with us.

Apart from the oral tradition, this myth has found place in almost all important books on Kabir and Kabirpanth written in the *Bind* tradition, including *Anurag Sagar* (n. d.) and *Kabir Mansur* (1887). Besides these four women, the Dharmadasi Kabirpanth believes that Kabir had also blessed many other women. *Kabir Mansur* relates an incident to Ameen in which she is quoted as saying to Dharmadas:

Kabir Sahib blessed many women e.g. Indramati (the wife of King Chandra Vijaya), Mandodari (the wife of King Ravana), Manikavati (the wife of King Veer Singh), Leelavati Puranti (the wife of King Yogadhar) etc. . . . [He] blessed Meera, Khemsari (a milkmaid), and countless other women and consequently, all went to the heaven as swans. (Parmanand, 1987, p. 329)

Thus, Kabirpanth conveys a positive and friendly image of Kabir among women followers. During our fieldwork, we observed that no sect of the Kabirpanth cites any anti-women couplets or verses of Kabir in *satsangs* and *pravachans*. Instead, at times, the stories and songs which describe Kabir's association with Indramati, Khemsari, Mandodari, Ameen, Kamali etc. are either narrated or sung in order to strengthen the bond of women followers with Kabir and Kabirpanth. Nancy Martin (2002) who studied the tradition of Kabir-singing among the selected Meghval singers western Rajasthan also notes a positive image of Kabir in songs:

Nowhere in these Meghval repertoires of Kabir are women portrayed as temptresses or dangers to religious pursuit (though other 'Kabir' speaks in

this way), but rather they are courageous models of the religious life. The image of the virtuous wife fearlessly ascending her husband's funeral pyre is invoked in this way. While there is no critique of gender hierarchies, the institution of marriage, or the ideal of *sati* here, there is an assertion of a kind of equality between the sexes, with both female and male images for God and for the heroic devotee. (p. 210)

At present, the number of women followers is on the rise in the Kabirpanth. *Sadhvi* preachers (many sing also) and women singers have also been one of the important forces behind this increase. *Sadhvi* Gyansarovar Maharaj from Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, *Sadhvi* Shanti Das from Akbarpur, Uttar Pradesh, *Sadhvi* Gyananand from Giridih, Jharkhand, Shraddha Mata from Bettiah, Bihar etc. head their own *maths* and have made hundreds of women followers. Sumila Devi, a Kabir singer from Patna, Bihar told us that she had made about five thousand disciples, majority of them being women followers. Popular women singers such as Renu Bharati from Patna and Dulo Dasi from Begusarai, Bihar have drawn many women to the Kabirpanth through singing and preaching Kabir. This gives us a glimpse of how women singers and preachers are playing an important role in connecting women with Kabir. It gives them agency and earns them respect as *Guru* as well. It is also breaking the confinements of their traditional gender roles. For these women, Kabirpanth has proved a progressive religion in which they are enjoying a better status of life. Kelsy Burke (2012) observes that "women's involvement in progressive religions" demonstrates "their activities as agentic, without question, as these women often attempt to break free from the constraints of traditional gender roles" (p. 5). This observation is quite relevant in the context of Kabirpanthi women too, who sing and preach Kabir.

Women followers reject Kabir's anti-women image. We put Kabir's anti-women verses and the questions which we framed on the basis of these verses before large numbers of the women followers to respond. We found the following sets of interpretations and responses which reflect a women-friendly image of Kabir. We have cited and

incorporated the significant views and comments of the women followers e.g. Gyansarovar Maharaj, Renu Bharati, Shanti Saheb, Phulmati Devi, Dulo Dasi, Vimala Devi, Sangeeta Vishwakarma, Malati Devi and Amrit Das in support of our arguments.

Looking beyond Kabir's Anti-women Image

Women followers believe that Kabir is not a detractor of women. Had he been ill-disposed towards women, they argue, he would not have made women disciples. Gyansarovar Maharaj says: "Kabir had *sadhan Yoga* (means of *Yoga*). He made Kamali his disciple; he made Loi his disciple . . . he made Bavari Saheb his disciple." Similar is the argument given by Renu Bharati:

There were many women e.g. Neema (his foster mother), Khemsari, Indramati, Ramdhaniya and Kamali in Kabir's time. If Kabir had spoken so about women, he would not have given them his shelter; instead, he would have insulted them; he would not have taken them into his supervision at that time.

