

**UCLA**

**UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations**

**Title**

Find the True Country: Devotional Music and the Self in India's National Culture

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/67s3p240>

**Author**

Virani, Vivek

**Publication Date**

2016

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
Los Angeles

FIND THE TRUE COUNTRY:  
DEVOTIONAL MUSIC AND THE SELF IN INDIA'S NATIONAL CULTURE

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Ethnomusicology

by

VIVEK VIRANI

2016

© Copyright by

Vivek Virani

2016

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Find the True Country:  
Devotional Music and the Self in India's National Culture

by

Vivek Virani

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnomusicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Daniel M. Neuman, Chair

For centuries, the songs of devotional poet-saints have been an integral part of Indian religious life. Countless regional traditions of *bhajans* (devotional songs) have been able to maintain their existence by adapting to serve the contemporary social needs of their participants. This dissertation draws on fieldwork conducted over 2014-2015 with contemporary bhajan performers from many different genres and styles throughout India. It highlights a specific tradition in the Central Indian region of Malwa based on poetry by Kabir and other Sants (anti-establishment poet-saints) performed by lower-caste singers. This tradition was largely unheard-of half a century ago, but is now a major part of Malwa's cultural life that has facilitated the creation of lower-caste spiritual networks and created a space for those networks to engage in discourse about social issues. Malwa's bhajan singers have also become part of India's popular



religious and musical life as certain performers have attained celebrity status and been recognized at the national level as living bearers of the Sant tradition.

This dissertation follows performers and songs from Malwa into new contexts and explores the processes by which performers and audiences in diverse styles and contexts use Sant bhajans to construct understandings of the self. It further addresses the role of Sant bhajans in the formation of new communities comprising members from previously disparate social groups. It interrogates why Sant bhajans might be relevant and appealing to Indians from so many backgrounds and how these bhajans and their performers are relevant to major cultural, religious, and social discourses in India today. It describes and analyzes the various processes by which Sant bhajans are creating new arenas for artistic, spiritual, and social dialogue, and allowing previously marginalized voices to contribute to the formation of Indian culture.

The dissertation of Vivek Virani is approved.

Aamir R. Mufti

Timothy D. Taylor

Ali J. Racy

Daniel M. Neuman, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

To Swami,  
who brought me into the world of devotional music

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents	vi
Note about Orthography	vii
Table of Figures	viii
Table of Images	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Vita	xv
 Chapter 1 “Come to My Country” Introduction	 1
 PART I: THE REGION	
 Chapter 2 “Bhajans Have Purified My Body”: Nirgun Bhajans in Malwa Society	 30
Chapter 3 “Pierced by the Arrow of Song”: Musical Structure of Malvi Nirgun Bhajans	77
Chapter 4 “This World is a Bustling Marketplace”: Changing Contexts, Identities, and Performance Practices	111
 PART II: THE NATION	
 Chapter 5 “A Voice with No Singer”: Regional Devotional Performers on the National Stage	 152
Chapter 6 “One Water in Many Vessels”: Kabir in Popular Music	203
 Conclusion	 232
 Glossary of Foreign Terms	 241
References	245

## NOTE ABOUT ORTHOGRAPHY

When rendering terms from Hindi and other languages in Roman characters, I use a modified form of IAST transliteration to account for ambiguities in the regional pronunciations of certain words, and for the fact that pure IAST is difficult to read for most Indians. My deviations from IAST include the following:

1. The vowel ‘ṛ’ (ठ) is rendered as ‘ri’.
2. The consonants ‘c’ and ‘ch’ (च and छ) are rendered respectively as ‘ch’ and ‘chh’.
3. The consonants ‘ṣ’ and ‘ś’ (श and ष) are rendered respectively as ‘śh’ and ‘ṣh’, although the distinction between sibilants is highly ambiguous in practice, particularly in regional dialectic pronunciations.
4. The nasalization of vowels typically represented by a *chandrabindu* (ँ) in Hindi is represented by ‘ñ’, not to be confused with the cerebral nasal consonant ‘ṇ’ (ण).
5. ‘N’ is used to represent the dental nasal (न) as well as the nasals typically represented in IAST as ‘ñ’ and ‘ṇ’ (ढ and ण). The latter nasals only occur in conjunctions preceding homorganic consonants, and the distinction between them is nonexistent in spoken Hindi and most other North Indian languages.
6. IAST does not provide a standardized means of differentiating between the dotted and undotted forms of the voiced dental stops ‘ḍ’ (ढ and ढ) and ‘ḍh’ (ढ and ढ). Therefore, there is a small degree of ambiguity in words containing these letters.
7. Frequently used terms, including *bhajan*, *maṇḍalī*, *nirgun*, *sagun*, and *tambura*, are rendered in non-italicized text without diacritics after their first use.

## TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 3-1: Common tambura and kartāl patterns	88
Figure 3-2: Standard nirgun bhajan form	92
Figure 3-3: Example sākhi melodies	95
Figure 3-4: "Zara halke gādi hāñko," chorus and first verse,	97
Figure 3-5: Chorus of "Thāri kāyā nagarī meñ"	98
Figure 3-6: "Saudagir, ab kyon bhulyo jāye?" Chorus and Part of First Verse	100
Figure 3-7: Chorus of "Muniyā pinjare vālī nā"	103
Figure 3-8: Chorus of "Kar le mail gañvārā"	103
Figure 3-9: Chorus of "Kin kārān āyo?"	106
Figure 3-10: First line of first verse of "Guru sharan meñ rehnā"	106
Figure 3-11: First line of first verse of "Kartā karam se nyārā"	107
Figure 4-1: Typical four-beat rhythm played by percussion section of a nirgun mandali.	139
Figure 4-2: Intro to "Avadhu vo koi des batāvo"	143
Figure 6-1: Guitar and vocal parts from "Piya kī suratiyā"	214

## TABLE OF IMAGES

Image 2-1: Brahmin boys stand protectively at the temple steps	33
Image 2-2: The road between Lunyakhedi and Kabir Nagar	33
Image 2-3: Shrine to Ajay Bal Chakravarty Bhagavan	39
Image 2-4: A home in Malwa displaying images of Kabir alongside Baba Gurinder Singh	42
Image 2-5: Republican Party of India banner in Pune	56
Image 2-6: Pritam Malviya and Madanlal Malviya Singing at a Mrtyu Bhojan function	59
Image 2-7: A disciple touches the feet of a Kabir Panth mahanth	60
Image 3-1: A winter night satsang in Lunyakhedi village	78
Image 3-2: Kabir Kalā Manch, a bhajan mandali	82
Image 3-3: Two types of tambura plectra worn on the index finger	85
Image 3-4: Prahlad Tipanya inserts bridges into a number of new tamburas	86
Image 3-5: Prahlad Tipanya with his son, Vijay, performing in Indore	109
Image 4-1: A section of the crowd at one of Tipanya's performances	115
Image 4-2: Mathuralal Bilodiya with his son, Amritlal, and mandali	122
Image 4-3: Grounds and stage where annual Lunyakhedi Kabir Utsav is held	125
Image 4-4: A Malvi dance troupe performs for Doordarshan Indore	127
Image 4-5 a) Malvi Kabir bhajan VCD album covers	133
Image 4-6: Pavan Parihar and Manglesh Malviya playing <i>ḍholak</i> and <i>ṭimki</i>	138
Image 4-7: Devnarayan Saroliya and Dharmendra Tipanya playing violin and harmonium	141
Image 4-8: Mandalis gathered at the bhajan competition	151
Image 5-1: Prahlad Tipanya's troupe prepares for a concert	153

Image 5-2: Malvi musicians representing Madhya Pradesh	155
Image 5-3: Private Concert by Prahlad Tipanya's troupe	157
Image 5-4: Poster for the first Mumbai Kabir Festival, held in 2011.	167
Image 5-5: Mooralala Marwada's group practicing with Nirali Kartik	169
Image 5-6: 2015 Lunyakhedi Kabir Workshop	170
Image 5-7: Performers and travelers from all over at the 2015 Malwa Kabir Yatra	172
Image 5-8: Deepa Kamath sings a Kabir bhajan in her home	180
Image 5-9: Table selling traditional instruments at the 2014 Mumbai Kabir Festival	188
Image 5-10: Parvathy Baul performs at the Malwa Kabir Yatra	200
Image 6-1: Bindhumalini Narayanaswamy and Vedanth Bharadwaj perform	216
Image 6-2: The audience cheers for Kabir Cafe	218
Image 6-3: Kabir Cafe conducting sound check	221



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my overwhelming gratitude to the many people without whom this project would have been unimaginable. I thank the UCLA Department of Ethnomusicology for its continued support through research fellowships, conference travel awards, and the fieldwork fellowship that allowed me to conduct research for this dissertation. I also thank UCLA's Graduate Division for funding in the form of Summer Research Fellowships, a Graduate Research Mentorship during my fourth year, and the Dissertation Year Fellowship that allowed me to complete this project. Many thanks to my committee members, Aamir Mufti, A. J. Racy, and Timothy Taylor for sharing their insight and for challenging me to expand my perspectives. Thanks especially to my advisor and committee chair, Daniel Neuman, whose continued guidance and confidence in me have been invaluable to my growth as a scholar. I am also grateful to the many professors at UCLA who have offered intellectual, professional, and personal guidance over the years, including Münir Beken, Tara Browner, Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, Stephanie Jamison, Roger Kendall, Cheryl Keyes, Vinay Lal, Steven Loza, Saloni Mathur, James Newton, Timothy Rice, and Anthony Seeger. In particular, I would like to thank Helen Rees for the many hours she selflessly offered to help the professional development of myself and so many other students. My thanks to Donna Armstrong and Sandra McKerron for making my dissertation, and the rest of the department, actually happen through all of the bureaucracy. Special thanks to my cohort, who are some of the best intellectual and musical companions I could have hoped to spend six years with: Logan Clark, Ryan Koons, Scott Linford, Larry Robinson, and Dave Wilson.

I would like to thank the countless musicians and contributors who shared their time, music and ideas with me over the course of my fieldwork. First, I must thank Prahlad Ji, whose spirit and hospitality helped turned this dissertation from a dream into a reality, and whose

music and insight have been a continual source of inspiration. Thank you to all the Tipanyas, who have become like my own family: Ajay Bhaiya, Vijay Bhaiya, Ashok Kaka, Dharmendra Bhaiya, and Ambaram Kaka. Most importantly, my thanks to the Tipanya women, Shanti Ji, Sangeeta Bhabhi, and Seema Bhabhi, who fed and cared for me as their own son or brother. Deepesh Bhaiya was an excellent host, brother, and guide who chauffeured me through Malwa during the hottest time of the year.

I also thank all of the nirgun singers and instrumentalists of Malwa who have become a part of this dissertation: Kanhaiyalal Malviya Atela, Kaluram Bamaniya, Nanuram Bhagat, Mansingh Bhondiya, Mathuralal Bilodiya, Jaimal and Kalusingh Chopda, Bheru Singh Chauhan, Rakesh Chauhan, Gurucharan Das, Premsingh Dipalpuriya, Lalkrishna Dhangar, Tarasingh Dodve, Ramachandra Gangoliya, Manoj Gudavat, Shankar Jayaram, Magdiram Malviya, Mangilal Kulshresht, Mahesh Malviya, Prabhulal Malviya, Pritam and Madanlal Malviya, Manglesh Mangroliya, Sundar Malviya, Suman Singh Mangroliya, Paras Nayak, Prahlad and Pavan Parihar, Hari and Sunil Patel, Anjana Saxena, Dayaram Saroliya, Devnarayan Saroliya, Ambaram and Sunil Solanki, Babulal Surivams, Narayan Thakur, Shivji Suri Vams, Mahesh Yadav, and so many more whose names I cannot list.

My thanks to all the other devotional musicians who took part in this project in different ways: Lakshman Das Baul, Parvathy Baul, Bharti Bandhu, Vimal Das Bawra, Satyasheel Deshpande, Paresh Kamath, Nirali Karthik, Kailash Kher, Mooralala Marwada, Radhika Sood Nayak, and the boys of Kabir Café: Neeraj Arya, Mumbai Dakshinamurthy, Raman Iyer, Britto KC, Mukund Ramaswamy, and Viren Solanki. A special thank you to my musical brothers and sisters Ankit Chadha, Vedanth Bharadwaj, Bindhumalini Narayanaswamy, and Shruthi Vishwanath – I am sure the years will bring many more chances to play together and explore new musical spaces.

I thank Linda Hess and Shabnam Virmani, whose work inspired me to pursue this project. I, along with thousands of Mumbaikars, am grateful to the Mumbai Kabir festival team, whose vision and organization have made the festival an incredible experience for so many years: Priti Turakhia, Sachi Maniar, Tejal Rajyagor, and especially Falguni Desai, for her unmatched sincerity and dedication. Thank you to my family in Indore and Bangalore, for sharing their homes with me for so long. In Indore: Neelu Bua, Kuldeep Chacha, Ritu Chachi, Karan and Kapil. In Bangalore: Ramesh Uncle, Rajni Aunty, Manish Bhaiya, Anjali Bhabhi, and Kushal. Thank you to those who have become closer than family, and made me a part of your homes. In Mumbai: Mirabelle D’Cunha, Rudy D’Cruz, and little Sivana. In Pune: my elder brother and sister, Sheetal and Khushmita Sanghvi, and my extended Pune family: Girdar Mama, Vipul Shah, Sahil Narula, Vinit Gujarathi, the whole Urban Ashram family, Krishna Revankar, Dilip Bhame and the rest of the Sinhgad Road Sai Sammiti, and all of my guru-bhais – especially Kunal Kale and Sumit Malviya. Further thanks to the countless people who shared their hearts and homes with me during my fieldwork, and whose voices have contributed to my work and my life: Leslie Nazareth and Mayuree Pandit, Ritu Joshi, Apurva Patel and Hetal Sheth, Ayesha Mishra, Vipul Shah, Reena Ginwala, Deepa Kamath, Ambika Ramakrishnan, Kapila and Susheel Nair, Vipul Rikhi, Ravi and Kalyani Nair, Shubha Chaudhuri, Anupreet Dhodhy and Goli Golani and so many more.

I offer my thanks and my *pranām*-s to my Guruji, Pandit Suresh Talwalkar, who awakened the music within me. I also thank all of the music teachers who have trained and inspired me throughout the years, including Uncle Subbarao, Shyam Pai, John D’earth, Radha Prasad, and Arun Dravid. To Fred Maus, Michelle Kisliuk, Ted Coffey, Melvin Butler, and Richard Will, thanks for inspiring me and equipping me to pursue music scholarship. Thank

you to Matthew Rahaim, Justin Scarimbolo, Anna Schultz, and many other senior colleagues for helpful discussions about this project.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my family. Thanks to my parents, for their limitless support and encouragement. To Pooja, for inspiring me to pursue any adventure and for some crucial proofreading. To Latha and Chandra Nair, for their faith and interest in my work. And to my sounding-board, my musical partner, my best friend, and my wife, Turya Nair, for everything.

## VITA

### EDUCATION

- Present      Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology, UCLA. Dissertation defended May 2016.  
(Degree expected June 2016)
- 2012          M.A. in Ethnomusicology, UCLA  
M.A. paper: “Tabla Education in Maharashtra: Suresh Talwalkar’s 21st Century  
Music Ashram”  
Advisor: Professor Daniel M. Neuman
- 2008          B.A. in Music, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA

### PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

- 2016-Present   Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology and Music Theory, University of North  
Texas College of Music, Denton, TX.

### AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- 2015-16      Dissertation Year Fellowship, UCLA Graduate Division
- 2013-14      Graduate Research Mentorship, UCLA Graduate Division
- 2012          FLAS fellowship from UC Berkeley for Marathi Summer Language Program
- 2012          American Institute of Indian Studies Fellowship for Marathi Summer Language  
Program (declined in favor of FLAS)
- 2011          Graduate Summer Research Fellowship, UCLA
- 2010          Graduate Division Fellowship, UCLA

### UPCOMING PUBLICATIONS

- 2017 (EST.)   “Dual Consciousness and Unconsciousness: The Structure and Spirituality of  
Poly-Metric Tabla Compositions.” Chapter in *Music and Consciousness 2*, edited  
by David Clarke, Eric Clarke, and Ruth Herbert. To be published by Oxford  
University Press.
- 2016 (EST.)   “Scheduled Castes and Social Capital: Social and Spiritual Reform through Kabir  
Singing in Central India.” Chapter in *Songs of Social Protest*, edited by Aileen  
Dillane, Eoin Devereux, Amanda Haynes, and Martin J. Power. To be published  
by Rowman and Littlefield International, London.

## CONFERENCE PAPERS

- 2016        “Saints and Sufis: The Cultural Politics of Labels in Indian Popular Religious Music.” To be presented at 61<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Washington, DC, November 10-13, 2016.
- 2016        “Rethinking the Tabla Solo.” Presented at Fourth International Conference on Analytical Approaches to World Music, The New School, New York, NY, June 8-11, 2016.
- 2016        “A Voice without Singer: Sant Bhajan Musical Structure and Adaptability in Malwa, North India.” Presented at Conference on the Music of South, Central, and West Asia, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, March 4-6, 2016.
- 2015        “Folk Musicians on Tour: Regional Devotional Music Emerges into India’s National Culture.” Presented at 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Austin, TX, December 3-6, 2015.
- 2015        “Casteism and Capitalism: Social and Spiritual Change through Kabir Singing in Central India.” Presented at conference “Songs of Social Protest,” University of Limerick, Ireland, April 30-March 1.
- 2015        “Dual Consciousness and Unconsciousness: The Structure and Spirituality of Poly-Metric Tabla Compositions.” Presented at 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference on Music and Consciousness, Oxford University, April 14-17.
- 2014        “Where Do We Find Kabir? The Impact of Popular Recordings on a Spiritual Tradition.” Presented at 49<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Southern California and Hawai’i Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology, University of California, Santa Barbara, February 22-23.
- 2013        “Om Shanti Om: Diasporic Dialogue in Popular Music of India and Trinidad.” Paper presented at 58<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of Society for Ethnomusicology, University of Indiana, Indianapolis, November 14-17.
- 2011        “Innovation and Unconsciousness: Poly-Metric Tabla Compositions of Suresh Talwalkar.” Presented at 46<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of Southern California and Hawai’i Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, CA, February 19-20.

## Chapter 1

### “COME TO MY COUNTRY”

#### INTRODUCTION

*Choḍ jo pīyar sāsro, mhārī helī, choḍ jo rang bhar sej*  
*Choḍ pithāmbhara orlo, mhārī helī, kar li vo bhagam besh*  
*Āvo hamāra deśh*

Leave behind your family, my dear friend,  
Leave your comfortable bed  
Cast aside your colorful clothes, my dear friend  
Don this robe of ochre  
Come to my Country.

- Dharamdas Bhajan

Do you hear the call of the *Sants*, inviting you to come to their land? They warn that the journey will not be easy; it will require us to step outside of our comfortable houses, outside of the familiar boxes that we inhabit. The Sants are an informal pantheon of vernacular poet-saints from South Asia whose poetry advocates a departure from all hierarchies, labels, and categories people use to create divisions among themselves. For centuries, their voices have lived through *nirgun bhajan*-s, devotional songs celebrating an indescribable and omnipresent divinity. These songs have been performed primarily by communities marginalized by dominant cultural or sociopolitical frameworks. Although these frameworks have changed over the centuries, the Sant tradition still lives and grows in India as nirgun bhajans are performed and interpreted to address present-day issues. This dissertation is about the performance of nirgun bhajans as a means of negotiating cultural, spiritual, and social constructions of self and identity in contemporary India. It focuses particularly on communities of performers and listeners that have formed through singing bhajans of Kabir, the most venerated of the Sants.

In the bhajan above, Kabir addresses his disciple Dharamdas – and by extension, all who are listening – to come to his *desh* (land or country). This *desh* is a common metaphor of Sant poetry; it does not refer to any geographical place, but to an abstract realm from which all souls have come, and to which they will return. It is the “True Country,” a plane of existence in which material distinctions of caste, class, race, gender, and language have no meaning. Bhajan singers playfully invoke the multiple meanings of *desh* as land, country, and utopian plane of existence. Some adopt the role of preachers or spiritual mentors, admonishing their listeners to lead moral and humane lives, so they may reach the Elysian *desh* after death. Others are secular reformers, presenting the egalitarian vision a *desh* as a metaphor for reforms they seek within the country of India, in response to caste discrimination, sectarianism, and other social ills. Many singers I encountered during fieldwork also used *desh* in a mundane sense; they performed bhajans like this one to welcome me to their *desh* – to their land.

Yet the spiritual meanings of *desh* are never lost or obscured by the tangible meanings. Sant bhajans performances are characterized by, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s terminology (Bakhtin 1981), dialogism and heteroglossia. They are dialogic as their meaning in any performance context is shaped by a perpetually growing and transforming body of perspectives and interpretations across multiple spiritual traditions. They are heteroglot as they speak simultaneously in multiple registers of meaning. They are irrefutably spiritual songs, but distinguish themselves from other Indian spiritual songs through their visceral (at times, approaching vulgar) emphasis on the body and the incongruities of society. Singers draw on different registers of meaning based on their personal experiences, the performance context, and audience expectations. These factors have become increasingly significant as recent socioeconomic and cultural shifts have created new performance contexts and brought together previously disparate communities of singers and listeners.



This dissertation addresses Sant bhajan performance in India today, which not only retains its importance as a spiritual tradition but has also been incorporated into major public discourses about plurality and modernity in Indian society. The dissertation is focused on a specific regional tradition of Sant bhajans that has attracted numerous and diverse performers and audiences over the last four decades. This tradition finds its home in the central North Indian region of Malwa, where it is primarily performed by people from lower-caste backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> These are not professional musicians; most make little or no money through performances and have minimal specialized musical training. Recently, Kabir bhajans have experienced a massive surge of popularity in Malwa. Most of these bhajans are in the local language of Malvi, and are unique to the region. Countless new ensembles are emerging, particularly from the younger generation. The tradition has begun to receive national attention, resulting in broader performance opportunities and improved social status for many singers. A few have even developed strong followings of urban bourgeois Indians who are drawn to Kabir and the Saints. Communities of affinity have developed around Kabir and Sant bhajans, incorporating performers and listeners from diverse social, musical, and cultural backgrounds.

This dissertation explores the artistic, cultural, and spiritual dialogues that emerge as these performers and audiences interact and collaborate. These dialogues have much to tell us about the dynamic nature of spirituality and cultural identity in the era of the modern nation-state. I aim to demonstrate that nirgun bhajans remain an important means through which Indians from diverse backgrounds develop and articulate social, spiritual, and cultural

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term “lower caste” in this dissertation (non-pejoratively) to refer primarily to the groups officially classified as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC). However, membership in these groups is highly politicized, particularly due to issues regarding the advantages of voting blocs and affirmative action (reservation) policies. While the preferred contemporary term is Dalit, this term has specific political connotations that may be misleading, as Dalit identity is not yet widespread in Malwa. Lower-caste people in Malwa most often referred to themselves as *anusūchit jāt* (scheduled caste), *Harijan* (“person of God”; a label coined by Mohandas Gandhi), or using the English acronyms SC / ST / OBC.

conceptions of self. In doing so, they contribute to the attitudes and practices that constitute national culture in a manner quite different from, and often opposed to, “top-down” narratives of nation advocated by government or other institutions.

### ***Background Information: Hinduism and the Sants***

The term “Hinduism” has always been problematic for scholars of South Asia due to its ambiguous historical usage and the diversity of (often contradictory) beliefs it comprises. Many recent scholars have suggested that people of South Asia may only have begun to identify themselves as “Hindu” as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>2</sup> influenced by colonial categorization (Cohn 1996; Pandey 1990; Pennington 2005; Thapar 1999). Others have countered Hindu religious identity is evidenced in vernacular texts as early as the Delhi Sultanate, and no later than the 15<sup>th</sup> century (C. Bayly 1985; Lorenzen 2006, 24-27).<sup>3</sup> Regardless of its ambiguities, the term “Hindu” is used by over a billion people today to describe their beliefs and practices. Furthermore, classification as Hindu is not merely nominal; it has concrete effects on people’s political affiliations, social interactions, and the arenas of spiritual dialogue in which they participate. The ideological and sociopolitical problematics of the Hindu label are particularly relevant in the cases of dissenting traditions, such as those discussed in this study. Such traditions have a liminal status; in both scholarship and popular discourse, they are simultaneously considered “Hindu” and “other.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> “Hindu” originally derives from the Persian pronunciation for the Sindhu (Indus) river. It originated as an outsider term referring to the people who lived beyond the river. Scholars who argue against the early adoption of Hindu identity within South Asia contend that people within the region would have identified instead by sect or spiritual lineage, e.g. they would consider themselves Vaishnavite, Shaivite, or Smartha rather than Hindu.

<sup>3</sup> Lorenzen (2006) suggests that medieval Sanskrit may neglect to discuss distinctions between Hinduism and Islam religions due to cultural isolationism or aloofness. Vernacular texts, including poetry attributed to Eknath, Kabir and his followers, clearly distinguish theologically between Hindus and Turks (Muslims).

<sup>4</sup> This liminal status has existed for at least the last three centuries. Hawley’s analysis of early poetry collections suggests that the Sants and other heterodox poet-saints were often included in orthodox Hindu collections, but also treated as a separate

Scholars have endeavored to develop intellectual models of Hinduism that reconcile its internal diversity with the pervasiveness of many common themes, mythologies, and rituals. The most influential of these models has been the “Great Tradition” and “Little Tradition” model proposed by Robert Redfield and developed by Milton Singer (Redfield 1956; Singer 1972). In this model, the Great Tradition of Sanskrit or Brahmanical Hinduism is in constant feedback with innumerable Little Traditions, acquiring beliefs, practices, and mythology from these traditions even as it homogenizes them to look more like itself. M. N. Srinivas proposes a similar model that differentiates between “all-India Hinduism,” “regional Hinduism,” and “local Hinduism” (Srinivas 1952). Srinivas’s model centralizes the process of “Sanskritization,” in which local and regional forms of religion imbibe the values and practices of all-India Hinduism. Other scholars have proposed similarly evolutionist regional models, such as Surajit Sinha’s distinction between “peasant Hinduism” and “urban Hinduism” (Sinha 1958).

These models have persisted due to their descriptive usefulness, but they provide an incomplete – and possibly even distorted – picture. Religious scholar David N. Lorenzen argues:

[These models] strikingly downplay and even reject any serious attempt to distinguish the cultural values and institutions of upper and lower-caste groups, much less those of classes. The culture of low-caste groups is taken as being either representative of the Little Tradition relatively uncontaminated by the Great Tradition, or else as being a poorly Sanskritized prototype of upper caste culture... [which is] tacitly accepted as pervasively normative. (Lorenzen 2006, 78)

The Great/Little Tradition models are particularly inadequate for describing reactive lower-class and lower-caste traditions that oppose the status quo maintained by elite traditions. Such subaltern traditions are not merely Little Traditions that have not yet Sanskritized, they are

---

pantheon in fully heterodox collections (Hawley 1995). An essay called “Diverse Systems of the Religion of Hindustan” written by the Capuchin Franciscan traveler Marco della Tomba in the late eighteenth century describes eight broad divisions within Hinduism, but considers followers of Kabir and Nanak separate from these divisions – yet not separate enough to classify as a different religion, as he does with Christians and Muslims (Lorenzen 2006, 18-19).

define themselves in opposition to Brahmanical Hinduism.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Redfield/Singer/Srinivas model implicitly links elite, Sanskritic Hinduism with a wide geographical influence, and other traditions with a narrow regional following. Therefore, they cannot accommodate the traditions of the poet-saints, who have been an integral part of South Asian religious life for centuries. Many poet-saints acquired widespread geographical following even within their lifetimes, despite being distinctly non-Sanskritic and non-elite in character. In modern Indian religious life, poet-saints have a broad popular appeal. Concerts of their songs attract listeners from many different castes, classes, and faiths.

### **Poet-Saints**

Poet-saints are semi-legendary figures who emerged through the subcontinent during the medieval period from all regions and social backgrounds. Their ranks included scholars, street-sweepers, and even princesses. Although they were not bound by any specific ideology or institution, a few common themes have united them in academic consideration as well as popular imagination. First, these poet-saints all wrote in accessible vernacular poetry, rather than the abstruse Sanskrit of the scholarly elite. Second, they all advocated personal, emotional relationships with Divinity (despite varying conceptions of the nature of that Divinity) rather than relationships established through ritual worship. These populist and egalitarian models of spirituality implicitly or explicitly opposed the authority of the socio-religious elite, i.e. theological scholars and ritual authorities. Centuries later, the poet-saints' mythos and poetry are still invoked by countless Indians constructing their own personal belief systems, often in opposition to Brahmanical or institutionalized forms of Hinduism.

---

<sup>5</sup> I use the term "subaltern" to describe people, communities, ideologies, and theologies that are not only circumstantially marginalized or oppressed, but that *define themselves* primarily through their marginalization or oppression.

In reference to their common emphasis on spiritual devotion or *bhakti*, poet-saints are collectively referred to as *bhakti* poets.<sup>6</sup> This usage seems to have solidified through the influence of seminal Hindi literature scholar Ramachandra Shukla (1884-1941). Shukla defined the “Bhakti Period” in North India as 1338-1643 CE (Shukla [1929] 2001). Kabir, Tulsidas, Mirabai, and Surdas, the most renowned North Indian poet-saints, lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Contemporary scholars typically refer to a “Bhakti Movement” of devotional sentiment beginning with the Nayanar and Alvar sects in 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>-century Tamil Nadu and gradually migrating northward throughout the subcontinent. Krishna Sharma, however, has criticized this use of the term *bhakti* and the notion of Bhakti Movement. He believes these frameworks were developed through colonial scholarship that did not sensitively consider the significant social, ideological, and theological variety among the poet-saints and their followers (Sharma 1987).<sup>7</sup> Communities that have historically upheld the status quo and those that have opposed it are uncritically lumped together under the rubric of a single socio-religious movement. The notion of an ideologically homogenous Bhakti Movement lingers in popular imagination, although many scholars, incorporating Sharma’s criticism, have begun referring to plural *bhakti* movements.

Sharma further argues that the conception of Bhakti Movement distorts the original (and still commonly used) meaning of *bhakti*, which refers to a personal feeling of love rather than a categorization of ideology or sect. He explains, “even in the religious context, the term *bhakti*,

---

<sup>6</sup> The Sanskrit word *bhakti* derives from the root verb *bhaj*, literally meaning, “to share or distribute” and often used commonly used in the sense of “to worship, honor, or serve.”

<sup>7</sup> Sharma (1987) maintains that the contemporary academic use of *bhakti* as theological category was first formulated by H. H. Wilson in his *Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus* (1846) that refers to a “bhakti religion.” The distinction was furthered by scholars like Monier Monier-Williams and Albrecht Weber, and was solidified into its contemporary form in James Hastings’s *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (1909).

when used without any prefix, can mean devotion to God only in a general sense, and nothing more. By itself, it does not suggest any doctrinaire or ideational position, nor any particularized concept of God, personal or impersonal” (6). Sharma’s arguments have all borne out in my own fieldwork. Although the musical traditions discussed in this work are *bhakti* (i.e., devotional) traditional, I will avoid referring to them with that general label due to its reductionist implications. Chapters 5 and 6 will discuss in more detail how the homogenizing categorization of *bhakti* at a national level is used to exclude the unique perspectives, theologies, and oppressive social conditions that characterize regional devotional traditions.

Lower-caste bhajan singers in Malwa refer to their tradition as *Sant-vāṇī*, meaning the message (literally the “voice”) of the Sants. Sants are a subgroup of India’s devotional poet-saints. The word Sant is commonly equated with the English “saint,” although this is a false cognate (Schomer 1987a, 2-3). It derives from the Sanskrit *sat* (reality, truth); a *sant* is a “knower of truth.” Literary and religious scholars refer to two major lineages as Sants (Vaudeville 1987, 22). The Western Sant lineage comprises the devotional poets of the Maharashtra region, whose poetry is primarily sung in the *abhang* idiom in the Marathi languages. This lineage includes saints spanning the late thirteenth through seventeenth centuries, including Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Chokhamela, Janabai, Eknath, and Tukaram. Their poetry primarily addresses the form of Krishna called Vitthala, and is the main literary and musical repertoire of the Varkari or Vithoba sect. The Northern Sant lineage is more fragmented, and incorporates many sects spanning Rajasthan, the Punjab, and the Gangetic Valley. It includes Kabir, Nanak, Ravidas (Raidas), and Dadu, and the many sects formed by their followers. Ethnographically, I found that the usage of the term “Sants” was less clearly defined. Malvi singers primarily use the term to refer to the Northern lineage. They are aware of the Western lineage and occasionally refer to Marathi Sants, but I did not encounter a single instance of Marathi Sant poetry within the

operative Sant corpus in Malwa. I did encounter many poems attributed to figures who would not be included in the common academic classification of Sant, such as local folk heroes and deities. The most common uses referred to Kabir, Ramdev Pir, and the poet-saints of the Nath sect, which will be described in greater length in the next chapter.

Sants are distinguished from other poet-saints through non-conformity and counter-elite theological frameworks. They came from the most socially marginalized backgrounds; nearly all of them were lower-caste *shūdra*-s or non-caste *achyuta* (untouchables) (Vaudeville 1987). While other poet-saints poets might implicitly subvert traditional religious authorities, Sants explicitly opposed Brahmanical religion and all forms of sectarianism and “superstitious” ritualism.” Scholarship of the Sants and other non-caste or lower-caste Hindu traditions began to flourish in the 1960s (Lorenzen 2006, 79). Many scholars have undertaken anthropological studies on the religious practices of marginalized (including non-caste, lower-caste, or tribal) communities. These include Dhali (2004), Dube (1998), Chaudhuri (2009), Henry (1991); Hess (2015), Juergensmeyer (1980; 1987; 1995), Khare (1984), Lamb (2002), Lorenzen (1987; 2006), Lynch (1969), Omvedt (1980), and Zelliott (1970; 1981). The volume *The Sants*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod (1987) is the most comprehensive interdisciplinary work addressing multiple Sant traditions. The volumes *Bhakti Religion in North India*, edited by David Lorenzen (1995), and *Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and Dissent in India*, edited by S. N. Eisenstadt, Reuven Kahane, and David Shulman (1984) have also provided many useful case studies and theoretical perspectives.

Great / Little Tradition models as well as case studies of marginalized traditions both fall short in addressing the role that regional traditions play in constructing national religious and cultural identity. The construction of national identity has predominantly been a “top-down”

process, and existing scholarship has mostly reflected this.<sup>8</sup> Social, economic, and technological changes in the last two decades fundamentally changed the degree and nature of interaction between social groups. In the India where my parents grew up four decades ago, it would have seemed highly irregular – if not inconceivable – that large groups of wealthy upper-class urban Indians would turn to lower-caste village musicians as spiritual mentors. Now, as this dissertation illustrates, this is becoming a common occurrence. Nor did the communications technology exist until recently for the formation of virtual spiritual communities in which smartphones are used to discuss and share bhajans – including music videos produced by multinational corporations. We scholars of South Asia must encourage new discussions of popular Hinduism that recognize beliefs, experiences, and debates at the local level as contributors to a national, and increasingly international, entity.<sup>9</sup> Today’s popular Hinduism comprises both the hegemonic Great Tradition’s majoritarian narratives and nationalistic political interpretations and the diverse body of heterodox, subaltern, and non-elite spiritual traditions that suddenly have the means to engage in dialogue with the Great Tradition – often even on the same concert stage. I expect this dissertation will be one of many studies addressing this dynamic religious climate in the coming years.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Scholars like Anna Schultz (2012) have refined our understanding of Indian nationality by looking at regional constructions of nationality or subnationalities. Scholars within the Subaltern Studies group, such as Shahid Amin (1988) have deconstructed top-down nationalist endeavors by emphasizing their diverse reception and interpretation within different social contexts.

<sup>9</sup> The term “popular Hinduism” has been used before by Milton Singer (1972), but his usage is concerned with tribal or village practices that are either diluted forms of Sanskrit Hinduism, or practices that existed prior to Sanskrit Hinduism and have been influenced by it.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Krakauer’s recent study on Bāul-Fakirs in West Bengal is one of the first entries in what I expect will soon be a substantial body of studies addressing the post-liberalization recontextualization and commodification of regional devotional traditions (Krakauer 2015).



## Saint Legends, Sectarianism, and the National Imagination

Scholars seeking the factual biographies of poet-saints face an uphill battle. Legend and hagiography are far more available and widely accepted than verifiable history. Lorenzen (1991) suggests that the commonly accepted hagiographies of the poet-saints may not be factual, but they reveal much about ongoing dialogues and debates between sects. This is particularly clear in the case of legends that are shared across multiple sects, but with different outcomes. For example, the same meeting between Ravidas and Mirabai may be described in multiple legends, but will end with Mirabai touching Ravidas's feet when told by Ravidas's followers and vice versa when told by Mirabai's followers (Hawley 1995b). Similar apocryphal encounters are described by followers of Gorakshanath and Kabir (Hess 2015, 91; Lorenzen 1991).<sup>11</sup>

Many of the popular legends surrounding Kabir address his unique liminal status. Kabir was born into a Muslim family of the Julaha (weaver) caste in the holy city of Varanasi (also known as Banaras or Kashi). Most scholars and followers of Kabir agree that this was considered a lower caste. A recent, but significant, stream of Kabir scholarship has further suggested that Kabir's Dalit (oppressed) caste status is central to understanding his poetry (Dharmvir 1997; Wakankar 2010).<sup>12</sup> Regardless of his birth status, Kabir is commonly included among a pantheon of Hindu poet-saints. Kabir's terminology and metaphors overlap with much contemporary vernacular Hindu poetry; Sufi influence is present, but to a far lesser degree.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> While the alleged correspondences between poet-saints seem to be primarily apocryphal, there is textual evidence that many poet-saints were aware of each other and even occasionally referred to one another in their poetry (Hawley 1995a, 164).

<sup>12</sup> Dalit is a self-chosen term adopted by many members of historically oppressed castes, particularly those considered untouchable. The term was popularized by Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956), the author of India's constitution and the single most influential figure in the movement against caste discrimination in India. Wakankar (2010: 5) suggests that Kabir's community were recent converts to Islam, which resulted in a de facto Dalit status.

<sup>13</sup> Wakankar (2010) suggests the limited influence of Islamic metaphor and terminology in Kabir's poetry owes to the relative newness of Islam within Kabir's region and family. He explains that recent converts still existed primarily within a spiritual milieu of Hindu metaphor and terminology.

Kabir poetry often uses names for God drawn from the Vaishnava devotional tradition, including Govind, Murari, Hari, and most commonly, Ram.<sup>14</sup> Yet Kabir clarifies that he is not referring to the popularly worshipped *avatars* described by these names, but using them as general terms for Divinity, while simultaneously ridiculing the ritualistic practices of Brahmanical Vaishnavism. Kabir is also replete with mystical somatic metaphors drawn from the esoteric *yoga-tantra* tradition that describe the flow of *kuṇḍalinī* energy through the *chakra* centers. Such metaphors seem to be the influence of the Nath Yogi tradition, yet Kabir is equally critical of the yogis and of the goddess Shakti who is usually honored in yogic practices (Hawley 2005: 269-270). It is no wonder that this theologically and communally liminal figure – who simultaneously synthesizes and denounces so many spiritual traditions – sits at the crossroads of many discourses on religion in India today.

The most common legends about Kabir all reveal a desire to clarify Kabir's position vis-a-vis other major religious traditions, notably Islam and Vaishnava Hinduism (Hawley 2005; Lorenzen 1991; Thukral 1995).<sup>15</sup> These include the legends of Kabir's antagonism to the Sultan Sikandar Lodi, his alleged discipleship under Brahmin Vaishnava guru Ramananda, his birth into a Hindu Brahmin family before being discovered by Muslim foster parents, and even the story of his funeral, in which Hindus and Muslim quarrel over how to execute his last rites.<sup>16</sup> The details and outcomes of these stories change according to the narrators' sectarian affiliations, but

---

<sup>14</sup> These names all apply to Rama and Krishna, the two most-worshipped *avatārs* of Vishnu.

<sup>15</sup> Many of these are recounted in the *Bhaktamālā* (Garland of Devotion) written in 1585 by Nabhadās, and the *Kabir Paracai*, also written in the late sixteenth century, attributed to Kabir's disciple Anantadas (Lorenzen 1991, 2005). Similar to the Buddha legend of Gautama Siddhartha established by Aśhvagoṣa's *Buddhacharita*, these legends are generally accepted uncritically by most followers.

<sup>16</sup> The full details of these legends will not be described here. These legends, and others, are described and analyzed in detail in many scholarly works including Dwivedi 1993; Lorenzen 1991; Vaudeville 1974; and Wescott 1907.

all are invested in legitimizing Kabir based on his influence or synthesis of religious traditions, or legitimizing other traditions through associations with Kabir.

I will not engage deeply with hagiographies of Kabir and the Saints within this dissertation, but I discuss them briefly here because they are essential in shaping shared knowledge and beliefs about these figures held by devotees and laypersons. They constitute the shared national imaginations of poet-saints. Performers and listeners rely on this shared knowledge to determine the values and ideas a bhajan by any poet-saint might represent. Merely hearing the name of Kabir in a concert will recall for many listeners the story of Hindus and Muslims quarrelling over which community he belonged to. Poet-saints' names and images become indexes for beliefs and ideas, and these indexes are continuously invoked in any performance context.

Perhaps the most prevalent characterization of Kabir through his hagiographies has been the syncretic free spirit who straddles conventional boundaries between Hinduism and Islam (Hedayetullah [1997] 2009). There are a handful of other North Indian saints who share similar associations, most prominently Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE) and Bulleh Shah (1680-1757 CE). This association is so strong that singing poetry by any of these saints is implicitly perceived as a gesture in favor of religious harmony. It is no coincidence that the poetry of Khusrau and Bulleh Shah is often performed on the same stage, and even by the same artists, as that of Kabir. These figures are central in a well-established historical narrative of the Hindu *bhakti* and Muslim Sufi traditions that describe perceive these traditions as intrinsically united by their celebration of divine love (Hussain 2007). The issues surrounding contemporary Kabir performance discussed in this dissertation may easily be extended to address the performance of Khusrau or Bulleh Shah, but this is beyond the scope of the current project.