The association of these women disciples in the oral tradition or in the legends popular in his name, makes the women followers believe that Kabir has not belittled women. They doubt the authenticity of anti-women verses of Kabir and think that it is a conspiracy against Kabir. Under the guise of Kabir, his opponents have written such verses: "Somewhere or the other, these things have been uttered by other men to denigrate Kabir" (Renu Bharati). *Sadhvi* Shanti Saheb also supports this view:

The saints who speak ill of women, cannot be true saints. Under the guise of Kabir, others have written so. The words of Kabir can never be rejected. If they are rejected, they are not of Kabir. It is a conspiracy to defame Kabir. The knowledge that I have possessed today is only because of Kabir. Tell me if Kabir had denounced women,

could I have reached here? I could not have obtained that knowledge.

Phulmati Devi from Varanasi also rejects these anti-women verses as being spurious but makes a slightly different argument: "Since Kabir was illiterate, he himself had not written anything. He had orally composed his verses. But later are the people who reduced them to writing, made many changes on their own and also introduced verses in the name of Kabir."

The above views of the women followers manifest their strong devotion to Kabir and his *vanis* (compositions or words). However, we found this devotion as the result of their experiences of practicing and living Kabir's message and preaching Kabir. They, in fact, cite the changes of their lives, as we see in case of Shanti Saheb, which they have undergone through Kabir *bhakti*. Since they live these experiences and changes in their everyday life, they find Kabir close to women.

The women followers credit Kabir for their spiritual uplift. Renu Bharati claims that Kabir has transformed her life. Dulo Dasi finds her life worthless without Kabir and Kabirpanth. Vimala Devi from Gorakhpur feels restless unless she listens to his *bhajans* (devotional songs). The Dalit women credit Kabir for improvement in their lives. Kabir's *vanis* give them strength and confidence. They develop a sense of community through the Kabirpanth. Women born into Kabirpanthi families show a remarkable attachment to him and his *vanis*. Women singers who are influenced by Kabir's *vanis* have found great career opportunities as singers in Kabirpanth. *Sadhvis* consider him a perfect ascetic. To them, he is the greatest of all saints and sages. Kabir's *vanis* inspire them to lead an ascetic life. They have become preachers of Kabir and many of them sing his *vanis* also. A number of women who join Kabirpanth under the influence of their Kabirpanthi friends claim that they get peace from his *vanis*. The above account reveals that women follow Kabir for different reasons and inspirations. However, one thing common among them is the ability of Kabir to give them spiritual solace. Kabir has proved to be a way of life for them.

Women followers understand the spirit and relevance of Kabir. Many recite and

expand his verses to prove his superiority and significance. Many tell his legends to do so. They consider Kabir God or *Sadguru*. According to them, he is the only true saint or person: “He is the only true person” (Sangeeta Vishwakarma) and “he is the *Satpurush* (the true person)” (Malati Devi). Renu Bharati shares her experience about Kabir and his *vanis*, which attests to how intimately she knows and experiences Kabir, and why she follows him and what importance Kabir holds in her life:

I have searched for Kabir from within. I have known Kabir. I have lived Kabir. I have lived only Kabir. I explored Kabir and have coloured myself in the colour of Kabir. I do not see anything in the world except Kabir. Wherever I see, I see Kabir only. Kabir is God. The *padas* (verses) of Kabir are based on life. No *vanis* that Kabir has spoken are hollow. His *vanis* are tied to music and based on human life. Therefore, the people see truth in his *vanis* and follow them. Other *bhajans* except those of Kabir that we hear and see are artificial and hollow, but the *vanis* of Kabir are the primary words and they are composed of the pearl and diamond of life. Therefore, they influence people. We take interest in reading and listening to the events and incidents, which are associated with our own lives. We like them. When we listen to the *vanis* of Kabir, we feel that these are our stories; these are our own biographies, these are our own events; and these are our own thoughts. Our Kabir was a great soul who enlightened us with such *vanis*. His *vanis* are associated with us and therefore, people like them. They are not hollow, artificial and external.

Women claim that Kabir always supported and glorified women. They often cite one verse in support of this claim and to

dismiss all the anti-women couplets and verses. Many women (such as Renu Bharati, Dulo Dasi, Shanti Das, and Amrit Das) who we interviewed cited this verse. Though this verse is a recent construct, they identify it as of Kabir:

*Ninda na karo nari ki, nari ratan
ki khan
Nari se nar hot hain Dhruva
Prahlaad saman*
(Do not condemn women;
women are mine of gems;
It is women who bear men like
Dhruva and Prahlaad.)