## “Authentic” Songs

Although this dissertation is concerned primarily with performed, rather than literary, Sant traditions, the importance of the literary traditions cannot be ignored. The widespread prestige of and love for the Kabir literary corpus is a major reason that performers from relatively unknown traditions bearing Kabir’s name have been able to rise to national prominence. Much scholarship of the poet-saints has been dedicated to ascertaining the “authenticity” of the poems and songs that bear their names (Callewaert 2000; Dharmvir 1997; Hawley 2005; Hess 1987; Mishra 1987; Tiwari 1961; Vaudeville 1970). How many of these songs, if any, were actually written by the historical figures to whom they are attributed? In the case of Kabir, the abundance of literary material creates a major difficulty. Poems attributed to Kabir have been found in many collections spanning many regions of North India over several centuries after his own lifetime. The largest of these are three anthologies of poetry from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hess 1987). The earliest of these is the *Ādī Granth* or *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, a scripture compiled by the Sikh Guru Arjan in Punjab in 1604 that is the central liturgical scripture of the Sikh faith (112). The second, dating to the late seventeenth century, is the *Panchvānī* (Five Voices). This is an anthology of poems by five Sants, compiled by followers of the Dadu Panth in Rajasthan (112). The third is the *Bījak*, compiled by the Kabir Panth in the Uttar Pradesh or Bihar region (113). Although this is geographically the closest to Kabir’s home of Varanasi, it is more recent than the other anthologies; the earliest verifiable edition of the *Bījak* is from 1804 (Hess 2015, 121-122).<sup>17</sup> In recent scholarship, John Stratton Hawley discovered 15 poems of Kabir in a collection compiled in Fatehpur in 1582, less than a century after Kabir’s death in 1518 (Hawley 2005, 280). This is the earliest written record of Kabir poetry

---

<sup>17</sup> Hawley suggests the comparatively late date of the written *Bījak* might be explained by the low social status (and therefore, low literacy) of its custodians, who were primarily from lower castes (Hawley 2005, 269-270).

discovered so far, although the collection primarily comprises works by Surdas and other Vaishnava poets. Hawley notes, however, that the very first poem in the collection is a Kabir poem, suggesting that Kabir's preeminence among poet-saints had been established by the sixteenth century (281).

There are three poetic forms used most commonly in Sant poetry. The shortest form is the *dohā* (plural *dohe*), a poetic couplet consisting of two rhyming lines of 24 morae with a caesura after the 13<sup>th</sup> mora of each (Schomer 1987b, 63). The importance of *dohe* extends well beyond the Sant traditions; they were the dominant form of poetry in the literature of the medieval North India, particularly in the vernacular languages called Apabrahṃśha. Kabir's *dohe* are more widely known than any of his other poetry, likely due to their aphoristic simplicity and universality. The second poetic form is *ramaini*, a set of rhyming stanzas in a fixed meter called *chaupai*, ending with a *dohā*.<sup>18</sup> The third form, called *pad* or *śhabd* (word), is the most relevant for this study, because it is intended to be sung (Hess 1987, 115). Accordingly, *pad*-s have the least rigid structure, and are typically arranged into strophic format when sung.

The *Bījak*, *Panchvāṇī*, *Ādī Granth* and other collections contain hundreds of *ramainī*-s and *pad*-s and thousands of *dohe* attributed to Kabir; far more than scholars can credit to a single author. The written collections demonstrate considerable variability, not only in contents, but also in theological emphasis. The Rajasthani and Punjabi collections, for example, are far more devotional and emotionally vulnerable than the esoteric and confrontational *Bījak*, likely reflecting the former collections' use as liturgical texts and the influence of Krishna *bhakti* traditions (Hess 1987). Yet certain ideas, themes, and metaphors are common to all Kabir collections: conception of formless divinity, direct (even brash) speech addressed to the

---

<sup>18</sup> *Chaupai* refers to a verse containing two lines of 16 morae each. As in *dohā* meter, each line is divided into two feet. *Chaupai* verse is used commonly in North Indian vernacular poetry, most notably in the *Ramacharitmānas* of Tulsidas.

common man, a preoccupation with death and impermanence, and references to yogic concepts and practices (Hess 1987; Hawley 2005). Kabir begins to resemble not an author so much as an idea, a *zeitgeist*, an enduring poetic persona that is evoked to disseminate certain forms of spiritual knowledge. This is articulated best by the Kabir singer Prahlad Tipanya in a documentary called *Had Anhad* (Bounded and Boundless). During a concert, Tipanya explains to his listeners, “Kabir is not any person’s name. Kabir is only a *stream*. Kabir is only an *illumination*. Kabir is only a *signal* and a *message*” (Virmani 2008b).<sup>19</sup>

To further frustrate the efforts of scholars, written collections are only limited snapshots of a rich and dynamic oral tradition. They are vessels filled from this “stream” of Kabir at specific times and places. Kabir himself claims to never have written anything down:

I don’t touch ink or paper,  
this hand never grasped a pen.  
The greatness of ages  
Kabir tells with his mouth alone.

- Kabir, *Bijak śhabda* 187 (Hess and Singh 2002, 3)

A common characteristic of South Asian oral tradition is the inclusion of the putative author’s name within the poem itself. In *sākhī* couplets, this is often omitted due to the limited space available in the format, but in longer poems it is included almost as a rule. In *pad*-s, the author’s name always occurs in the last verse, formally called the *bhāṇita* (uttered), but more commonly referred to as the *chhāp* (signature). The *chhāp* may simply contain the poet’s name, or may include a characteristic phrase. Kabir’s, “*Kahat Kabir suno bhāi sādho*” (Kabir says, “Listen well, friends!”) is the most well-known of all the poet saints’ *chhāp*-s. It is also the most confrontational; the imperative “*sunō!*” (listen!) commands the listeners’ attention.

---

<sup>19</sup> “*Kabir koi vyakti kā nām nahin hai. Kabir keval ek dhārā hai. Kabir keval ek prabhā hai. Kabir keval ek saṅket aur sandeś hai*” (Virmani 2008b).

While *chhāp* lines may have a powerful rhetorical effect, they are far from reliable sources for determining authorship. One poet's *chhāp* may easily be substituted for another's, either through imperfect transmission or through a singer's deliberate choice. Many sects will sing the same *pad* with identical lyrics but with different *chhāp* verse, each attributing the poem's authorship to their own patron saint. Linda Hess's analysis of the textual anthologies attests to this pattern (Hess 1987). She observes that the *chhāp* stanza is often a non-sequitur within a poem, suggesting a later insertion or substitution. I observed a few instances of a singer affixing Kabir's *chhāp* to contemporary poem published by living authors, effectively expanding the Sant repertoire for generations to come. The protean nature of this oral tradition is certainly frustrating to scholars determined to ascertain the "authentic" corpus, but it is also one of the tradition's greatest strength. The repertoire grows and changes with the generations to ensure it is always relevant to contemporary social needs.

Many singers are aware of the ambiguous provenance of their repertoire, but are not overly concerned about it. Most of the singers I interviewed during my fieldwork determined the authenticity of poetry using their own subjective criteria: a poem is "authentic" if its message resonates with one's understanding of the *Sant-vānī*. Whether or not it appears in a historical manuscript is irrelevant. Unsurprisingly, this was the most common attitude in Malwa, where almost none of the local Kabir repertoire is attested in any medieval poetry collection. This dissertation is similarly indifferent to historical authorship. It is concerned with the relevance of Sant bhajans in the lives of people today, based on participants' beliefs rather than historical provenance. Therefore, when I use phrases like "Kabir bhajan," "Dharamdas bhajan," etc., I ask the reader to accept them as shorthand for the clumsier, but more accurate, "bhajan whose lyrics are attributed to Kabir." All verses cited throughout the dissertation, unless an origin is otherwise specified, are from the oral tradition of Malwa.

## *Issues and Discourses*

This dissertation is centrally concerned with Sant music performance as a tool used by people or groups in the construction of their selves and identities. Self and identity are anything but concrete concepts; their usage varies dramatically by discipline and author interpretation. I will attempt to clarify my own idiosyncratic use of the terms and to apply them consistently within this work.

The term “self” has a distinct hue in South Asia. The Sanskrit word for self (*ātma*) is inseparable from its divine connotations, and is often translated as “soul.” Simultaneously, the conception of personal self (*ahamkāra*), usually translated as “ego,” is the central obstacle to spiritual enlightenment. Misidentification with the ego-self prevents realization of the Supreme Self. Ashish Nandy, trained as a clinical psychologist, has provided important insight into the Indian self in the twentieth century from a psychoanalytical perspective. His work emphasizes the processes by which this self has been fractured and reconstituted in response to major disruptions including colonialism, urban migration, and religious conflict (Nandy 1983, 2001; Nandy et al. 1995). Ravindra Khare (1984) centralizes selfhood or “individuation” in his analysis of socially marginalized lower-caste individuals. In this usage, self-hood refers to the subject’s moral and spiritual autonomy, and the aspiration to assert oneself as an individual rather than a member of a collective. I intend to incorporate all of these meanings in my use of the term, referring to a subject’s spiritual, psychological/emotional, and social self-perceptions and self-understandings.<sup>20</sup> This multi-layered definition may seem hopelessly entangled, but it reflects my ethnographic experience. From my observations, people in South Asia musical performances simultaneously construct their emotional, social, and spiritual selves.

---

<sup>20</sup> I am in reputable intellectual company: Mohandas Gandhi deliberately entwines the spiritual and political meanings of self in his treatise on Indian *swarāj* or self-rule (Gandhi [1909] 1938).



“Identity” has a far more diverse and contested use in the social sciences.<sup>21</sup> I will use the term to refer to a person or group’s perceptions of their *relationship to society*. In my use, self refers to internal perceptions, while identity is external. In most cases I will specify social identity, religious identity, cultural identity, etc., to clarify whether I am referring to a subject’s place in society vis-à-vis occupation and social networks, sectarian or religious affiliation, or participation in cultural practices or performances.

This dissertation will engage in many discourses about the construction of self and identity in relation to facets of Indian society that are experiencing dramatic transformation during the nation’s emergence into global modernity. Debates about the nature of these transformations, and countless viewpoints about how they should be mediated, can be heard on every Indian news channel. I am therefore intrigued to explore how nirgun bhajans are performed as commentary on these distinctly modern developments.

### **Caste and Community<sup>22</sup>**

Modernity has enabled the reorganization of formerly entrenched group identities. In rural India particularly, lower castes see this as a major opportunity to escape oppressive social paradigms. By redefining themselves through the new values systems or social identities introduced through global modernity, they aspire for social mobility or for previously denied selfhood. But this transition is incomplete; rural Indian social life is now framed within the

---

<sup>21</sup> I contemplated following the advice of Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) and dispensing with the term “identity” entirely, but it proved too useful. Instead, I have chosen to use the term and restrict its parameters.

<sup>22</sup> The English word “caste” elides the two concepts of *varna* (literally “division” or “color”) and *jāti*. *Varṇa* is a theoretical construct described in Sanskrit texts (most notably the *Manusmṛiti* or *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*) that divides society into four categories. The *varṇa* was prescriptive; at no point did it comprehensively describe South Asian social structure (Jaffrelot 2003; Olivelle 2005). The operative category of social division in India is *jāti*, a vernacular category originally based on occupation that became codified into its present form under the British colonial administration (Appadurai 1999; Bayly 1999; Jaffrelot 2003). In common usage, *samāj* (“community” or “society”) is typically used as a euphemism for *jāti*. In this dissertation, I use “caste” to refer to *jāti* unless otherwise specified.

often-contradictory paradigms of casteism and democracy. Sant bhajans, as a cultural tradition of lower-castes, have become not only a channel for critique of oppressive social structures but also a primary means for performers to forge new social identities and pursue new economic aspirations.

Urban India is seeing similarly dramatic realignments in group identity. Communalism is the Indian term for social identity based on religious affiliation and the hostility that arises (primarily between Hindus and Muslims) as a result. Communalism and its critiques underlie many of the largest sociopolitical debates in India today. As these discourses increasingly devolve into blind factionalism and mob violence, it seems communal tensions are causing society to crack at the seams.<sup>23</sup> Disillusioned Indians increasingly seek to develop group identities that are not based on traditional categories of caste, sect, or ethnicity but rather on shared interest and ideology. A key feature of modernity, in Arjun Appadurai's model, is the transformation of imagination into a "collective, social fact" (Appadurai 1996, 5). This encourages the formation of new spiritual communities:

Collective experiences of the mass media, especially film and video, can create sodalities of worship and charisma.... These mass-mediated sodalities have the additional complexity that, in them, diverse local experience of taste, pleasure, and politics can crisscross with one another, thus creating the possibility of convergences in translocal social action that would otherwise be hard to imagine. (Appadurai 1996, 5)

The formation of a Kabir Community across multiple regions of India resonates strongly with Appadurai's observations. One of the most intriguing (and unprecedented) aspects of this community is its constituency of urban and rural Indians across many caste, ethnic, and social

---

<sup>23</sup> The destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 has been seen by many as the moment when communalism reached a boiling point (Lal 1994; Nandy et al. 1995; Virmani 2008b). Many Indians were shaken by this catastrophe, and by subsequent bombings, religious riots, and pogroms in Maharashtra and Gujarat, and began to reevaluate their religious identities.

backgrounds. Such sodalities will likely become increasingly common, and possibly even definitive of India's spiritual culture in the coming generations.

### **National Culture, Unity, and Pluralism**

The project of nation-state is invested in defining national culture, often through reductive and homogenizing narratives (Anderson [1983] 1981). India has been no exception as its emergence from colonial rule to modern nation-state was characterized by the formation of grand narratives of a nation whose origins were projected into the ancient Hindu past (Chatterjee 1986; Nehru [1946] 1994). The dominant architects of these national narratives were from the new urban middle class, educated under a British system (Chatterjee 1986; Joshi 2001).<sup>24, 25</sup> Their perceptions of Indian history and cultural were often based, ironically, on colonial forms of knowledge and Orientalist perceptions of Hinduism.<sup>26</sup> Thinkers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay reconfigured Hinduism into a political identity that provided the foundations for twentieth-century chauvinistic Hindu nationalism (Chatterjee 1986). Over the last two decades, right-wing Hindu nationalism has seen a great increase in political presence (Panikkar 1999).<sup>27</sup> Unsurprisingly, the conceptions of Hinduism that has come to dominate the social and political mainstream ignore the traditions and ideologies of non-caste Hindus and heterodox traditions.

---

<sup>24</sup> “[H]itherto politically insignificant men from 'service communities' were able to emerge as the new arbiters of appropriate social conduct and establish new modes of political activity that empowered them at the expense of the traditional elites of the city, less powerful social groups, and ultimately also the British rulers” (Joshi 2001, 2).

<sup>25</sup> Shahid Amin (1988) provides an excellent analysis of the disjuncture between rural and urban narratives during India's struggle for Independence, as does Nehru's patronizing depiction of the peasantry in *Discovery of India* ([1946] 1994).

<sup>26</sup> The effect of these narratives in shaping the contemporary the canon of and participation in art and classical music has been discussed by many scholars including Bakhle (2002), Lelyveld (1994), and K. Singh (2003).

<sup>27</sup> Narendra Modi's rise to power in 2014 marked, for many, the ascendancy of chauvinistic religious nationalism as a dominant political ideology.

Vinay Lal argues that these tensions, and broader fissures in the fabric of Indian society, result from the unnatural attempt to force a diverse and pluralistic civilization into the limited rubric of a nation-state (Lal 2003). Lal is not alone in this view; many believe that ideological, cultural, and theological plurality are hallmarks of Indian civilization (Alam 1999; Bigelow 2004; Chand 1963; Kabir 1946; Lal 2006; Mohamed 2007; Sen 2005; Vivekananda 1893).

Now, Indian society is seeing new surges in pluralism both in reaction against cultural chauvinism and as a product of increased social contact across groups and regions. Many Indians have been disillusioned by the violent results of reductionist narratives of religion and culture. Additionally, as in many modern nation-states, the dominance of globalized mass media culture (imported primarily from the United States) has encouraged many cosmopolitans to seek their own “roots,” or to rediscover indigenous forms of knowledge. The present-day custodians of this cultural knowledge are often from historically marginalized communities.<sup>28</sup> The fact of their historical oppression becomes an extra layer of “authenticity.” India has seen a boom in cultural consumption of all forms; urban Indians are interested in “folk” arts, clothing, and music. Many state governments have begun to respond by sponsoring performance troupes to represent their regional traditions on the national stage (Ayyagari 2009). Unique regional identities are transformed into cultural capital.<sup>29</sup> Within the Kabir Community, urban intellectuals look to rural performers as tradition-bearers and even spiritual mentors. Following Lal’s theory, this championing of voices that are perceived as traditionally Indian but have been excluded from grand narratives of Indian culture may be seen as advocacy for Indian civilization

---

<sup>28</sup> Countless examples of this phenomenon in other societies may be found in ethnomusicology and folklore studies. A few examples include Baily (1994), Boyes (1993), Kapchan (2007), Krakauer (2015), Markoff (2001), Rees (2000), and Rodnitzky (1976).

<sup>29</sup> Helen Rees (2000) observes a similar phenomenon with performers from the Naxi ethnic minority in China.

against the Indian nation-state. These issues of defining Indian national culture amidst tensions over cultural unity and pluralism underlie all the case studies examined within the chapters of this dissertation.

### ***Research Design and Methods***

The fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted over 2014-2015 with two interconnected networks. The first network comprises nirgun bhajan singers of the Malwa region. This network has taken form over the last four decades as Kabir bhajans have surged in popularity within the region. Most singers credit this revival<sup>30</sup> in large part to the efforts and popularity of the singer Prahlad Singh Tipanya. The second network comprises urban Indians with an affinity Kabir bhajans who have become connected with Tipanya and other Malvi singers. This new class of bourgeois and socially progressive literati often look to “folk” traditions for cultural and spiritual inspiration and guidance. Many even travel to Malwa to experience Kabir bhajans in their “authentic” rural context. My urban fieldwork was primarily conducted with an informal community called the Mumbai Kabir family who have organized the annual Mumbai Kabir festival since 2011. This is one of many non-sectarian spiritual communities that have emerged in post-liberalization India, particularly over the last decade. Other connected networks include the Stone Soup Adda group in Mumbai, the Urban Ashram in Pune, and the Moved by Love group, which comprises members from throughout India and other parts of the world. Such communities’ members are predominantly well-educated and socially liberal. They may be equally influenced by Eckhart Tolle, Rumi, or Paulo Coelho as by the *Upanishads* or the *Bhagavad Gita*. They often participate in transnational dialogues of belief, spirituality, and religion through the internet, primarily through social media.

---

<sup>30</sup> I rely on Georgina Boyes’s definition of revival, which emphasizes that traditional forms of music are rediscovered and reconfigured with the *intent to affect contemporary cultural change* (Boyes 1993, 4).

These urban communities' interest in Malvi Kabir bhajans was sparked through an initiative called The Kabir Project. A team from Bangalore's Srishti School of Art, Design, and Technology, headed by filmmaker Shabnam Virmani, produced four documentaries and ten music CDs featuring Kabir bhajan singers from different regions of India. These were screened at festivals and released for online purchase in 2009, producing a sudden surge of urban interest in regional Kabir traditions, and particularly in Prahlad Tipanya. Simultaneously, Stanford religious studies professor Linda Hess had been studying the Kabir tradition in Malwa since 2000. Hess is among the preeminent scholars of Kabir, whose previous works include a translation of the major Kabir anthology *The Bijak*, and of the Malvi Kabir and Sant songs popularized by classical singer Kumar Gandharva (Hess 2009; Hess and Singh 2002). Hess's work on the Kabir singers of Malwa was recently published in the volume *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India* (2015). My own work may be seen as a follow-up to Hess and Virmani's that represents my own perspective as an ethnomusicologist and performer. Hess and Virmani have fortunately addressed many issues that emerged during my research (often far more poignantly or poetically than I could) but were primarily concerned with the poetic tradition of Kabir. My work is concerned with musical performance, and the dialogues and communities that are articulated through it.

The seeds of this project were planted in 2001 when, at age 13, I heard my first Kabir bhajan, "Jhīnī Jhīnī Bīnī Chadarīyā." Although of Indian heritage, I was born and raised in the United States with limited fluency of Hindi. Even the little I understood was captivating, however; Kabir's unique metaphors and message resonated in my mind. Years later, as I began my PhD work in ethnomusicology, I contemplated a dissertation project addressing the contemporary relevance of vernacular poet-saints bhajans. Kabir was an obvious choice, as a single poet-saint whose songs are performed in diverse genres and styles. I quickly discovered

that the staggering popularity and variety of Kabir songs necessitated a further narrowing of the project's scope; I needed to identify a small number of communities as case studies.

I began to meet these communities in August 2012, as I was preparing to return to the US after a summer spent studying classical tabla in Pune. The day before my flight, a few friends invited me to a concert in South Mumbai that was described as a “Kabir bhajan *satsang*” (devotional gathering) featuring a “Sufi singer from Rajasthan.” The “Sufi singer” was Mukhtiyar Ali, a hereditary performer from the Mirasi community.<sup>31</sup> The venue, which I had considerable difficulty finding by taxi, was an upmarket furniture showroom called The Great Eastern Home, in Byculla. I thoroughly enjoyed Mukhtiyar Ali's performance; his voice was piercing and virtuosic, and I even recognized a handful of songs (including “Jhīnī Jhīnī Bīnī Chadarīyā”). But I was more intrigued by the diverse makeup of the audience; they did not fit my expectations of the crowd I would find at “bhajan *satsang*.” There were the middle-aged and elderly attendees I expected at a religious event, but the majority of the audience were younger. There were bohemians – artists, writers, and musicians – as well as accountants and software engineers. This was my first encounter with the Mumbai Kabir family. In the coming months, I voraciously watched Virmani's documentaries and in January 2014, I attended the fourth annual Mumbai Kabir festival and made contacts with volunteers, organizers and performers. Most importantly, I met Prahlad Tipanya and discussed my dissertation plans with him. Tipanya was excited by my research plans, and warmly invited me to stay in his village of Lunyakhedi as long as necessary to complete my research. Confident in the feasibility of the project, I returned home to complete and defend my dissertation prospectus.

---

<sup>31</sup> Like many traditional Muslim performers of devotional music, Mukhtiyar Ali has recently begun describing himself as a Sufi singer. The popularity of this label and its increasing use as a marketing term by performers from diverse genres are discussed by Peter Manuel (2008).

I arrived in Lunyakhedi for the first time in August 2015. The Mumbai Kabir family has organized a yearly workshop in Lunyakhedi since 2012, in which 20-25 urban Indians spend five days in the village, learning Kabir bhajans from Tipanya and other singers and discussing the spiritual dimensions of the poetry. I participated in the workshop, and remained in Lunyakhedi village after as a long-term guest in Prahlad Tipanya's Kabir Ashram. This became a home base from which I could travel to meet other performers at concerts or in their homes throughout Malwa. My father's family is from Indore, the largest metropolitan center in Madhya Pradesh, only two hours away from Lunyakhedi by road. Therefore, my aunt and uncle's houses in Indore also acted as bases between field excursions. In total, I was able to record 38 singers or ensembles from Malwa. I interviewed 26 singers or singer-duos; 23 of these interviews included the full ensembles, and the remainder were only with the lead singers. For my research with urban musicians and communities, I made several trips to Mumbai, Pune, and Bangalore. There, I interviewed and recorded musicians, organizers, and other attendees at concerts and informal spiritual gatherings.

### **Musical Ethnography**

My research methods included 1) participant-observation with musicians as a student, performer, collaborator, and listener; 2) direct interviews with performers, organizers, and audience members; and 3) audio and video recording for analysis and archival preservation. These methods are conventional within the discipline of ethnomusicology, although my fieldwork differed from most scholars' in the extent to which I performed and collaborated musically with many of my research interlocutors. My background in Hindustani (North Indian classical) tabla performance allowed me to interact with musicians as a fellow performer, rather than only as an uninitiated listener. Additionally, I have been playing South Asian devotional music since childhood, and am comfortable playing many instruments used in regional



devotional traditions. Within many of the genres and communities I was researching, the atmosphere is participatory; it is expected that those who are able to sing or play instruments will do so. I frequently accompanied other singers on harmonium, *bāñsurī* (bamboo flute), guitar, tambura, or percussion, and was increasingly asked to lead bhajans myself. I also performed on stage with many of my research interlocutors; I provided accompaniment for many artists at the Mumbai Kabir Festival and Malwa Kabir Yatra (described in later chapters), and become a regular member of Prahlad Tipanya's group, traveling and performing with them in events throughout the country.

Performance and collaboration are invaluable as research tools. They provide insight into decisions and thought processes that musicians rarely voice in direct interviews. Which songs should be presented for a specific audience? How should we dress for a particular venue? Which explanation of this poetic verse resonates with – or challenges – the listeners' preconceived spiritual ideas? As a member of the band, a researcher may receive considerable insight into how performers feel and behave beyond the public personae they present in formal interviews. Additionally, such interaction fosters a deep relationship of cooperation and trust between the researcher and interlocutors. Topics that are sensitive or off-limits to a "scholar" may be comfortable subjects of discussion for a fellow performer. Sitting in trains or hotel rooms between concerts, musicians were eager to speak candidly about issues including monetary compensation, difficulty with concert organizers, or tailoring their performances to meet the expectations of a specific audience.

There are, of course, shortcomings to performance-centered research. There are practical limitations to recording audio and video while performing. Whenever possible, I would set up a stationary camera and audio recorder to run autonomously, although this was usually only an option in small venues when I could easily keep watch on the equipment and ensure my tripod

was not toppled by a packed audience. On many occasions, friends volunteered to handle the recording equipment; I trained a number of them in operating the equipment so that I could interact candidly with research interlocutors. More importantly, I must admit that while I am on stage, I do not have the same attention available for social observation that I would as a detached spectator. As part of an ensemble, my mind is primarily focused on the performance; the quality and emotional content of the music are, for a time, higher priorities than data collection. This does not invalidate the efficacy of performance-based research. Rather, it suggests that a researcher's position at an event fundamentally alters (even shapes) the information available. My solution was to use both modes of research, rather than simply relying on one. At many events, I was on stage, as invested in the performance as any other member of the ensemble. At others, I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, remaining in the back of the performance venue with my camera and notebook. The result, I hope, is ethnography that incorporates both experiential and critical perspectives.

### ***Organization of the Dissertation***

This dissertation is divided into two sections. The first section, *The Region*, is concerned with the *Sant-vāṇī* or nirgun bhajan tradition in the region of Malwa. Chapter 2 introduces Malwa and describes the place of nirgun bhajans in Malvi society, emphasizing their recent rise to prominence as a primary means of constructing selfhood among Malwa's lower castes. Chapter 3 analyzes the musical structure of Malvi nirgun bhajans. It discusses the symbolic and musical role of the tambura, and suggests that the way Malvi singers conceptualize bhajans allows for accessibility and mutability of the dynamic poetic tradition. Chapter 4 discusses the new performance contexts emerging for the public performance of Malvi Sant bhajans, and the musical adaptations and changes in performer identity that result from these transformations.

The second section of the dissertation, *The Nation*, is concerned with the increasing role that Malvi singers and other devotional performers have as contributors to India's national culture. Chapter 5 follows regional musicians from Malwa, Kutch, and West Bengal into their new performance contexts in major urban centers and at national-level festivals. The chapter interrogates why India as a nation has an interest in these performers. It further examines the communities being formed through these new performance contexts, and potential issues of exploitation or cultural appropriation that may result. The final chapter addresses professional popular music performers from different generations who have learned from and collaborated with Malvi bhajan singers and other regional devotional musicians. This chapter explores how urban popular Hinduism and post-liberalization youth culture reconfigure Kabir based on their own life experiences, and reconfigure their understandings of themselves based on their engagement with Kabir music. Through these chapters, I intend to demonstrate how a single repertoire of devotional music is finding relevance in a number of different contexts, despite serving different social needs in each of those contexts.

## Chapter 2

“BHAJANS HAVE PURIFIED MY BODY”

NIRGUN BHAJANS IN MALWA SOCIETY

*Helī Mhari,*

*Haldī patangiyāro rang uḍ jāye Kāl kī ghaḍi*

*Mat kar jo kā kāyā ko ahaṁkār, Kāya re thārī chāmkī baṇī*

*Bole Bhavānī Nāth bhajan se mhārī kāyā sudharī*

Dear Friend,

When the hour of Death approaches,

even the golden hue of the moth’s wing shall fly away

Do not have pride in your body, for it is as fragile as glass

Bhavani Nath says – through bhajans, my body has become pure

- Bhavani Nath Bhajan

*September 2, 2014: Lunyakhedi Village, Ujjain District*

Listen: Our sandals squelch into the muddy path as we walk towards the old section of Lunyakhedi village. As we approach the Brahmin section of the village, I am surprised to see this sludgy path give way to a neatly paved concrete road. Staying in Lunyakhedi for the past several days, I believed the entire village was a disorderly collection of around two dozen small houses. Deepesh and Rakesh, the two young schoolteachers walking with me, explained to me that what I had seen was only Kabir Nagar (Kabir Town). This recent settlement was founded by bhajan singer Prahlad Singh Tipanya adjacent to the village where he was born.

“In Lunyakhedi village there are only two communities.” Rakesh explains, using the common euphemism *samāj* (community or society) to refer to caste (*jātī*). “There are Brahmins and us, the Balai.”<sup>32</sup> The Brahmins consider us *nīche jāt* (low-born) and even *achyūta*

---

<sup>32</sup> The origins of the Balai are not precisely known, but they claim origins in Rajasthan. Russell ([1916] 1974, 107) describes an origin story of the Balai entering the Nimar region of Madhya Pradesh along with the army of Raja Man Singh (1793-1843)

(untouchable). For decades Prahlad Ji tried to teach them.<sup>33</sup> 20 years ago, he finally gave up and moved out here, and the rest of the Balai all followed. Now only Brahmins live in old Lunyakhedi, and only Balai live in Kabir Nagar.”

We continue to walk down the winding streets. The midday heat brings silence to the village; most villagers are at home or conversing quietly in doorsteps or village squares. Even this low chatter is silenced as we pass by. Heads turn to stare; everyone recognizes Rakesh and Deepesh as Balai boys from across the village, but no one speaks. From my clothing and the camera around my neck, the villagers recognize me as one of the many visitors who come to learn Kabir songs from Prahlad Ji, although they likely assume I have come from Mumbai or Delhi. The silence is broken by one rambunctious man, possibly inebriated, who sees the *rudrāksha* (sacred *Elaeocarpus* seed) around my neck and begins to holler. “*Are vāh!* Look at this one with his rosary! We must have a big important *sādhū* among us.” I am bewildered, particularly as I have difficulty parsing his provincial Malvi dialect. “*Āpkī gālī kar rahā hai,*” Deepesh explains. “He is making fun of you because you are with us. Just ignore him.”

We proceed through the streets, passing many houses with the Bharatiya Janata Party’s lotus emblem painted on the walls. Many of these bear the campaign slogan for a local politician: “the noose for anyone who slaughters a cow!” (Later, Prahlad ji laughs when I show him photographs. “And what about those who oppress other human beings?” he asks whimsically,

---

from Jodhpur. They are considered weavers by ancestral profession, but this profession was abandoned several generations ago. Now, most are farmers and laborers. Many of them have taken the last name Malviya (of Malwa) and refer to themselves as the members of the Malvi *samāj*, particularly to outsiders, doubtlessly to obscure their caste backgrounds. Malviya is also the last name of a Gaud Brahmin caste in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh whose members have included the Indian Independence leader and Benares Hindu University founder, Madan Mohan Malviya.

<sup>33</sup> “Ji” is a common honorific used in North Indian languages to refer to an elder or respected person. In ethnographic sections, I have tried to retain conversational style and modes of address.

“what penalty should we give them?”)<sup>34</sup> Finally we make our way to the Ram *mandir*, the temple in the center of the village. “Come,” says Rakesh, “let me show you inside.”

Now the stares from the Brahmin villagers have grown more obvious, and more acerbic. Still nobody speaks as Rakesh walks boldly up the temple steps. CLANG! He rings the bell in the entryway. Meanwhile, Deepesh remains outside the temple with his arms crossed. These two young men both wordlessly demonstrate their defiance. Rakesh is showing the whole village that he, an “unclean” Balai, can enter the temple without anyone stopping him.<sup>35</sup> Deepesh is showing that he, a follower of Kabir, has no need for temples or deities whatsoever. As we walk back to Kabir Nagar, I ask them: “How long ago were Balais allowed to enter the temple?”

“Things changed when we were children,” said Rakesh,” before then we could not even use the Brahmin streets. We had to take off our shoes and carry them on our heads if we wanted to pass by Brahmin houses.”

“Was it really that bad?” I ask, aghast. “So what happened in 20 years to make such a big change?” Rakesh’s simple answer amazes me.

“Prahlad ji started singing. And now... we don’t do that anymore.”

---

<sup>34</sup> Prahlad Tipanya, and most of the other Balai, rarely ever enter old Lunyakhedi Village. Tipanya’s younger brother Ashok, a registered medical practitioner, would go occasionally to see patients. With that exception and the incident narrated in this chapter, I did not see anyone go to that side of the village once during the ten months I spent in Malwa.

<sup>35</sup> The right of lower-caste people to enter upper-caste temples has been a central, but controversial issue in the history of the caste equality movement. People like Mohandas Gandhi advocated strongly for the right to temple entry, while many Dalit leaders including Ambedkar felt it was irrelevant to the status of lower caste people; Ambedkar felt Dalits should have no need or desire to enter the temples of religion that, to him, was inseparable from its socially oppression (Ambedkar 1946).



Image 2-1: Brahmin Boys stand protectively at the temple steps as Rakesh Chauhan departs. Lunyakhedi Village, Ujjain District, MP. September 2, 2014.



Image 2-2: Deepesh Malviya and Rakesh Chauhan stand at the transition from the Brahmin section of Lunyakhedi to the Balai-settled Kabir Nagar, where the paved road ends abruptly. Lunyakhedi Village, Ujjain District, MP. September 2, 2014.

## A Bhajan Revolution

Rakesh's response struck me because it claimed a direct link between bhajan singing and social progress for lower castes in Malwa. Nor was Rakesh the only one to make such a claim. I heard similar sentiments reflected from countless singers and audience members: bhajan-singing is not merely for personal spiritual growth, but has deep societal implications. Throughout Malwa, I heard people refer to the *āndolan* (movement) represented by the surging popularity of Kabir bhajans. One elderly audience-member told me "there is a *krānti* (revolution) happening through bhajans right now." Most people credited Prahlad Singh Tipanya with spearheading this revolution.

This chapter will introduce the nirgun bhajan tradition performed by lower-caste people of Malwa. I will focus on the way that these bhajans, and particularly the recent Kabir bhajan revival, figure into broader discourses of religious identity. It is neither within the interest nor within the practical scope of this project to assess singers' claims vis-à-vis the efficacy of bhajan singing in advancing tangible social reform. Such an assessment would require not only great time and resources, but also a means of isolating the specific impact of bhajans from that of countless other reform initiatives and political shifts occurring simultaneously throughout North India.<sup>36</sup> Rather, I will focus on the social importance accorded to nirgun bhajan-singing and its role in shaping participants' self-understanding and social identity. After providing a brief background about the Malwa region, the chapter will discuss Sant traditions in Malwa within the broader context of non-elite or subaltern theology within India. It will then address the specific case of the Kabir revival and its social effects.

---

<sup>36</sup> As in many regions of North India, lower castes have come to represent a voting bloc. Lower-caste blocs may form their own parties, or they may align with existing leftist parties, such as the Indian National Congress (typically called the Congress Party), or more recently, the anti-establishment Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Jaffrelot (1996a, 1996b) attributes the dramatic decline in support for the right-wing BJP between 1990-1993 in Madhya Pradesh state assembly elections to the Congress party's success in courting lower-caste voting blocs.



## Malwa: Background Information

Malwa is a region in central India that lies approximately between the 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> degrees North latitude and the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 80<sup>th</sup> degrees East longitude (Varghese 2009). It is a natural plateau bounded by the Vindhya Mountains to the North and the Betwa, Narmada, and Chambal rivers to the East, South, and West, respectively (Mathur 1964). This region has historically been significant as a “gateway to the South,” a well-situated expanse of fertile plains that connect North India plains to the Deccan Plateau (Mathur 1964:6). Writings as early as the sixth century BCE identify the region as “Avanti” whose capital city of Avantika or Ujjayini corresponds to the modern city of Ujjain. Avanti was an important state in early Buddhist kingdoms, eventually becoming one of the four divisions of the Mauryan Empire (Majumdar and Pusalkar 1953).

The name “Malwa,” derived from the Malava tribe from Southern Punjab and Rajasthan, was likely applied to the region during the sixth century CE (Majumdar and Pusalkar 1953). Raja Bhoja of the Paramara dynasty shifted Malwa’s capital to Dhar, where it remained until Sultanate conquests of the region began in the twelfth century. During the Sultanate period, the region was coveted by the Khilji dynasty. They gained and lost control of Malwa many times as they struggled on multiple fronts with the Paramaras, the Muslim kingdom in Gujarat, and Hindu princedoms in Rajasthan. Hoshang Shah of the Khilji dynasty consolidated the Malwa kingdom in the early fifteenth century and established a new capital in Mandu. In 1531, the Khiljis were defeated by Bahadur Shah of Gujarat, who came to occupy Mandu. The region traded hands during further struggles among the Shahs, Mughals, and Khiljis until 1561, when Akbar’s general Adham Khan drove Bahadur Shah’s descendant Baz Bahadur from Mandu.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Bahadur was able, briefly, to regain his kingdom, but was driven out of Malwa again and for a final time by Abdullah Khan’s army, which Akbar sent in 1562.

For over 150 years, Malwa was a territory of the Mughal Empire, until Maratha raids began in 1699. These raids fragmented the region into small states administered by Rajput landowners. In the following decades, the region came fully under Maratha control, and most of its districts were given to the Holkar dynasty, seated in Indore, and the Scindia dynasty, seated in Gwalior. The Holkar dynasty was defeated during the third Anglo-Maratha War and ceded sovereignty to the British in 1818. The dynasty officially dissipated in 1948, when Malwa became part of the province of Madhya Bharat in independent India.

Malwa includes the modern political districts of Ujjain, Rathlam, Indore, Dewas, Shajapur, Mandsaur, Nimuch, Rajgarh, Sehore, Dhar, and Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh and Jhalawar in Rajasthan (Varghese 2009). This definition is not official, nor is it rigid. In practice, the Malwa region is determined by the use of the Malvi language. Malvi is a member of the Rajasthani language family with significant influence from Gujarati, Hindi, and Marathi.<sup>38</sup> The 1991 Census reported approximately three million Malvi speakers, but more recent estimates are close to ten million (Varghese 2009, 12).<sup>39</sup> Malvi is not a written language; literacy in Madhya Pradesh is synonymous with a Hindi education. Therefore, a person's proficiency in Hindi is usually correlated with his or her level of education. During my research, I generally observed that elders, women, and hard laborers had the least fluency in Hindi. Young men and women with access to educational opportunities were equally fluent in Hindi and Malvi, and increasingly conversant in English as well. The influx of Hindi as a public language does not

---

<sup>38</sup> Malvi might also be considered a Western Hindi dialect (Varghese 2009). Mathur (1964) describes it as a Hindi dialect and claims he was able to speak it comfortably within a few weeks of leaving the region. I required several months before I could understand casual Malvi conversations, and am still not able to speak it. This may be due to my lack of native Hindi fluency, although many of my natively fluent friends have found the language utterly incomprehensible as well. By contrast, many of Gujarati-speaking friends claimed they could easily comprehend regular Malvi conversation the first time they heard it.

<sup>39</sup> As in much of North India, the tremendous boom in population over a few decades is likely correlated with a drastic decrease in child mortality through increased access to healthcare and nutrition.

seem to have decreased the younger generation's proficiency in Malvi (Varghese 2009, 40). On the contrary, Hindi and English proficiency have been important vectors for bringing Malvi culture into national visibility.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Heterodox Religion in Malwa***

The 2011 Census reports 90.59% of Madhya Pradesh residents as Hindu (approximately 66 million people) and 6.57% as Muslim (approximately 4.8 million). Jains, Christians and Sikhs each comprise less than one percent of the population. But these numbers, particularly the 91.1% Hindu majority, obscure more than they reveal about the reality of religious diversity within the state. The census category of "Hindu" comprises a vast number of religious traditions which differ socially and theologically. Ramdas Lamb explains:

If we conceive of Hinduism solely in brahmanical terms and categories, a religion bound in the Vedic tradition and the socioreligious stratification expressed in the *varnashramadharma* system, then we would have to say that the majority of Indians are, in fact, not Hindu. If, on the other hand, we think of Hinduism as the religion of India's masses, with its vastly differing customs, values, beliefs, and practices, then we must reject the brahmanical model as the norm. While the latter's nomenclature and certain of its dimensions function as a veneer to make India's religious and cultural diversity appear unified, this covering obscures many of the divisions and gaps that give popular Hinduism its broadly diverse shape and character. (Lamb 2002, 1)

Upper-caste Hinduism in Madhya Pradesh resembles practices found throughout North India. As in much of the Hindi belt, Rama *bhakti* is very widespread and Tulsidas's *Rāmācharitmānas* (the sixteenth-century Hindi retelling of the *Rāmāyana*) is often quoted, sung, and performed

---

<sup>40</sup> The emergence of Malvi culture into national is far from realized. While certain figures from Malwa, particularly Prahlad Tipanya, have gained significant recognition, many Indians have never heard of the Malwa region outside their history books, and do not know that the Malvi language exists. The promotion (and possibly *invention*) of "Malvi culture" outside Madhya Pradesh will be addressed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

through dance and moralistic storytelling.<sup>41</sup> There is also a particular emphasis on worship on the mother goddess in the form of Durga, who is propitiated through all-night musical ceremonies called *jāgran*.

In addition to these recognizable gods, countless minor deities are worshipped in small temples and shrines.<sup>42</sup> Such shrines are typically rudimentary. The *mūrti* (idol) may be a mere pile of stones, a crudely shaped and painted stone, or even an important tree. Some of these deities are the personification of diseases (e.g., Shītal Mātā, the goddess of smallpox) who are propitiated in hopes that they will stay away. Some deities, such as Bheru and Bhayani, are worshipped throughout Malwa and in nearby regions, but are not part of the Sanskritic Hindu canon.<sup>43</sup> Others are local spirits whose presence is confined to one or a few villages. These deities may represent important historical persons, often from the last few centuries. In some cases these persons were exemplary devotees or were associated with miraculous events, in others they were simply authority figures who were elevated to divinity in the generations following their death. In Lunyakhedi village, one such shrine exists for a figure named Ajay Bal Chakravarty. No

---

<sup>41</sup> See Lamb (2002) and Lutgendorf (1991) for a detailed account of the emergence and transformations of Ram *bhakti* in Central India.

<sup>42</sup> For a more detailed discussion of minor deities in Malwa, see Mathur (1964, 31-32).

<sup>43</sup> In many cases, these deities have become amalgamated into Hinduism at the local level. They are considered manifestations of mainstream Hindu deities, such as Shiva or Devi, following the process Srinivas's describes as Sanskritization (1953; 1966).

one I met knew much about Chakravarty's life, but the consensus seemed to be that he was a warrior who ruled the village in centuries past, and who now continues to protect it.<sup>44</sup>



*Image 2-3: Shrine to Ajay Bal Chakravarty Bhagavan. Main road of Lunyakhedi Village, Ujjain District, MP.  
December 27, 2014.*

Folk heroes elevated to the status of local or regional deities are common occurrence in this region, but have received relatively little academic attention. Rajshree Dhali (2004) recently conducted a major study of four such deities from Rajasthan: Ramdev Pir, Goga, Tejaji, and Pabu. She suggests that the valorization and deification of these figures was the work of Charan and Bhat bard castes (Dhali 2004, 2). They are related to our study as some of them, most prominently Tejaji and Ramdev Pir, entered Malwa and mingled with other heterodox Hindu traditions. Malvi bhajan singers include these among the Sants, although they are not considered Sants in general scholarship (Schomer and McCleod 1987). A few singers I interviewed,

---

<sup>44</sup> An excellent discussion of a similar local deity in Rajasthan, and how the methods of worship for her are becoming increasingly Sanskritized, can be found in Chaudhuri (2009).

particularly in the regions closest to Rajasthan, considered Ramdev Pir their primary saint and specialized in singing his bhajans.<sup>45</sup>

Apart from these deified folk heroes, there are four major Sant traditions in Malwa. These traditions are often organized into sectarian institutions called *panth-s* (paths), but also have followers with no institutional affiliation. The four traditions are the Kabir lineage, the Nath lineage, Sikhism, and Radha Soami Satsang Beas. The Kabir lineage will receive the most attention in this study, but I will describe the other traditions briefly here.

The Nath lineage is based on the teachings of Gorakshanath (eleventh century, also known as Gorakh) and his disciples. Followers are called Nathpanthis or Nath Yogis. The Nath tradition emphasizes intensive practices of yoga intended to stimulate the upward flow of *kuṇḍalinī* energy.<sup>46</sup> Nath Yogis typically reside outside societal conventions, and are associated with the practice of extreme austerities and the use of mind-altering substances, particularly cannabis. This tradition shares a close affiliation with the Kabir tradition in Malwa and other regions of India (Henry 1988). Bhajans by Gorakh and other saints from his lineage, such as Bhavani Nath, are frequently performed by Kabir singers, and Kabir bhajans are often performed by Nath Yogis. A Nath Yogi named Shilnath lived and practiced in the city of Dewas for 20 years during the early twentieth century. Shilnath compiled an anthology of over 500 nirgun poems, an overwhelming majority of which are attributed to Kabir (Hess 2015, 94). The Shilnath Dhuni Mandir, a prominent temple in the city, commemorates the site where he performed austerities. Temple-goers today still chant and sing poetry by Kabir and Nath Yogis. Notably, this temple is

---

<sup>45</sup> Although Ramdev is grouped among the Sants in Malwa, many of the Ramdev bhajans I heard express worship or reverence *to* him, rather than being allegedly composed *by* him.

<sup>46</sup> Thorough accounts of the Nath Yoga philosophy and practices may be found in Banerjee ([1962] 1999) and Djurdjevic (2005).

the site where vocalist Kumar Gandharva is said to have learned the Kabir bhajans he later popularized throughout India in his classical renditions.

Sikhism has developed into a separate religion from Hinduism, but its roots are in the poet-saint tradition (McLeod 1987a). Kabir is one of the most prominent poets featured in the Sikh Scripture, the *Ādī Granth*. He is featured more prominently than any poet apart from the Sikh gurus themselves. A sect called the Nanak Panth also formed in Central India, stylistically similar to the Nath Panth and Kabir Panth, from followers of Nanak's teachings who did not relinquish their Hindu caste identities (Russell [1916] 1969, 278). Nanak is generally included within the pantheon of Sants by those who do not identify as Sikhs or Nanakpanthis. The 1961 Census of India describes the popularity of Nanak bhajans among the Banjara community (a Scheduled Tribe) of a village in the Indore district (Ballal 1965, 51). Kabir singers also sing a handful of bhajans attributed to Nanak. As these bhajans are not present in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, they are likely products of the Malvi oral tradition.

Radha Soami Satsang Beas (RSSB) is the Punjab-based branch of the Radhasoami spiritual movement begun by Shiv Dayal Singh in Agra in the late nineteenth century (Jeurgensmeyer 1987). A unique feature of this movement has been the construction of a formal lineage of Sants that incorporates Kabir and the Sikh gurus (Jeurgensmeyer 1987, 329-330; S. Singh 1982). The concept of *Sant Mat*, a canon or lineage of Sants, was likely crystallized through Shiv Dayal Singh and his followers (Barthwal 1936; Jeurgensmeyer 1987). RSSB has a following throughout India, and is generally a middle-class sect (Jeurgensmeyer 1995).<sup>47</sup> In Malwa, however, it interacts strongly with other Sant traditions and has attracted many lower-caste followers at the regional level. Local RSSB chapters meet weekly, with attendance ranging from

---

<sup>47</sup> Jeurgensmeyer (1995) describes the Radhasoami movement's uneven progress with regards to casteism and other forms of oppression in both the Agra and Beas branches.

the hundreds to the thousands. I had a chance to attend a few of these meetings. Bhajans and poetry by Kabir and Nanak form a significant part of the devotional practice and the spiritual discourses. The *Anurāg Sāgar*, an eighteenth-century text putatively dictated to Dharamdas by Kabir, is important to both the Radhsoami movement and the Dharamdasi branch of the Kabir Panth (Jeurgensmeyer 1987; S. Singh 1982).<sup>48</sup>

Overall, these four Sant traditions operate as distinct social groups, with some shared membership. Relations between them are cordial, and the few disagreements about issues like whether Gorakh or Kabir actually composed a particular poem generally have a tone of friendly rivalry rather than sectarian hostility.



Image 2-4: A home in Malwa displaying images of Kabir alongside Baba Gurinder Singh, the current head of RSSB. A number of other saints' and teachers pictures are displayed, including that of Dharamdas (far left). Dewas, MP. May 21, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> There is much ambiguity about when Dharamdas lived. Traditionally, he is said to have lived in the sixteenth century, which would allow him to have been a direct disciple of Kabir if we accept the traditional 120-year lifespan of Kabir (1398-1518) but not if we accept the dates suggested by Vaudeville (1974) and other modern scholars of 1398-1448. The language of the *Anurāg Sāgar* suggests that it was written no earlier than the eighteenth century (Jeurgensmeyer 1987, 347). The text itself explains that Dharamdas and his wife were Kabir's foster parents, Niru and Nima, who were reborn because they were not ready to receive Kabir's message during his lifetime (S. Singh 1982, 47). Kabir manifested himself before Dharamdas in different forms to narrate the text (S. Singh 1982, vii-ix), and it is accepted as the authentic word of Kabir by members of the Radhasoami and Dharamdasi sects.



## *Nirgun versus Sagun*

As scholars including David Lorenzen and Robert Lamb remind us, these Sant traditions are an important part of popular Hinduism, despite not fitting into the Brahmanical models of Hinduism expressed by Sanskrit texts. They differentiate themselves from Brahmanical Hinduism using the distinction of nirgun versus *sagun*. *Sagun* (literally “that which has qualities or form”) applies to conceptions of divinity in embodied forms, such as personal deities or avatar. *Nirgun* (literally “that which has no qualities”), refers to conceptions of divinity as formless and indescribable. Nirgun divinity is not found in any idol, temple, or text. It is found within the *ghaṭ* (vessel) of one’s own body:

*Kaī hertī phire mhārī helī?*  
*Kyon bhāgtī phire mhārī helī?*  
*Ghaṭ-ghaṭ meñ Rām jī bole ri,*  
*parghaṭ piyāji bole ri*

Where are you rushing off, my dear friend?  
Why do you run to and fro?  
In all bodies, Ram speaks  
Within every body, the Lover speaks

- Kabir Bhajan

*Thārī kāyā nagari meñ, pardesī piyā bole*  
*Piyā kā ḍhūndhat chali dīvānī ban ban ḍhūndhat ḍole*  
*Kāśhī Mathura sab jag ḍhūndhā*  
*Thāre pāv meñ paḍe phaphole*

Within the village of your body, your long-lost Lover speaks  
Searching for the Lover you went mad, you searched forest after forest  
The holy cities of Kashi and Mathura – you searched everywhere  
All you got were blisters on your feet

- Kabir Bhajan

*Sāī merā rahe ghaṭ māhī*

*Bāhar nainā maiñ kyon khole?*

My Lord resides within this very body  
Why open my eyes to the outside?

- Kabir Bhajan

Nirgun Sants further emphasize their separation from Hindu orthodoxy by criticizing the practices of ritual worship as meaningless superstition (*aṇḍaviśvās*). Many bhajans openly mock ritual observances, admonishing that these only serve to generate wealth for priests instead of bringing people closer to God:

*Des-des kā bhopā bulāyā, ghar māy bhaiṭh ghumāyā re*  
*Nāriyal phoḍe nareṭī chaḍhāve, golā khud gaṭkāve re bāñvarī*

*Khīr khaṇḍ kā bhojan banāyā, devataḍā ne chaḍhvāyā re*  
*Unā devat ūpar kuttā re mute, khīr gilori gaṭkāve re bāñvarī*

You call priests from different lands, they wander around your house chanting  
They break a coconut, offer the shell to god, and eat the fruit themselves  
You crazy one!

You make a delicious pudding to offer to God's statue  
A dog pees on that statue while a squirrel eats up the pudding  
You crazy one!

- Kabir Bhajan

*Bahutak dekhā nemī dharmī, prāt kare asnānā*  
*Ātam choḍ pāshāñ hī pūje, tinkā thothā hai gyānā*

*Mālā pahre ṭopī pahre, chhāp tilak anumānā*  
*Sākhī shabade gāvat bhūle, ātam khabar na jānā*

I see so many pious devotees performing ablutions at the crack of dawn  
Forgetting the soul, they worship a stone – they have only the knowledge of parrots

They wear a rosary and cap, and all the other religious ornaments  
But they have forgotten how to sing the Sakhi and Shabd,  
they do not know the message of the Self

- Kabir Bhajan

The belief in omnipresent divinity discovered through introspection rather than ritual is a central theme in many streams of Indian philosophy. The omnipresent *Brahman* of the Upanishads, in particular, bears a striking resemblance to the nirgun divinity described by the Sants (Staal 1987). But the Upanishads are an abstruse Sanskritic tradition whose participation is restricted to the intellectual elite. The Sants speak to the common man, using not only vernacular languages but metaphors drawn from everyday life.<sup>49</sup>

Historically, the distinction between nirgun and sagun has not been clear. Hawley (1995) observes that even distinctly sagun poets like Surdas wrote verses about the presence of inner divinity very similar to those of their nirgun contemporaries:

I traveled great distances to have a glimpse of you, forgetting that you reign everywhere.  
Inaccessible to thoughts, words, and deeds: that was the image I never thought to see.  
Its traits are no traits; its form, no form; its no-name name they call Hari-Ram.

- Surdas *pada* (quoted in Hawley 1995, 162-163)

Hawley observes a similar ambiguity in the compilation of medieval poetry collections (164-175). Some collections contain exclusively Vaishnava bhakti poets, others contain exclusively nirgun poets, but many contain a mix of both. Hawley concludes that the nirgun versus sagun distinction existed in the medieval period, but was fluid and likely not of major concern to the common practicing Hindus of the time (175-176). He suggests that the divisions were

---

<sup>49</sup> Within the nirgun Sant tradition, Krishna Sharma (1987) further distinguishes between the accessible Kabir lineage and its esoteric tantric predecessor, the Nath tradition. "Kabir occupies a unique place in the Nirguna tradition for he took it to the common man and gave it the character of a popular religion" (Sharma 1987, 194).

emphasized over time due to sectarian disputes (177) and credits Ramachandra Shukla with crystalizing the nirgun / sagun binary in literary scholarship (Hawley 2005: 14).

Nirgun Sants often use non-sectarian terms to refer to divinity, addressing it as *sadguru* (True Teacher), *sāhib* / *sāi* (Master), or *piyā* (Lover), but they equally often use common Vaishnava names for God including Govind, Hari, and most importantly Ram. Yet they remind us often that these names are used not to refer to the avatar figures, but to formless divinity. In Rajula Shah's film, *Shabd Nirantar / The Word Within the Word* (2008), a nirgun singer is asked to distinguish between "Kabir's Ram" and "Tulsi's Ram" (referring to the epic *Rāmacharitmānas* by Tulsidas). The singer replies, "*Tulsī kā Rām jo Dasharath kā putra hai, aur Kabīr kā Rām voh antar ātmā hai.*" (Tulsi's Ram is the one who was Dasharatha's son, and Kabir's Ram is the one who is the Inner Soul). Yet he is quick to add that even Tulsidas refers often to the "Ram who is beyond Ram," the "Ram who cannot be described." A popular *dohā* of unknown provenance is sung by Tulsidas-Rama devotees and Kabir devotees alike, distinguishing between the physical Ram and the formless Ram:

*Ek Rām Daśharath kā beṭā, ek Rām ghaṭ ghaṭ meṅ baiṭhā*  
*Ek Rām sab ke pyārā, ek Ram sab se nyārā*

One Ram is Dasharath's son, one Ram resides in every vessel (body)  
One Ram is beloved to everyone, and one Ram is different from all else

### **Nirgun Identity**

Although theological distinctions between nirgun and sagun are ambiguous, social distinctions in rural North India are very clear. In Malwa and many other regions, nirgun identity is explicitly associated with people from lower castes. Specific castes may gravitate towards specific nirgun traditions, as the Balai in Malwa have towards Kabir. Anthropology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggests that such theological shifts often created

new caste identities. For example, the Satnami and Ramnami sects in modern-day Chattisgarh drew their members almost exclusively from the untouchable Chamar caste (Dube 1998; Lamb 2002). After joining the sects, members effectively became members of new castes, although they never shed their original stigma of impurity in the eyes of the upper castes. In Malwa, Adrian Mayer describes a caste called Balai Babaji, comprising Balai who joined the Ramananda or Kabir panths (Mayer 1956, 1970).

The lower-caste membership in nirgun sects appears, at first glance, to be a maneuver for increased social mobility, but this explanation is incomplete. If we accept that social mobility is the only motivation for joining nirgun sects, we would have to deem the effort a failure. The mobility afforded seems, in nearly all cases, to be lateral rather than vertical within the local hierarchy; one may be identified as a Balai Babaji rather than a Balai, but both occupy the same tier of society within a given village (Mathur 1964; Mayer 1956, 1970). Many studies of lower-caste religious traditions have observed the limited potential for tangible social mobility (Dube 1998; Jaffrelot 2003; Lamb 2002; Lorenzen 1987; Zelliott 1981). But there is more to the equation than social or economic mobility. I suggest that concerns of selfhood are central to understanding the benefits lower-caste people in Malwa and other regions derive from subaltern religious traditions.<sup>50</sup>

I will refer to the concept of “individuation” expounded by Ravindra Khare (1984), in his model of “Untouchable ideology.” Khare bases his model on studies of lower castes in Lucknow and the ideas of Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu.<sup>51</sup> Khare’s model contrasts two archetypes of spiritual

---

<sup>50</sup> Scholars who focus too narrowly on issues of mobility in relation to caste would benefit from Appadurai’s (1986) reminder that hierarchy should not be the central principle of analysis of Indian society.

<sup>51</sup> Khare’s ethnography is based on discourses of selfhood specifically among urban Untouchables. In my fieldwork, I observed similar discourses implicit in the theology and ideology of Malwa’s rural lower castes.

excellence in Indian society: the Brahmin and the ascetic. The former represents adherence to societal ideals of behavior, while the latter represents an individual path that defies social mores and orthodox customs. Khare theorizes that lower-caste theologies have championed the ascetic model through non-conformist figures such as Gorakh, Ravidas, and Kabir in extension for their own desire for “moral individuation,” or the freedom to exist as spiritual individuals rather than members of an oppressive group identity.<sup>52</sup> He concludes that the cultivation of selfhood, or individuality, renders the personal spiritual journey of an Untouchable into a potent force for systemic social changes:

[E]mphasizing individuality over collectivity through the principle of asceticism, the Untouchable ideologist wants (a) to call the caste order to a fundamental moral account; (b) to create a tenable moral basis for freedom of thought and action for his own kind; (c) to register his claims for a positive social identification of the Untouchable; (d) to devise ways for the expression, identification, and evaluation of Untouchables' participation in democratic politics and equality; and (e) to renegotiate his institutionalized relationships to the society. Thus, societies seek radical change when they “redo” their conception and identity of the individual. (Khare 1984, 63)

My experiences in Malwa resonate with Khare’s theory. Whereas Malvi people’s caste identities were forced on them at birth, their identities as Kabirpanthis, Gorakpanthis, Radhasoamis, etc., reflect conscious theological and ideological decisions. The benefit may not be a concrete shift in social mobility, but it is something equally important: the autonomous construction of self. Kabir singers in Malwa took pride in their nirgun identity, and would often speak condescendingly of the “superstitions” of their upper-caste counterparts. “Nirgun ruins this whole sagun business,” Prahlad Tipanya explained to me once:

PRAHLAD TIPANYA: The priests want a fancy *pūjā* (ritual) so that people will bring shawls and gifts and money. But would that happen if they allowed a nirgun singer to

---

<sup>52</sup> It is telling that that the lower-caste movement initiated in Tamil Nadu by Periyar E. V. Ramasamy was labeled the Self-Respect Movement. Although this movement was atheistic, it expressed similar concerns of selfhood.

sing Kabir's words for one hour before the program? Their game is finished! No one will want anything to do with their *pūjās*.<sup>53</sup>

On another occasion, he compared sagun and nirgun bhajans, noting the formers' tendency to focus on descriptions of the *lakṣhaṇa*-s (characteristics) of a deity.

TIPANYA: In sagun bhajans you only have a description: look at Krishna, his hair is so lovely, his clothes are so nice, his earrings are beautiful. But nirgun bhajans ask what kind of transformation (*parivartan*) you can achieve from within. The sagun bhajan is saying "look at this car – it has such a nice color, nice wheels and windows," while the nirgun bhajan says, "Get in the car! See where it takes you!"<sup>54</sup>

Kabir singers throughout Malwa make similarly witty criticisms of sagun worship. In Rajula Shah's film about Malvi Kabir singers, *Shabad Nirantar*, one singer explains, "If I tell that boy to get me a glass of water, he will get it for me. But this statue [of god]? Ask it for water all day – you will remain thirsty" (Shah 2007).

These critiques of orthodox Hindu practice express the sense of self-respect that lower-caste Malvi people derive from singing Kabir bhajans, and the pride they have in their religious identity. This is highly significant for an oppressed community whose members (particularly from older generations) grew up constantly being reminded of their alleged inferiority or impurity. I believe this was the transformation Rakesh implied in his statement, "Prahlad ji started singing, and now we do not do that anymore." The subject in this sentence is the Balai, not the Brahmins. Rakesh is not suggesting that the system of caste discrimination has ended, but that the Balai are now refusing to comply with it. This shift in egalitarian social consciousness mirrors broader movements currently occurring throughout North India (Jaffrelot 2003). Government policies and increased educational opportunities have undoubtedly

---

<sup>53</sup> Personal communication at the Kabir Ashram, Lunyakhedi Village, Ujjain District, MP. September 14, 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Personal conversation in Tipanya's car while driving through Malwa. December 25, 2014.

been a major factor in this transformation, but local participants feel that Kabir bhajans have been an essential catalyst.

### **The Kabir Revival in Malwa**

Over the last four decades, Kabir-singing in Malwa has surged in popularity. Malvi people characterize this as a revival of a lost or suppressed tradition, spearheaded by singer Prahlad Singh Tipanya. I will not provide a detailed biography information about Tipanya, since Hess (2015) and Virmani (2008a, 2008c) have done so in their work. Tipanya is undoubtedly the most popular Kabir singer of the region, and his personality and musical style have been tremendously influential on other performers in the genre. Tipanya was born in the village of Lunyakhedi, Ujjain District, in 1954. He is the oldest of four surviving children in his family: three brothers and one sister. There was another boy and three girls who died in childhood due to lack of available medical care. As a child he was sent to live with his grandparents, in whose village caste discrimination was less severe. He was the first in his family to pursue post-graduate education. He completed a BA in history, economics, and sociology in 1980, and an MA in history in 1984 from Vikram University, Ujjain. Tipanya recalls hearing his first Kabir bhajan in his mid-twenties, around 1978. Until then, he had only experienced Kabir in the form of *dohā* poetry; Kabir *dohā*-s are a standard part of the Hindi curriculum throughout India. He began to sing and play tambura, and learned as many bhajans as he could. His reputation grew steadily, until by the 1990s, he was considered the preeminent Kabir singer of the region. In 1991 an educational non-profit group in Bhopal called Eklavya began an initiative called the *Kabir bhajan evam vichār manch* (Platform for Bhajans and Discussion of Kabir), or simply the Kabir Manch.<sup>55</sup> Singers including Tipanya met to perform and discuss Kabir bhajans in a non-

---

<sup>55</sup> A detailed discussion on Eklavya's initiatives related to Kabir can be found in Hess (2015, Chapter 6).



sectarian context. In 1993, Tipanya released his first audio cassette, *Kabir Soi Pīr jo Jāne Pīḍ* (Kabir Says ‘He Who Knows Suffering is a True Sage’). The cassette became massively popular. Tipanya’s son Ajay explained to me, “It sold millions of copies, we could not even understand how many. Every house you entered in Malwa, there would be a copy.” The first song on the album, “*Zara halke gāḍī hānko mere Ram gādīvāle*” (Drive my cart slowly, O God, my cart-driver), remains Tipanya’s most popular bhajan. He usually sings it at the end of a program; audiences often refuse to let him leave until they have heard it.

After staying in Malwa for a few months and repeatedly hearing singers remark on how Tipanya had “revived” a dying tradition, I became increasingly curious about what kind of revival had taken place. What did the Kabir tradition in Malwa look like 50 years ago? 100 years ago? On one hand, a number of the singers I interviewed said they learned Kabir bhajans from their parents, who had learned them from their parents. Furthermore, when Eklavya began its Kabir initiative in 1991, it cited the presence of an active and vibrant Kabir bhajan tradition already existing in the area (Hess 2015, 258-260). However, Tipanya’s account of hearing a Kabir bhajan for the first time at age 24 indicates that Kabir bhajans must not have been as ubiquitous or as openly sung in the region as they are today. To the extent that they were sung, they were not *performed*. Veteran singer Jaimal Chopda told me, “thirty years ago there were only three groups performing. Ours, Tipanya’s, and Bheru Singh Chauhan’s.”<sup>56</sup> Now look how many there are – we do not even know how many.” It is clear that the tradition has seen a substantive transformation over the last four decades, although the exact details have been hard to piece together from inconsistent and subjective oral narratives.

Most Kabir followers in Malwa participate in sects called panths. Most panths I observed in Malwa are under the institutional umbrella of the Dharamdasi Panth, based in the village of

---

<sup>56</sup> Tipanya and Chauhan both verified this statement independently.

Damakheda, near Raipur, Chhattisgarh. This is one of the two main *shākhā*-s (branches) of the institutionalized Kabir tradition. The other is the Kabir Chaura, based in Kabir's own city of Varanasi, with its own network of satellite panths.<sup>57</sup> The Dharamdasi branch has been far more influential in Malwa, likely due to its proximity. *Mahant*-s (priest) from the local Panths pay obeisance to the lead *mahant* in Damakheda, who is part of a direct lineage of teachers that allegedly traces back to Kabir himself, through his student Dharamdas. Many of the bhajans in the Malvi Kabir tradition bear Dharamdas's *chhāp*, "*Kahe Kabir Dharamdas se...*" (Kabir says to Dharamdas...).

It is uncertain how long the Dharamdas Panth, or Kabir in general, has had a massive following within Malwa. The anthropological of Malwa by Mathur (1964) and Mayer (1956, 1970) do not mention Kabir as a significant part of popular religion in the region, except in the case of the Balai Babajis, who are small in number. The 1961 census of India conducted a survey of "Fairs and Festivals," documenting all religious functions and *mela*-s (fairs) held during the entire year (Dubey and Mohril 1965). The report from Madhya Pradesh lists dozens of Hindu festivals, including major annual events such as Ramnavami and Shivaratri, with attendance ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand. However, only two Kabir-related events, both labeled as "Kabirpanthi Mela" are listed in the entire state. One is a three-day festival in the Chhindwara district, and the other is a one-day fair in the Bilaspur district, now part of the state of Chhattisgarh. Both of these are far to the east of the Malwa region, closer to Damakheda. This suggests that Kabir following within Malwa was minimal in 1961. Another possibility is that the

---

<sup>57</sup> As one might imagine, the relations between these two branches are often strained and occasionally openly hostile. These are described in more detail by Hess (2015, Chapter 6) and Lorenzen (2005, Chapter 4). Though the nature of these disagreements varies based on contemporary prevailing ideologies, a strong element of sectarianism seems to have been established from the outset: the *Anurāg Sāgar*, the central text of the Dharamdasi Panth, fiercely condemns the "deluded" followers of other panths and describes the founders of these panths as messengers of Kal Niranjan (Time, Kabir's nemesis) sent to ensnare followers by using Kabir's name (S. Singh 1982).

Kabir followers did not organize any events at a scale that would be registered by the census. Since the census lists many events with as few as 50 estimated attendees, we might assume that events not recorded would be small-scale private gatherings, and not public events or formal panth gatherings. By contrast, the Sants / folk deities Ramdev Pir and Tejaji are strongly represented. The census lists ten festivals of Ramdev Pir and 14 of Tejaji, most of which occurred in the Malwa region. During the ten months I spent in Malwa, I attended several Kabir functions with attendees numbering in the thousands. Several groups would perform, and the programs with their blaring sound systems would last through the entire night. It is clear that Kabir following, at least in public arenas, has expanded tremendously since the 1961 census. However, I believe that when Malvi people talk of the Kabir bhajans revival in their region, they are referring more to qualitative transformations in the way that Kabir bhajans relate to social life. These changes include the use of Kabir bhajans for the mobilization of lower castes as a collective, and the de-institutionalization of bhajan-singing as singers increasingly move away from the Kabir Panth. These changes will be described in the next section.

### *Singing as Social Action*

Bhajans are not merely a means of communicating ideas. The act of singing and listening to bhajans is considered a spiritual practice. Singers describe being “pierced” or “wounded” by bhajans that have the potential to transform them from within, and to carry them to the ultimate spiritual destination:

*Laharī anahad uṭhe ghaṭ bhītar, pahlī rahā chau pehrī*

*Re divanī, lagī bhajan dhun gahrī*

*A re avadhū, lagī shabad dhun gahrī*

Boundless waves arise within this vessel (body), flowing forth in all direction

O mad one, you have been pierced by the bhajan, the deep melody

O mystic sage, you have been struck by the Word, the deep melody

- Kabir Bhajan

*Shabad kī choṭ lagī mere man meṁ  
Bhed gayā tan sāra  
Satguru maharaja mope, Sai ne rang dārā*

My heart is wounded by the Word  
And my whole body is transformed  
The Master, the True Teacher, the dyer, has dyed me in His color

- Kabir Bhajan

*Kahe ho Kabir Dharmidas se, re lobhī,  
sun le re chitth man lāye  
Gāve bhajāve sune sām̐bhaḍe, re lobhī  
Haṁs to satlok jāye*

Kabir says to Dharamdas, “O greedy one,  
listen now with your full mind and consciousness:  
Sing, play, listen, and imbibe,  
And attain the Abode of Truth.”

- Dharamdas Bhajan

*Bole Bhavānī Nāth bhajan se mhārī kāyā sudharī*

Bhavani Nath says, “Through bhajans, my body has become purified.”

- Bhavani Nath Bhajan

The paradisiacal objective of achieving a celestial plane, a *satlok* (Abode of Truth), is not detached from mundane existence in the Kabir tradition. It is grounded in the experience of the body, and the harsh realities of society. Purushottam Agrawal (2009, 2010), Linda Hess (2001, 2015) and Milind Wakankar (2010) are among the contemporary literary scholars who have commented extensively on the unique capacity of Kabir poetry in weaving sublime, transcendental mysticism with a blunt, visceral awareness of worldly experience. Hess (2015, Chapters 5 and 7) and Virmani (2008c) describe the syntheses and tensions between the political

and spiritual interpretations of Kabir in Malwa. I witnessed these on several occasions myself, as it was common for public Kabir programs to include a mix of bhajan-singing and speeches, both by *mahant*-s of the local panths and by local intellectuals and social activists. On one such occasion, during the 2015 Malwa Kabir Yatra (described in Chapter 3), a schoolteacher's discourse about Kabir's message was interrupted when a *mahant* angrily shouted, "Do not simply call him Kabir – say *sāhib* (Master) Kabir!" The mixed response of applause and jeers from the audience revealed their ambivalence toward to the question of Kabir's status as a social voice to be analyzed or a deity to be worshipped. During my interviews with Malvi singers, I asked why they chose to sing Kabir bhajans. Two of the most-repeated words were *badlāv* and *parivartan* (change). The question that followed was exactly what concrete social changes singers hope to effect through Kabir bhajans.<sup>58</sup>

The transformation underlying all discourse of social change in the Malvi Kabir tradition is the abolition of caste discrimination. There has been a growing trend in Kabir literary scholarship and popular following to read Kabir as a secular Dalit revolutionary. This began in full force with Dr. Dharamvir (1997), who was reacting against the overly Brahminized portrayals of Kabir popularized by authors such as Hazariprasad Dwivedi ([1943] 1993). The debate over Kabir's Dalit identity is still active in literary scholarship in the work of Agrawal (2009), Callewaert (2000), Wakankar (2010), and others. B. R. Ambedkar, the most influential Dalit activist of the twentieth century, was the son of a Kabirpanthi (Hess 2015, Virmani 2008c). He counted Kabir among his three gurus, along with Jyotirao Phule (a seminal figure in the Maharashtrian Dalit movement), and the monk who initiated him into Buddhism. Ambedkar

---

<sup>58</sup> The idea of using devotional songs to effect concrete social changes is well established in India (Hood 1982, 356). Scholarly case studies of such traditions in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu can be seen in Schultz (2012) and Sherinian (2014) respectively.

evidently considered using Kabir as a central figure for mobilizing Dalit consciousness, but was concerned that Kabir had become too thoroughly Hindu-ized in popular religion, and therefore chose Buddha instead (2008c).<sup>59</sup> Modern constituents of the Indian Republican Party and other Dalit political movements frequently display banners featuring the faces of their ideological forebears: Ambedkar, Phule, and other historical figures, along with the less historical figure of Kabir.<sup>60</sup>



Image 2-5: Republican Party of India banner in Pune, Maharashtra. Kabir is included in the left-most portrait on the top, implicitly casting him as a Dalit activist alongside a number of historical figures. June 17, 2014.

In Malwa today, the sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory ideologies of activism and reverence share many of the same audiences and performance spaces. Bhajans have been largely responsible for providing this social space for a cohesive, if ideologically diverse, community of lower-caste Malvi people to convene and voice their beliefs. The unforeseen

<sup>59</sup> Anand Patwardhan's 2011 film about Dalit activism in India featured an Ambedkar-ite communist bhajan group who, despite singing in Marathi regional styles, invoked the association between Kabir and Dalit consciousness by naming their group Kabir Kala Manch (Platform for the Art of Kabir).

<sup>60</sup> The Republican Party of India formed out of Ambedkar's Scheduled Casts Federation in 1957.

commercial success and national recognition of a few singers (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) has undoubtedly had an impact on local caste relations as well, as these singers have attained an exalted status at the national level even as their lower-caste stigma remains at the local level.

I further asked all the Malvi singers I interviewed what concrete changes had been effected in their own lives through bhajan singing. A few gave unique and profound responses about the cultivation of a sense of universal oneness, which included:

NANURAM BHAGAT: If any person wishes me harm, even to him I will bow my head with love.<sup>61</sup>

NARAYAN THAKUR: I used to see differences between people based on religion, caste, gender, everything. Now I feel we are all the same. It grants me great *ātma-śhānti* (peace of the soul).<sup>62</sup>

MAHESH YADAV: From listening to Kabir's bhajans, I have learned this: before anything else, a person must learn forbearance and tolerance. Whatever else may happen in life, whether one's state is happy or unhappy, one should always maintain the same inner state. This is the most important thing.<sup>63</sup>

JAIMAL CHOPDA: When we go to sing, then we do not see any divisions of caste or anything else. The *vāṇī* (message) of Kabir, the *vāṇī* of the Sants, it is for all human society to understand.<sup>64</sup>

Many singers shared similarly inspiring and profound ideas. However, nearly every singer I interviewed specifically mentioned that singing bhajans had 1) reduced their reliance on

---

<sup>61</sup> Personal communication at Bhagat's residence, Ralamandal village, Tonk Khurd District, MP, May 13, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Personal communication in Kshipra, Dewas District, MP, May 21, 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Personal communication at Dayaram Saroliya's residence in Ranayalgadri village, Tonk Khurd District, MP, May 13, 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Personal communication at Chopda's residence in Mendal village, Mhow District, MP, May 23, 2015.

*aṇḍaviśvās* (superstition), and/or 2) helped them develop morally, particularly with regards to abstinence from meat, alcohol, and other social vices.

### **Ritualism and the Kabir Panth**

*September 21, 2014: Mohan Barodiya Village, Shajapur District*

I am sitting in the home of Pritam Malviya, a schoolteacher and Kabir bhajan singer in his late twenties. Pritam learned Kabir's bhajans and teachings by sitting with Prahlad Tipanya for several years, playing cymbals and singing behind him at concerts. We are joined by Madanlal Malviya, who performs alongside Pritam and plays the harmonium. They have called a number of friends and younger cousins from around the village, and we now sit crowded in Pritam's small family house. A young man named Vallabh is playing the *ḍholak* drum with a loud, strong sound that belies his wiry frame. Almost everyone else is playing *manjira* (hand cymbals) or *kartāl* (clappers). I am playing Pritam's tambura, as he and Madanlal ask me to show them a few of the Malvi Kabir bhajans I have learned. I have been in Malwa for only a month and still have difficulty playing tambura and singing simultaneously, particularly in an unfamiliar language. Everyone knows the bhajans, however, and it becomes far easier to sing as their voices join mine. Pritam receives a phone call, and announces that we must all leave in less than hour. A man has passed away in a village a few kilometers away, and tonight is his funeral observance. It is customary for the family of the deceased to serve food to everyone in the village. "Whenever there is a *mṛtyu bhojan* (funerary banquet)," Pritam explains, "the family calls all Kabir bhajan groups to sing, one after another, for the entire night. Even when it is an upper-caste family – when there is a death, there must be Kabir bhajans." I am surprised to hear this, as there is minimal upper-caste participation in the Kabir tradition under normal circumstances, but it makes sense: death is among the most prevalent themes Kabir poetry.



We arrive at the funeral after 9PM. Another group is singing bhajans when we arrive. We sit down to eat and listen. I notice that a ritual service is clashing sonically with the bhajan-singing; men are chanting and ringing bells. Pritam gestures to the other end of the enclosed lawn, where there is a small group of elderly men with long beards. “*Kabir Panth-wale log hain*,” he explains, “these are priests from the Kabir Panth. They are conducting rituals.” I nod in understanding.

“You do not participate in the prayers and rituals.”

“Not anymore,” says Madanlal. “Once, we believed in all this superstition too, but Guru ji [Prahlaad ji] taught us otherwise. Kabir says to forget all rituals and superstitions – so how can his followers practice them?”



Image 2-6: Singing Kabir Bhajans at a Mrtyu Bhojan function. Left to right: Vallabh Malviya, Pritam Malviya, Madanlal Malviya, Gokul Chauhan. Shajapur District, MP. September 22, 2014.

I notice the sharp division between the musicians and the priests. The tension is obvious; the two groups refuse to look at one another or acknowledge each other at all. The chanting and bell-ringing grows louder, as does the bhajan-singing, as the groups compete for sonic space. The crescendo continues until the ritual is completed, and the priests prepare to depart from the grounds. Many people touch their feet and take blessings as they go, but the singers continue to play as if oblivious to their presence.



*Image 2-7: A disciple touches the feet of a Kabir Panth mahanth who has been presiding over ritual observances. Shajapur District, MP, September 22, 2014.*

The incident recounted above illustrates the conflict that singers referred to when they claimed they had dispensed with superstition once they began singing bhajans. It also illustrates that a rejection of ritualism is, for many singers, synonymous with a rejection of the certain

branches of the Kabir Panth and their interpretations of Kabir's message.<sup>65</sup> The performance of a ritual called the *chaukā āratī* is important practice in many Kabir Panths.<sup>66</sup> In the Dharamdasi Panth in particular, it is considered an indispensable form of worship. Vivek Das, the current leader of the Kabir Chaura in Varanasi, has vocally condemned this ritual, describing it as a "powerful assault on Kabir's revolutionary ideas" (Das 2003, 25; translated in Hess 2015; 340).<sup>67</sup> Lorenzen (1996) explores the ritual practices of the Kabir Panth and concludes that, while the *chaukā* ritual does seem to contradict Kabir's stance against ritualism, it encodes important subversions and resistances to Brahmanical Hindu ritual.<sup>68</sup> However, as the above incident illustrates, many singers in Malwa are now distancing themselves from the Panth. While they cite theological differences as their reason, I believe there are important social developments that have facilitated this exodus. Earlier I suggested that lower-caste people are attracted to nirgun theology largely because of concerns of selfhood. Ironically, some singers in Malwa now view the Kabir Panth as a threat to selfhood in its own right through practices perceived as exploitative and non-egalitarian.

Prahlad Tipanya has been an outspoken critic of the Dharamdasi Kabir Panth for many years. Many singers consider him a musical and spiritual role-model, and have been influenced by his example. The Eklavya organization's Kabir Manch in the 1990s, as an explicitly non-sectarian forum for discussing Kabir, became an important venue for critique. Tipanya claims

---

<sup>65</sup> Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty notes that many, if not most, nirgun traditions inevitably develop strong practices of image-worship and other sagun rituals over time (O'Flaherty 1987)

<sup>66</sup> *Chauka* literally means "square," in reference to squares of wheat flour drawn during the ritual. Prescribed performance of the *chaukā* is detailed in the *Anurāg Sāgar*, and ethnographic descriptions have been provided by Dvivedi (1965) and Lorenzen (1996, Chapter 6).

<sup>67</sup> Vivek Das's progressive ideology and his criticism of the Dharamdasi Panth are discussed by Linda Hess (2015, Chapter 7).

<sup>68</sup> Lorenzen (1996) further asserts that the extent of ritualism within the Panth is still extremely minor compared to most Indian religious traditions.



that, through rituals like the *chaukā āratī*, the Panth is conducting the same “business” that he associates with sagun worship. Conducting a *chaukā āratī* typically involves a large financial expenditure. Wealthy patrons are encouraged to sponsor the travel and accommodations of the *mahant*-s, and oversee the organization of the ceremony. Attendees are expected to buy supplies for the ritual, and donate gifts to the *mahant*-s. Tipanya sees this as a means for the Panth to acquire wealth from followers who often have very little themselves.

Tipanya and the Manch were also critical of the guru-worship practiced within the Panth. The guru, or spiritual teacher, is an important figure in nearly all South Asian spiritual traditions, but he is endowed with special importance in nirgun traditions. In the absence of a tangible idol or image of divinity, the guru becomes the focus of reverence. The Sikh and Kabir traditions refer to God as *Vāheguru* (Awe-inspiring Teacher) and *Sadguru* (True Teacher), respectively. These terms are exclusively used to refer to God rather than any earthly teacher, but their usage reflects the spiritual centrality of the guru. The first bhajan performed during a Kabir bhajan session will always be an invocation to the guru.<sup>69</sup> Such bhajans emphasize the necessity of a guru for spiritual seekers, and encourage the listener to “earn the guru’s love.”