On the basis of the above couplet, they also profess that women are greater than men. Naturally, motherhood makes women feel superior. They are proud of being progenitors of humans. They foreground the importance and greatness of motherhood. Sangeeta Vishwakarma from Sant Kabir Nagar says: “If there were no women, where would we see all this (creation)? All have come from women. A woman is the Lakshmi (Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity) of the home.” Dulo Dasi too remarks: “Kabir never spoke ill of women. If there had been no woman, from where would the world have come? You are also a son of someone. The saints are also sons of some mothers. God is also a son of someone.” Renu Bharati claims that Kabir has established the greatness and superiority of women over men:

Many great persons have been born of women. Women are great. Kabir has also spoken about the greatness of women. All great men have been born of women. Therefore, women are worth worshipping. *Nari bhayala nar se mahanva, jananya jag me naam kaile ba* [women are greater than men, and they have earned great reputation all over the world]. Kabir has pronounced that woman is greater than man. Therefore, woman is worth worshipping.

One can clearly see how the Indian women think about motherhood which they highlight to show their

superiority over men and through which they portray Kabir friendly to them and use it as their defense against negative portrayals of women by patriarchy.

According to women followers, Kabir never discriminates against them. They believe that to Kabir, everyone is equal. He looks at the soul within everybody. For him, the soul is neither male nor female. Phulmati Devi substantiates: "His words are different. For him, no one is either male or female. We are just pure souls. All of us are souls. No one is either male or female." Some women are also of the opinion that Kabir looks at all human beings as of one gender. Sangeeta Vishwakarma says: "For Kabir, men and women all are female persons." She cites the following verse in support of her claim:

*Andaj Omkar se sab jag bhaya
pasar
Kahe Kabir sab nari Ram ki
avichal purush bhartar*
(The whole world has emanated
from egg (ovary) and Omkar
All are wives of Ram who is
their permanent husband, says
Kabir.)

On the one hand, as per the view of Sangeeta Vishwakarma, all persons are women for Kabir and on the other hand, Gyansarovar Maharaj notes that all are men for him:

*Sab ghat purush katahu nahi nari
Akath katha Jam drishti pasari*
(There is a male person in
everyone, there is no female
person anywhere;
Death's gaze spreads —
untellable story).

Gyansarovar Maharaj further explains that Kabir does not scorn women. He treats a woman as a man if she comes to seek his guidance. It is our worldly eyes which distinguish between men and women. When we see with the eye of heart, the soul of everyone is male.

It is noticeable that the views of Phulmati Devi, Sangeeta Vishwakarma and Gyansarovar Maharaj are contradictory, but

portray a positive image of Kabir to women. Their views also show that Kabir treats both men and women equally. Thus, women construct a neutral or equal approach of Kabir on the question of gender. It also reflects that women expect an equal treatment from Kabir and other saints or *bhaktas*. To us, they demand an equal treatment to women in the real world as well.

Conclusion

To sum up, the paper has brought out different images of Kabir among Kabirpanthi women beyond his misogynist image. Women construct their own version of Kabir. In this process, they substitute the misogynist Kabir with a women-friendly Kabir. In discounting Kabir's anti-women verses, they clearly appear to be challenging oppressive patriarchal power equations. Furthermore, in promoting the myth of Kabir's association with women such as Khemsari, Mandodari, Indramati, Kabirpanth too seeks to counter Kabir's anti-women image and make him popular among women.

Endnotes

1. It is the conventional time of Kabir's death. However, some scholars such as Vinay Dharwadker and Winand Callewaert place Kabir's death in 1448 (2003, p. 2; 1998, p. 407).
2. A place where Kabir is believed to have appeared or born.
3. A place where Kabir spent the major part of his life and delivered his teachings.
4. A place where Kabir is said to have taken his last breath.
5. He was the founder of the Mahadev *math* (Satkabir Vachan Vanshacharya Gaddi) Rosera. He passed away in 1976.
6. *Yuga* refers to an age of time. In Hinduism, time is divided into four *Yugas* (ages): *Satya Yuga*, *Treta Yuga*, *Dvapara Yuga* and *Kali Yuga*. The current age denotes the *Kali Yuga*.

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