*Guru binā gyān na pāvogā more sadhu bhaiyā  
Phokaṭ janam gamāya ho, virthā to janam gamāyā ho*

Without the Guru, you will never attain wisdom, oh brothers and sages  
Your life will be ruined, your life will be useless

- Kabir Bhajan

*Gurū sharaṇ meṇ rahnā, re man tū,  
Utarogā pār pūrā Gurū mil gyā,  
Pīṭh jagat se denā*

---

<sup>69</sup> The guru *vandana* (invocation) has the same place in a Kabir bhajan program that a Ganesha *vandana* typically occupies in sagun bhajan programs.

*Tan man dhan arpan Sadgurū ko, Gurū vachan sun lenā  
Jo Gurū jī thāro mastak mānge, shīsh kāṭ dhar denā*

Remain in surrender to the Guru, oh Mind  
United fully with the Guru,  
You will cross over (the ocean of creation)  
Turn your back to the material world

Body, mind, and possessions are all offerings to Sadguru  
Listen to the word of the Guru  
When the Guru asks for your bowed forehead,  
Cut off your head whole head and offer it to him

- Kabir Bhajan

Such bhajans assert the absolute necessity of a guru, and of obedience to that guru, for spiritual progress. They also present an ambiguity between the voice of God (the divine Guru) and the earthly guru. This ambiguity is built into the theology of the Panth as the head gurus are considered to be ordained by, or even *avatār*-s of, Kabir (who is unequivocally a divine incarnation within this tradition, rather than a humble weaver). Tipanya and many other singers increasingly view the expectation of unquestioning obedience to a guru hierarchy as a threat to their selfhood and spiritual individuality. They still sing many guru bhajans, however, and continue to accord them primacy of place as the first bhajan to be sung at any *satsang*. But they have reinterpreted the concept of guru as something entirely different from a human teacher. While performing guru bhajans, Tipanya will expound on their inner significance, clarifying his interpretation of guru. He will often refer to a Kabir's *sākhī*:

*Guru Govinda dono khaḍe, kin kā lāgūn pāye  
Balihārī Guru āpko, Govinda dīyo batāye*

Guru and Govinda (God) stand before me,  
Whose feet shall I touch?  
Guru, I devote myself to you

Who has granted me the knowledge of Govinda

- Kabir *sākhī*

This famous *sākhī* is commonly quoted to emphasize the importance of the guru, but Tipanya's interpretation inverts that meaning. "Kabir says the guru is that which brings you to God. And what is that? What allows you to come to *satsang*, to hear bhajans, to learn about God? It is your body. Your body is your guru. Your own experience is your guru." He cites another Kabir *sākhī* emphasizing the importance of personal experience:

*Sab gurū hai had ke, behad ke guru nāhī*  
*Behad apne āp upje, anubhav ke ghar māhī*

All gurus are bounded, there is no guru of the boundless  
You will become boundless yourself  
Within the house of experience

- Kabir *sākhī*

This reinterpretation shifts spiritual agency from the Panth hierarchy to the individual.

Many of the singers I interviewed still attended weekly or monthly Panth events, but others proudly announced that they had no connection to the Kabir Panth or any other sect.<sup>70</sup> For many of them, the Eklavya discussions were a major turning point. Others split from the Kabir Panth after events in the early 2000s. In 2003, after years of vocally criticizing the Dharamdasi Panth, Prahlad Tipanya was invited to become a *mahant* of the Panth.<sup>71</sup> Panth leaders likely believed that he would curb his criticisms if he were part of the organization. To the confusion and consternation of his friends and family, Tipanya accepted the offer and began

---

<sup>70</sup> Panth allegiance also varies considerably due to the great ideological variety across different Panths and their branches. Many singers will decry one Panth, but reverently attend another. Nearly all singers support and respect the Varanasi Kabir Chaura and its current leader, Vivek Das.

<sup>71</sup> This full episode is described in greater detail in Hess (2015, Chapter 7) and Virmani (2008c).

performing the role of a *mahant*, including overseeing the *chaukā āratī*. He had his own reasons for joining: he was hoping to reform the Panth from within, to foster more discussion and less dogmatism, and to ameliorate relations between the Dharamdasi and Kabir Chaura branches. The Dharamdasi Panth leaders were affronted, however, when he continued to criticize aspects of the Panth he disagreed with. Additionally, though he did conduct the *chaukā āratī*, he changed aspects of the ceremony (Hess 2015, Virmani 2008c). He asked attendees to stop bringing gifts and donations, and refused to sit in the symbolic seat of Kabir, encouraging people to worship the guru within, rather than their ritual guru. In 2005, the Dharamdasi Panth had enough of Tipanya; he was expelled from the Panth and stripped of his status as *mahant*. For him and many other singers, this marked a clean break from the Dharamdasi Panth and its leaders.

Malvi singers' disassociation from the Panth exemplifies their concerns about theology and selfhood, but the circumstances under which it is happening elucidate broader transformations of spiritual communities in Indian society. Sects like the Dharamdasi Panth exist to serve needed functions for their constituents: they provide a 1) locus for spiritual community and 2) a means of preserving theological knowledge. When Eklavya's Kabir Manch formed in the early 1990s, it served both of these functions while granting greater spiritual autonomy to the musicians. The Manch even expanded the sense of community by bringing bhajan ensembles into contact with each other throughout the region. For most singers, this was the first opportunity to engage directly in discourse with a large group of other singers without the mediation of the Panth.

Eklavya's Kabir Manch ended in 1998, but in some ways, it is no longer needed. Its role is now performed through modern communication technology. The new community platform for bhajan singers is neither a sect nor an NGO – it is the mobile phone. Singers have a self-

moderated community through which they conduct their own discussions and arrange performances without Panth affiliation. They have also continued to conduct discussions about Kabir bhajans, through voice conversations or chat applications such as WhatsApp. As I traveled around Malwa meeting singers, I realized my own cell phone number was being added to a number of WhatsApp chat groups with names like “*Kabir ke bande*” (Kabir’s Dear Ones), “*Sāchā Sāhib ek Tū*” (The True Master and You are One), “*Kabir bhed vāñī*” (Kabir’s Piercing Voice) and even “*Shodh navāchār*” (Innovative Research). Within these groups, bhajan performers and listeners discuss poetic passages, share media clips, and circulate information about their own performances. Today Malvi nirgun singers maintain a cohesive community spanning the entire region without requiring any institutional mediation.

### **Moral Reform**

The majority of the singers I interviewed described moral reformations they had undertaken after they began participating in bhajans. “Since I have started singing,” many of them told me, “*sab aparād choḍ diya*” (I gave up all my vices), or “*ab koī dhokā kām nahīñ karta*” (I do not do anything dishonestly). Singers believe strongly in the power of bhajans to transform individuals’ moral character and, by extension, to transform society. The moral reformation of Kanjar people in the area of Tonk Khurd, Dewas district, was frequently cited as an example.

The Kanjar community is a Scheduled Caste of traditionally nomadic people who, during British colonial administration, were labeled a “criminal tribe.” This stigma has remained after Independence; many Kanjar people in Malwa continued to engage in criminal activity and the community as a whole was disproportionately targeted by the police. When Prahlad Tipanya found out about this situation, he began to conduct bhajan regular *satsang*-s with Kanjars in their homes. He recounts the story:



PRAHLAD TIPANYA: I used to pass by that area every day on the way to the school. I knew that Kanjar people lived around there, and they were considered a criminal caste – people who steal, eat meat, drink alcohol, that sort of thing. I was a bit scared, but I never went to meet them... In 1997 we had a big program in our village, and lots of people came, at least two or three thousand people. And this group came and did lots of *sevā* (service). I did not know who they were. Someone told me, “these are Kanjar people.” I was surprised, I thought Kanjar people would be rotten, but here they are doing so much service. They helped all night and left early, around four in the morning...

A few days later I passed their area, and I thought I would go see them. I did not know any of their names, but they saw me and said “Guruji, Guruji – come!” and invited me home... we were talking for some time in Satnarayan’s home, and I noticed one window in his house was broken. I asked how it broke; I thought the children must have done it by accident. He told me no, the police broke it. I couldn’t believe it. He said “Last week the police conducted a raid, and they broke everyone’s windows.” At that time, I did not even know what a raid was. He explained, “the police will come every now and then on a raid and arrest anyone they can catch, lock them up and demand money for their release.” I did not understand.

“But you are *satsangī* people (spiritual people),” I said, “you do not steal from anyone.” He told me the police will arrest anyone who is Kanjar, whether they steal or not... That was when I found out their condition. Nobody is born guilty. Everyone has their own situation, their own difficulties. I realized the Kanjars were not a criminal caste – they had been made criminals.<sup>72</sup>

Tipanya later went to speak with police, and realized that they were indiscriminately arresting Kanjars. He also discovered that police often demanded large sums of protection money from Kanjars that were unattainable through ethical means, giving the Kanjars little choice but to steal. His response was to begin conducting bhajan *satsang*-s with the Kanjars in their homes. He continued this for about five years. Many Kanjars who previously did not attend *satsang*-s began coming, and began to give up theft, meat, and alcohol. Tipanya estimates that

---

<sup>72</sup> Personal communication at Prahlad Tipanya’s home, September 15, 20104.

around 50% of the Kanjars who had previously engaged in theft had now stopped.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, he said that police saw the transformation happening within the community. They saw that people were regular attending bhajan *satsang*-s, and ceased conducting raids.

This story illustrates a few major issues regarding social reform through bhajan singing. The case of the Kanjar community was frequently cited by nirgun singers as proof of the lasting social transformation that can result from singing bhajans. It also links broad societal transformations to individual moral reforms. When I began interviewing Malvi nirgun singers, I was struck by this apparent discrepancy: all of them spoke of the *parivartan* (transformation) that these bhajans were effecting in Malvi society, but when pressed further for specific changes, most of them described their own behavioral changes. Almost ever singer I interviewed mentioned the importance of abstaining from meat, alcohol, gambling, and other vices.

The singers were certainly invested in change at the societal level, but strongly believed that such change originated with individual moral reform. One way to decipher this approach is pragmatism; singers cannot directly change the attitudes of Brahmins, but they can change their own behavior. But there is likely a deeper understanding of change involved here, a characteristically South Asian notion that changes in the self are reflected in the outer world.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps the most famous proponent of this notion is Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi's treatise on "Indian self-rule" explicates how self-rule of an Independent nation should be achieved through self-rule in the form of self-mastery within the individuals of the nation (Gandhi [1909] 1938).<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> I have no way of confirming this number, but most people I interviewed from the Kanjar community and nearby areas gave similar estimates

<sup>74</sup> This attitude may derive from solipsistic schools of philosophy such as *advaita Vedanta* that believe the entirety of creation is illusory, and the external world is merely a temporary dream experienced by the cosmic Self.

<sup>75</sup> This idea is summarized in the famous quote attributed to Gandhi: "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Another issue raised in Tipanya's anecdote and singers' interview responses is the particular societal definition of *aparādh* (vice, wrongdoing). In his account, Tipanya refers not only to criminal activity (theft), but also dietary vices (consumption of meat and alcohol). Of course, most participants in Kabir bhajans do not come from criminal backgrounds, but nearly all proudly told me that bhajans inspired them to give up the consumption of meat, alcohol, and tobacco. Why these specific vices? Bhajans themselves are mostly vague in this area. Many bhajans urge listeners to "act righteously" and "cast aside vices," but they rarely provide concrete examples of righteous behavior.<sup>76</sup> This ambiguity allows singers to ensure the continued social relevance of the bhajans; while singing, they speak between verses to provide examples of the sort of behavior Kabir is admonishing his followers against. For example, a singer might discourse on vegetarianism during a bhajan about the divinity that exists in all creatures:

*Jhāḍ bind aur jīv charāchar meñ phūl rahā mere Sāi  
Jā dekhūñ vā rītā nāhīñ, sab ghaṭ rahe samāi*

In all plants, animals, and beings, my Lord is blossoming  
Wherever I look, nowhere is empty, He resides equally in every vessel

- Kabir Bhajan

Specific moral injunctions therefore come not from the poetry itself, but from the values of Malvi society. The intriguing, and perhaps ironic fact is that Malvi society's condemnation of meat is directly linked to Brahmanical values. In other words, Kabir singers' extremely high prioritization of vegetarianism may be seen as a manifestation of Sanskritization:

Sanskritization is the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and,

---

<sup>76</sup> Bhajans by more recent Sants (nineteenth and twentieth-century) often do sing against very specific vices. Prahlad Tipanya demonstrated one bhajan for me that specifically admonished listeners to relinquish alcohol, and admonished females against wearing makeup ("Why do you spoil the beauty of your white eyes with black kohl?")

frequently, 'twice-born' caste. Generally, such changes are followed by a claim of higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community. (Srinivas 1966, 6)

Srinivas's original model (Srinivas 1952) even further emphasizes vegetarianism and non-alcoholism as central pillars of Sanskritization. Under the Brahmanical Hindu hierarchy, the consumption of meat, and especially beef, is one of the main sources of "impurity" that lowers a group's ritual status. Anthropological studies of North India are replete with examples of groups relinquishing their consumption of beef or all meat in order to claim higher ritual status (Dube 1998; Lamb 2002; Lynch 1969; Mathur 1964; Mayer 1956, 1970). Balai in Malwa have traditionally been associated with meat-eating; one folkloric origin story of the community, when they first migrated from Rajasthan, distinguishes them from other groups by their willingness to eat beef (Russell [1916] 1969, 107). In the past several decades, Balai have been endeavoring toward upward mobility in Malwa, and for many this has involved adopting a vegetarian diet (Shahana Bhattacharya 1996).

Scholars are typically wary of Sanskritization in heterodox forms of Hinduism, as it can often serve to undermine the egalitarian vision of these traditions. Susan Bayly observes:

Paradoxically, however, even though both Islam and the popular *bhakti* forms of Hinduism are often described as casteless and egalitarian, few if any adherents of these traditions should be seen as renouncers of caste. Many sects denied entry to "unclean" groups, others only allowed Brahmin gurus. (S. Bayly 1999, 48)

Many scholars and Dalit activists have broadly criticized *bhakti* traditions for engendering complacency and obedience within a hierarchical values system (Deliege 1993; Guha 1997; Jaffrelot 2003; Zelliott 1981).<sup>77</sup> The general argument is that followers tacitly accept the logic of

---

<sup>77</sup> Guha describes *bhakti* as an indigenous model of "obedience." Zelliott (1981) describes the Dalit antipathy to the role-model of Sant Chokhamela, who laments his mistreatment as an Untouchable but does not challenge the validity of the caste

ritual purity and endeavor to raise their status within an iniquitous system rather than revolting against the system itself. Jaffrelot (2003) even suggests that the popularity of *bhakti* traditions that are theologically egalitarian, but socially non-egalitarian, has precluded the expansion of resilient anti-Brahminism movements in North India of the kind seen in West and South India.

Are Kabir singers implicitly adopting a framework of purity versus impurity when they adopt vegetarianism? In some cases, I would have to say yes. A few singers proudly declared to me that they refused to eat in places where non-vegetarian food was even served. This is ironic, as segregated eating is a central medium for maintaining caste hierarchies and egalitarian commensal eating has been a cornerstone of anti-caste movements (Mathur 1964; Sherinian 2014). However, there is also a subversive element to the Kabir singers' "purity." Just as Untouchable Yadavs in Lucknow practice the *upanayam* rite to "challenge the Brahmin monopoly" of the domain (Jaffrelot 2003, 200), Malvi Kabir singers' insistence on being *more* pure than Brahmins' challenges the latter group's claim to superiority. This is particularly evident in bhajans that denounce Brahmin rituals for the unnecessary violence they commit by plucking living flowers or leaves to use in ritual offerings:

*Bhūlī mālan pātī re toḍe, pātī pātī ke māy jīva re*  
*Pātī toḍe devat ko chaḍhāve, vo devat nirjīva re bāñvarī*

*Dālī Brahmā, pātī Viṣṇu, phūl Shankar deva re*  
*Phūl toḍ devat ko chaḍhāve, vo devat nirjīva re bāñvarī*

*Kyon bhūlī gayī thāro des, re bāñvarī?*

A confused gardener plucks a leaf,  
But there is life within every leaf

---

system. Deliege (1993) provides examples of origin stories of lower-caste communities that reveal an acceptance of their ritual inferiority.

He plucks a leaf and offers it to a stone god  
That stone god is lifeless, you crazy!

The branch is Brahma, the leaf is Vishnu,  
The flower is Lord Shiva  
You pluck flowers and offer them to a stone god  
That stone god is lifeless, you crazy!

Why have you forgotten your True Country, O crazy one?

- Kabir Bhajan

*Bāgā re bāgā lobhī, the phiryā, re lobhī,  
Main to phirī re thārī lār  
Bāgā kā phūlḍā thane thoḍyā, re lobhī  
Mhāne to gūnṭhī re bhar māl*

*Saudāgir ab kyon bhūlyo jāye?*

You walked from garden to garde, O greedy one  
And I walked with you  
You tore out the flowers of the garden, O greedy one  
And bound me in a garland of knots<sup>78</sup>

O trader, why have you lost your way?

- Dharamdas Bhajan

By condemning the violent practice of plucking flowers for rituals, Kabir followers can claim moral superiority over their Brahmin counterparts. It would be dismissive, however, to suggest that Sanskritization or Brahmanical subversion were the only reasons for singers' adoption or vegetarianism. It is also an individual moral choice made based on their own understandings of the non-violent theology. Nor is their condemnation of alcohol simply cultural puritanism; it is a

---

<sup>78</sup> Like most Dharamdas bhajans, this song is framed as Kabir speaking to Dharamdas. Kabir is chastising Dharamdas, the "greedy businessman," for his errors, such as wrapping his image in flower garlands instead of imbibing his teachings.

response to the significant social detriments caused by alcoholism in rural Malwa. The inherited values of Brahminism and purity are woven together with individual consciences and inclusive social discourses.

To those unfamiliar with Indian culture, the question of meat consumption by a specific community may seem provincial and irrelevant to broader social concerns. But this is a central issue in India's negotiation of cultural difference. Initiatives by government bodies to outlaw consumption of beef or other types of meat have become major public debates following the right-wing BJP's recent political triumphs. In Madhya Pradesh, the state government banned a proposal to include eggs in the menu for children's shelters in tribal areas (Ghatwai 2015). This provoked ire among critics who argued that the children were from tribal backgrounds whose theology did not share Brahmanical Hinduism's aversion to eggs, but who were largely suffering from malnutrition. The state of Maharashtra moved to prohibit slaughter of cows; the offense is punishable by jail-time. Such policies have elicited reaction from the millions of non-Hindus in India as well as the millions of Hindus whose belief systems do not include vegetarianism.

In an ostensibly secular republic, such policies seem to enforce the values of a specific kind of Hinduism over a theologically diverse population. Nor is the violence against dissenting views or minority religions merely theoretical: in rural Uttar Pradesh, a Muslim man was lynched in September 2015 by a mob who claimed (erroneously, it was later found) that the man's family had killed and eaten a cow (Khalid 2015). Such events elicit major concern about India's majoritarian climate and its potential intolerance of minority views. They also place Malwa's Kabir singers in an interesting liminal space, as they believe in vegetarianism but actively resist the homogenizing forces of Hindu nationalism.

### ***Conclusion***

*June 14, 2015: Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh*

The Ambedkar Yuva Sangh (Youth Society) of Ujjain has organized a program in celebration of Kabir Jayanti, the festival observing Kabir's birthday. In 2015, Kabir Jayanti actually fell on June 2, but by celebrating it a few weeks later, the group was able to invite a number of high-profile guests. These include *mahant*-s from Kabir Panths in the Katni and Rewa districts in eastern Madhya Pradesh, between Malwa and Varanasi and Malwa's own Prahlad Tipanya. Also in attendance is Ranjit Kabirpanthi, a Buddhist Ambedkarite Kabir devotee who has authored several books about Buddha, Kabir, Ambedkar, and the Dalit political struggle and spiritual tradition. The chief guest is Vivek Das himself, the chief *mahant* of the Kabir Chaura ashram in Varanasi. The Gangoliya family of Ujjain open the program with a few bhajans. Husband and wife sing lead, while their daughter provides backup vocals and their sons accompany on *manjira*, *dholak*, and harmonium. As they sing, a youth volunteer hands them Nehru caps to wear – not the typical white, but the blue of the Buddhist Ashok Chakra on India's flag, the blue of the Republican Party of India founded by Ambedkar's followers.

Then the speeches begin; each guest speaks for 30-40 minutes, followed by one or two bhajans by a different group. Sanath Saheb, a *mahant* from the Rewa district, challenges the beliefs of many Kabir followers, debunking the commonly held assumption that Kabir was a disciple of the Brahmin guru Ramananda. He explains that, during Kabir's lifetime, there were three major teachers named Ramananda. Each was affiliated with a different Vaishnavite sect, and their casteist teachings were incompatible with Kabir's egalitarian message. "One Ramanand wrote, 'wisdom should not be shared with any *shūdra*.' How could he be Kabir's guru? If Kabir had any guru, it was only *viveka* (conscience, spiritual discernment)." He proceeds to discuss and debunk many other common legends about Kabir's lifetime, explaining the sectarian or casteist origins of these stories.



After all the other guests, it is time for Vivek Das's speech. While introducing him, the organizers adorn him with several garlands of marigolds, which he removes and places on the image of Kabir on the side of the stage. Vivek Das's speech contains many exegeses of Kabir's message, but also heavy criticisms of those who have failed to grasp that message. He warmly, but firmly chastises the organizers for the garlands they have heaped on him and the other guests: "Every flower on these garlands is a lost life. Kabir taught us to recognize divinity in all creation, including these flowers." He is less warm as he decries the Dharamdasi Panth, accusing them of using the name of Kabir to "blackmail" their followers. "Kabir said, 'I am grateful to the Guru for leading me to Govinda,' he explains, "but many teachers are now telling their devotees to forget Govinda and worship the Guru. Kabir's message is that the Guru is only importance as for leading disciples to Govinda."

I have heard similar criticisms voiced by others in the past, but never with Vivek Das's level of erudition, spiritual zeal, and biting wit. But I did not expect the next target of Vivek Das's criticism: India's current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. "Today you have very proudly invited Vivek Das to come from Varanasi as your guest. But if there is one name on Narendra Modi's blacklist, it is the name of Vivek Das." Das refers to an incident last year when Modi decided to base his Uttar Pradesh campaign out of Varanasi, citing the city's history as a great center of Hinduism. At the time, Vivek Das spoke from his position as a major religious leader within Varanasi, publicly condemning Modi's campaign and arguing that Kashi (the traditional name for Varanasi) is not a Hindu city, but a spiritual center for all faiths in India. Das's statements were reported in the news media:

[Kashi] is a nerve centre of various religions, traditions and ideologies. Kabir had made the city a centre of Indian civilisation. Buddha had come here 2,500 years ago. It is an important place for people belonging to Jain faith... The place reflects India's core values of pluralism, tolerance and intellectual thinking. The current political discourse may

have a long-term impact on the city. If people here have not understood the threat, then it is a misfortune for the city. (Press Trust of India, 2014)

Recounting this incident, Vivek Das says, “If Modi insists on calling Kashi a Hindu city, then every Kabir Panthi will have to pack their bags and leave Kashi.” Vivek Das’s discourse continues for two hours. During the speech, he warmly praises Kabir’s devotees in Malwa and their dedication to putting Kabir’s message into. “Every *ḍholak* played for bhajans here in Malwa,” he remarks, “has more devotion within it than the empty statues installed by falsely pious devotees in the temples of Varanasi.” After Vivek Das’s speech, Tipanya sings one of his favorite *samājjik* (socially conscious) Kabir bhajans:

*Sāhib, dekh hūñ jag borānā*  
*Sāch kahūñ to māran dāve, jhūṭhā jag patiyānā*

O Master, I see this world has gone mad  
If I speak the truth, I am beaten  
But if I tell lies, the whole world condones me

- Kabir Bhajan

This celebration of Kabir’s birthday reveals the multi-faceted role Sant bhajans play in contemporary Malvi society. The names of Kabir and other Saints create pan-regional and inter-regional networks of devotees across North India. These devotees share a reverence for the timeless spiritual message of the Saints, but also interpret that message in response to their more immediate concerns regarding casteism and other forms of oppression. As Vivek Das’s speech revealed, regional communities of Sant devotees are increasingly connected to national debates and intellectual movements about pluralism and tolerance in India.

### Chapter 3

#### “PIERCED BY THE ARROW OF SONG”

#### MUSICAL STRUCTURE OF MALVI NIRGUN BHAJANS

*Roi roi rūdan karā, mhārī helī, āvo hamārā desh*  
*Ab mhāṇe lāgyo bhajan vālo bān, mhārī helī, āvo hamārā desh*

I weep and weep, my friend, come to my Country  
Now I am pierced by the arrow of bhajan, my friend,  
Come to my Country

- Dharamdas Bhajan

*December 18, 2014*

Listen: Prahlad Tipanya tunes his *tambura*. There is a piercing wooden squeak as he slides the instrument's bridge into place. He motions to me to play a note on the harmonium. Wooden pegs creak as Prahlad Ji turns them, slowly bringing the tambura's three middle strings in unison. They ring out as he flicks them with a fingernail. His voice, barely louder than a hum, gently merges with the resonating strings. I must lean in to hear the *sākhī*: “The lotus resides within the water, as the moon resides in the sky / Find That residing within the heart, and you shall find the Goal.” A moment of silence to reflect on the pithy couplet, punctuated by another sharp flick of tambura strings. Then, a sudden burst of energy as Prahlad Ji plays a brisk rhythm on his tambura, accompanied by the clacking of his wooden *kartāl*. He begins to sing:

*Kin kāraṇ āyo jagat mein? Kāi surūr āyo?*  
*Thoḍā Gurū ko sun upadeśh re gelyā, in kāraṇ āyo*

For what purpose have you come into this world? For what delight?  
Just to hear the Guru a little bit and receive his teaching,  
You have come for that purpose

- Kabir Bhajan

Prahlad ji's son Vijay sits beside him on the floor with a small brass pair of *manjira* (cymbals) and begins to sing and play along. As the breeze carries the strains of the song and tambura through the night, other friends and family hear the call and enter, wrapped in thick shawls and mufflers. Prahlad ji's nephew Dharmendra enters the hall and takes over the harmonium. Rakesh comes in next from his house next door. He takes the *ḍholak* drum from Vijay's two-year-old son, Himanshu, who has been enthusiastically beating the drum in his own rhythm and jumping gleefully with each strike. Prahlad ji's youngest brother, Ashok, arrives from his house across the village and takes up another pair of *manjira*. Soon a full group of men and boys are assembled. All sing loudly in defiance of the biting winter cold.

*Māñ ka garab meñ re ulṭo re tañgiyo, vatūñ ne vādo kiyo*  
*Bhajan tumhāro karūngā meñ sahib, pakkā kol kiyo*

In your mother's womb you hung upside down and made a promise:  
'Lord, I will sing songs of devotion to you' – yes, you made a solid oath



Image 3-1: A winter night satsang. Lunyakhedi village, December 18 2014. Pictured: Dharmendra Tipanya, Ashok Tipanya, Sandeep Brahmbhatt, Prahlad Tipanya, Sheetal Sanghvi, Layashree Joshi, Ambaram Tipanya, Rakesh Chouhan, Deepesh Malviya (standing).

This is a spontaneous *satsang*, an open, joyful gathering for sharing in bhajans and discussion. Although Malvi singers are increasingly pursuing opportunities to perform on concert stages and record in studios, the home *satsang* remains the most common setting for singing and experiencing nirgun bhajans. The previous chapter discussed the revival of Kabir bhajans that has been taking place in Malwa over the last four decades. The tradition as it exists today is simultaneously new and old. Its modern performance practices and social contextualization are intrinsically linked with recent cultural and political developments in North India, yet it is perceived by its participants as a practice they have inherited from countless generations. The poetry shares this chronological ambiguity. Many singers believe they are singing words written by Kabir himself over 500 years ago. Increasingly others acknowledge that these lyrics do not come from a historical individual, but from the continuously growing and changing *vāchik parampara* (oral tradition) of Malwa. Both views agree that, regardless of the historical origins of the poetry, the message communicated is timeless, and shares wisdom that is as old as humanity. This combination of timelessness and novelty is manifested in the instrumentation and melodic structure of bhajans as well. Although I have not been able to locate any recordings of Malvi nirgun bhajans from earlier than the 1990s, the oral accounts I heard were sufficient to convince me that the music has changed significantly over the last generation. My own fieldwork experiences and recordings suggest that the music will continue to change with the next generation. These emerging changes will be discussed in the next chapter.

This chapter will discuss the current musical structure and organization of Malvi nirgun bhajans. My analysis is based primarily on my own fieldwork in 2014-2015, but also considers studio and live recordings released from 1993 and later. The first section of the chapter describes the bhajan ensemble and the instruments commonly used. It focuses particularly on the

tambura, the central instrument in Malvi nirgun bhajans, describing its symbolic importance as well as its role in shaping bhajan rhythm and melody. The second part of the chapter examines the form and melodic organization of Malvi bhajans, emphasizing how these structures accord centrality to poetic text over musical virtuosity or innovation. I will suggest that melodic structures within this tradition have developed to facilitate accessible memorization, transmission, and alteration of Sant poetry.

### ***The Bhajan Maṇḍalī***

A *maṇḍalī*, sometimes referred to by the English word “party,” is a group of bhajan performers. In some cases these are formalized ensembles, with business cards and an official name stickered onto their instruments. Other mandalis are simply groups of friends who gather informally for both spiritual enrichment and recreation. All members of the nirgunī mandalis are lower-caste. Most are from the Balai caste, although I also met a significant number from other Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes including Chamar, Bilal, and Bhil. Nearly all participants are men. This reflects the general state of gender inequality in rural Malwa, which is still incredibly regressive.<sup>79</sup> I encountered two primarily male mandalis in which females sang, in both cases either the wife or daughters of the mandali leader. I also encountered two *mahilā* mandalis (all-female ensembles), both of which regularly traveled for public performances. Hopefully, such groups will become more common following broader improvements in the treatment of women in Malwa.

---

<sup>79</sup> While other facets of Malvi social life have seen significant progress since the 1970s, gender equality has not significantly improved (Kumar 2009). I am optimistic that the next generation will see far more progress in gender equality issues, as many young Malvi are receiving unprecedented access to education and are speaking out against gender inequality in their society.

A few decades ago, mandalis used much less instrumentation, and their sound was far less adorned.<sup>80</sup> Narayan Singh Thakur, a middle-aged schoolteacher who has been singing bhajans for over 20 years, explained this to me:

NARAYAN THAKUR: The good singers, like [Prahlaḍ] Tipanya ji, they heard the same bhajans in this community. But they gave them their own style. They gave them a new rhythm. And everyone liked that rhythm. So we also began to play like that...

PAVAN THAKUR (NARAYAN'S SON): Before there were not so many instruments. Only the tambura was played. The tambura and *manjīrā* (cymbals). And there was no sound system. Now ḍholak and harmonium have come, violin is also coming...

NARAYAN THAKUR: Bhajans have become melodious. Before they, were only dry.<sup>81</sup>

These performers are describing a shift in the tradition towards public presentation. The style has changed to make nirgun bhajans more broadly appealing, and less “dry.” All singers I interviewed agreed that the bhajans they remembered from childhood were musically austere. The main accompaniment was a type of tambura that originated in Rajasthan. Before these tamburas became commonplace, the same musical function was played by an *ektār*. This term, literally meaning “one string,” refers to a number of entirely different chordophones throughout India. The *ektār* referred to in Malwa is a two-stringed spike-lute made from a bamboo neck and a gourd resonator. A section of the gourd is cut off and a goat skin is stretched over it to give the instrument a flat face.<sup>82</sup> In Malwa, a few singers I met had *ektār*-s sitting unused at home, but none were in playable condition. The tambura had taken over completely. Rajula Shah's 2008

---

<sup>80</sup> Examples of this sparse, non-presentational sound can be heard by the singers in Rajula Shah's 2008 documentary, *Shabad Nirantar / The Word Within the Word*.

<sup>81</sup> Interview conducted May 21, 2015 in Lohar Pipliya, Dewas District, MP.

<sup>82</sup> I have encountered the same instrument played in Maharashtra and Gujarat. It is likely extant in other parts of North India as well. It is also popularly used in devotional music by Indians in Fiji.

film *Shabad Nirantar* feature ensembles who still sing in an entirely non-professional “dry” style. Some of these ensembles still use the *ektār*.

In addition to tambura or *ektār*, the only other instrument used was the *manjīrā*. This is a pair of heavy metallic cymbals, typically made of bronze, approximately 1.5-2.5 inches in diameter. The cymbals are held together by a cotton thread, and a musician holds one in each hand and strikes them together. *Manjīrā* are considered essential in many bhajan genres. In Malwa, *manjīrā* players are also backup singers; every performer who is not playing any other instrument will likely play *manjīrā* and sing.



Image 3-2: Kabir Kalā Manch, a bhajan mandali in Magrana, Madhya Pradesh, led by Presmsingh Dipalpuriya. May 16, 2015. Musicians and instruments pictured: Unknown (ṭimki), Babulal Malviya (shaker), Ram Singh Malviya (tambura), Premsingh Dipalpuriya (harmonium), Dinesh Malviya (manjira), Mohan Singh Dipalpuriya (ḍholak), Ajay Malviya (manjira), Mohan Dipalpuriya (kartāl).

In contemporary mandalis, the *ḍholak* (a wooden barrel-shaped drum) has become standard percussion accompaniment, often supplemented with a pair of bongo-like drums called *ṭimkī*. Melodic accompaniment has been added in the form of harmonium, violin, and a few other instruments. Many Malvi singers credit Prahlad Tipanya with reinventing the nirgun mandali. Although Tipanya has been the most popular role-model in Malwa, these



transformations mirrors those on other North Indian devotional traditions. For example, the *ḍholak* has become standard in Rajasthani Manganiyar ensembles, although it was not used at all until a few decades ago (Ayyagari 2009, Jairazbhoy 1977). The changing role of instrumentalists will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. This chapter will highlight the most important instrument in the nirgun mandali: the tambura.

**“Friend, Listen to the Tambura!”**

“All of this began with the tambura,” Prahlad Tipanya explains to guests from Mumbai. “Through the tambura, I met Kabir.” I smile as Tipanya tells the familiar story; he is eager to share it every time he is asked how he came to Kabir. Linda Hess recorded an excellent rendition of the story during a conversation with Tipanya in 2002:

PRAHLAD TIPANYA: One day there was a *pūrnimā* (full moon) program for Ramdevji in Gorkhedi village. I went along with some other teachers. There were a lot of programs like that. That was when I heard the tambura for the first time. It was around 1978. The sound of the strings hit me really hard. That vibration, that *brrrrrrr*, went inside my body. I thought, wow, I should learn this. I had heard *ḍholak* and harmonium and never felt like learning them. But with the tambura I felt an ache, a pang. People don’t all get wounded by the same arrow. Some are struck by a bhajan’s words. I was wounded by the tambura’s strings.

I left my posting in Kathbaroda, got transferred to Gorkhedi so I could learn to play the tambura. A man called Kakur-da taught me every day. I learned quickly because of my concentration [*lagan*]. I played morning and night and learned from him every day. People used to get together at night to sing bhajans. They told me I’d learn faster if I sang and played at the same time. I said okay, write out a bhajan for me and I’ll sing. (Hess 2015:31)

This was the first Kabir bhajan that Tipanya learned. And so he credits the tambura with bringing him (and by extension, an entire generation of singers) to nirgun bhajans.

The tambura used in Malvi nirgun bhajans is originally from Rajasthan. I refer to it as the nirgun tambura to avoid confusion between similarly named instruments. Some Malvi singers claim that it was brought to their region by Baba Ramdevji, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Sant from the Jaisalmer district.<sup>83</sup> Regardless of this claim's dubious historicity, it illustrates the sense of cultural connection that many Malvi singers feel for Rajasthan and associates the tambura with a regional Sant tradition. Nowadays tamburas are available locally in Malwa, but many singers still make the journey west into Rajasthan for the best instruments. The nirgun tambura is a long-necked lute, similar in form to classical *tānpuras* that provide the drone in Hindustani and Carnatic music.<sup>84</sup> Whereas those classical instruments use a gourd resonator, the nirgun tambura is made entirely out of wood. A full-size tambura is approximately 51” long from end to end.<sup>85</sup> 36.5” account for the neck, and the remaining 14.5” are the diameter of the tambura’s face. The soundboard is a perfect circle, unlike the oblong face of a classical *tānpura*, and is made from a thinner piece of wood. Behind the soundboard, a deep wooden bowl extends up to 9”. The neck ranges from 3.25” wide where it meets the soundboard, and tapers to 2.25”. The neck is completely hollow, and approximately 2.25” deep.

Five steel strings are wound around tuning pegs that are inserted completely through the neck. The three central pegs penetrate the neck from the front, perpendicular to the soundboard, and the remaining two pegs penetrate the neck from either side, parallel to the soundboard. The

---

<sup>83</sup> The Meghwal community of Rajasthan, who are devotees of Ramdevji, play the exact same tamburas. More information about Ramdev and his followers can be found in Dhali (2004).

<sup>84</sup> In Carnatic music, the instrument is called *tambūrā*. In Hindustani music, the name has been Sanskritized to *tānpura*. Although there are slight differences between the varieties of classical *tānpura*, in this dissertation I do not distinguish between them, and refer to both as *tānpura* simply to avoid confusion with the tambura found in Malwa.

<sup>85</sup> I have used my own tambura, which is the same size as Prahlad Tipanya’s concert tamburas, for reference. It is common to see smaller tamburas, as little as 46 inches long with the other dimensions adjusted accordingly. It is rare to see larger tamburas.

strings are run through holes in a simple wooden nut and tied to thick inverted V-shaped metal wires that are affixed to a block on the other end of the tambura. On well-made tamburas, these



*Image 3-3: Two types of tambura plectra worn on the index finger.*

V-shaped wires each have small metal rings or nuts around them that serve as fine-tuners. However, even the best nirgun tamburas I have played are difficult to tune precisely, and easily lose their tuning while being played. The strings sit on a movable wedge-shaped wooden bridge that is slid up off the soundboard and onto the neck when not in use, to prevent the thin soundboard from caving in under prolonged pressure.

The tambura is played while sitting cross-legged on the floor. The bowl rests in the player's lap, and the neck leans against his shoulder (the left shoulder for right-handed players). The three middle strings are all tuned to the tonic (*shadja*).<sup>86</sup> The string farthest from the player's body is tuned to the dominant below the tonic (*pancham*), forming a perfect fourth with the middle three strings. The string closest to the body may also be tuned to the dominant, but

---

<sup>86</sup> In analysis, I use terminology from both Western and Hindustani classical music theory. It should be noted that Malvi singers do not use any of this terminology themselves; very few even know the basic solfege system of Hindustani music. Terms used by Malvi musicians are explicitly indicated as such.

many players tune it to the submediant instead (*dhaivat*), creating a minor third with the tonic. This tuning was likely popularized by Prahlad Tipanya. The two side strings are referred to by stylized names: the string farthest from the player is called *rāginī* (melody) and the string closest to the player is called *jhikārā* (likely an onomatopoeia similar to the sitar's *chikārā* strings). Tambura strings are always played open; they are too far from the instrument's neck to be stopped by pressing against the neck, and there are no frets. Unlike a classical *tānpura*, which maintains an unmetered drone, the Rajasthani tambura is played rhythmically. Singers often use it to establish the tempo and cue the rest of the mandali. The strings can be deflected with a fingernail or, for better control, a heavy metal plectrum worn on right index fingertip (shown in Image 3 above). The three middle strings are always strummed in unison, while the two side strings are played selectively and muted using the ring finger (for *rāginī*) or thumb (for *jhikārā*) when not desired.



Image 3-4: Prahlad Tipanya inserts bridges into a number of new tamburas, brought recently from Rajasthan. Sadguru Kabir Samsthan, Lunyakhedi village, Ujjain District, MP. September 28, 2014.

The tambura is usually played by the lead singer of a mandali. If the lead singer prefers to play harmonium, the tambura will be played by a backup singer. Its most obvious role is to maintain a drone on the tonic, but it also plays an important role in shaping the rhythmic and (as I will discuss in the next section) melodic structure of a bhajan. While playing tambura, a performer uses his left hand to play the *kartāl*, a pair of wooden or plastic clappers in which thin metal cymbals are embedded. The *kartāl* and tambura together establish the tempo. Each performer has his own style of playing tambura, but many, particularly the younger generations, use Prahlad Tipanya's style as a reference. Most Malvi nirgunī bhajans are set in an eight-beat rhythmic cycle. Each four-beat half of the cycle is characterized by an underlying 3+3+2 pattern (♩. ♩. ♩) that is common in *keherwā* (eight-beat) patterns throughout South Asia. At lower tempos, eighth notes are swung heavily. The tambura rhythm's and song melodies reflect the underlying 3+3+2 pattern, while the *kartāl* plays an even 4+4 pattern. The cross-rhythm of 3+3+2 against 4+4 combines with a practice of delaying the start of each phrase by an eighth note to create an appealing angular rhythmic feel. The tambura strikes on the downbeat, but melodic phrases usually start an eighth or quarter-note later. The result feels, particularly at lower speeds, like the halting gait of a bullock cart.

Many bhajans are in a seven or 14-beat rhythmic cycle that can be represented in phrases of 3+2+2 (♩. ♩. ♩). A few bhajans are in six-beat cycles, characterized by a hemiola feel of 2+2+2 (♩ ♩ ♩) along with 3+3 (♩. ♩). Songs in six and seven-beat cycles do not use swung eighth-notes, presumably because of the cycles' natural lilt. The figure below illustrates a few typical tambura and *kartāl* patterns used to accompany songs in eight-beat rhythmic cycles. For simplicity, I have used G as the tonic for all transcriptions in this work. Since the three middle strings of the tambura are tuned to the tonic, each occurrence of G in the figure below represents strumming

all three. In the kartāl notation, round noteheads represent clapping the wooden blocks together, and X noteheads represent shaking or jerking the *kartāl* to produce a sound from the cymbals.



Figure 3-1: Common tambura and kartāl patterns

These are just a few common patterns, far from an exhaustive list of possibilities. Skilled tambura players are adept at choosing different patterns to suit the rhythm of each song and freely switching patterns within a song. They will play sparse patterns (e.g., Example D) while singing verses to ensure the audibility of the lyrics, and dense patterns (e.g., Example C) to provide a burst of energy during the gaps between verses. Less skilled tambura players might know only one pattern (typically a simple pattern such as Example A) and will use it for every song they learn, without any variation in rhythm or dynamics.

The tambura's symbolic significance is just as important as its musical role. As evidence of this, the tambura is present on stage even when it serves no musical purpose. I saw many ensembles in which the lead singer played harmonium while a backup singer played an untuned tambura inaudibly. Why would performers suffer the inconvenience of carrying a fragile instrument for hours on a motorcycle or in a cramped car in these cases, in which the tambura only functions as a prop? What does the tambura mean to Malvi nirgunī singers?



Regula Qureshi's model for exploring the meaning of musical instruments is based on relationships between each instrument's body, affect, and memory (Qureshi 1997). For example, she describes how the sight of a sarangi in certain contexts (e.g. Rajasthan, Sindh) invokes the image of wandering *jogī* singers who accompany themselves on the sarangi while singing nirgunī bhajans or romantic Sufi odes (ibid.). The image of the tambura carries many similar affective associations in Malwa: itinerancy, introspection, and the juxtaposition of material poverty and spiritual wealth. But this is taken a step further; the body of the tambura is a spiritual representation of the human body. Its five strings represent the five elements and five senses, and the three central strings represent the three major *nāḍī* (energy channels) within the body: *īdā* (lunar/female energy) on the left, *pingalā* (solar/male energy) on the right, and *sushumnā* (unified/*kuṇḍalinī* energy) in the center.<sup>87</sup> Many tambura makers strengthen this symbolism by painting sun and moon symbols on the appropriate sides of the tambura's soundboard. In yogic thought, the flow of energy upwards through the *nāḍī* channels affects spiritual evolution. Likewise, the flow of sound vibrations through the strings of the tambura is considered spiritually enriching. Tipanya references this belief in his story, when he describes being "wounded" by the sound. The spiritual potency of the tambura's sound is described in a popular Malvi bhajan, "*Tambura re sun le sādho bhai*" (Listen, Oh Friends, to the Tambura).<sup>88</sup> The

---

<sup>87</sup> Readers of an analytical disposition might question how the five strings can represent *both* the five elements *and* the senses while three of them simultaneously represent something entirely different. In South Asian spiritual traditions – and particularly yogic traditions – practitioners will entertain every possible symbolic or numerological interpretation and often permit many different interpretations to exist simultaneously without cognitive dissonance. This may be frustrating to a logical mind, but it is an essential part of pluralistic spiritual traditions.

<sup>88</sup> Linda Hess observed, during a personal conversation, that this song was not at all common in Malwa during the early 2000s, and must have come into vogue within the last decade. Its adoption into the popular Malvi repertoire likely correlates with Malvi singers' increased use of the tambura as a visual symbol of their tradition.

bhajan suggests that the mere sound of the tambura has the power to liberate listeners from the cycle of birth and death:

*Tambura re sun le sādho bhai  
Terā kiyā karam kaṭ jāyī, terī lakh chaurāsī miṭ jāyī  
Sāheb Kabir ne gāyo tambūro sab Santoṅ kerā māī  
Gyān garībī pāyo re tambūro, Sant samjhaṅ ghar āyī  
Tambura re sun le sādho bhai*

Friends, listen to the sound of the tambura  
Your past deeds and karma will be cut away,  
Your 8.4 million lifetimes will disappear.<sup>89</sup>  
Saheb Kabir sang with the tambura in the company of all the Sants  
Through the tambura, the Wise and the Poor alike  
Will reach the house of the Sants' knowledge.  
Friends, listen to the sound of the tambura !

- Kabir bhajan

The third element of an instrument's meaning, according to Qureshi's framework, is memory. In Malwa, the memory of the tambura is strongly connected to lower-caste singers and by, extension, to caste discrimination. In *Chālo Hamāra Des*, a documentary about Tipanya by Bangalore-based filmmaker Shabnam Virmani, Tipanya's wife, Shanti describes the stigma that once accompanied tamburas in Malwa. "If people saw you walking with a tambura, they would cross the street to avoid you. They would sprinkle water and mutter prayers to avoid being spiritually contaminated. You would not be allowed to stay in guest-houses" (Virmani 2008a). Perhaps these were among the reasons that tamburas were played less often or less openly two generations ago, and why Tipanya only heard one for the first time in 1978, when he was in his twenties. Now that stigma is gone, and tamburas are a regular sight and sound in villages and by

---

<sup>89</sup> In yoga philosophy, the individual soul must be take 84 lakh, or 8.4 million births before it can leave the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*). The phrase "*lakh chaurāsī*" (8.4 million) is commonly used in Sant poetry as shorthand for time spent in *samsāra*.



the roadside. An interviewee in Virmani's film credits this resurgence of the tambura to Tipanya's widespread success and revitalization of Malvi nirgunī bhajans: "All the tamburas were lying in the dust," he explains, "then Tipanya Ji wiped the dust away."

The (re)emergence of the tambura into Malwa's public life is certainly an index of the waxing popularity of nirgunī bhajans. More importantly, it is a representation of Malwa's lower-castes asserting a sense of self-identification as nirgun bhaktas. When Tipanya made his first international tour in 2002, the singer Bheru Singh Chauhan proudly exclaimed, "This tambura is going to London!" (Hess 2015). Chauhan was articulating the level of identification that nirgunī singers in Malwa have with the instrument; if a tambura has attained status sufficient to travel abroad, perhaps the lower castes of Malwa are on their way to finally earning respect and dignity within their society.

### ***Bhajan Form and Structure***

All Malvi nirgunī bhajans follow a strophic form, beginning with a chorus (*tek*) and then alternating between verses (*antara*) and repetitions of the chorus. Bhajans may have as few as three *antara* or as many as eight, but most have four or five. The last *antara* always contains the *chhāp*, the name of the poet who allegedly wrote the bhajan. Figure 2 below illustrates standard nirgun bhajan form.

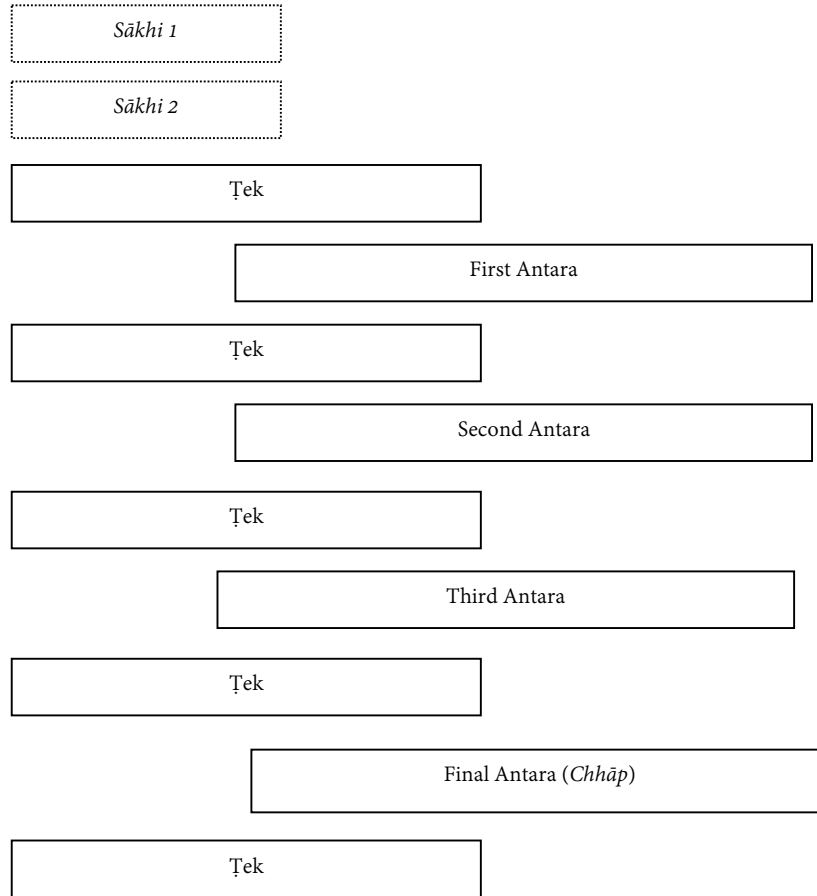


Figure 3-2: Standard nirgun bhajan form.

Although mandalis are adapting stylistically to make their performances more musically engaging, poetic lyrics remain the central element of the performance. The music is intended to engage audiences without distracting them. Musical structure is therefore subordinate to poetic structure; the phrasing of melodic lines adheres exactly to poetic phrasing. Melodic phrases are predictable, syllabic, and sung with little to no ornamentation. Unlike a bhajan rendered by a classical or *ghazal* singer, in which each verse may have a different melody, and which may involve extended melismatic improvisation, the melody never varies at all between choruses or verses. Within a single bhajan, every chorus will be sung with exactly the same melody, and every verse will be sung with exactly the same melody. Tune and poem are not conceived as a

single, inseparable entity.<sup>90</sup> The clearest indicator of this is the tendency of singers to set multiple poems to the exact same melody. Malvi singers have no qualms about singing melodically identical bhajans within the same concert, or even back-to-back. Through the remainder of the chapter, it should become clear how the musical style of this tradition has developed in a manner that facilitates the accessibility and adaptability of poetic lyrics.

### Sākhī

Before beginning each bhajan, performers will sing one or more pithy couplets in free rhythm. These are *dohē* couplets, referred to as *sākhī* (literally “witness”) in the Sant tradition. The choice of nomenclature between *dohā* and *sākhī* may be somewhat politicized, as it reveals whether the speaker aligns with sagun or nirgun traditions. The same couplet will be called a *dohā* when sung by upper-caste devotees at the Ram *mandir* and a *sākhī* when sung by lower-caste Kabir devotees at a satsang. In this work, I will use both terms according to ethnographic context.

*Sākhī*-s are not part of any bhajan, but are chosen by the singer to complement the bhajan’s meaning. Some singers have limited knowledge of *sākhī*-s and therefore rely on a limited set of well-known *sākhī*-s that may have little relevance to the proceeding bhajan. The ability to draw from an encyclopedic memory bank of *sākhī*-s and choose the best ones for each bhajan is highly respected among singers and audiences. The free-rhythm singing of *sākhī*-s before a bhajan bears an apparent similarity to the singing of *ālāp* before a piece in classical or semi-classical performance.<sup>91</sup> However, while classical *ālāp* is intended to showcase artistic

---

<sup>90</sup> Edward Henry observes the same phenomenon in nirgun bhajans in Uttar Pradesh (1991).

<sup>91</sup> Stephen Slawek (1988) notes this parallel in his discussion of responsorial *kīrtan* in Varanasi, which is also preceded by a *dohā*. From my observations, this practice is standard in many regional folk music traditions of North India, particularly those associated with poet-saints.

creativity, the primary purpose of nirgun bhajans is to share the poetry of the Sants.

Accordingly, the style of singing is highly syllabic to ensure the words can be easily heard. The lack of melismatic singing may also reflect the limited musical training of Malvi singers; a few of the same bhajans are sung by professional musicians in Rajasthan, e.g., with a greater use of melisma. However, Edward Henry (1991) observes that professional nirgun singers in Uttar Pradesh also sing syllabically. Reflecting both the limited musical vocabulary and emphasis on poetry over musicianship, *sākhī* melodies are not improvised. Each singer learns or creates a limited set of melodies which they can use for any *sākhī*-s they may learn. While there is considerable variation between singers, I have not heard any individual singer use more than six or seven different *sākhī* melodies over the course of a performance. *Sākhī*-s may easily be mapped onto pre-existing melodies because they follow a rigidly standardized metric formula.

Figure 3 below shows a few examples of common *sākhī* melodies. For illustration, I have shown how they may all be applied to the same *sākhī*. I have chosen the following *sākhī*, as it is both popular and thematically appropriate:

*Ek sādhe to sab sādhe, sab sādhe ik jāye*  
*Mālī sīche mūl ko, phūl phale adhāye*

Do one correctly, and all will be correct.  
Try to do all correctly, and even the one will be lost.  
The gardener must water the roots,  
and flowers and fruit will grow.

- Kabir *sākhī*

*Ex. A*

Ek sā dhe to sab sā dhe sab sā dhe ik a jā - ye

3 Mā lī sī - che mūl a ko aur a phūl a pha le a-dhaye

*Ex. B*

Ek sā dhe to sab sā dhe sab sā dhe ik a jāye

7 Mā lī sī che mūl a ko aur a phūl a pha le a dhāye

*Ex. C*

Ek sā dhe to sab sā dhe Ek sā dhe to sab sā dhe sab sā dhe ik a jāye

11 Mā lī sī che mūl a ko aur a phūl a pha le a - dhāye

Figure 3-3: Example *sākhī* melodies.

In all of the example melodies above, the metrical structure of the *sākhī* is clearly maintained in four distinct phrases. Melisma and ornamentation may be used sparingly (as in Ex. B) or generously (as in Ex. C), but are only used at end of phrases, where they will not disrupt the clarity of the poetry. Phrases may be repeated, as in Ex. C, and filler words such as *e-jī!* (hey!) or *aur* (and) are often inserted for rhythmic effect. Scholars of South Asian oral literature have noted the brevity and simple formula of *dohā* couplets allows for easy

memorization, dissemination, and composition (Schomer 1987b). In Malwa, the use of simple melodic formulae complements the poetic structure, aiding in the same processes. The mnemonic effect of *sākhī* melodies is illustrated in my observation that an individual Malvi singer will rarely sing the same *sākhī* using different melodies. In other words, a will nearly always sing *sākhī*-s X, Y and Z with melody A, and *always* sing *sākhī*-s P, Q, and R with melody B. It is therefore common for a bhajan to begin with three *sākhī*-s in three different melodic modes, none of which matches the mode of the proceeding bhajan. From these observations, I suggest that Malvi singers retain *sākhī*-s in their memories in musical, rather than “plain text” form, and that this allows them to easily retain and recall an impressive amount of poetry.

### **Bhajan Melody**

After the introductory *sākhī*-s a singer will proceed into the bhajan, typically starting with the *tek* (chorus). The *pad* or *shabd* poetic structure is not rigidly standardized, but there are many common elements. In most cases, each *antara* (verse) is a single stanza consisting of two lines of equal length, each with a caesura in the middle, resulting in a total of four poetic phrases. The chorus may be one or two lines, each with a caesura in the middle, for a total of two or four phrases. There are different arrangements of end-rhyme. In some bhajans, all lines rhyme across verses and chorus. In others, only the second line of each verse rhymes with the chorus. In some, each verse has a self-contained end-rhyme that is not common with other verses or with the chorus.<sup>92</sup> Prahlad Tipanya’s most popular bhajan, “*Zara halke gādī hāṅko*” (Drive my Cart Slowly, O God my Cart-driver) is an example of this style:

---

<sup>92</sup> More detail on these poetic structures can be found in Hess and Singh (2002).

♩ = 140

Za ra hal-ke gā - dī hān - ko Me re Rā - ma gā - dī vā le Zara dhī re dhī re gā dī

hān - ko Me re Rā ma gā - dī vā le Ga - dī mhā - rī rang a rang ī - ī

pa - yā he lāl - a ghu - lāl E ji hān ka na vā - le che la cha bī lī bhaiyā

bhai ṭha na vā - le Ram O bhai - yā hal ke gā dī hān - ko Me re Rā ma gā - dī vā le

Figure 3-4: “Zara halke gādī hānko,” chorus and first verse, transcribed from Prahlad Tipanya’s album *Kabīr Soī Pīr Jo Jāne Piḍ* (1993).

In this case, the chorus is a single poetic line and is rendered as a single melodic line of two phrases (mm. 1-5). In many cases in which the chorus is only one poetic line, the second foot of the line will be repeated twice in a higher register, usually centered on the fourth or fifth scale degree (*shuddha madhyam* or *pancham*).<sup>93</sup> This effectively creates four melodic phrases from two poetic phrases. This allows bhajans with a one-line chorus to be mapped into the same melody as bhajans with a two-line chorus. One example is the bhajan, “*Thārī kāyā nagarī meṇ padesī pīyo bole*,” (Within the Town of Your Body, Your Long-lost Lover Speaks):

<sup>93</sup> Observing a similar trend in *kīrtan* melodies in Varanasi, Stephen Slawek notes the similarity to the *sthai-antara* structure in Hindustani classical form (Slawek 1988).

♩ = 168

Thā-rī k̄ā - yā na ga rī\_ meñ\_ pa ra de sī\_ Pī yo bo - le Thā rī

5 k̄ā - yā na ga rī\_ meñ\_ pa ra de sī\_ Pī yo bo - le

11 pa ra\_ de sī Pī - yo\_ bo - le\_ pa ra\_ de - sī Pī - yo\_ bo - le He pa ra de - sī Pī - yo

17 bo - le\_ re\_ Thā rī k̄ā - yā na ga rī\_ meñ\_ pa ra de - sī\_ Pī yo bo - le

Figure 3-5: Chorus of “Thāri Kāyā Nagarī Meñ” transcribed from performance by Tarasingh Dodve. Indore, MP. May 22, 2015.

In this example, the single line of the chorus is sung twice with the same melody (mm. 1-8) followed by a break during which only tambura and *kartāl* are played. Then the second poetic foot of chorus is sung twice centered on the upper dominant (mm.11-15) and one final time descending back to the tonic (mm.15-17) before reiterating the entire chorus line in its original melody. This style of organizing text is typical: each poetic foot is assigned a melodic phrase, and phrases or pairs of phrases are repeated at the singers’ discretion. The caesurae in between poetic feet are clearly indicated by the melodic contour. They are also the only places where we may hear the use of melisma (e.g. mm.14 in Figure 4, mm.3 and 6 in Figure 5). The clear and predictable correlation between poetic phrases and melodic phrases ensures the poetic structure is clear to listeners, and allows singers to more easily learn poems and set them to melody.



## Melodic Modes

Most Malvi musicians have no formal training in music theory, and do not cognize their bhajan melodies in terms of *rāga*-s or scales. However, there are common modes or sets of pitches used in this genre. In this section I will describe the most common modes used. I will refer to them using Western terminology as well as the names of analogous Hindustani *rāga*-s. It should be understood, however, that the singers are not singing in classical *rāga*-s, but in melodic frameworks which make use of the same pitch classes.<sup>94</sup> Therefore I will refer to “the *Bhūpālī* mode” for example, instead of *rāga Bhūpālī*.

A vast majority of the bhajans I heard and recorded use modes derived from the Mixolydian or *Khamāj* mode (1 2 3 4 5 6 b7), or less commonly from the Ionian or *Bilāwal* mode (1 2 3 4 5 6 7). The bhajan “*Zara halke gādī hāñko*” (Figure 4) uses the full septatonic Mixolydian, but most Malvi bhajans use pentatonic derivatives. The most common by far is the Major Pentatonic mode or *Bhūpālī* mode (1 2 3 5 6). Other common modes are the second mode of the major pentatonic, which resembles the *rāga*-s *Megh* and *Madhmadh Sārang* (1 2 4 5 b7), and the fifth mode of the major pentatonic, which resembles the *rāga Durgā* (1 2 4 5 6). Minor modes are used less frequently, including the septatonic Aeolian Minor or *Āsāvarī* mode (1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7), and the pentatonic *Shivaranjanī* mode (1 2 b3 5 6).

While I was immersed in Malvi bhajan-singing during my fieldwork, I began to notice an interesting trend: many bhajans seemed to be combinations of two modes, but the different modes would be clearly segregated into separate melodic phrases. The chorus might be in one mode and the verse in another, or the first foot of a line may be in one mode and the second in

---

<sup>94</sup> Classical *rāga*-s define many parameters of melodic movement beyond defining available pitches. Nazir Jairazbhoy might describe the melodic frameworks of Malvi bhajans as “embryonic *rāga*-s” similar to those he encountered in Rajasthan (Jairazbhoy 1977).

another. But each individual phrase neatly correlated to a single, usually pentatonic, melodic mode. In most cases, they would correlate to the ambitus; one mode would be used in the lower register, and another would be used in the higher register.

The bhajan, “*Saudāgir, ab kyon bhūlyo jāye*” (Trader, Why Have You Lost Your Way?) in Figure 6 below provides an excellent example. It uses three different modes in a single bhajan:

*Thā-ro Dhar-ma san - gā - ti re lār Thā-ro mā - ra-ga mā - ti re lār Sau-*

*dā - gi ra ab a kyon bhoo - lo jaye Sau - dā - gi - ra*

*ab - a ma - ta bhoo - lo jaye*

*Hā - thā re hā thā lo - bhī A re hā - thā re hā-thā lo - bhī te phi ri*

*yāre lo-bhī Meīn to phi - ri re thā - rī lār*

Figure 3-6: “*Saudāgir, ab kyon bhūlyo jāye*” Chorus and part of first verse

The chorus (mm. 1-16) immediately suggests that we are in a *Megh* mode (1 2 4 5 b7) with a tonic of G (G A C D F).<sup>95</sup> However, once the verse begins (mm. 17-27), we shift to a

<sup>95</sup> This may also be described as the second mode of an F Major pentatonic.

*Durgā* mode (1 2 4 5 6) with a tonic of G (G A C D E).<sup>96</sup> In other words, a b7 (F) has been replaced with a 6 (E). However, the b7 occurs *only* below the central tonic, and the 6 occurs *only* above the central tonic. The bhajan remains entirely in *Megh* in the lower register and entirely in *Durgā* in the upper register. In this example and in many other bhajans, each individual melodic phrase moves within a clusters of only five notes. The chorus (mm. 1-16) uses the b7 below the octave, and 1 2 4 5 in the central octave. The verse (mm. 17-27) retains the 1 2 4 5 in the central octave and adds the 6 above them.

Overall, this melodic organization suggests that bhajans are constructed not as cohesive units following a single pervasive melodic framework, but as discrete phrases constructed from small clusters of notes.<sup>97</sup> Each of these clusters does seem to fit within a mode that is melodically cohesive and, in most cases, resembles an “embryonic” *rāga* (Jairazbhoy 1977). This explanation is further supported by the melisma at the end of the first line of the verse in Figure 6 (mm. 31). This phrase suddenly introduces a mediant (*shuddh gandhār*), suggesting a shift into a major pentatonic or *Bhūpālī* mode (1 2 3 5 6). However, if we perceive the bhajan melody as an assemblage of independent phrases, we may instead interpret it as a generic melodic “tag” that singers may append to the end of a line regardless of the mode used in the rest of the bhajan. Such tags are very commonly used, particularly at the end of long-held notes, presumably to provide rhythmic variety and interest.

This phrase-centric conceptualization of melody reflects a tradition that has not been conditioned to think in terms of scales or *rāga*-s, but I believe it also reflects the influence of the tambura and *ektār*. The first time I tried singing with a nirgunī tambura, I found my voice

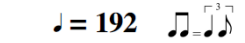
---


<sup>96</sup> This may be described as the fifth mode of a C Major pentatonic.

<sup>97</sup> An alternative possibility is that there are overarching melodic structures that use different notes below the tonic than they do above the tonic, as in certain Arab *maqam*-s (Marcus 1978), but I find this less probable.

behaving quite differently than it does when I sing with a harmonium, guitar, or other instruments. With a tambura, my voice naturally begins to move in clusters of notes, pulled magnetically to notes that match or complement the tambura. The “magnetism” of the tonic and dominant provided by the tambura may explain why so many phrases of Malvi bhajans are essentially movements around or between these notes. The short duration of the phrases is influenced by the short duration of the tambura’s resonating strings and by the strumming patterns used. By contrast, the sustained resonance of a classical *tānpura* drone encourages singers to slowly stretch their voices between notes, instead of quickly moving into place on a tonic or dominant.

This modular phrase-based melodic organization is highly adaptable. I believe that Malvi singers subconsciously imbibe or discover these modular units through exposure and experience, and work with them in the manner of Lego™ bricks, chaining them together to create new melodies. When a singer hears or reads a new poem, he can easily set it to music by using these building blocks. As mentioned earlier, an entire bhajan melody may be recycled for use with a different poem, with minor rhythmic variations to account for different lyrics. However, in many cases only select phrases are shared between bhajans. One bhajan might take its entire verse or chorus melody from another, or just a single phrase. For example, compare the choruses of the bhajans “*Kar le mail gañvārā*” (Clean the Stains Completely) in Figure 7, and “*Muniyā pinjarewalī nā*” (The Hermit Cannot be Caged) in Figure 8 below.

♩ = 192    




He sat a gu rū hai bai - pā rī te rā sā - hab a hai bai - pā rī mu ni yā—

6



pin ja re vā lī nā o te rā sa ta gu rū hai bai - pā rī mu ni yā—

10



pin ja re vā lī nā O te rā sā hab a hai bai - pā rī

Figure 3-7: Chorus of “Muniyā pinjare vālī nā” transcribed from performance by Pritam Malviya and Madanlal Malviya, Lunyakhedi, Ujjain District, MP on August 16, 2014.

♩ = 180    



He kar le mail a gañ - vārā gurā jī se kar a le— mail gañ vā - rā re kā so - te?

7



Kyā dhūn ḡat a bār - am - a - bā - rā Sa hab a se? kar le mail a gañ - vā - rā Kyā -

12



soch - at - a bār - am - a - bā - rā Sa hab a se? kar le mail a gañ - vā - rā

Figure 3-8: Chorus of “Kar le mail gañvārā” transcribed from performance by Prahlad Tipanya and group in Kajlas, Bhopal District, MP on February 28, 2015.

In both bhajans, the chorus is only one line, or two poetic feet. As in the example of “*Thārī kāyā nagarī meṇ*” (Figure X above), the second foot of the line is repeated twice in order to produce a total of four feet. In both of the bhajans above, the repeated second foot is sung first, then the entire line is sung together. In the first bhajan, the chorus consists of the line:

*Kyā dhūṇḍhat bārambārā? Sāhab se kar le mail gāṇwārā*  
(What do you search for again and again?  
Through the master, clean the stain completely)

Which is rendered, within the bhajan as:

*He kar le mail gāṇwārā, Gurāji se kar le mail gāṇwārā*  
*Re kā sote?*  
*Kyā dhūṇḍhat bārambārā? Sāhab se kar le mail gāṇwārā*  
*Kyā sochat bārambārā? Sāhab se kar le mail gāṇwārā*

(Clean the stain completely through the Guru, clean the stain completely  
Why do you sleep?  
What do you search for again and again?  
Through the Master, clean the stain completely)

It is common for singers to repeat lines in part or whole with slightly different lyrics. In this bhajan, “*kyā dhūṇḍat*” (what do you search for?) is replaced with “*kā sote*” (Why do you sleep?) (mm. 6) and “*kyā sochat*” (why do you keep thinking?) (mm. 12). Such changes not only provide rhythmic variation, but allow singers to assimilate different versions of a poem into a single performance.

The second bhajan’s chorus consists of the line:  
*Muniyā pinjarevālī nā, terā Satgurū hai baipārī*  
(The hermit cannot be caged, your True Teacher is a merchant)

Which is rendered in the bhajan as:

*He Satgurū hai baipārī terā Sāhab hai baipārī*  
*Muniyā pinjarevālī nā, O terā Satgurū hai baipārī*

*Muniyā pinjarevālī nā, O terā Sāhab hai baipārī*  
(O your True Teacher is a merchant, your Master is a merchant,  
The hermit cannot be caged, O your True Teacher is a merchant,  
The hermit cannot be caged, O your Master is a merchant)

In addition to similar poetic organization, the two bhajans begin with almost identical melodic phrases descending from the upper tonic (mm. 1-5 in Figure 7, mm. 1-5 in Figure 8). However, the melodies then begin to deviate. After this first phrase, they no longer share phrase length or melodic contour. Furthermore, the first bhajan shifts to a different mode with a  $\sharp 7$  (*shuddh nishadh*), similar to *rāga Brindāvanī Sārang* (1 2 4 5 7), while the second bhajan stays in the *Megh* mode using a  $\flat 7$  (*komal nishadh*).<sup>98</sup> The verses of the bhajans, which I have not notated, have entirely different melodies from one another.

The preponderance of bhajans that share only one or two melodic phrases strongly suggests that Malvi singers construct bhajan melodies from pre-existing learned or created melodic building blocks. These units are highly mutable and adaptable. In some cases, a phrase's rhythmic is kept intact between bhajans, but it is rendered in a different melodic mode. Compare the second line of "*Kar le mail gañvārā*" (Figure 7, mm. 7-11) with the second line of "*Kin kāran āyo?*" (For What Purpose have You Come?) below (Figure 9, mm. 5-9). Both share the exact same melodic contour, and the same rhythm (adjusted for number of syllables in the poetic text). But the former song uses a  $\sharp 7$  below the tonic, shifting into the *Brindāvanī Sārang* mode (1 2 4 5 7), while the latter stays in the *Megh* mode (1 2 4 5  $\flat 7$ ) by maintaining a  $\flat 7$  below the tonic.

---

<sup>98</sup> The *rāga Brindāvanī Sārang* in fact uses both the natural and flat 7, but in this analysis I have described it using simply the natural 7 to different it from the *Megh / Madhmadh Sārang* mode.



Figure 3-9: Chorus of “Kin karan āyo,” transcribed from performance by Prahlad Singh Tipanya and group in Lunyakhedi, Ujjain District, MP. December 18, 2014.

In other cases, melodic units may be rendered in different meters. Compare the first line from the verses of the bhajans “*Guru śharaṇ meṇ rehnā*” (Remain in Surrender to the Guru) and “*Kartā karam se nyārā*” (The Creator is Different from the Creation) in Figures 10 and 11 below. The first bhajan is in a fast quadruple meter, while the second is in a medium triple meter. However, barring stylistic differences between the two singers (such as the repetition of a phrase in the first bhajan (Figure 10, mm. 2-3) they are the same general melody.



Figure 3-10: First line of first verse of “Guru sharan meṇ rehnā” transcribed from performance by Ambaram Solanki and troupe, Gadroli, Ujjain District, MP. May 20, 2015.





Figure 3-11: First line of first verse of “Kartā karam se nyārā,” transcribed from performance by Prahlad Tipanya and troupe, Lunyakhedi, Ujjain District, MP. August 15, 2014.

These examples illustrate how bhajan melodies often share melodic and rhythmic material, and hint at the subconscious processes by which performers likely set poems to melody using pre-existing structural units. This organization allows the tradition as a whole to be highly adaptable. As discussed in the introduction, most of the bhajans sung in the Malvi nirgun tradition are not written by the historical Sants to whom they are attributed, but are products of the Malvi oral tradition.<sup>99</sup> Through the processes I have outlined, it is a simple matter to integrate new poetry into the repertoire. Singers may learn new poems from books, or through live or recorded performances by musicians from other regions. Then, they organize these poems into a new, predictable and syllabic melody, often started with melodic segments they know from other songs. The modularity of Malvi bhajans also allows for alteration in bhajans over time. Many bhajans exist in several variations. These variations simply be phrasing for the same idea, or they may drastically alter the philosophical meaning of an entire bhajan. Singers who have learned multiple variations of a bhajan may repeat lines to include all the variations in a performance (as seen in Figures 10 and 11). Mapping poetry onto predictable and familiar melodies also allows singers to memorize staggering amounts of poetry. One singer in Rajul

<sup>99</sup> Hess (2015) speaks in far greater depth about theorizing orality and examines the specific case of the Malvi oral repertoire.

Shah's documentary (2008) boasts of performing for seven days without repeating a single bhajan. I am willing to credit this claim. I accompanied Prahlad Tipanya in concerts for several months, and every performance included at least one bhajan I had never heard before.

It would be too dismissive, however, to suggest that music *only* serves as a mnemonic in nirgunī bhajans. As much as singers emphasize the centrality of poetry, music is an undeniable force of attraction for both singers and their audiences; many informants recount how their interest in Sant poetry began with joyful experiences of hearing music. Prahlad Tipanya himself commented on the power of music to reach the masses and transform the consciousness of a society. “*Yeh sab parivartan sangeet se hī ho gaye*,” he explained to me once. “All these changes, they happened through music. Poetry alone didn't do it. The poetry has been there for hundreds and hundreds of years, but did it change anyone? Things changed when we started singing.” Tipanya is therefore crediting the spiritual and social potency of the Sant-*vānī* not to poetic text alone, but to poems performed as bhajans. Although my analyses in this chapter suggest that music and poetry may be conceptualized distinctly, within social life of Malwa they are inseparable. The music exists as a vehicle for the poetry, and the poetry survives and thrives through the music.

### ***Conclusion***

*September 23, 2014: Indore, Madhya Pradesh*

Today, Prahlad ji and his team are in Indore for a concert. A Dr. Varma has asked them to sing bhajans at her house occasion of her father's death anniversary. The *satsang* is held for a small audience, consisting of the doctor's close family and friends. In the intimate setting, the music is stirring, and all the guests appreciate Tipanya's commentary and enjoy his wit. Afterward, musicians and guests partake in a vegetarian lunch, and I converse with Dr. Varma. She explains to that she has heard Tipanya on CD before, but this is her first time experiencing

his music live. She found the experience emotionally moving and musically impressive, and she remarks to me in English, “they are very original.”

At the time, I believed this was an inaccurate assessment of Tipanya’s group. After all, whenever I asked Tipanya or any of the other members about their songs, they denied any part in composing them. “I just learn them from here and there. Sometimes a tune stays in my mind,” Tipanya would comment. Later, I realized that Dr. Varma’s statement captured a poignant truth. Although nirgun singers in Malwa do not identify themselves as composers, artists, or creators of repertoire, they are constantly reinventing their inherited tradition. Through ever-changing performances and interpretations, they ensure that the Sant-*vāṇī* remains relevant, remains accessible, and remains original.



*Image 3-5: Prahlad Tipanya with his son, Vijay, performing in Indore. September 24, 2014.*

This chapter has introduced bhajan ensembles and discussed the form and structure of Malvi nirgunī bhajans. I have discussed how the tambura shapes bhajan structure and serves as a symbol of spiritual and social identity for nirgun singers. I have also explored how the musical structure of Malvi bhajans is conducive to the oral preservation of poetry and the incorporation of new poetry into the region's repertoire. Through all of these discussions, I have endeavored to highlight an underlying paradox of the genre: Malvi nirgunī bhajans are simultaneously old and new. The idea of the Sants represent centuries of poetic tradition and mystical messages that reach beyond time, but is interpreted today through distinctly modern social lenses. Within Malwa, nirgunī bhajans are perceived as part of a tradition dating back to at least the fourteenth century CE, but simultaneously celebrated as being a new social and musical movement. Even the semiotically turgid body of the tambura invokes images of both solitary old men, singing without an audience, and of a generation of youth singers, eager to bring Malvi music and Sant poetry to the world stage. In the next chapter, these paradoxes will rise to the foreground as I discuss the emergence of Malvi nirgun bhajans into new performance contexts, and the stylistic adaptations that follow.

## Chapter 4

### “THIS WORLD IS A BUSTLING MARKETPLACE”

#### CHANGING CONTEXTS, IDENTITIES, AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

*Yo saṃsāra kāgaz kī puḍiyā, bünd paḍe to gali jāye*  
*Yo saṃsāra kāñch vālī chūḍiyā, lāge ṭhakoro jari jāye*  
*Yo saṃsāra borīvālī jhāḍī, ulajh-pulajh mar jāye*  
*Yo saṃsāra hāṭ vālo melo, saudā kari ne ghar jāye*

This world is a small paper packet, one drop and it will be ruined  
This world is a glass bangle, one strike and it will shatter  
This world is a thorny bush, caught in its brambles you will die  
This world is a bustling market – do your business, and go home.

- Kabir Bhajan

*May 7, 2015: Raikunda, India.*

Listen: The clamor of drums and cymbals sounds like a battlefield. Our car has barely entered the grounds, but it is already surrounded by a veritable swarm of enthusiastic welcomers armed with instruments and flowers. Prahlad Ji emerges from the car and is thronged by adoring followers eager to garland him and touch his feet. I leap out from my side of the car and duck behind the crowd, dodging the flurry of lovingly tossed flower petals as I try to find a good vantage point from which to capture the scene on camera. My efforts are futile. The sun has set, and there is too little light to film the event, even if I could see anything over the excited crowd.

As Prahlad Ji is guided to his place of honor on the stage, we park the Scorpio SUV and carry our instruments into the grounds. An open field in the village has been covered by a large fabric tent, held up by a steel and wooden frame. On one end, a stage has been erected, on which sit large black speakers emblazoned with neon stickers advertising the sound company's name (Sapna Sounds) and contact number. They squeal and echo through the open space. We are all grateful for the chance to stretch after several hours packed inside. The Scorpio is a large vehicle,

but it was not designed to accommodate eight people along with a *dholak*, harmonium, tambura, *ṭimkī* and violin. We are invited to enjoy a home-cooked meal in the organizers' home before we all take our places in the audience.

Prahlad Ji is seated toward the rear of the stage, next to a dignified-looking man with a long grey beard and a long white *kurta* – a *mahant* from the Bakhilai district Kabir Panth named Gangadas Sahib. In the center of the stage, religious scholar and Dalit activist Satyanand Maharaj is making an impassioned speech. He invokes the name of Ambedkar as often as the name of Kabir, and invokes Sant poetry and hagiography to talk about social revolution rather than personal spiritual transformation:

SATYANAND MAHARAJ: Consider this, contemplate this, muse on this! What is the belief in India? Only a Brahmin can become a *gyānī* (wise, knowledgeable). Nobody else is capable of this. That is the belief in our country. The Brahmin is a *gyānī* and everyone else is a dishrag. There is no other place like this in the world – in England, America, Germany, Japan, France – all society can become *gyānī*. Even their mothers and sisters are educated over there. Now, a few of our mothers and sisters are starting to receive education, they can even read and write English, but before they did not have the right to an education. Why is this? Because in the rest of the world there are no Brahmins, but in India there are Brahmins...

So Kabir started this *revolution*. And he started by being born into this society, and born from the womb of a Brahmin woman.<sup>100</sup> After all, the work of Brahmin women is to make more Brahmins, isn't it? You tell me, do they have any other work? Think about it, consider it, contemplate it!

---

<sup>100</sup> Satyanand Maharaj is referring to the common belief that Kabir was born to a Brahmin parents, and only fostered by Muslim Julaha parents. Most scholars agree that this legend is an obvious Brahminization of Kabir's hagiography, intended to suggest that Kabir's spiritual insights would have been impossible to someone of non-Brahmin birth. Interestingly, although Maharaj himself likely disbelieves the claims of Kabir's Brahmin birth, he is aware that most of his audience uncritically accepts them, and therefore invokes them for rhetorical effect.

The audience loves the speaker’s energy and wit, but after some time, I hear restless murmurs. They want to hear Prahlad Tipanya sing. The MC asks youth from the local Kabir community to formally welcome and felicitate Tipanya and the other chief guests. The youth come to the stage bearing garlands, shawls, and sandalwood paste to adorn Tipanya, Maharaj, and Gangadas Sahib. Tipanya receives the shawl and sandalwood *tilak*, but intercepts the garland before it is placed around his neck. The rest of the musicians come to the stage and begin to set up their instruments. They too receive shawls, garlands, and marked foreheads as the tambura, *dholak*, violin, and *ṭimkī* are tuned to match the harmonium. Young volunteers from the village scramble to arrange microphones in a tangled wiry mess in front of the performers. While the ensemble prepares, Tipanya announces another guest: a scholar from “a big university in California, America” who is researching Kabir bhajans. I am guided to the stage and presented with garland, shawl, and *tilak*. The group has kept an open spot for me on the stage and placed my *bāṇsurī* (bamboo flute) beside it, but I have already insisted I will not play with them today. With less than two months left in India, I realized I have very few full-concert video recordings, and I would like to take one tonight.

I return to my place behind the camera, and Tipanya opens his performance with a *guru-vandana* (invocation to the teacher):

*Dhyāna mūlaṃ gurū mūrtiḥ, pūjā mūlaṃ gurūr padam  
Mantra mūlaṃ gurūr vākyaṃ, moksha mūlaṃ gurū kṛipā*

The root of meditation is the Guru’s form,  
The root of worship is the Guru’s feet,  
The root of recitation is the Guru’s word,  
The root of Liberation is the Guru’s Grace

- Sanskrit Guru Invocation, recorded in *Skanda Purāṇa*

His voice echoes through the metallic-sounding PA system, carrying well beyond the tented ground and into the fields beyond. He interprets it for the audience, emphasizing that the “guru” referred to is not a physical teacher, but an omnipresent divinity to be found within oneself. He launches into song:

*Binā tankār seva pāyal bāje re bāje, Jhīnā Jhīnā āvāz suno re*  
*Ghaḍiyāl Sant bāṅsuri vīnā, anhad nād suno re*

*Mhāra sādhu bhāī – sun le smāraṇ, surat se mile re*  
*Sab ghaṭ nām sādho, ek he re ji*

Without movement from the body, anklets are ringing  
Listen to that subtle, subtle voice  
The bell of the Sants rings, the *bāṅsuri* and *vīna* play  
Listen to the boundless sound

My dear seekers – listen to repetition of the Name, unite with that awareness  
All names and all bodies are One.

- Kabir bhajan

The crowd, segregated into two sections by gender, listens in rapt attention. Prahlad ji continues to sing, speaking intermittently to explain the significance of particular lines or couplets.

Regardless of his own views on Brahmins or social revolutions, his public performance emphasizes unity rather than division. “Listen to the voice of the Sants, and discover this truth within your own life,” he beseeches the audiences, “the same divinity resides within all of you.”

A few listeners are overwhelmed by devotional energy, musical ecstasy, or in some cases, alcohol. They stand up to sway, revolve, and dance to the bhajans. From the crowd of hundreds, only two or three people will dance at any time, and never standing anywhere close to one another. Now, a woman in the first row dances. Even as she turns and swings her arms in rapturous abandon, her *ghunghaṭ* (veil) remains covering her face, as is customary for Malvi



women at public functions. She is a striking picture of contrast, as this bhajan offers her a rare, but limited, moment of freedom within her repressed life.



*Image 4-1: A section of the crowd at one of Tipanya's performances. Bakhelai village, Kargon District, MP. February 26, 2015.*

I look at my watch; it is well past midnight. Concerts in many Indian cities must shut down by 11PM to meet curfew regulations, but out in the village, they frequently last the entire night. The concert ground is covered with bedding and blankets. When listeners grow too tired to keep their eyes open, they will stay where they are and lie down to sleep, the sound of the bhajans still washing over them. Many of them have come from several hours away, as we have. In the morning they will wait by the road for buses or delivery vehicles to take them back to their villages.

A few weeks later, I am sitting with Prahlad Ji's son, Ajay, in his flat in Indore. "It was not always like this, you know." He tells me. "Nowadays thousands of people are coming for Papa's concerts. He has become very big. But for 20 years he sang and no one paid him a cent.

We would go wherever they would call for a *satsang* – walk for hours, and then return home in the morning. Sometimes they did not even feed us.” He recounts one occasion in the 1990s, in which they were invited to perform in a village some distance away. His father traveled separately to the village the day before, and now the rest of the group was going to join him on the night of the program.

AJAY TIPANYA: The bus only takes you so far. After that, we sat by the road to wait for the post truck to pass, and we climbed on that with our instruments. But that also stopped five or six kilometers outside the village. We thought, five or six kilometers is not a big deal, and we heard the sounds of some function in the distance. But when we got there, the village was empty. Everyone had gone for some wedding in the next village. Finally, around nine or ten-o-clock we found one man – he thought we were thieves coming in the night. We showed him the invitation card and he said, ‘that is the name of this village, but there is no person by that name who lives here. He must live in the *other* village with the same name – it is on the opposite side of the river.’ So, Vivek Bhaiyya, we had to walk then – 20 kilometers or so, all through the night, holding our instruments. And nobody had mobile phones in those days. Papa did not know where we were, or when we would arrive. We final reached after four in the morning, performed, and came home the next day.

I am astounded to hear these stories, and slightly ashamed recalling my own complaints whenever I have to carrying my own instruments several blocks for a performance. Ajay’s stories contrasted strikingly with the program in Raikunda, in which Kabir singers were treated as honored guests, spiritual mentors, and even celebrities. In her documentary *Chālo Hamārā Des* (Come to Our Country), Shabnam Virmani refers to Prahlad Tipanya as a “rural rock star.” This label comes to mind every time I see Tipanya perform before his massive crowds, but a number of other labels accompany it. Bhajan singers adopt the personae of entertainers or “rock stars,” but also the personae of spiritual leaders, cultural tradition-bearers, and social activists. Through bhajans, singers may assume one or more of these roles in hopes of increased social or cultural capital. A generation ago, none of these identities were available to nirgun singers; many of these

identities did not even exist in rural Malwa. Previous chapters have discussed the social context and musical style of Malvi nirgun bhajans. This chapter will address new contexts for nirgun bhajans, and the musical adaptations that follow. It will address how social identities of singers are changing as they strategically navigate the transformations in their society effected by broader changes in technology and media culture in India.

### ***Nirgun Bhajans in New Contexts***

Bhajan singers and mandalis are increasingly seeking to identify themselves as “professional performers.” This repositioning may involve a number of maneuvers, include establishing a formal name for the mandali, printing business cards (in English as well as Hindi, if particularly ambitious) and producing commercial recordings. Most importantly, it involves performing not only at informal home *satsang*-s, like those described in the previous chapter, but also at invited programs and concerts. The home *satsang*-s have not disappeared; they remain the most common context for nirgun bhajans. But a number of new contexts have emerged that offer new social identities and potentially elevated status to bhajan performers. This section will discuss how traditional performance contexts are changing and new performance contexts are emerging, and address the social identities that these contexts present.

### **Personal and Family Functions**

Malvi nirgun singers are frequently invited to perform at privately organized family functions. These may include special events or rites of passage such as a birth, marriage, or *upanayanam saṃskār* (sacred thread ceremony). For Kabir singers, the most common event by far is the *nuktā*, or funeral observance. A *mṛtyu-bhojan* or funerary feast is observed a number of days after a death, and is open for all to attend, partake in a meal, and share their prayers and condolences with the family of the deceased. Guests come and go over the course of the event, which typically lasts the entire night. The family will usually call all the local Kabir bhajan

mandalis to attend, and they will perform one after another throughout the event. Dayaram Saroliya of Ranayalgadri, Dewas district, is one of the most popular and sought-after Kabir singers in Malwa today. “I perform five to six times a week,” he tells me, “almost every day. Most of those performances are in *nuktā*-s.”

In Chapter 2, I recounted one of the *nuktā*-s I attended during my fieldwork in which all the local Kabir mandalis had been invited to perform. The singers in that account explained that even upper-caste families would invite Kabir singers for funerals, and I did attend a few such funerals during my fieldwork. This is because of the special place Kabir accords to death; it is among the most commonly recurring themes in the Kabir bhajan repertoire. The popular bhajan “*Zara halke gāḍī hāñko*” describes the image of ashes billowing around a funeral pyre, comparing them to the clouds of colored powder seen during the festival of Holi. The image may seem macabre, but it captures the attitude that death is to be celebrated rather than mourned. In Kabir bhajans, the inevitability and immanency of death is simultaneously an urgent motivation to prioritize spiritual practice and the final word in social equality. After all, everyone is equal in death, regardless of their wealth or status in life.

*Āyā hai so jāyegā, rājā rank fakir*  
*Ek sinhāsan chadī chale, ek bandhe janjhīr*

Everyone who comes [into this world] must leave, be they king, pauper, or mystic  
One will leave seated on a throne, while another leaves bound in fetters

- Kabir *Sākhī*

*Hoṣhiyār rehnā re nagar meñ chor āvegā*  
*Tu jagrāt rehnā re nagar meñ Kāl āvegā*  
*Chor āvegā nagar meñ Jama āvegā*

*Tīr top talwār na barchī, nā bandūk chalāvegā*  
*Sāre nagari se koī kām nahīn hai, tujhe hi pakaḍ le jāvegā*

*Dhan daulat aur māl khajīnā yahi dharā rah jāvegā  
Bhāī bandhu aur kuṭumn kabīlā khade dekhat rah jāvegā*

*Kahe Kabir yā mulk virānā, koi nahīn yā apnā  
Muṭṭhī bāndh tū āyā, re bande, hāth pasāre jāvegā*

Stay alert! A thief is coming to town  
Stay awake, because Time is coming to town  
A thief is coming, yes, Death is coming

He does not wield a sword or a spear, he will not fire a gun  
He has no interest in anything in the village – he is only here to take you away

Your wealth, finery, and all your possessions will remain stuck right here  
All your friends and family will stand and watch

Kabir says, this country is desolate – no one here is yours  
You came into this world with closed fists, my dear,  
And you will leave with your fingers spread open

- Kabir Bhajan

Multiple meanings are at play in such bhajans. Death is simultaneously a final deadline for spiritual pursuits, a metaphorical death of the ego-self as the spiritual Self merges into divinity, and the end of a lifetime of suffering in the material world for those whose lives have been filled with pain and oppression.

*Uḍ jāyegā Hans akela,  
jag darshan kā melā*

*Jab hovegā umar pūrī, jab chūṭegā 'hukum huzūrī'  
Jam ke dūt baḍī mazbūt, Jam se paḍā jhamelā*

*Dās Kabir Hari ke gun gāve. vā Hari ko pāran pave  
Guru kī karnī guru Jāyegā, Chele kī karnī Chelā*

The swan (soul) flies away alone  
The sight of the world is but a fair

When one's lifetime has ended, when all "yes sir, no sir" has ended,  
The messengers of Death are powerful, Death's clutches are inescapable

Kabir sings of Hari, and he will cross over to that Hari  
The teacher will go wherever the teacher's actions take him  
And the student, where his actions take him

- Kabir Bhajan

All of the mandalis I interviewed performed at *nuktā*-s, and many cited them as their most common performance context. They indicated that the *nuktā*-s have not changed radically in the last few decades, but the mandalis have grown more numerous and more organized. When anyone passes away, there is a flurry of communication among mandalis via mobile phone, ensuring that all local groups may participate in the program.

### **Performance within Religious Organizations**

Chapter 1 discussed the growing tension between the Dharamdasi Panth and Kabir bhajan singers, particularly Prahlad Tipanya and his followers. Panth functions remain important venues for the performance of Kabir bhajans, and it is important to recognize the social identity of singers within this context. In panths, singers are humble devotees, presumably both of Kabir and of the presiding panth gurus. They sing as an act of service to accompany the panth functions and *mahant*-s discourses, but are not given space to provide their own interpretation of bhajans. The singers sing, the *mahant*-s speak and interpret. Most singers see this devotee role, however subservient, as a position of esteem. It is, after all, a self-chosen spiritual identity that confers more self-worth and agency than their imposed caste identities. However, as discussed in Chapter 1, an increasing number of performers feel that the hierarchical constraints of the Panth limit their spiritual autonomy. Many singers have

dissociated from panths entirely. Others continue to perform at Panths, but also perform extensively in other contexts.

Outside the Panth, singers may assume the role of spiritual authorities in their own right, despite the lack of formal title or institutional affiliation. Today, if one were to poll villagers in Malwa to name an expert on Kabir, Prahlad Tipanya would be named far more than any of the Panth *mahant*-s. Many villagers even told me eagerly that Tipanya is Kabir himself, reborn in our age. In his performances, Tipanya discourses at length in between – or even during – bhajans. He speaks about the inner meanings of the bhajans, explains complicated phrases or ideas, and adds his own interpretation, often liberally sprinkled with lines from other bhajans or *sākhī*-s. Nor is he the only singer to have adopted this style; I encountered many who performed bhajans in the manner of musical sermons.<sup>101</sup> In doing so, singers are implicitly claiming the spiritual authority of the *mahant*-s and creating for themselves a new social identity, that of the non-affiliated spiritual leader.

Many nirgun singers also perform at upper-caste or orthodox Hindu temples. In some cases, these are temples they are not allowed to enter except in the capacity of bhajan performers.<sup>102</sup> In such temples, they are invited as craftsmen who provide a service, rather than as spiritual participants. They are expected to sing sagun bhajans to Hindu deities rather than the nirgun bhajans that express their own theology. I met one such group of Balai performers in

---

<sup>101</sup> The tendency to discourse at length while singing seems correlated with level of education. Singers who had completed higher education were, from my observation, more likely to mix preaching and performing. Many of these singers worked as schoolteachers. By contrast, many singers I interviewed had formal education only until the fifth or eight grade, or in some cases, none at all. These singers generally knew a great number of bhajans, but many of them were reticent to discuss the meaning or interpretation of bhajans. I did meet a few notable exceptions, including Nanuram Bhagat of Ralamandal. Bhagat, in his own words, “never entered a classroom,” but speaks profoundly about bhajans during performances.

<sup>102</sup> The standards for allowing lower-castes into orthodox temples vary wildly by village, town, and even by temple. Some temples will allow free access to certain lower castes, but not others. Other temples may allow lower-caste singers inside only during religious holidays and festivals. Lower-caste bhajan singers may be allowed in some temples only if they are performing. In other cases, they may be asked to perform, but required to remain outside the temple.



Kukdeshwar village, Neemuch district, led by singer Mathuralal Bilodiya. Bilodiya is a full-time singer. He makes his living by performing sagun bhajans at a local temple. However, he considers himself a Kabir bhajan singer, and will sing nirgun bhajans for his own pleasure and spiritual edification.



Image 4-2: Mathuralal Bilodiya (center) with his son, Amritlal, and mandali performing at the Junasheshavatar temple in Kukdeshwar Village, Neemuch District, MP. May 18, 2015.

This pattern may be changing, however, as some upper-caste temples are inviting nirgun bhajan mandalis to perform their nirgun repertoire. Hari Patel, a young singer in Dhar, told me his group was often invited for events such as *mūrti stāpaṇa*, the installation of an idol at temple. “Recently we went for *mūrti stāpaṇa* at a temple of Durga Mata,” he explained, “but we still sang only Kabir bhajans.”<sup>103</sup> It seems the organizers were happy to invite Hari in his chosen identity as a nirgun bhajan singer with a self-determined theology, rather than in the mercenary capacity of a lower-caste musician who will sing what he is told to sing.

<sup>103</sup> Personal communication at Hari Patel’s residence in Dhar, MP. May 23, 2015.



## Public Programs

The concert in Raikunda village described at the beginning of this chapter was organized and funded by a private family. It was not a family function to mark a birth, death, or rite of passage event, but a public devotional program presented as a Kabir *utsav* (festival), free to all who wished to attend. In practice, family functions and public programs can be very similarly executed. Families typically invite the entire village for births, marriages, and deaths, and hire the same tents, stages, and sound systems. However, public *utsav*-s are not prompted by family events, but by organizers' desire to assemble a spiritual and/or ideological community of Sant followers. *Utsav*-s commonly feature speeches in addition to bhajan performances. Apart from home *satsang*-s, these public programs were the most common context in which I experienced Kabir bhajans in Malwa. The increased frequency of such programs is likely an index of the increasing popularity of Kabir within Malwa, particularly among people who can afford to organize such programs.<sup>104</sup> This implies increased social and economic mobility for Malwa's lower castes, and possibly a burgeoning interest in Kabir bhajans among higher castes as well.

Although the hosts of a public Kabir *utsav* may establish an ideological tone through their choice of invited speakers and singers, most *utsav*-s are ideologically pluralistic. The Raikunda program described at the beginning of the chapter was an excellent example of this pluralism. It featured three main guests, activist-scholar Satyanand Maharaj, Kabir Panth *mahant* Gangadas Sahib, and bhajan singer Prahlad Singh Tipanya. All three spoke about the need for society to overcome casteism and *aṇḍaviśvās* (superstition), although they all likely had different definitions of what qualified as *aṇḍaviśvās*. All three had very different modes of delivery and emphasis. Maharaj spoke as a radical Dalit activist, for whom anti-casteism was

---

<sup>104</sup> I infer that public nirgun programs have been happening more frequently based on the oral histories shared by performers as well as the lack of any mention of Kabir festivals or fairs in the 1961 census (Dubey and Mohril 1965).

equivalent to anti-Brahminism.<sup>105</sup> The underlying themes of his speech were modernity and social progressivism. Gangadas Sahib spoke as a religious authority within a traditional sectarian institution. He agreed vocally with Maharaj's critique of superstition, caste discrimination, and other forms of social divisiveness, but viewed these issues through a different lens. The Panth's vision of eradicating casteism is not a radical Marxist revolution against traditional institutions, but a religious realignment under one institution with unitarian values.

Tipanya delivered discourses as commentary during his musical performance. Unlike Gangadas Sahib, he emphasized spiritual individualism through his interpretation of the "guru" as an inner voice rather than an outer. Unlike Maharaj, his emphasis was on the unification of all rather than the overthrow of Brahmins. It is not surprising that the ideology expressed by Tipanya, the musician, was more universalist than those expressed by the other two speakers. Musicians perform for broader and more diverse audiences than scholars or priests and are adept at expressing themselves in unifying, non-controversial terms. This ensures their ideology reaches the largest possible audience, and on a practical level, it also ensures that they are invited back to perform again.

One of the largest annual Kabir *utsav*-s in Malwa is hosted by Prahlad Tipanya himself. He began the festival in 1997, after the Madhya Pradesh state government granted him a large plot of land adjacent to Lunyakhedi village to establish a nonprofit foundation. The foundation, called the Kabir Smārak Seva Shodh Sansthān (Kabir Memorial Service and Research Foundation) organizes a large festival every year, around February or March, that lasts a full day and night. In 2010, the Lunyakhedi festival was integrated into a larger program called the Malwa Kabir Yatra, which will be described in the next chapter. Tipanya's festival features

---

<sup>105</sup> Maharaj's "anti-Brahmin" approach to social advocacy strongly resembles the revolutionary Dalit movements of West and South India. Such movements have been less common in the North, where *bhakti* movements have been the major outlet for lower-caste egalitarian advocacy (Jaffrelot 2002).

performances and speeches by many prominent Kabir bhajan mandalis and scholars. Although this is the only annual event of its kind that I encountered in Malwa, it represents an important step towards singers creating and mediating their own performance contexts. At the Lunyakhedi festival, musicians determine the program and engage in dialogue about Kabir's bhajans and teachings on their own terms. A special platform next to the stage is allotted to all the *mahant*-s from local Kabir Panths. They sit in a place of importance, but singers run the program. During the 2015 festival, I saw many singers, writers, and schoolteachers give speeches, but not a single *mahant*.



Image 4-3: Grounds and stage where annual Lunyakhedi kabir utsav is held. Kabir Nagar, Lunyakhedi Village, MP. May 27, 2015.

## Cultural Programs

After Indian Independence, the state-sponsored All India Radio (AIR) and later television channel Doordarshan (DD) became indispensable patrons of music. The national stations accorded special status to the classical genres of Hindustani music, which was presented as the national music of the newly created India (Bakhle 2002; Lelyveld 1994; Neuman 1990).

Programming time was also allotted to “folk music” traditions to showcase the nation’s cultural diversity. Additionally, many states have their own DD stations that broadcast content in local languages and showcase the states’ own artists and traditions. Many Indian states are home to performance traditions that are closely (if sometimes stereotypically) linked with regional and linguistic cultural identity. Punjab has *bhangrā*; Maharashtra has *sangīt nātāk*. Madhya Pradesh, however, does not have the same distinctive regional culture seen in many other states. It is in the center of the country (romantically termed “the heart of India”) and its culture comprises many influences from surrounding states and exhibits the amalgamation of several centuries of rule by diverse political regimes.

Furthermore, the Malwa region does not have enduring hereditary performance communities unlike its neighbor, Rajasthan. R. V. Russell’s research in Malwa 1916 describes performers from the Charan Bhat caste who had emigrated from Rajasthan, but all the Bhats Mathur and Mayer encountered during their fieldwork in the 1950s and 1960s had abandoned musical performance for at least a generation and had taken up farming or labor (Mathur 1964; Mayer 1956, 1970; Russell 1916). So what is there to represent Malvi culture? When I asked people in Malwa what constituted Malvi *saṁskṛitī* (culture), most would refer to *dāl bāṭī*, a hard bread made from wheat flour balls and eaten with lentils. Performers would refer to their language: “*Malvī saṁskṛitī Malvī bhāṣhā hī hai*” (the Malvi language itself is Malvi culture).

As nirgun singers in Malwa have increased in popularity, the state of Madhya Pradesh has found a tradition through which it can define its cultural identity and present it to the rest of India.<sup>106</sup> Many Kabir singers perform regularly on Madhya Pradesh Doordarshan and All India

---

<sup>106</sup> Kabir bhajans are not the only tradition showcased by Madhya Pradesh state as an example of Malvi culture. Regional dance groups are also featured regularly on Madhya Pradesh Doordarshan and in cultural stage performances.

Radio (AIR).<sup>107</sup> These are prestigious opportunities, and singers often refer to them as a metric for their success and recognition. Dayaram Saroliya has performed on various Doordarshan stations eight times. Bairāg Kabir Mandal, a newly formed group of young vocalists in Barwani district led by singer Paras Nayak, received their first opportunity at Doordarshan Indore during my field research in May 2015. Most established groups said they received their first AIR and Doordarshan opportunities during the 1990s or later.



Image 4-4: A Malvi dance troupe performs for Doordarshan Indore. Indore, MP. May 26, 2015.

Apart from Doordarshan and AIR, state governments and cultural NGOs frequently enlist groups to perform for programs in other states. These programs typically feature a number of troupes from different genres. If the program is billed as *sāṅskṛitik kāryakram* (cultural program), other performers may include dancers and musical theater. If it is a *bhakti kāryakram* (devotional program), it will feature bhajan mandalis from different traditions. Most singers I

---

<sup>107</sup> Prahlad Singh Tipanya and Bheru Singh Chauhan have both earned a prestigious “B high” grade from All India Radio in the *lok-sangīt* (folk music) category.

interviewed had performed for such programs in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, and a significant number (including Prahlad Tipanya, Bheru Singh Chauhan, Kaluram Bamaniya, Dayaram Saroliya, and Pritam Malviya) had performed in many other states.

All the groups I interviewed stated that the state government provided many performance opportunities. In some cases, the state provided other means of assistance: Nanuram Bhagat's group gratefully told me that the state government had provided them with their instruments.<sup>108</sup> Prahlad Tipanya was allotted land by the state government which he has used to build a large structure, or Kabir Ashram. This building and the surrounding grounds are used to host the yearly festival, conduct a primary school for lower-caste children called the Kabir Academy, and house guests (including myself) who travel to Lunyakhedi to learn about Kabir. However, singers were generally critical of *sarkārvāle* (state-sponsored) programs. "They will not help us out with anything, they will just call us if they need someone for their own programs," Dayaram Saroliya explained. "Then we only get paid for food and transportation, and are not given any *izzat* (respect)." But singers will never refuse to perform in a government program. Touring with Tipanya and his group, I witnessed many occasions when he was obliged to reorganize his schedule at great inconvenience to accommodate a government concert, despite receiving meager compensation. As a practical concern, singers have a vested interest in maintaining a positive relationship with the state government. But I believe they are also reticent to refuse government programs because of the status they bestow. Through these performance contexts, singers may assume the identity of cultural ambassadors. They become officially conscripted agents of the state government in the effort to define and narrate regional culture within the broader matrix of Indian culture.

---

<sup>108</sup> Personal communication at Nanuram Bhagat's home in Ralamandal, Tonk Khurd District, MP. May 13, 2015.

This identity has affected a change in repertoire for some singers, who have incorporated *lok-gīt* (folk songs) into their performance repertoire. These include family and work songs, traditionally sung by women at events such as weddings. Dayaram Saroliya and his group proudly demonstrated to me a few *lok-gīt* from the considerable repertoire that they have adapted for stage performance. He claims that this specialization has brought him many performance opportunities beyond what he would receive as a bhajan singer alone. However, most bhajan mandalis have chosen, whether for ideology or musical limitations, to perform only bhajans. As these mandalis are increasingly showcased as representatives of the Madhya Pradesh state and Malwa region, it will be interesting to see if future generations of Indians implicitly associate the Malwa with Kabir bhajans the same way Indians currently associate Punjab with bhangra. Observations in next chapter suggest that this process has already begun.

### **Studio recordings**

During the 1980s, the audio cassette became a widespread medium in India. Peter Manuel (1993) describes the democratizing paradigm shift this development effected in India's popular music. Vinyl record production and distribution was monopolized by the UK-based Gramophone Company, and records were only affordable for the wealthier sectors of society. Audio cassettes were cheap to make and cheap to buy, allowing for an explosion of recording labels recording an unprecedented variety of genres. This included a boom in the production and distribution of regional, traditionally non-professional music genres. This trend increased alongside continued urban migration as many Indians in metropolises longed for the sounds of home (Manuel 1993, Chapter 8-9).<sup>109</sup> Simultaneously, singers like Anup Jalota and Hari Om Sharan developed a new style of singing bhajan, heavily influenced by *ghazal* and Bollywood

---

<sup>109</sup> Andrew Alter (1998), Stephan Fiol (2010; 2011), and Scott Marcus (1995) provide case studies of commercial recordings in regional North Indian genres.

music. These recorded bhajans were successfully marketed to middle-class urban Hindus (Manuel 1993, Chapter 6). This marked the emergence of a new social identity in India – that of the professional devotional recording artist.

Beginning in the 1990s, Malvi nirgun singers have begun producing commercial recordings of bhajans by Kabir and other Sants. Initially in the form of cassettes, and later in the form of audio CDs, MP3 CDs, and VCDs with accompanying music videos. These recordings reflect nirgun singers' desire to disseminate the Sant-*vāṇī* as widely as possible using the newly available medium as well as their aspiration to the social identity of professional recording artists.<sup>110</sup> Many Malvi singers from the older generation, including Prahlad Tipanya, have been inspired by bhajan recordings of the Gujarati singer Hemant Chauhan. Younger singers, in turn, have been inspired by Tipanya's generation. A number of younger singers I interviewed even cited cassettes as their first exposure to Kabir bhajans. Hari Patel, a singer in his mid-twenties, told me he began learning bhajans by listening to cassettes of Prahlad Tipanya, Tarasingh Dodve, and Gurucharan Das. In January 2015, just a few months before I interviewed them, his mandali had released their first CD, titled *Santvāṇī*.

To record a bhajan album, a mandali will go to a studio in a nearby city (typically Indore, Ujjain, or Dewas) with their instruments, and typically record the entire album in one take. Neither performers nor producers do anything to differentiate recorded songs from live performances; instruments are not tracked separately, and there is minimal (if any) editing and effects applied to the tracks after recording.<sup>111</sup> Some tracks even include obvious mistakes, such as out-of-tune instruments or singers stumbling over a line and then repeating it, that are not

---

<sup>110</sup> Stephan Fiol (2010) explores a similar case study in Uttarakhand, in which Garhwali ritual musicians produce music videos that Fiol describes as a “dual framing” of spiritual practice and commercial enterprise.

<sup>111</sup> Reverb effects are used generously in many of these recordings, but they are used in live performances as well.



edited out. In short, listening to a Malvi Sant singer's album will provide a very similar aural experience as attending a live concert. From his second cassette onward, Tipanya even began including a spoken introduction to each song, in which he spends two to three minutes expounding on the bhajan's meaning. Hess (2015, 51) recalls a writer from Bhopal criticizing this practice, saying the excessive preaching detracts from the bhajan experience. Although many listeners may agree with this sentiment, the preaching certainly makes Tipanya's recordings very similar to his live concerts.

Tipanya's first run of cassettes was through a company called Sonotek, based in Jabalpur. He released 14 cassettes with them from the years 1993-2002. The bhajans included in these are primarily Kabir's, with a fair number attributed to Dharamdas, Bhavani Nath, Jeevadas, and other Saints. The 1997 album *Virhaṇī Mīrā* (Lovesick Mira) and the 2002 album *Banānāth Vāṇī* (The Voice of Bananath) featured bhajans by Mira and Bananath, respectively. VCDs, or video CDs, came later. For these, mandalis will record music videos to accompany the audio tracks. In most cases, these are simply videos of the group lip-syncing the songs in one of a few predictable locations (either filmed on location or added via green screen): on a concert stage, in front of a river or waterfall, in a scenic field, or in front of a historic or religious monument. I have seen a few videos in which the lyrics of a bhajan are enacted. For example, Tarasingh Dodve's video for *Pyāro Hanso Nikal Gayo* (The Beloved Swan-Soul Has Flown Away) features amateur actors as the *Jamadhūta* (messengers of death), dressed in death and brandishes prop swords, coming to collect the soul from a body lying on a sheet.

Tipanya initially accepted a lump-sum upon recording each album. "In those days we never even knew what 'royalties' meant," he explained to me. However, after he saw how well his cassettes were selling, he began to feel exploited. Sonotek increased his compensation, but eventually he decided to record through a different label called Sapna Cassettes, based in Bhopal.

After a few years, he decided the best course of action was to create his own record label, and so Sahib Cassettes was created in 2005. Now Tipanya funds the initial production costs of records himself, but makes a fair profit. He uses proceeds from his CDs to fund the yearly festivals, maintain the Kabir ashram and Kabir Academy, and pay for necessities that have grown over the years, such as the Mahindra Scorpio SUV used to travel to concerts.

Brothers Jaymal Chopda and Kalusingh Chopda are members of the Bhil Scheduled Tribe who live in the tribal areas in the mountains south of Indore. Their village is scenic and peaceful, but remote. They have recorded over 51 cassettes or CDs of Sant bhajans, each featuring the songs of a different Sant: Kabir, Gorakh, Mirabai, Tolabai, Ramdev, others. Their first album, *Yā Gāḍī Mhārā Desrī* was produced in 1997 by a Rajasthan-based company called Mayura. Most of their records are produced by Yuki, a Delhi-based company that has a studio and dealership in Indore. They prefer to take a lump sum rather than royalties, explaining that they do not know how many units their records sell, and do not trust the companies to provide accurate compensation. “We had problems with royalties, they would always tell us ‘this cassette did not sell,’ they never gave us the full accounting and record-keeping. So now we ask for cash up front and one master copy... In the beginning they used to give us five thousand rupees for one cassette, then five became ten and ten became twenty.”<sup>112</sup>

However, artists like Tipanya and Chopdas and a few others are the exception rather than the rule. Most nirgun mandalis do not make any profit from their record sales. Many even lose substantial sums of money. This may be the reason that some highly popular and successful singers, including Kaluram Bamaniya and Dayaram Saroliya, have released few or no cassettes or CDs. Hari Patel, whose mandali released their first CD in 2015, explained that it cost his group 20,000 rupees (about \$300) total. This included studio time, recording and mixing engineers,

---

<sup>112</sup> Personal communication at Jaimal and Kalusingh Chopda’s residence in Mendal, Indore district, MP, May 23, 2015.

compensation for accompanying musicians, and they received 200 physical copies of the CD. Their CD, like most small-studio CDs and VCDs on the market, is labeled to sell for 35 rupees (approximately 50 US cents). Hari Patel's mandali was fully aware that at that price, even if they sold all 200 of their CDs, they had no chance of recovering even half of their investment. Most of the CDs were not being sold at all, but distributed for free. "This is really for our *prachār* (promotion)," Patel explains, "so people can hear about our mandali and call us for programs in the future." The fact that an increasing number of singers are releasing CDs and VCDs despite earning limited profit or even incurring a loss suggests that this "commercial" practice is more fundamentally about social status and the self-perception of singers as "professional" artists.

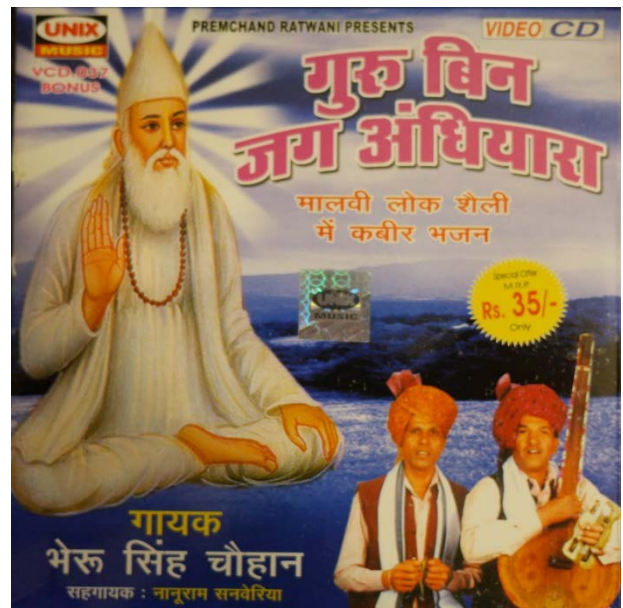


Image 4-5 a) VCD cover for album Chetan Hojā Musāfir by Mahesh Malviya and b) Gurū Bin Jag Andhiyārā by Bheru Singh Chauhan.

## Money and Fame

As Sant bhajans enter the commercial realm, many participants in the tradition are concerned about its spiritual integrity diminishing. Monetary success is always a thorny issue in Indian devotional traditions, particularly those that celebrate humility, simplicity, and even poverty:

*Jo sukh pāyo Ram bhajan meñ, voh sukh nāhīn amīrī meñ  
Man lāgyo mero yār fakīrī meñ*

*Hāth meñ tumbā, bagal meñ soṭā, chāhu dishā jāgīrī meñ  
Man lāgyo mero yār gharībī meñ*

The happiness attained from singing God's name  
Cannot be found in riches  
Friend, root your mind in asceticism

With a stick in one hand and bowl in the other  
My kingdom extends in four directions  
Friend, root your mind in poverty

- Kabir Bhajan

I expected many singers to be resentful of Tipanya's superlative success. However, I discovered that while a few did seem envious, most credited him with bringing unprecedented attention to their genre and bringing improved social status and increased performance opportunities to all of them. Most criticism about over-commercialization were leveled at the many emerging youth mandalis. Tipanya himself often reminded me that he performed for 20 years before receiving payment. "Before, bhajan-singing was about changing your life," he said often. "Now, it is becoming a business."

However, the shift toward "professional" identity for performers is really not about money. Almost none of the performers are technically professionals, as they do not make their living primarily from music. Kaluram Bamaniya was the only Kabir singer I met during my fieldwork who had left his former job and was now singing full-time. Most other singers work in service-based or professional jobs. Prahlad Tipanya is a schoolteacher, Bherusingh Chauhan works in an electronics store, Dayaram Saroliya is a Panchayat secretary, Tarasingh Dodve is a medical laboratory technician, and Gurucharan Das was recently elected Sarpanch (village

head). Those who have land also work as farmers. As mentioned earlier, CD and cassette sales earn very little money for most bhajan singers. The same is true for live performances. When invited for a funeral, cultural program, or other kind of concert, a mandali will most often receive a meal and enough money to pay for diesel. More successful mandalis may receive an additional honorarium, but not a lucrative amount by any means. Ambaram Solanki, a singer from Gadroli village, Ujjain district, said his group asks for a standard fee of 2000-2100 rupees above transportation costs. This allows each member of the mandali to receive 400-500 rupees (about six to eight US dollars).

The endeavor toward professionalism therefore is more about social identity than monetary capital. Like the identities of spiritual leader, social activist, or cultural ambassador, the role of musical specialist offers increased social status and self-respect to lower-caste performers. Interestingly, although the lead singer of a mandali holds the highest social status, the accompanying musicians are more likely to be professionals in the technical sense. Singers often pay harmonium, dholak, or violin players to accompany them for concerts. In many cases, this money comes from the singers' own pockets. The most active singers, including Tipanya, Chauhan, Dodve, and Saroliya, typically have salaried jobs, allowing them to bear these expenses. The most sought-after accompanists have been able to subsist entirely on music, accompanying different mandalis every day for programs or recordings. This arrangement echoes social structures seen in Hindustani classical music and many regional genres, in which singers enjoy higher social status than instrumentalists, who are seen as craftsmen (Neuman 1990).

The desire for new social identities is fueled by two forces: the push of caste discrimination and the pull of media-influenced aspirations. India's adoption of economic neo-liberalization 1990s has received much criticism from scholars who observe that it has often not

been economically beneficial to the underprivileged masses, and has primarily created more wealth for the privileged few. Ritty Lukose (2009) suggests that these assessments of “inclusion and exclusion” the pervasive undercurrent of aspiration created by India’s new economic environment. Lukose claims the forces of globalization have fundamentally altered the way that youth in particular perceive themselves and their future. Youth in villages may be on the margins of globalization’s economic effects, but they are “fully formed by its structures of aspiration and opportunity” (Lukose 2009, 3). Young singers in Malwa being inspired by Prahlad Tipanya’s celebrity status is a compelling example. If one Malvi singer can earn a Padma Shri and tour overseas, why not others? Tipanya’s youngest brother, Ashok, once observed to me, “It is very good that young groups are singing bhajans, but they want to become big and important. They sing for one year, and they want to perform on Doordarshan. Everyone is trying to become the next Tipanya.” Young singers’ dreams of overnight celebrity are likely influenced strongly by programs like *Indian Idol* and *SaReGaMa* that they watch on satellite television.

I discovered how deeply these frameworks of aspiration had affected mandalis when I realized that many of them, without any suggestion on my part, assumed that I was interviewing and recording them to scout groups to bring to the US for performances. One group I interviewed in Shajapur proudly announced to me that they had no interest in fame or commercial endeavors, they only wanted to grow spiritually through the power of the Sant-*vāṇī*. As I was leaving, the lead singer pulled me aside and told me he and his group were ready to travel whenever I called them. I had to hastily explain that I was not capable of bringing anyone to the US for performances.

As mandalis perception of themselves shifts from devotees to professionals, the musical style of nirgun bhajans is also changing. Mandalis must meet higher standards of performance to

justify asking patrons for monetary compensation. They must present themselves as professionals and “authentic” cultural performers if they aspire to perform on television as representatives of Malvi culture. Most important, a genre which until recently was used as a vehicle for poetry in a private or ritual setting must be reconfigured into an entertaining genre that will engage growing audiences.

### ***Musical Adaptations***

Although Malwa has undergone unique social developments, the musical transformations of Malvi bhajans closely resemble those observed in other regional genres throughout North India including *biraha* in Bihar (Marcus 1993), Manganiyar music in Rajasthan (Ayyagari 2009), and Garhwali ritual music in Uttarakhand (Alter 1998; Fiol 2010, 2011). These changes include the establishment of the *ḍholak* as primary percussion accompaniment, the inclusion of melodic interludes played on harmonium and other instruments, and in some cases a shift toward homogenized vocal style characteristic of film music and semi-classical genres.

### **Percussion**

In the previous chapter, I described the composition of the nirgun mandali as older singers remembered it from their childhood: a singer with tambura and *kartāl* (clappers with built-in cymbals) accompanied by other singers with *manjira* (hand cymbals). The *kartāl* and *manjira* have not disappeared from mandalis. If anything, there are more than ever, as mandalis are growing in size. The *ḍholak*, however, has become the main percussion instrument. The *ḍholak* is a double-sided barrel-shaped membranophone used throughout North and Central India and Pakistan. Some regions, such as Sindh and Pakistan, have highly specialized playing styles, but in many regions the playing style is fairly homogenous, particularly when used in non-specialized or non-hereditary traditions.

The *ḍholak* has two membranes made of goat skin. The smaller one, played with the right hand by most musicians, has a sharp treble sound. This side is struck with the tip of the index finger near the rim or with a cupped strike using all four fingers near the center of the skin. The larger side of the drum has a thicker and looser goat skin with a lower pitch. On this side, a player may use the full hand for a closed or resonating stroke, or pluck the skin with his fingertips while sliding his palm forward, creating a glissando.



Image 4-6: Pavan Parihar and Manglesh Malviya playing *ḍholak* and *ṭimkī* at a *bhajan* program in Indore, MP. September 28, 2014.

In Malwa, the *ḍholak* is often supported by another drum called the *ṭimkī* or *bāṅgo* (a Hindi pronunciation of the word “bongo,” which these drums resemble). The *ṭimkī* consists of two small cylindrical drums, attached to one other and played with sticks. The lower-pitched drum is played using a sliding technique to create a glissando similar to the bass side of a *tabla* or *ḍholak*, and the higher-pitched drum produces a sharp and nasal tone similar to the treble side



of the *dholak*. Figure 1 below shows common rhythmic patterns played on the *dholak* and *ṭimkī*, and how they interact rhythmically with the *kartāl*, *manjira*, and tambura.

The figure displays two musical examples, A and B, for a four-beat rhythm. The notation is organized into five horizontal staves, each representing a different instrument: Tambura, Kartaal, Manjira, Timki, and Dholak. The time signature for all staves is 4/4. Example A (labeled 'Example A') shows a sparse pattern with few notes and 'X' marks. Example B (labeled 'Example B') shows a more complex pattern with many 'X' marks and notes. The 'X' noteheads represent non-resonant sounds, while the notes represent resonant sounds. The Dholak and Timki staves show a melodic movement, while the Kartaal and Manjira staves show a rhythmic pattern. The Tambura staff shows a melodic line with 'V' marks above it.

Figure 4-1: Typical four-beat rhythm played by percussion section of a nirgun mandali.

X noteheads represent non-resonant sounds. These are produced in the *dholak* and *ṭimkī* by holding the fingers or stick against the membrane, and with the *manjira* by holding the cymbals together. The accented X notehead in the *dholak* represents a sharp pop sound produced by cupping the fingers together and chopping into the center of the membrane at an upward angle. The melodic movement in *dholak* and *ṭimkī* represents the glissando produced by sliding hand or stick against the membrane. Rapid sixteenth notes on the *ṭimkī* are produced by allowing a stick to bounce against the treble head.

This figure illustrates two different patterns that might be played by the percussion. The first, Example A, is relatively sparse, particularly played at lower speed. In Prahlad Tipanya's recording of "*Zara halke gādī hāṅko*" from his first album (released 1993), the percussion instruments play a similarly sparse pattern and do not deviate or introduce any variations. In their contemporary performances and albums, Tipanya and his accompanists introduce a great

deal of rhythmic variety within a song by alternating between sparse and dense rhythmic patterns. For instance, while singing a verse, they will play patterns resembling Example A, but during the chorus or melodic interludes they will play patterns resembling Example B. These relatively dense patterns and the contrast of different patterns creates a dynamic and exciting rhythmic feel that engages and incites audiences. As one singer related to me, “Now the *ḍholak* has come onto the stage, and people have started dancing.”

### **Melodic Accompaniment**

Scott Marcus (1993, 104) discusses how melodic interludes became a staple of *biraha* performances in Bihar beginning in the 1940s. *Biraha* ensembles, like Malvi nirgun ensembles, were originally a few singers accompanied by *kartāl* (metallic, in this case, rather than wooden). However, in the 1940s, audiences developed a taste for film music, which featured ornate melodic interludes between verses. *Biraha* musicians were compelled to provide similar entertaining interludes or risk losing their audiences; in many cases the melodies for these interludes were taken directly from popular films. This musical development affected a shift in performer social identity. *Biraha* ensembles grew in size and specialization, and required higher fees to cover the costs. They shifted from avocational to professional performers, as Malvi nirgun singers are attempting to do now.

Malvi nirgun bhajans are undergoing this shift now. Melodic instruments, largely unused a generation ago, are now an important part of the genre. The most common is the harmonium, which musicians can easily acquire and learn how to play at a basic level. I also saw a few uncommon melodic instruments, such as the typewriter-keyed chordophone called *bulbul tārang* or *benjo* (after its acoustic similarity to the banjo), and a four-stringed rebab-like lute that was simply called a *chautār* (four-string). The most sought-after accompaniment instrument, however, is the violin. The current popularity of the violin seems to originate with Devnarayan

Saroliya, Prahlad Tipanya's main accompanist. Interestingly, before meeting Tipanya, Saroliya played violin in a Bollywood band. The band performed Bollywood songs in village concerts, and Saroliya played the interludes. Tipanya heard the band perform, and asked Saroliya to accompany his bhajan mandali. For some years, Saroliya attempted to balance commitments to his Bollywood band and Tipanya's bhajan mandali, but eventually had to choose one. He chose to become a full-time bhajan performer.



*Image 4-7: Devnarayan Saroliya (center) and Dharmendra Tipanya (right) playing violin and harmonium accompaniment for Prahlad Tipanya. Seva Dham, Ujjain, MP. February 26, 2015.*

As discussed in the previous chapter, nirgun singers intend for bhajan performances to emphasize poetic messages rather than musical creativity, virtuosity, or entertainment. However, there is a tension between using musical entertainment to engage the audience's attention, without emphasizing to the point of distraction. Melodic accompanists like Saroliya have settled on a compromise: they play melodic interludes, but these interludes do not introduce new musical material. They repeat, note for note, the last line that was sung. They do not alter the melody or rhythm, and use little or no ornamentation. In some cases, this may

reflect an accompanist's limited ability or creativity, but in Saroliya's case, it is clearly a conscious choice. When accompanying Bollywood songs or even bhajans from other genres, Saroliya will improvise tuneful and ornamented interludes, but when accompanying nirgun bhajans, he will repeat the sung melody exactly.

But this compromise is an unstable equilibrium. As more and more youth mandalis emerge, and as they improve on their instruments and compete for performance opportunities and public attention, accompanists are beginning to shift toward more entertaining presentation. This shift is signaled by the use of harmonium, violin, or other melodic instruments to introduce new musical material that does not directly mirror the sung bhajan. The mandali led by Ambaram Solanki and his 15-year-old son, Sunil, is an example of this phenomenon. Figure 2 below illustrates the vocal and harmonium parts during their introduction to the bhajan "*Avadhū, vo koi des batāvo.*"<sup>113</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup> Most musical examples in this book are transcribed using G as a tonic, reflecting the typical range of Malvi male vocalist tonics between F and A. However, Sunil, the singer in this example, was only 15 at the time of recording and had a much higher tessitura. His actual tonic was close to C#, but I have transcribed it here in C to facilitate easy legibility.

Sakhī, Free rhythm

Vocals

Aaa \_\_\_\_\_ Ham a vā-sī vā \_\_\_\_\_ des-a kā \_\_\_\_\_ jā

4

Vox.

jā tī \_\_\_\_\_ varāṇ kul a nāi \_\_\_\_\_ Śhabd a mil ā vā ho ra hā \_\_\_\_\_

6

Vox.

de ha mil ā - vā nāi

Harmonium Intro

Hmn.

10

Hmn.

14

Hmn.

19

Vox.

Chorus

Re av a dhū vo ko i des - a ba - tā - vo Re av a dhū

Hmn.

23

Vox.

vo ko i des - a ba - tā - vo

Hmn.

Figure 4-2: Intro to “Avadhū, vo koi des batāvo” played by Sunil and Ambaram Solanki, recorded February 24, 2015.

The performance begins with an unmetered *sākhi* sung by Sunil Solanki:

*Ham vāsī vā des kā, jahān jāṭī varṇ kul nāhīn*  
*Shabd milāvā hoi rahā, deha milāvā nāhīn*

We are residents of that country, where there are no castes, clans, or divisions  
Where we are united perennially with the Word, not with the body

While Sunil sings the *sākhī*, his father, Ambaram, accompanies him heterophonically on harmonium. After the *sākhī* is finished (mm. 7), Ambaram plays an energetic, highly rhythmic introductory passage. He pumps the harmonium bellows rhythmically to create a dancing, circus-like feel. He repeats this four-bar phrase twice. His uneven adherence to the rhythmic cycle (mm. 11-12) reveals his lack of formal instruction in music; Ambaram does not conceptualize performances by counting the number of beats in a cycle. Then, he begins to play the melody of the bhajan itself (mm. 16). After two instrumental repetitions of the first line of the bhajan, Sunil rejoins to begin singing. Ambaram continues to accompany him heterophonically on harmonium.

This rhythmic harmonium introduction is clearly intended to be entertaining and sensually exciting. However, once the bhajan begins, the harmonium is relegated to a supporting role. It follows the vocalist closely with little ornamentation. During the four verses of the bhajan, Ambaram played this same harmonium passage twice: once as an introduction, and one between the second and third verse. In the spaces between the first and second verse and the third and fourth verse, he merely repeated the vocal melody, as a majority of nirgun harmonium accompanists do. This judicious use of musical creativity and virtuosity demonstrates how performers like the Solankis are developing practices that balance audience engagement with poetic clarity and integrity.

This balance is reflected in vocal style as well. Sunil sings the introductory unmetered *sākhī* in a highly melismatic and ornamented style, showcasing his vocal range and flexibility. However, once the bhajan begins, he shifts to a syllabic, unornamented style. He does not use melisma extensively or showcase his virtuosity during the bhajan itself, nor does he introduce

new melodic variations or improvisations. This fulfills both goals of the mandali: the audience is entertained and impressed with Sunil's musical ability, but they may also hear the bhajan's lyrics clearly.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that certain aspects of Malvi nirgun vocal style might be connected to the centrality of tambura in performance. Specifically, the tambura encourages short phrases comprising tight clusters of notes centered on the tonic or dominant. But in many contemporary mandalis, the lead singer plays the harmonium, and the tambura becomes an inaudible prop. I believe this shift is connected with singers' movement toward more "melodious" singing; the harmonium's capacity for unlimited sustain and easy movement across a wide melodic range encourages singers toward longer-held notes and less tightly clustered phrases. Increased exposure to professional singers, through easily shared MP3s and videos, is also encouraging young singers to experiment with new vocal styles. Narayan Singh Thakur explains, "Now the younger singers are starting to understand, 'in this bhajan, I should do this with my voice, it will give a good effect...' Earlier we did not have any experience with *sur* (tone, tuning)." Young singers are clearly invested in developing and showcasing their voices to stand apart from the pack. Yet most of them, like Ambaram and Sunil Solanki, relegate displays of vocal artistry to the introduction of a bhajan, and deliberately sing clearly and syllabically during the bhajan itself.

Kabir mandalis are still negotiating these shifts towards entertaining musical presentation within their spiritual values systems. They are clearly happy about the increasing size of their audiences and increasing performance opportunities. But many have expressed ambivalence when witnessing audience members (in some cases, inebriated) get up to dance during performances. "I do not like it when people dance during bhajans," Prahlad Tipanya confided. "The music pulls people in, but then some of them only want to enjoy the music, not

understand the message and change their lives accordingly.” Narayan Singh Thakur and his companions share Tipanya’s criticisms. Thakur’s mandali is skeptical of their modern audience’s interest in *manoranjan* (entertainment, diversion) over *sādhana* (spiritual practice). Thakur’s companion Shankar Jayaraman laments, “Now they are all attracted to musicianship, before they were attracted by the *vānī*. Earlier, listeners thirsted for the *shabd*, now they thirst for *rāga*.” Thakur’s companion brother Pavan agrees, “These people work all day, doing hard labor at in the fields, they come back and are looking for something to entertain them. Earlier all the laborers were truly thirsty for bhajan, but now there are very few thirsty ones.”<sup>114</sup> These discussions among musicians reveal are illustrative of concerns within the tradition as it transitions from marginalized spiritual *satsang*-s to presentational and even professional stage and studio performance.

### Changing Repertoire

The repertoire of Sant bhajans, as discussed in previous chapters, is fluid and open to new additions and alterations. The professionalization of mandalis is effecting changes within that repertoire and, as in musical style, some of those changes seem to be in the direction of homogenization. The most common adaptation made in the repertoire is the transition from pure Malvi to Hindi-tinged Malvi and, in some cases, pure Hindi. This is a practical and fairly obvious adaptation singers make to ensure that audiences outside Malwa can still understand bhajan poetry. Furthermore, since no one believes Kabir ever wrote poetry in Malvi, many singers view this as a re-translation rather than an alteration of canonical text. But as discussed earlier in the chapter, Malvi language is the central marker of cultural identity used by Malvi

---

<sup>114</sup> Personal communication in Kshipra, Dewas District, MP. May 21, 2015.



people to distinguish themselves from other North Indian regional cultures.<sup>115</sup> Is a shift to Hindi therefore a step towards cultural homogenization?

Another important transformation has been the ascendancy of Kabir as the supreme nirgun Sant, and the identification of lower-caste nirgun singers as Kabir singers. In Chapter 1, I referred to the 1961 Census of India report that indicated that Kabir did not likely have a large following in Malwa at the time. By contrast, the traditions of Ramdev Pir, Tejaji, and the Nath Sampradaya had large followings attested by numerous large festivals. It is indeed possible that much of the Malvi Kabir repertoire comes from poetry preserved by the Nath Sampradaya.<sup>116</sup> Many singers indicated to me that they used to mainly sing Ramdev bhajans in their childhood, before they began hearing Kabir bhajans popularized by Prahlad Tipanya. Tipanya's own mother was a follower of Ramdev Pir, and as mentioned in earlier chapters, he did not learn his first Kabir bhajan until age 24. I suggest that this ascendancy is due, in no small part, to the recognizability and popularity of Kabir on a national scale. Audiences in Mumbai may not have heard of Ramdev, but they have certainly heard of Kabir. Groups are incentivized to present themselves as "Kabir bhajan mandalis" rather than "Ramdev bhajan mandalis" or "Sant bhajan mandalis" as this may attract broader audiences, particularly in urban areas. In Shabnam Virmani's film *Chālo Hamāra Des* (2008a), a villager captures this sentiment when he explains to her that "Kabir's *bhāv* (market value) is increasing" in Malwa.

This does not necessarily indicate that songs of Ramdev Pir and other Sants will be lost from the tradition. It is perhaps more likely that the bhajans will remain, but the *chāp* of a lesser-

---

<sup>115</sup> Varghese (2009) observes that "pure Malvi" (reflecting little influence from Hindi or other neighboring languages) is primarily spoken by lower castes, including the Balai. It is therefore possible that singers may see the use of Malvi language either as a caste stigma to be hidden

<sup>116</sup> The most popular Malvi Kabir bhajans outside Malwa are those recorded by Kumar Gandharva who, as Hess (2008) notes, learned them from a Nath Sampradaya collection and setting.

known will be replaced with the *chāp* of Kabir, as has undoubtedly already happened countless times. Additionally, entirely new songs will likely continue to be added to the traditions and legitimized with the stamp of Kabir's name. Tipanya already sings a few songs whose origins are unknown, but that have come to be labeled Kabir songs within Malwa simply due to their inclusion within his performance repertoire. Examples include the ecumenical "*Sankalpa ho hamārā insān ham banenge*" (Our Will is Simply to Be Human) and the Sufi-tinged "*Tujhe hai shauk milne kā*" (If You Yearn for Union).<sup>117</sup> Overall it is likely that the Malvi oral tradition will maintain its flexibility and mutability, but is now responsive to national cultural interests to an unprecedented degree due to singers' aspirations to perform at the national level.

At the beginning of my field research, I expected to observe a trend of musical homogenization within Malvi bhajans. I believed that the increasing importance of recorded media (cassettes, CDs, and MP3s) as a means of transmission in an oral tradition would result in younger mandalis reproducing the melodies and styles of recordings from which they learn bhajans. In particular, I expected that the melodies used by Prahlad Tipanya would become informally standardized across the region. However, I observed very little of this in practice. Malvi singers retain a strong tendency to sing bhajans in their own melody and style, even if they have learned the bhajans from recordings. Ironically, it seems that a lack of formalized musical training actually produces greater originality in this case, as Malvi singers do not place a high value on being able to precisely reproduce a melody they have heard elsewhere. It seems that Malvi nirgun bhajans may follow a similar trajectory to the *qawwālī* tradition in Pakistan or the *abhang* tradition in Maharashtra. In both of these traditions, the recordings of a single celebrity

---

<sup>117</sup> Prahlad ji sings four verses of this song, which do not include a *chāp*. Other sources I have found include a fifth verse which does have a *chāp* attributing the song to "Mansur," likely in reference to the ninth-century Persian mystic Mansur al-Hallaj. The lyrics of the song are consistent with popular interpretation of al-Hallaj's philosophy, and even invoke his signature phrase, "ana-al Haq" (I am the Real), but of course it is highly unlikely that al-Hallaj ever composed poetry in Hindi/Urdu.

vocalist (Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Bhimsen Joshi, respectively) have established canonical melodies and arrangements for many songs for a broader, pan South Asian audience. However, in both cases, the genres continue to be performed in their home regions with a high degree of heterogeneity and originality.

### ***Conclusion***

In February 2015, Prahlad Tipanya decided to host a bhajan competition, diplomatically titled *Kabir bhajan maṇḍalī chayan pratiyogita* (Kabir bhajan ensemble selection event), to recognize the best up-and-coming mandalis in Malwa. Fourteen groups of varying experience levels entered the competition. A few of the groups had been performing regularly for years, and a few would be performing on stage for the first time in the competition itself. Most of the groups were trying to establish themselves as professional mandalis, and were pursuing as many public performance opportunities as possible. To discourage the participation of established mandalis, the lead singer of every mandali was required to be under 35 years of age.

The competition was a remarkable even for observing the overlapping systems of values and performance attitudes that have come to characterize the Malvi nirgun tradition. The mandalis competed over the course of four elimination rounds in two days. The first round eliminated six of the fourteen mandalis, the second round eliminated three more, and the third round reduced the five remaining mandalis to a final top three. In the final round, these three mandalis were ranked from first through third place. In each round, judges evaluated the mandalis in five categories: 1) dress and ornamentation, 2) coordination, melody, and rhythm, 3) bhajan selection and singing ability, 4) lyrical clarity and emotional expression, and 5) timeliness and punctiliousness.

The categories clearly lacked precision; many even include multiple unrelated criteria. The judges, who included local intellectuals and cultural authorities, exercised a considerable

degree of subjective interpretation. Musicianship and aesthetic appeal were clearly the most significant factors in determining which mandalis lasted until the final rounds. The winning three mandalis were unanimously considered high-quality musical performers. This was interesting in itself, as the genre of Malvi nirgun bhajans a few decades ago accorded little or no importance to musicianship. The inclusion of categories for dress and presentation is still more interesting, as these reveal a conscious effort towards professionalization and public performance and a set of stylistic values entirely absent from the *satsang* context. Most of the mandalis arrived for the competition wearing coordinated outfits: matching *kurtā*-s, vests, brightly colored turbans, and in some cases even costume jewelry. Every mandali who lasted past the first two rounds of elimination was thus coordinated. Tipanya reinforced presentational values on the night of the first day of the competition, as he spoke to all the participants as a spiritual and musical mentor. He advised all the aspiring performers to be conscious about issues including the proper tuning of instruments (many *tambura*-s and *dholak*-s were out of tune during the competition). He emphasized dressing and behaving like professional performers – after all, he reminded the groups, they would be representing Malwa as well as the Kabir tradition. The attitude of cultural ambassadorship had clearly permeated the participants’ self-images and their aspirations for participation in national culture.

However, the spiritual values of the *satsang* have not disappeared. Bhajan selection and lyrical understanding were major criteria. During the final two rounds of the competition, each mandali was asked to select a piece of paper at random, on which was written a spiritual topic. They were then required to sing a bhajan based on that topic, a feat that demonstrated both the extent of their repertoire and their understanding of Sant poetry. The topics were challenging, even for knowledgeable bhajan singers. They included “Kabir’s boundless word,” “Kabir’s

words on experience,” and “Kabir’s unfathomable word.” In the final round, all three remaining teams were asked to sing a bhajan on the theme of *desh* – the True Country.



Image 4-8: Mandalis gathered at the bhajan competition. Kabir Ashram, Lunyakhedi Village, Ujjain District, MP. February 23, 2015.

A few months later, I asked Kalusingh Chopda about the changes happening in the Malvi nirgun tradition. He believed that, as much as performance style and context is changing and will continue to change, the heart of the tradition will remain intact. “*Malvi shaili Malvi shaili hi rahega*” (The Malvi style will always be the Malvi style). This chapter has presented many of the ways in which nirgun bhajan performance has transformed and expanded to new performance contexts, and the new social identities assumed by performers who negotiate these transformations in aspiration of social mobility or improved self-image. Despite the dramatic social and stylistic changes, performers have sought to maintain the spirituality and poetic integrity of their tradition.

## Chapter 5

### “A VOICE WITH NO SINGER”

#### REGIONAL DEVOTIONAL PERFORMERS ON THE NATIONAL STAGE

*Bina kartāl pakhāvat bāje, bin ras nāse gun gāyā  
Gāvanhār ko rūp nahīn rekhā, Satguru alakh lakhāyā*

Without the strike of a hand, a drum plays,  
Without a throat, a song resounds  
The singer has no form and leaves no trace  
Only the True Teacher can explain this mystery

- Kabir Bhajan

*August 22, 2014: JW Marriott, Mumbai.*

Listen: Prahlad Tipanya and his troupe are preparing for a concert. “*Kitro samay batāyo?*” (How much time did they say?) Prahlad ji asks his son, Ajay, in colloquial Malvi.

“20 minutes.”

“That’s it? Only 20?”

“Yes. Papa, please do not talk too much for this show. We can probably fit three or four bhajans. And we should sing ‘*Tū Kā Tū*’ – they will like a fast song.” Prahlad ji’s propensity to sermonize is no secret. Today, however, there is simply not enough time.

Now, Ajay addresses me: “We don’t like these *sarkār wale* (government) programs. They always give such a short time. Never enough for a proper concert.” Today’s event is a presentation by the Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board. I sit with Prahlad Tipanya and his troupe at the JW Marriott in Juhu, Mumbai. We are in a conference room that is currently serving as a dressing room for the Malvi musicians and the classical fusion dance troupe that will perform after them. The men are tying their *sāfā*, or traditional headgear. Tipanya’s nephew, Dharmendra, shows me the process of tying the *sāfā*. I watch as he carefully wraps layer upon

layer. “Take a photo, Vivek bhaiyya,” he requests, “I’ll put it up on my Facebook.” As we prepare for the photo, Dharmendra’s hand slips and the *sāfā* comes undone. We laugh as he begins the wrapping process anew.



Image 5-1: The band prepares for the concert. Left to right: Gurucharan Das, Manglesh Mangroliya, Dharmendra Tipanya, Prahlad Tipanya, Ajay Tipanya, Vijay Tipanya. J. P Marriott, Juhu, Mumbai, MH. August 22, 2014.

Soon, we are called backstage, but there is still time until the performance. While we wait, we watch the tourism presentation. A brief video showcases Madhya Pradesh’s historical sites and natural beauty, inviting all to come and experience its “*sau tarah ke rang*” (hundreds of colors).<sup>118</sup> The emcees then inform the audience of Madhya Pradesh’s competitive tax benefits and exemptions for hotels, film production crews, and other businesses they wish to draw to the state. Finally, an emcee introduces Prahlad ji, quoting from his most recognized song, “*Zara Halke Gāḍī Hāṅko.*”

---

<sup>118</sup> This advertisement can be viewed at the MP Tourism website, <http://www.mptourism.com/web/experience.aspx>. Last accessed February 13, 2015.

*Des vides k̄a ved bulāya, lāyā jaḍī aur būṭī*  
*Jaḍī būṭī thari kām nahi āve jhine Rām ke ghar se chūṭī*  
*Zara halke gāḍī hāṅko, mere Rām gāḍīvāle*

Physicians were called from near and far, and they brought herbs and ointments  
But herbs and ointments could do nothing for the one who left the house of God  
Please drive my cart slowly, oh God, my cart-driver.

- Kabir Bhajan

“We are privileged to have among us,” the emcee proceeds, “this celebrated singer from the *bhakti* tradition.” Prahlad ji and his group take the stage.

Prahlad ji begins singing “*Pīyujī binā mharo prān paḍe*” (Without my Beloved, my Breath Fails), a song that employs the common South Asian poetic trope of a young woman pining for her lover. “Who will unite me with my beloved?” the chorus exclaims, “Come to my land!” Here, Prahlad ji employs a double entendre as he reframes the song’s chorus of “*Āvo Hamārā Des*” (Come to My Land) as an invitation for the audience to come to his land of Madhya Pradesh, on behalf of the tourism department.

“In this way,” he says in the immaculate Hindi of a school headmaster, “we welcome you all to Madhya Pradesh.” He then plays off the “colors of Madhya Pradesh” advertisement shown earlier, citing one of his favorite Kabir *sākhī*-s:

*Lālī mere lāl kī, jit dekhūn tit lāl*  
*Lālī dekhan main gayī, aur main bhī ho gayī lāl*

This wondrous red color (of Divine Awareness) is everywhere I look  
I went to see that red color, and I also became colored red.<sup>119</sup>

- Kabir *sākhī*

---

<sup>119</sup> Kabir commonly uses the color “red” as a metaphor for Divine Awareness. As a weaver, Kabir frequently references the cloth (the disciple) being dyed red by the dyer (the Guru).



“Come, so that all the colors may emerge. And once the Master’s red color that is within everyone emerges, then all will become one.” With this pithy summary of the message of the *sants*, he begins to sing “*Tū Kā Tū*,” followed by “*Halke Gāḍī Hāñko*.” Instinctively, he begins to sermonize, but quickly catches himself and launches directly into the music. A few reporters at my table comment in English that they enjoy the music, but have difficulty understanding Prahlad ji’s high Hindi speech - let alone the song lyrics (which they realized were an unfamiliar dialect, but were likely not able to identify as Malvi).



Image 5-2: Malvi musicians representing Madhya Pradesh. Left to right: Manglesh Mangroliya, Ajay Tipanya, Vijay Tipanya, Prahlad Tipanya, Dharmendra Tipanya, Devnarayan Saroliya, Gurucharan Das. J. P. Marriott Mumbai, MH. August 22, 2014.

After one more song, the set is finished. The tourism presentation continues, peppered with dance performances by fusion dance troupe Nadyog, who recently placed first in the 2014 season of the television program *India’s Got Talent*. A lavish buffet dinner awaits them in the hotel lobby afterward, featuring many exotic dishes as well as regional specialties, such as *dāl bāṭī*. As always, Tipanya’s troupe fill their plates with simple vegetarian food, relying primarily on *dāl-chāval* (lentils and rice) and avoiding anything that looks unfamiliar.

*August 23, 2014: A South Mumbai Apartment*

The next afternoon, I join Prahlad ji and troupe at the hotel where they are staying. The MP Tourism Board has arranged their accommodation at a small, and not entirely clean hotel in Andheri. It is a far cry from the Marriott where they performed the previous night, but they do not seem to mind. They are quite comfortable staying anywhere, and even these meager accommodations are luxurious by the standards of their villages.

Falguni Desai, head organizer of the Mumbai Kabir Festival, arrives with a cab to escort us to the private concert. We pile in, instruments and all, and travel to the home of Karan and Sejal Patel, a couple who participate in many Kabir-related events in Mumbai. Their flat is in a wealthy area of South Mumbai. As we enter the lobby a few residents glare at the band. Prahlad ji looks regal as ever in a long *kurta*, but the rest of the group is wearing casual clothing, and all are clearly out of place in the opulent setting.

Some of the tenants are clearly unhappy about their presence. One finally declares in English, “They have to use the service elevator.” A few others murmur in agreement. The musicians do not understand the full meaning, but can sense the hostility. Falguni, the organizer and also a lawyer by profession, does not attempt to contain her outrage at the suggestion.

“*Service elevator*? Just whom do you think you are speaking to!? These are *artists* – they are Padma Shri recipients – and they are certainly not using your bloody service elevator.”

“They are carrying luggage. Those are the building rules.”

“That’s not luggage – those are *instruments*. And you can stuff your snobbish rules.”

The tenants retreat under Falguni’s fury and we enter the regular elevator. As we ascend, Ajay remarks, “Just by looking at our faces and clothes, people here know we are from the village.”

We arrive at the Patel's flat, which has a breathtaking view of the ocean. Karan participated in a workshop entitled "Singing and Understanding Kabir" held in Prahlad ji's home village of Lunyakhedi earlier that month, and now wants to share this music with his family in Mumbai. It is a private concert. Only seven people are present in the audience, excluding Falguni and myself. Prahlad ji is in his element, however, as he is able to perform a full-length concert, including lengthy philosophical discourse. The group performs for two hours, as the sun sets over the ocean behind them.



*Image 5-4: Private Concert. Back row: Manglesh Mangroliya, Dharmendra Tipanya. Front row: Ajay Tipanya, Prahlad Singh Tipanya, Devnarayan Saroliya, Gurucharan Das. Mumbai, MH. August 23, 2014.*

#### *August 24, 2014: Imperial Heights on Pali Hill*

The next day, we meet at Imperial Heights, an upscale apartment building in Pali Hills owned by actor Sanjay Dutt. One of the building's residents is a lawyer who was introduced to Prahlad Tipanya's music through Falguni and who attended the residential workshop in

Lunyakhedi earlier in August. She has invited the Malvi musicians to hold a *satsang* before their train back to Madhya Pradesh later that evening.

People arrive at staggered times. The musicians are setting up against one wall of the apartment as vegetarian snacks and non-alcoholic beverages are served. Prahlad ji motions to me and asks me to join the group on *bāṁsurī* (bamboo flute).

The atmosphere is friendly and informal. Many of the attendees know each other well, either from the Lunyakhedi workshop or from Kabir Festivals over the past three years. There are also many newcomers, including a local television star who comes with young twin sons. Prahlad ji engages conversationally with the audience. He will often stop singing entirely and take several minutes to solicit different perspectives or interpretations of particular lines or verses. After the first hour, the audience begin to request their favorite *bhajans*. The hostess, a practitioner of yoga, asks Prahlad ji to sing “*Avadhu, Soi Jogi re Guru Mera*” (O Ascetic, That Yogi is my Teacher). The *bhajan* is characterized by Kabir’s signature “*ulaṭ bāśā*” (upside-down language”), or intentionally confusing mystical metaphors.

*Śūnya śikhar par gavā re byānī, dharti kṣīr jamāya*  
*Mākhan mākhan to santoṅ ne khāya, chās jagat baparāya*  
*Re Avadhu – soi jogī re merā*  
*Ina pad karega niveda*

On the peak of nothingness stand a cow and her calf, milk spilling into the ground  
The *sants* have eaten up all the butter, and distributed the buttermilk to the world  
Oh ascetic! That Yogi who can explain these words is my Teacher

- Kabir Bhajan

After the song, we discuss what the abstruse poetry might mean, and how it may be relevant to our lives. Today, everyone is in a festive mood, and we do not dwell for long on the topic before people begin clamoring for another *bhajan*. Prahlad ji sings one more, and then insists that the rest of the group sing some of the *bhajans* he taught them during the workshop a

few weeks earlier. The workshop attendees procure their Kabir *bhajan* books and sing “*Mhara Satguru Baniya Bhediya*” (My True Teacher has Transformed Me). They sing slowly, and Prahlad ji leads by strumming the tambura and joining in whenever they have difficulty. After one more bhajan, the *satsang* ends, and the group shares tearful goodbyes as Tipanya’s troupe prepares for their journey home. Meanwhile, a few Mumbai residents are already marking their calendars, planning to meet again in two weeks to practice the new *bhajans* together.

### ***Sants in the City***

These three events, all held during a single trip to Mumbai, reveal many different contextualizations of and attitudes toward regional devotional singers. The previous chapter explored how new nirgun singers within Malwa negotiate new performance contexts to create or assume new social identities, including the identities of spiritual leaders, cultural ambassadors, and professional performers. Devotional singers from Malwa and other regions are now finding audiences within Mumbai and other major cosmopolitan cities; they are performing on the national level. Within these contexts, their identities and performances are subject to a new set of social concerns and debates over Indian culture and values. At the J. W. Marriott, Tipanya’s familiar role as cultural ambassador was reconfigured through the expressly commercial aims of a neoliberal institution for which culture became not only identity but also commodity. In the service elevator dispute, I witnessed Tipanya’s status as a celebrity performer coexisting with his status as a socially marginalized villager with limited mobility in a privileged urban space. At the home *satsang*, Tipanya’s role as spiritual leader facilitated the creation of an entirely new spiritual community.

Previous chapters demonstrated how Malvi singers draw from Sant bhajans in their constructions of self. This chapter will demonstrate how urban Indians turn to bhajans as well as the personalities (real or imagined) of bhajan singers in their constructions of self. This section

discusses the performances of Sant singers in metropolitan contexts and the formation of communities within these contexts based on shared affinity for regional devotional music. The next section speculates about the cultural, social, and spiritual needs motivating the national popularity of regional devotional singers, and examines issues of representation that emerge as the singers and their traditions are repurposed in the service of neoliberal interests and ideologies. This section will begin by discussing The Kabir Project, the most influential catalyst for Kabir singers' urban popularity in the last decade.

### **The Kabir Project**

In 2002, Shabnam Virmani was invited for an artist residency at the Shrishti School of Art, Design and Technology, a progressive school for visual art and media studies based in Bangalore (established 1996). Virmani had earned recognition for her work on documentaries and community radio projects highlighting rural development and women's issues. Her films included *Tu Zinda Hai! / To Be Alive!* (1996), profiling a women's rights organization in rural Madhya Pradesh; *Aadavallu Ekamaite / When Women Unite: The Story of an Uprising* (1996), about a women's social movement in rural Andhra Pradesh; and *Aapno Asvari! / It's our Turn Now!* (1999), documenting a gathering of female panchayat officials in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

At Shrishti, Virmani used her newfound artistic freedom and institutional support to pursue a project based the poetry of Kabir. Like many urban Indians, Virmani's was exposed to Kabir bhajans through recordings by the renowned Hindustani classical singer, Kumar Gandharva.<sup>120</sup> Although she had been considered such a project for many years, it was imbued

---

<sup>120</sup> Gandharva's rather fascinating life and music are discussed in greater detail in Jabbar Patel's documentary, *Hans Akela* (2005). His engagement with Kabir poetry is the major subject of Hess's *Singing Emptiness* (2008). Although a native of Karnataka in Southwest India, he relocated to Dewas, in Malwa, while suffering from tuberculosis. In Dewas he learned many Kabir and Nath Sampradaya bhajans from the Malvi oral tradition, particularly from singers at the Shilnath Dhuni Mandir. His recordings of classicized renditions of these bhajans are tremendously popular among urban Indians with an interest in devotional music.

with a new sense of urgency in the wake of 2002's religious pogroms in Gujarat, in which communal tensions in India reached an explosive pinnacle. For Virmani, as for many Indians, the name "Kabir" was synonymous with resistance to sectarian boundaries and social violence of all forms, and so she felt his voice of reason was needed amidst India's climate of religious extremism.

Virmani and the Shrishti School received funding from the Ford Foundation in 2005 to film and record musicians, writers, actors, gurus, and other figures associated with Kabir in what became known as The Kabir Project (KP). Over the next few years, KP's scope expanded dramatically, eventually resulting in many documentaries and music albums. Early in the project, while exploring the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh where Kumar Gandharva had originally encountered *nirgun bhajans*, Virmani met Prahlad Singh Tipanya, who was already established as the preeminent singer in the region. The two formed a close friendship, and Virmani stayed for an extended period in Tipanya's village of Lunyakhedi to learn music and record material for her films. Eventually Tipanya became a central subject in the KP's four major documentaries, which began screening in festivals in 2008 and were released formally in 2009.

Each of Virmani's documentaries highlights the relevance of Kabir poetry vis-à-vis different issues in Indian society. *Chalo Hamara Des: Journeys with Kabir and Friends*, describes Virmani's "search for Kabir," resulting in her meeting with Prahlad Singh Tipanya and Stanford religious studies professor Linda Hess, who had begun working with Tipanya shortly before. The film depicts Tipanya's journey to Kabir as a response to caste-discrimination in his environment, and Hess's journey as a Jewish-born practicing Buddhist who encountered Kabir's poetry under different social and cultural conditions, but has nonetheless shaped her life through its message.

*Kabir Khada Bazaar Mein: Journeys with Sacred and Secular Kabir* explores the way Kabir is treated by different groups and individuals as either a deity to be worshipped, or a secular revolutionary whose message should mobilize social activism. The film depicts the incident (described in Chapter 1) in which Tipanya became a *mahant* of the Dharamdasi Kabir Panth. It also introduces many secular activists and NGOs, including Dinesh Sharma and Eklavya, who have based their movements around Kabir's poetry. The film is highly critical of exploitation in the name of religion, and explores the nexus between spiritual and political movements.

*Had Anhad: Journeys with Ram and Kabir* explores the notion of "boundary" in the forms of orthodoxy within a religion, sectarian hostility between religions (particularly Hinduism and Islam), and division between nation-states (India and Pakistan). In this film, Virmani interrogates the social violence that may result through religious orthodoxy and sectarian identity. She interacts with Sufiana singer Mukhtiyar Ali in Bikaner, Rajasthan, who has embraced Kabir bhajans and, to the chagrin of his father, abandoned the daily ritual observances of orthodox Islam. Virmani and Tipanya then travel to Pakistan, where they interact with the eminent *qawwālī* singer Fariduddin Ayaz and the Sufi Manganiyar singer Shafi Mohammed Faqir.

*Koi Sunta Hai: Journeys with Kumar and Kabir* explores Kumar Gandharva's engagement with Kabir and the Malvi *bhajan* idiom. The film relies primarily on interviews with Gandharva's students, but also includes a trip by Virmani and Tipanya to the Dewas district where Gandharva lived during the latter part of his life. This is probably the most popular of the four films among urban audiences, most likely to Kumar Gandharva's enduring popularity. Virmani explained to me that the film was "in danger of becoming a hagiography to Kumar



Gandharva,”<sup>121</sup> but that she wanted to reexamine Gandharva’s legendary presence in the classical music world through his engagement with nirgun bhajans, and the spiritual and aesthetic values he may have imbibed from them.

All four documentaries feature the music and personalities of regional Kabir singers. Following the success of the documentaries, KP produced three albums featuring these regional artists: *Kabir in Malwa*, *Kabir in Rajasthan*, and *Kabir in Pakistan*. Each album consists of two CDs, featuring different artists. *Kabir in Malwa* features Prahlad Tipanya and Kaluram Bamaniya, *Kabir in Rajasthan* features Mukhtiyar Ali and Mahesha Ram (a Meghwal singer who did not appear in the documentaries), and *Kabir in Pakistan* features Fareed Ayaz and Shafi Mohammed Faqeer. A fourth album, *Kabir in Thumri*, features Hyderabad-based semi-classical singer Vidya Rao. A compilation album, *Kabir in Every Body*, comprises three CDs and includes bhajans from the previous artists as well as a handful of classical vocalists, including Shubha Mudgal and Bhai Baldeep Singh. A fifth film, *Ajab Shahar* (A Wondrous City), chronicles the journey of Prahlad Tipanya’s mandali during their first college tour of the United States, organized by Linda Hess in 2003. All of the albums released by the Kabir Project include extensive liner notes, in the forms of accompanying books in Hindi and English. The books contain detailed translations of the bhajans, biographies of the singers, and many quotes by the singers themselves remarking on the meaning of particular bhajans or spiritual ideas.

The project was an outstanding success. The films were screened through festivals and cultural organizations in metropolises as well as in rural areas of Malwa and Rajasthan. Many urban Indians have credited the films with inciting their interest in Kabir and other traditions of devotional poetry and music. Many viewers had previously encountered Kabir as part of their

---

<sup>121</sup> Personal communication at Srishti School of Art Design and Technology, Bangalore, December 4, 2014.

school curriculum schooldays, but found his poetry brought to life through the performers featured in the films. Even those urban listeners who were well-versed in Kabir's poetry and philosophy had little exposure to the living traditions associated with Kabir, or to the millions of followers in rural regions who define their religious lives through Kabir and the *sants* and regularly listen or participate in *sant bhajans*.

Purushottam Agrawal of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi is among India's most recognized Kabir scholars. Agrawal comments on the developing relationship between India's urban Kabir aficionados and scholars and living traditions and performers in rural areas. He explains: "Nobody knew about Tipanya before 2002, and we all were studying Kabir and *bhakti* traditions. We were studying Kabir through the printed word, not the living word. Because Kabir in the universities is one thing; Kabir in the political life is another thing."<sup>122</sup> New technological and social conditions in India have allowed for a degree of contact between urban and rural Kabir followers that is unprecedented not only in degree, but also in kind, as this chapter will proceed to discuss. The Kabir Project has been among the most influential movement in initiating these dialogues.

### **Kabir Festivals**

Purushottam Agrawal's speech, quoted above, was delivered during a Kabir festival in Bangalore, organized in February 2009 by KP and Shrishti. The festival ran for three days, and included talks by Agrawal, Virmani, and poet Ashok Vajpeyi; screenings of the four KP documentaries; and performances by KP-recorded artists Prahlad Tipanya, Mahesha Ram, Mukhtiyar Ali, Vidya Rao, Farid Ayaz, and Shafi Faqir as well as Kumar Gandharva's disciple Vijay Sardeshmukh and other devotional musicians. In other words, the festival brought KP's

---

<sup>122</sup> Full speech is available at The Kabir Festival blog, <http://sunosadho.blogspot.com/2011/03/purushottam-agarwals-kabir.html>. Entry posted on March 25<sup>th</sup> 2011, accessed May 1<sup>st</sup> 2014.

films and CDs brought to life. “It was like meeting a film hero,” one fan recalled, excitedly, “we all saw Prahlad ji and Mukhtiyar ji on-screen, and now here they were, in person!”

Virmani and KP organized two more festivals in 2009. In August, there was a three-day in Auroville, Chennai, in which KP’s documentaries were screened along with performances by Prahlad Tipanya, Mukhtiyar Ali, and Mahesha Ram. In November, KP collaborated with organizations in Pune, Maharashtra to host another three-day festival. Other than film screenings and talks, it included one four-hour musical program featuring Mahesha Ram, Vijay Sardeshmukh, and Mukhtiyar Ali.

The coming years saw something of a Kabir festival craze. In 2010 there was a small-scale five-day festival in Vadodarai that comprised screenings of the four KP documentaries and a performance by Tarasingh Dodve, a medical doctor from Indore who began singing *sant bhajans* with Prahlad Tipanya and other Malvi singers in the 1990s. This was followed by a major three-day festival in Ahmedabad that again featured film screenings; talks by Virmani, Vajpeyi, and Agrawal; and concerts by Prahlad Tipanya, Mukhtiyar Ali, Kumar Gandharva’s student Madhup Mudgal, and a rural low-caste singer from Kutch named Mooralala Marwada, with whom KP had begun to work after the release of its documentaries and CDs. A five-day festival was held in Chandigarh in 2012, and Auroville held its second Kabir festival (on a much larger scale than the first) in April 2012.

The first wave of festivals, hosted in Bangalore, Auroville, and Pune in 2009 and Baroda in 2010 were organized in major part by Virmani and The Kabir Project. Future festivals were organized by separate organizations or individuals, but were largely designed after KP’s initial festivals and, as the preceding paragraphs show, primarily drew from the same pool of musicians. Virmani and the KP team also organized two major rural tours, in which urban and rural performers from various regions and genres performed through many villages and cities.

The Rajasthan Kabir Yatra was held in the Bikaner region in 2012. The Malwa Kabir Yatra was first held in 2010, and has become an annual event, although it is now organized by Prahlad Tipanya and his team without official involvement from KP.

### **A Kabir Community**

The wave of festivals organized by or associated with KP abated after a few years, but left an enduring legacy of communities formed through a nexus of shared interests including Kabir, spiritual poetry, devotional music, and non-sectarian spirituality. In Bangalore, Shabnam Virmani has continued to host regular Kabir *satsang*-s for several years. The most enduring of these new urban Kabir communities has emerged in Mumbai. The first Mumbai Kabir Festival (MKF) was organized in 2011 by a woman named Priti Turakhia, who was inspired while attending the Pune festival in 2009 and the Baroda festival in 2010. Turakhia approached Virmani about arranging a festival in Mumbai. At this point, Virmani and KP were beginning to pursue other initiatives at this point, so Virmani suggested that Turakhia organize the festival herself. Turakhia was able to secure sponsorship from Mahindra Group, one of India's largest multinational conglomerates.<sup>123</sup>

The first MKF was a staggering ten days long, from January 14 to 23, 2011. The festival's events included screenings of all four of Virmani's documentaries along with facilitated discussions; performances by Virmani, Tipanya, Marwade, Mukhtiyar Ali, and others; and talks by scholars including Purushottam Agrawal, Linda Hess, and Rakesh Ganguly. The festival was organized entirely through volunteer efforts. "People just started coming together, out of nowhere!" Turakhia relates. "I didn't know *anyone* from before, I was a total newbie... I went to

---

<sup>123</sup> The Mahindra Group declined to sponsor the Mumbai Kabir Festival in future years. Turakhia speculates that this was partially because Mahindra had begun to organize its own culture and music festivals in various cities, and partially because they wanted the festival to be called The Mahindra Kabir Festival, which Turakhia and the other organizers refused.

a few meetings where there were people from various groups working for human rights, and from there, the word just spread.”<sup>124</sup>

Turakhia discovered there were a number of people already involved in NGOs such as YUVA (Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action), the Ashiyana Foundation, NSPA (National Streets for the Performing Arts), and the Tata Institute for Social Sciences who were eager to become involved. This distributed network allowed the festival to host a staggering number of different events; each venue would take responsibility for organizing a single concert or event, and provide its own resources, volunteers, and publicity. This had the added benefit of spreading the festival throughout the entire city of Mumbai, rather than concentrating it in a single location. All events were entirely free of cost and open to the public.



*Image 5-5: Poster for the first Mumbai Kabir Festival, held in 2011.*

The Mumbai Kabir Festival (MKF) has since become an annual event, spanning four to five days every January. The sixth MKF was held this year, in January 2016. Its volunteer corps has grown considerably, while its corporate sponsors have faded away. For some time, the

---

<sup>124</sup> Personal communication at Priti Turakhia’s residence, September 9, 2014.

festival was supported partially by corporations and partially by the community, but now its entire financial backing comes from community donations. Most of these are made by a handful of dedicated individuals through a trust called Sahej Foundation, created to fund the festival. The core organizing team has remained small, including Turakhia, Sachi Maniar, and Mumbai-based attorney Falguni Desai. In recent years, Desai has taken over as chief organizer of the festival. Desai has made a concerted effort to expand the scope of the festival by continually including new performers, and encouraging established performers to explore new musical and spiritual perspectives. This has extended the festival well beyond the rubric of “Kabir.” Although his name still establishes the tone for the festival, it now includes many forms of South Asian devotional poetry and music. Some events at the last three festivals have included performances of poetry of Bulleh Shah, Shah Abdul Latif, Amir Khusrau, and the Marathi *abhang* Sants.

Desai and the other organizers have been dedicated to maintaining the sense of community provided by the festival. Desai explains that the donation-based sponsorship, and participation of cultural organizations throughout Mumbai gives the community a sense of ownership of the festival – it does not belong to a corporation or political party, it belongs to the people.<sup>125</sup> The sense of community is not limited to Mumbai’s residents; it includes all the festival’s participants, musicians and volunteers alike.

Every year, the Somaiya College of Engineering allows the MKF to use an entire floor of dormitory rooms. Musicians and volunteers all stay together in these rooms, creating an intimate and diverse community space for the duration of the festival. For several days, they have a space to share songs from their respective traditions, jam in the hallways, and engage in long night-time discussions about poetry, spirituality, and society. The organizers further

---

<sup>125</sup> See Joshi (2016). This contrasts with the major music festivals that have come to characterize India’s post-liberalization urban live music scene (Coventry 2013).

encourage amicable relations between the musicians by maintaining transparency and equity regarding the monetary aspects of the festival: all groups are paid the same (relatively meager) amount, whether they are established classical performers, or aspiring local bands.



Image 5-6: Mooralala Marwada's group practice for a performance with Mumbai-based classical singer Nirali Kartik while Prahladi Tipanya watches. Somaiyya College dormitories, Mumbai, MH. January 9, 2015.

The MKF has established a tradition of holding a *satsang* every year on Sunday morning, the last day of the festival. The rest of the festival involves multiple events held throughout Mumbai, so performers are often participating in simultaneous programs on opposite ends of the city. The Sunday morning *satsang* is the one event in which all musicians, volunteers, and organizers, along with any interested members of the general public, are together in one place. The whole group congregates at the amphitheater on Carter Road, Bandra, overlooking the ocean. They sing *bhajan*-s together as the sun rises over the water. Each singer leads in turn, while musicians from other groups accompany.

The Mumbai Kabir community, often referred to by participants as the Kabir *parivār* (family), has grown considerably beyond the bounds of the festival. The Sahej foundation uses



leftover funds from each year's festival donations to host multiple events throughout the year, often inviting festival performers for *satsang*-s or workshops. In July 2014, I attended a Sahej-sponsored workshop by Bengali Baul singer Parvathy Baul, who has been widely successful in the global "world music" scene, and has become a mainstay of the MKF. Parvathy spent two days teaching bhajans from the Baul tradition to artists, writers, musicians, and working professionals from Mumbai. Sahej has hosted similar workshops by Mukthiyar Ali and it continues to host a few workshops a year by Prahlad Tipanya.

One of the most important initiatives spearheaded by Falguni Desai has been a yearly workshop held in Tipanya's own village of Lunyakhedi, in which 20-25 people from Mumbai and other cities spend five days learning and discussing Sant bhajans in the village. The workshop is major community event within Malwa, as well. Tipanya invites a number of local singers and mandalis to attend, and to share their performances and perspectives with the guests. Attendees of these workshops continue to meet regularly in one another's homes in Mumbai throughout the year. They hold informal *satsang*-s to continue practicing the bhajans they have learned and to maintain their spiritual and cultural community.



Image 5-7: 2015 Lunyakhedi Kabir Workshop. Back row: Ajay Tipanya, Pritam Malwiya, Madanlal Malviya. Middle row: Devnarayan Saroliya, Prahlad Tipanya, Shabnam Virmani, Dharmendra Tipanya. Kabir Ashram, Lunyakhedi Village, Ujjain District, MP. April 14, 2014.



## The Malwa Yatra

In 2010, Shabnam Virmani and the Kabir Project worked with Tipanya's team to expand the annual Kabir festival held in Lunyakhedi (described in the previous chapter) into a nine day-long tour called the Malwa Kabir Yatra (journey). The Malwa Yatra began with the same all-night festival in Lunyakhedi, but the roster of participants was expanded to include many non-Malvi musicians. Some of these had been participants in the KP documentaries and the urban Kabir festivals, including Mukhtiyar Ali and Mooralala Marwada, while others, like Hemant Chauhan, were regional devotional singers with whom Tipanya had associated over the years. After the Lunyakhedi festival, the entire group loaded into a caravan of cars and buses. This included not only the musicians, but also several dozen fans from Malwa and from India's metropolises. Over the next eight days, the entire caravan traveled through multiple villages around Malwa, hosting massive concerts. Some musicians joined or departed over the course of the tour, and local bhajan mandalis also participated at each site.

The Yatra has become an annual program, although KP stopped organizing it after 2011. It is now typically held over five days every February and is organized mainly by Prahlad Tipanya, Ajay Tipanya, and Devnarayan Saroliya. Other than Tipanya, Mooralala Marwada and Parvathy Baul have become mainstay performers in the Yatra. I attended the Malwa Yatra in 2015. It was simultaneously an energizing and exhausting experience. After an entire day and night of music in Lunyakhedi, dozens of us loaded into a bus and spent most of the next day being jerked about Malwa's rough country roads. In addition to musicians, the bus contained members of the Mumbai festival team, a large group of college students from Delhi, and a handful of international visitors who had come from countries including France and Israel to participate in the festival. Despite the overall lack of sleep, most of the journey was spent singing loudly – everything from Kabir bhajans, to Bollywood hits, to John Denver songs.

We arrived after sundown in Bhaklai village, Khargon district, where a crowd of thousands awaited us. The concert in Bhaklai featured introductory performances by a few local mandalis, and full-length concerts by Tipanya, Parvathy Baul, Marwada, Varanasi singer Vimal Bawra, and Mumbai rock band Kabir Café. The program ended after 3AM, and we all piled back into buses and cars to sleep while the caravan traveled to Ujjain for a program the following afternoon. This level of intensity was characteristic of all five days of the festival. By the end, everyone was fatigued from sleep deprivation and the rough travel, but invigorated by the near-constant engagement with devotional music, and the opportunity to be part of a transcultural and increasingly transnational spiritual community.



*Image 5-8: Performers and travelers from all over at the 2015 Malwa Kabir Yatra. Kajlas Village, Sehore District, MP. February 28, 2015.*

## Commercial and Cultural Festivals

The Mumbai Kabir Festival is not the only festival to feature regional devotional singers. Such festivals are becoming mainstays of India's popular music culture. The labeling of these festivals may vary. Some are billed as religious music festivals, and others as "folk" festivals. The latter category includes the Rajasthan International Folk Festival (RIFF), a festival established in Jodhpur in 2007 by John Singh, the aristocratic entrepreneur behind the Anokhi clothing chain. RIFF primarily features hereditary artists from Rajasthan, but includes a few guests from adjacent regions, such as Prahlad Tipanya. In order to appeal to a broad audience of cosmopolitan Indians and foreign tourist, the festival features traditional performances as well as modernized, "fusion" performances.

Spiritual and religious festivals exist under a variety of labels. Ruhaniyat, one of the longest-running festivals, has been held in multiple cities throughout India since 2001 by an organization called Banyan Tree Events. It was originally billed as a Sufi music festival, but was changed to "Sufi and Mystical Music Festival," reflecting the fact that most of the performers would likely not identify their musical traditions as Sufi.<sup>126</sup> These performers include regional singers from India (including many of the Kabir Festival regulars) as well as classical musicians and international ritual or religious musicians. Other programs, marketed more toward the middle-class Hindu demographic than the hip cosmopolitan demographic, will be labeled as *bhakti* or bhajan programs. Such programs have existed in urban India for decades, but previously would only feature professional urban singers. Now, many such programs include "folk" singers like Tipanya and Parvathi Baul, and bill these performers alongside prestigious classical vocalists. This phenomenon would have been unthinkable even twenty years ago.

---

<sup>126</sup> See Manuel (2008) for more discussion about the contemporary use of Sufi as a broad genre marketing label.

However, as the service elevator incident at the beginning of the chapter illustrates, devotional singers' new status as cultural celebrities has not overwritten their previous status as culturally marginalized. These frameworks exist simultaneously; the public imagination of cultural heroes is quicker to change than social and economic realities. Many participants have complained to me about the treatment they receive at festivals like *Ruhaniyat* that are, despite their spiritual branding, explicitly commercial enterprises. Singers have unanimously told me that, despite being billed alongside classical musicians in the advertising materials, they are not treated with respect off-stage. One participant explained to me that groups are paid radically different amounts, and the organizers are not transparent about these issues. Furthermore, they are all provided accommodations in different hotels – each group is given the least expensive hotel the organizers feel would be acceptable based on the groups' socioeconomic status. I witnessed this firsthand during the Madhya Pradesh Tourism event described at the beginning of the chapter. Tipanya and his group were lauded as spiritual and cultural exemplars during the program, but were provided substandard accommodations and not compensated highly for their participation. This type of organization is not only exploitative, but does not offer a fraternal social environment in which regional performers may interact with each other, fostering artistic and cultural dialogues across traditions.

Despite the existence of exploitative festivals, I remain optimistic about the shift in broad social attitudes that these festivals represent. The mere fact that regional musicians are being billed alongside elite classical performers – even if only for marketing purposes – is indicative of an increased widespread public regard for marginalized communities. And many festivals and organizations do treat their folk performers with the same respect as their higher-class counterparts. In January 2015, I accompanied Tipanya's group for a performance in Goa, at a program called the *Sant Sohirobānāth Āmbiye Bhakti Sangīt Samāroh* (Saint Sohirobanath

Ambiye Devotional Music Celebration). The event was sponsored by the Kala Academy, a branch of the Goa State Government, and hosted by Goa University. There were three days of performances, featuring headliners Bhuvanesh Komkali (grandson of Kumar Gandharva), Dr. Shashank Maktedar (senior-most disciple of leading *khyāl* singer Ulhas Kashalkar and professor of music in Goa), and Prahlad Tipanya.

Tipanya and his group (including myself, who was accompanying on harmonium during this program) were provided accommodation at a nice hotel by the beach. The organizers provided an extra day of accommodation, so the group would have time to recuperate from their travels and enjoy some sightseeing in Goa. As we entered the hotel, the liaison warmly informed us that the Goa state government would even to cover the group's entire restaurant and room service bill. As it turned out, this was hardly a significant expense, as Tipanya and group are complete teetotalers and insisted on only ordering plain rice and *dāl* for every meal. (After the fourth time I called room service to place our order, a forlorn concierge responded with a cry of "Sir! You have come all the way to Goa! Please do not order such plain food – at least try our special fish curry!") In an increasing number of contexts, regional singers are being accorded the respect of musical artists and cultural tradition-bearers, instead of merely performing artisans-for-hire.

Large commercial festivals, state-sponsored cultural events, and community-organized workshops are all manifestations of India's growing desire to engage with its regional cultures, and particularly with regional religious music. The timing of this phenomenon is no coincidence. Regional devotional traditions have an important part to play in the negotiations of the Indian self following the nation's emergence into global modernity and its increasingly urgent debates over cultural plurality.

### *The Nation's Need for Kabir*

The surge of academic interest in Kabir and formation of enduring transcultural communities surrounding Kabir bhajans raises the question: Why are Indians from diverse backgrounds becoming interested in regional heterodox bhajan singers? What needs in Indian society do Kabir bhajans fulfill? I suggest that these bhajans and their performers offer many Indians a set of ideological tools from which to construct their selves in response to many pressing debates about modernity, religion, and nation. These debates are characterized by several dialectics, including the dialectic of tradition versus modernity, religion versus secularism, and religio-cultural heterogeneity versus homogeneity.

As Appadurai (1996) reminds us, the forces of global modernity often oblige citizens of nation-states to reevaluate or reconstruct their understandings of self, other, and national culture. Similar processes are occurring in all modern nation-states, but the unique experience of each nation-state is determined:

...not [by] the fact or extent of its modernity, but rather its distinctive debates *about* modernity, the historical and cultural trajectories that shape its appropriation of the means of modernity, and the cultural sociology (principally of class and state) that determines who gets to play with modernity and what defines the rules of the game. (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995, 16)

In India, these “debates about modernity” are centrally concerned with the interpretation and practice of culture and religion. We may examine these debates through several intertwined dialects that characterize mainstream social and political discourse in India. These include religion versus secularism, homogeneity versus heterogeneity, and the omnipresent tradition versus modernity. It is no coincidence that the folk singers gaining popularity at the national level are devotional singers, nor that they are representatives of heterodox spiritual traditions (e.g. Sant/nirgun, Sufi, Baul). These traditions offer fodder for both sides of the debate line in all

of these dialects, and also offer the possibility of synthesis. This section explores some of the forces spurring the national popularity of Tipaniya and other heterodox devotional singers using these dialectics.

### Secular Spirituality

Sant bhajans may have many dimensions of meaning, as discussed in Chapter 2. At their core, however, they are a form of spiritual practice. They provide participants with frameworks of meaning and awareness, although naturally there will be many interpretations of exactly what those frameworks are.<sup>127</sup> Yet the Sant traditions, with its defiance of social convention and emphasis on individual experience, offers affective possibilities that are often considered incompatible with orthodox or Brahministic Hinduism.<sup>128</sup> Milind Wakankar implicitly links the idea of Kabir with Indian modernity and the debaters subsumed therein:

Kabir' points us to the idiomatic core of a language's history, where there is a ceaseless struggle between competing claims for nation in such terms as tradition, history and community... [T]he name 'Kabir' has today become synonymous with a typically postcolonial question in India: can there be an indigenous modernity, indebted to but at the same time different from the idea of Europe? (Wakankar 2010, 39)

---

<sup>127</sup> The invocation of Kabir's name by secular activists like Kabir Kala Manch (Patwardhan 2011) and many of the figures in Virmani's film *Kabir Khaḍā Bāzār Merī* (Virmani 2008c) may suggest that many performers are interested in Sant poetry for entirely non-spiritual reasons. However, I would argue that even in these cases, the use of the names and/or poetry of Sants rather than of contemporary secular reformists specifically draws from the social legitimacy accorded to the Sants as spiritual figures.

<sup>128</sup> This is not to suggest that orthodox Hindus are not invested in ideologies of progress or modernity. In fact, modernity is a cornerstone of Hindu nationalist identity. This often manifests in reinterpretations of Hinduism as an intrinsically "modern" religion, in spite of its ancientness. The ritualistic practices of Hinduism are either discounted as "superstitions" practiced by those who misunderstood the "true essence" of Hindu philosophy, or are presented as precociously "scientific" practices that act as sophisticated mechanisms whose true meanings have been lost to the ages.

The personal relationships that many Indians have developed with Kabir poetry reflect this quest for “indigenous modernity.” Shabnam Virmani describes her family religious background and the inner spiritual longing that spurred the Kabir Project:

SHABNAM VIRMANI: What made the start of my journey towards Kabir particularly urgent and pressing, I think, was lack of spiritual consciousness or awareness in my life before that. It was completely zero. I had grown up in a post-Partition Punjabi family... a lot of Punjabis who moved from Pakistan during Partition - as my parents and grandparents did - developed a robust, forward-thinking mentality. And they did not want to engage too much with their heritage, their culture, their past, with what they perceived as things antithetical to modernity and progress...

Then when I grew up, I was under the influence of the left movement, the women's movement that was happening around the 80s and 90s. I was strongly influenced by that worldview, which also has a mistrust of the non-rational. It's robustly secular, to the point of not allowing any non-rational discourse to enter their worldview. My first decade of work with women in the social sector was informed by that sensibility.<sup>129</sup>

Virmani clarifies that the Kabir project actually begun, not as a spiritual endeavor, but as a social justice endeavor. She had been exposed to Kabir bhajans as a relevant form of social discourse during her past filmmaking endeavors, but when she began to experience them firsthand, she realized the need for spiritual direction in her own life:

VIRMANI: Any human's life's experiences, they bring you to a point where you are searching for more answers. You realize that the sum-total of the human being's consciousness is not material, it is beyond material. And there weren't any answers forthcoming from these worldviews that I had inherited, or grown up with, or grown into. I think there was a deep yearning in me to appreciate a spiritual worldview... The domain of faith really felt like an unknown space to me, and I felt like I did not even know the vocabulary of this space. As a person working in social movements, I couldn't relate to the people I was working with, because there was a whole domain of their worldview and their ideology that I didn't understand.

---

<sup>129</sup> Personal communication at Shristi Srishti School of Art Design and Technology, Bangalore, December 4, 2014.



Virmani emphasizes the aversion - even hostility - to spirituality and other matters of the “non-rational” that characterized her familial and ideological upbringing. When she developed an urge to engage with spirituality, Kabir offered a body of ideas that fulfilled the “deep yearning” she felt, but appealed to the sensibilities inherited from her “forward-thinking” family.

Deepa Kamath, a schoolteacher based in Bangalore, had an upbringing quite the opposite of Virmani’s; she was raised in a religiously conservative family:

DEEPA KAMATH: Ours was a very very orthodox family - a lot of idol worship, a lot of rituals. All what a normal Indian household would have... I never liked the idol worship. In my teens, I would just not bow down to all these idols. I did nothing, and my mother would crib about it. She would say, 'you will not find a good husband if you do not do this.' [*laughs*] And of course I would never rebel or anything in that sense, but I was a quiet rebel. Quietly I would tell myself, 'it doesn't matter. I don't want a good husband.'

But one thing I would do every day along with her was at 7PM she would sit and sing bhajans. So that was one thing that I never missed. But I would just sing and go away. She would say, 'Come bow down - why do you just sing and go away?' If I got the sense that she was really angry, then I would bow down just for her.<sup>130</sup>

Kamath describes an upbringing that emphasized sincere and respectful ritualistic practice of religion, but admits that these practices never suited her own temperament. Her husband was also very devout and committed to ritual workshop, but Kamath says that the “prayer room door closed” in her house when he passed away prematurely, leaving her to raise a son alone. She was introduced to a new landscape of spiritual discovery and self-inquiry when she began teaching at the Valley School, a school established in Bangalore by Jiddhu Krishnamurthi. Kamath (re)discovered Kabir through Prahlad Tipanya, who had come to Bangalore for a film screening with Virmani in 2009. Hearing Tipanya sing, Kamath burst into tears. Tipanya was

---

<sup>130</sup> Personal communication at Deepa Kamath’s residence in Bangalore, December 5, 2014.

moved by her reaction, and invited her and all other listeners to come to Lunyakhedi. That December, not knowing what to expect, she went to Lunyakhedi by herself and spent the winter holiday learning Kabir bhajans. Today, Kamath keeps a nirgun tambura in her flat and practices bhajans every day. She teaches many of these bhajans to her students at school. For Kamath, Kabir offered a way to remain engaged in spirituality that deemphasized ritual practices. Furthermore, the bhajan idiom connected with her lifelong love of devotional singing



*Image 5-9: Deepa Kamath sings a Kabir bhajan in her home while playing tambura and kartal. Bangalore, KA. December 4, 2014.*

Kamath and Virmani both provide excellent examples of why modern Indians may be interested in Sant poetry: it provides a framework for spiritual exploration unencumbered by the cultural baggage of orthodox Hindu praxis. Virmani perfectly summarizes this appeal of Kabir as simultaneously spiritually compelling and socially provocative:

VIRMANI: Kabir spoke a language that began to speak to me. Initially what drew me to him was this idea of debunking social divisions, and this folly of religion and how it can be so exploitative - the mullahs, the pundits. But what I had not reckoned was how much Kabir was beginning to speak to me, possibly because of my own unknown yearning for a different way of understanding myself and the world. And then it was just like the unraveling of a whole universe of meanings, which were moment-to-moment, day-by-day, changing me in ways that were deeply destabilizing, but deeply welcome as well.<sup>131</sup>

Virmani emphasizes the contrast of Kabir's language to the language of "religion," which has the potential to be exploitative. As discussed in Chapter 2, a major theme in Kabir poetry is critique of exploitation in the name of religion. However, this theme has slightly shifted in the popular conception of Kabir within India's national imagination. Rather than being a figure who expresses contempt for all religions in equal measure, Kabir is transformed into an ecumenical figure who straddles the line between Hinduism and Islam and symbolizes harmony between all faiths. This is perhaps the most pervading association of Kabir; he has even been described as the "apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity" (Hedayetullah 1977).

### **India's Composite Culture**

This ecumenical indexicality of Kabir likely derives from his religious liminality and from many pointed legends about his life and death (Hawley 2005; Lorenzen 1991; Vaudeville 1974), but they also reflect a deep-seated attitude of pluralism and tolerance in Indian religious life. One strain of scholarship of India has described this pluralism, and particularly the productive intermingling of Hinduism and Islam as both theological and cultural frameworks, as India's "composite culture."<sup>132</sup> Despite prevalence of deep cultural syncretism and generally

---

<sup>131</sup> Personal communication at Shristi Srishti School of Art Design and Technology, Bangalore, December 4, 2014.

<sup>132</sup> The notion of composite culture was first proposed by Tara Chand in his volume *Influences of Islam*, written in 1920 but published four decades later (Chand 1963). More recent treatments of this concept including Alam (1999) and Mohamed (2007).

tolerant and inclusive attitudes in India, Javeed Alam (1999) laments the lack of scholarly engagement with the idea of composite culture. Vinay Lal does not invoke the term “composite culture,” but agrees that both right-wing Hindutva extremists and the academic left share an “indifference to the *tolerance of everyday life*, indeed to the ordinariness of tolerance” (Lal 2006, 79, emphasis mine).

Alam (1999) suggests that the “cultural metamorphosis” that was “the most effective one in formulating the composite culture of India” was the synthesis of Sufi Islam and Hindu Bhakti during medieval India. He claims the “Bhakti movement was the consequence of Hindu tolerance in theology, religion, and metaphysics and the Islamic sense of equality in social practice (1999, 9-10). He further claims that South Asian history is shaped by a clear pattern: synthesis happens “at the folk level” in a manner that is “pre-reflective.” In other words, it is based on organic blending of people and ideas rather than a deliberate effort towards inclusion, what Lal described as the “tolerance of everyday life” (Lal 2006, 79). Invariably, Alam proceeds to argue, orthodoxies react against these syntheses and seek to reestablish sectarian boundaries. The syntheses “survived as long as they were left alone,” but faced with sufficient top-down intervention, they “begin to dissolve into the existing or parallel neo-orthodoxies (Alam 1999, 31-32). Placed within this narrative of history, we can understand how Kabir, whose poetry directly confronts these sectarian boundaries, comes to be an ecumenical figure. Although his poetry commonly uses language of exclusion (i.e., it chastises religious authorities for their divisiveness), it fits within the organic logic of South Asian religious inclusionism.

In Alam’s model, cultural synthesis is an organic process occurring at the popular level, while enforcement of orthodoxy and creation of neo-orthodoxy are top-down initiatives by those in positions of social power. Alam is far from the only scholar to suggest that institutions of power promote cultural and ideological hegemony. This theme has been addressed by many

scholars of modernity, nation, and subaltern studies. One stream of South Asian historiography, represented by scholars like Gyanendra Pandey, claims that the narrative that positions Hindus and Muslims in perennial violent struggle was manufactured by the British Raj to further their own aims. The neo-orthodoxies that characterize contemporary Indian discourse are products of the nation's negotiation with modernity and globalism. Appadurai argues that "the central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization," proceeding to explain that generalized fears about global homogenization may be exploited by nation-states to impose their hegemonic agendas on their own minorities (Appadurai 1996, 32). "One man's imagined community is another man's political prison," he elaborates, referencing Benedict Anderson.

### **Alternatives to Extremism**

Today, right-wing religious ideologies such as Hindutva are major forces in shaping and debating Indian culture. These identities have their roots in Indian nationalist movements that defied colonial oppression through reformist and modernist narratives of Hinduism that were, ironically, based on colonial perspectives (Chatterjee 1989, 1993). Although these identities have existed in India since the early nationalist movement, extremist Hindu nationalism has risen to become a major player in Indian politics during the last two decades, perhaps in response to fears of the cultural forces of globalization or the economic forces of liberalization (Ghosh 1999; Panikkar 1999). In 1992, the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, by a mob of militant Hindus and the ensuing communal riots marked the ascendancy of Hindu extremism as a dominant force in Indian politics.<sup>133</sup> In 2002, the violent legacy of the Babri Masjid incident was rekindled after 58 Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya were killed on a

---

<sup>133</sup> Detailed analyses of the Babri Masjid incident and the violent attitudes precipitating and resulting from it can be found in Lal (1994) and Nandy et al. (1995).

burning train in Godhra, Gujarat. The response was a series of pogroms throughout Gujarat that resulted in thousands of deaths or injuries. Many scholars and victims of the riots have directly accused the state government of complicity in the disproportionate violence perpetrated against Muslims in the state, even suggesting that it was a pre-meditated act by the state tantamount to ethnic cleansing (Dhattiwala and Biggs 2012; Ogden 2012; Pandey 2005). There is still debate over issues of culpability and cause, but this work is more concerned with the broad attitudes about the pogroms. A great number of people were appropriately horrified, but many ideologues from the extreme right publicly condoned the violence. Ashok Singhal, leader of the Hindu nationalist organization Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), reportedly described the incidents as a “successful experiment” that should be replicated throughout the country (Rajagopal 2003).

Many devout or spiritually engaged Hindus and Muslims have been disillusioned by these incidents of communal violence and the attitudes of those who support them. And so Kabir, India’s most established voice against sectarianism and symbol of religious harmony has become tremendously appealing and disturbingly relevant. Baul, Sufi, Sant and other syncretic devotional traditions attain a new level of importance as living testaments to India’s tradition of pluralism and religious harmony.

Here, we see a significant departure from Alam’s historical model of composite culture: again, hegemonic forces seek to disrupt syntheses at the popular level, but now the syntheses are *deliberate*. The Kabir Project and Kabir Festivals’ symbolic importance as reactions against sectarianism is not circumstantial. Many of the key people organizing these projects were driven by their experience of communal violence in Gujarat and Mumbai during the 1990s and 2000s. Shabnam Virmani lived in Ahmedabad, Gujarat during the riots, and explained that the zealous reactions of people around her convinced her of the “urgency” of Kabir’s message:

VIRMANI: What made me turn to Kabir was again from a social reformist view, where you turn to Kabir because he's saying, “Hindu-Muslim divisions are meaningless.” I had

witnessed the Godra riots take place in Gujarat in 2002. I saw how many people around me were charged with some kind of religious beliefs and ideologies, to which rational speech made absolutely no impact. I realized that you cannot speak to people who are passionately in favor of Rama of Ayodhya. Any real statistics or facts [you may provide] about, say Muslims in India - it doesn't fly.

Virmani, from her secular, progressive background, realized that her language of rationality was not capable of intervening with destructive and exclusionist ideologies that emerged from belief systems based on faith. Kabir offered a perfect rejoinder, as an established tradition of faith that espoused values of inclusion and ecumenism.

Falguni Desai, as a lifelong resident of Mumbai, witnessed the riots and bombings of the 1990s (in response to the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition) and the ascendancy of extremist Hindu nationalist groups like the Rashtriya Sevak Sangh (RSS). In 2002, she went to Gujarat in the capacity of a lawyer to record statements by victims and witnesses. Coming from a devout Hindu family background, Desai has had a strong personal reaction against Hindu extremism, which seeks to define Hinduism within the public sphere as something entirely antithetical to her belief system. In many conversations, she related the frustration she felt about extremists' increasing attempts to dominate the "space" of Hinduism in India's culture. Through the MKF and other Sahej-sponsored events, she has made many efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance. This included a program based on Amir Khusrao's poetry in 2014, Bulleh Shah in 2015, and a *qawwālī* program in 2016.

Kabir, the Sants, Sufis, Bauls, and other heterodox religious traditions have become increasingly important in response to India's increasing climate of religious fundamentalism. They offer possibility for spiritual practice that are grounded in (or perceived to be grounded in) traditionality, but characteristically syncretic and counter-extremist. But it is not only these religious traditions in abstract that have become popular, it is the performers who embody these

traditions. These singers are perceived not only as representatives of certain paradigms of spirituality, but as representatives of authentic culture.

### Rediscovering Roots

Prahlad Tipanya, Parvathi Baul, Mooralala Marwada, and the other regional performers who have become cultural celebrities in recent years present music from different languages, theologies, and regional styles, but in the national imagination they are all included under the broad rubric of “folk” culture. They are not merely representatives of oral devotional traditions, but embodied symbols of an “authentic” culture that many urban Indians feel is lacking in their lives. The desire for cultural consumption is deeply entwined with India’s emergence into the field of globalized mass media culture, following its adoption of economic neoliberalism in the 1990s.<sup>134</sup> As in many globalized societies, the increased participation in Western-dominated forms of media is accompanied by an anxiety over the loss of cultural self. Immersed in the logic of neoliberalism, many attempt to reconstitute the cultural self through the consumption of cultural commodities and ideas. Saadia Toor describes this phenomenon beginning in the late 1990s, when global capitalism reached a sufficient “level of hegemony” for “globally oriented capitalist consumer culture to truly manifest itself in Indian society” (Toor 2000). She explains that this paradigm shift has resulted in a “merchandising of culture” on the global scale that signals India’s international “arrival” (ibid.). She emphasizes that despite global circulation and influential networks with diaspora, the circuit of production, circulation and consumption of Indian cultural commodities starts and ends *in India*. Toor has poignantly theorized the attitude

---

<sup>134</sup> Vinay Lal (2009: 147) suggests that economic liberalization was itself a response to the increasing global presence of Indians, as it was strongly supported by the wealthy Indian diaspora in the US and other countries. Smitha Ramachandran (2008) has described the Indian middle class as an increasingly transnational community that shares common culture across a “circuit” encompassing metropolises in both India and the diaspora.



she describes as “new orientalism,” characterized by a self-exoticization of Indian culture, offering the example of Mira Nair’s gratuitously exotic film, *Kāma Sūtra* (ibid.).

The most tangible products of this wave of cultural consumption are found in retail chains such as Fab India. Fab India, which now has over 200 stores, sells *kurtās*, *salvārs*, *sārī*, and shawls made from rough cottons and silks with traditional rural patterns at relatively high prices, targeting a demographic of upper-middle-class urbanites. It has exploded in popularity over the last decade. These days, young men can wear cotton *kurtās* or bracelets of *rudrākshā* beads and be classified as hipsters rather than as good old-fashioned Hindu boys. Another chain, Anokhi, specializes in clothing with traditional block print motifs. Anokhi is both a retail chain and cultural conservation movement; it is not only a for-profit enterprise, but a means of preserving a fading artisanal tradition. Indians who wear Anokhi clothing are not only displaying their appreciation for folk culture, but passively safeguarding it.

Increasingly, Indians pursue folk culture not only through commodities, but through experience. Domestic tourism with India has become a booming industry, and has grown dramatically since the 1990s, far eclipsing international tourism (Bandyopadhyaya et al. 2008; Bhardwaj et al. 1998; Ghimire 2001; Gladstone 2005, 15-16).<sup>135</sup> Emerging tour companies, such as the Pune-based Black Swan Journeys, offer customers a chance to experience folk culture through tour packages that include interactions with hereditary musicians in Rajasthan or banana fiber artisans in Karnataka.<sup>136</sup> Those unable to leave the metropolis may experience a simulacrum of folk culture through village theme parks, such as Nakhrali Dhani outside Indore

---

<sup>135</sup> Domestic tourism, as Bandyopadhyaya indicates, can be a powerful and pervasive form of constructing national identity, and is certainly not free from state-disseminated narratives of culture and nation (Bandyopadhyaya et al. 2008)

<sup>136</sup> <http://blackswanjourneys.com/>

and Sanskruti outside Pune.<sup>137</sup> These parks are highly romanticized imitations of Rajasthani villages, in which visitors can stroll from tent to tent enjoying folk music, dance, handicrafts, and acrobatic performances. What is being offered is not simply a cultural product, but culture *as* a product. Patrons are not offered an object representing their culture, but the opportunity to participate in an experience of “authentic folk culture” that is increasingly alien from their lives in globalized metropolises. It is no coincidence that the Mumbai Kabir Festival, which does not usually sell CDs or other products by its artists, *does* have a table at many events selling folk instruments from the Baul tradition. Patrons are eager not only to observe folk culture, but to participate in it.



*Image 5-10: Table selling traditional instruments outside a performance at the 2014 Mumbai Kabir Festival. Khar West, Mumbai, MH. January 10, 2014.*

---

<sup>137</sup> [www.nakralidhani.com](http://www.nakralidhani.com), [www.sanskruti.com](http://www.sanskruti.com)

Now, through initiatives like the Kabir Project, the Kabir Festival, Ruhaniyat, and countless other folk music and devotional music festivals, urban Indians have access to live performances by regional devotional musicians. Figures like Tipanya and Parvathy Baul are cast not only as tradition-bearers but as cultural heroes, voices of a wisdom lost in the bustle of urban life and the inundating torrent of materialism, modernity, and corporate media. This phenomenon is not new to scholars of the humanities; it strongly resembles folk music revivals that occurred in Britain and the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Boyes 1993; Rodnitzsky 1976; Sweers 2005).

Rodnitzsky (1976) describes the 1960s as the first moment in US history when musical artists might be looked upon as role models or cultural heroes at the same level as sports icons, statesmen, or business tycoons. Youth who did not find their values reflected in traditional icons from these fields had a new set of icons available to them. In twentieth-century India, numerous classical musicians and film playback singers have been accorded with superlative respect and even reverence, but only now are folk musicians being accorded a similar status. This is significant, as the folk musicians may resonate with counterculture movements and provide a space for cultural heterogeneity, whereas the arena of classical music in the twentieth century has been dominated by the values of the status quo (Bakhle 2002; Lelyveld 1994).

When they are presented or marketed as representatives of authentic culture or Indian roots, performers are, in some sense, transformed from persons into symbols. As cultural symbols, they serve as building blocks for other Indians to use in their constructions of self through processes that may be collaborative or appropriative. We must then ask, what happens to the agency of the performers in these situations? How are the performers and their traditions represented?

## Representation and Appropriation

At the beginning of this chapter, I recounted two performances by Tipanya's mandali that occurred during a single weekend, but involved drastically different paradigms of representation. In their performance for the Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board on August 22, the performers were expected to present their tradition in the service of the Board's explicitly commercial aims. They were expected to sing, but not given space to speak. Within this context, they became subaltern in the Spivak-ian sense (Spivak 1988); the interpretation of their words and performance was largely out of their control. In striking contrast, during the home satsang on August 24, Tipanya was the moderator of discourse. The relatively wealthy urban satsang attendees had come not to consume Tipanya's music as a cultural commodity, but to engage with him as an individual thinker and learn from him as a spiritual leader.

These two concerts represent extremes on a continuum of representation experienced by regional devotional musicians. Generally speaking, most of these musicians' urban performance opportunities involve a portrayal of their tradition that is, in some way, reductive. Diverse traditions are divested of their unique social circumstances and ideological positions and presented under simple stereotypes of "folk" to fit audience expectations. When urban Indians asked about my research, I would typically respond (for simplicity) by saying, "I am studying Kabir bhajans by folk singers." The automatic reply in many cases was, "you must be traveling in Rajasthan, then." The automatic association was that folk culture is equal to Rajasthani culture, and usually reductionist stereotypes of Rajasthani culture of the type seen in the Rajasthani village theme parks described earlier.<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>138</sup> Rajasthan has long carried the association as India's repository of "folk" culture and destination for domestic cultural tourism. In recent decades, this status has been maintained through the efforts of Komal Kothari and other seminal folklorists, as well as contemporary attempts by cultural organizations and the Rajasthani state to sustain hereditary performance traditions, described in greater detail by Ayyagari (2009).

The elisions are not only cultural, but religious. As discussed earlier, regional devotional musicians are increasingly welcomed into religious music concerts and festivals, typically labeled as *bhakti* music programs. While this grouping is not ipso facto problematic, such programs generally fail to distinguish between different *bhakti* traditions and their social ideologies. They commit the very same error criticized by Krisha Sharma 30 years ago by uncritically grouping traditions that challenge the status quo with those that uphold it (Sharma 1987). Most organizers likely have good reasons in doing so; they are interested in celebrating India's religious unity in diversity. Most organizers are simply interested in selling the greatest possible number of tickets to a primarily middle-class and upper-caste Hindu demographic. But in doing so, traditions like the Sant-*vāṇī* are stripped of their radical voice and their performers are portrayed as participants in an orthodox Hindu discourse that they often do not support. For this reason, Prahlad Tipanya was initially opposed to Falguni Desai's decision to expand the traditions represented in the MKF. His contention was not that she was including non-Kabir traditions, but that her inclusion extended to sagun traditions such as Marathi *abhangā*. Tipanya felt that the MKF provided a much-needed space for nirgun traditions within a sagun-dominated religious music culture.

The representation of minority devotional traditions in India's public culture bears many resemblances to multiculturalism initiatives in countries like the US. Many critics have labeled multiculturalism as a new form of racism, citing its tendency to provide tokenistic representation for minorities without actually challenging a status quo in which these minorities have little genuine opportunity for social mobility. Vijay Prashad, one of the most vocal critics of multiculturalism in the US, explains:

[Multiculturalism] emerges as the liberal doctrine designed to undercut the radicalism of anti-racism. Instead of anti-racism, we are fed a diet of cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity. The history of oppression and the fact of exploitation are shunted aside in favor

of a celebration of difference and of the experiences of individuals who can narrate their ethnicity for the consumption of others. (Prashad 1999, 189)

In many ways, Prashad's critiques apply to the devotional/folk music situation in India today. Minority tradition-bearers are often presented in ways that conceal their historical oppression and expected to offer tokenistic performances for commercial consumption.

In 2012, MTV's Coke Studio released a music video featuring Mooralala Marwada. Coke Studio is a program that pairs traditional performers with modern studio producers, session musicians, and contemporary popular artists. The program originated in Brazil, before expanding to a number of other countries including Pakistan in 2008 and India in 2011. The Indian edition has been spearheaded by a number of high profile Bollywood producers. Episodes are aired on TV, but also on YouTube, where they are most widely consumed. In 2012, a track and video was released produced by Hitesh Sonik, featuring Marwada alongside jazz vocalist Suman Sridhar. Marwada comes from a lower-caste Meghwal community in the desert area of Kutch, Gujarat, on the desert border of the Sindh province of Pakistan. He sings bhajans by many Sants and poet-saints, specializing in the poetry of Kabir and the Sindhi Sufi saint Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai. He came to national prominence through the Kabir Project; although Virmani met him after the documentaries had been released, she featured him in a number of workshops and festivals, and he became a celebrity "folk musician." In the Coke Studio track, Marwada performs a popular Rajasthani bhajan called "*Vārī Jāūn Re*" (I Will Go in Surrender).<sup>139</sup>

The performance begins with Marwada's a high, wailing cry of "Aaa Rama" (O God). He accompanies himself on his five-stringed *santār* (a Gujathi instrument that provides a similar musical function as the Malvi/Rajasthani tambura). He sings two *sākhī*-s with sparse

---

<sup>139</sup> This video may be accessed at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLEChD\\_MZnY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLEChD_MZnY).

accompaniment – only *santār* and a keyboard pad in the background. As he begins the *bhajan*, guitars, bass and percussion join in. The sound palette changes, but the instruments are working in support of Marwada’s voice and minimalist aesthetic. One percussion plays a simple Marathi frame drum (*dimḍī*) while another shakes hand cymbals. Studio violinist Balabhaskar Santhakumari plays an interlude between verses, a minimalist, and lightly ornamented melody that imitates the aesthetic of a *jogī sarangi*. However, after the end of the first verse and chorus, there is a jarring transition. The guitarists switch to a ska-reggae rhythm, playing staccato jazz chords on the second and fourth beat of each bar. The drum set joins in, followed by jazz vocalist Suman Sridhar. Within a few minutes, she is scat-singing, and the violinist, piano, and drums, are playing virtuosically over jazz progressions. The music itself is inoffensive, but its pairing with Marwada’s *bhajan* is incongruous and poorly executed. The video begins by highlighting Marwada’s soulful and introspective presentation of devotional poetry, but only a few minutes later he is sitting idly on the stage while highly-trained professional musicians showcase their virtuosity in a manner that may uncharitably be described as masturbatory. Marwada is now more prop than participant.

My critique of this track is not borne out of a conservatively minded aversion to any form of “fusion” music, but rather out of the clumsy disjuncture that results from mixing “folk” and “modern” merely for the sake of novelty. Fiercer critics (i.e., commenters on YouTube) have voiced similar opinions, albeit using less forgiving language. Many comments attest that a number of listeners only enjoy the track up to the point when the *bhajan* ends and the mismatched jazz begins. From the perspective of a Sant singer, however, the most egregious misstep in the production of this track is the treatment of the *bhajan* as text. Only one of the *bhajan*’s five verses is included, and the virtuosic performance of the session musicians is clearly a higher priority than the spiritual poetry. Post-modern critic Ziauddin Sardar (2005) has voiced

similar critiques of commercial uses of *qawwālī* music. Sardar argues that recontextualization of *qawwālī* that obfuscate the original poetic is effectively discarding the most important essence of the tradition.<sup>140</sup>

All of the regional musicians I met that have been successful on the national scale are fully aware of the reductionist stereotypes that color audience expectations. They are skilled at navigating these expectations through a selective presentation of difference and performance of authenticity. Tipanya and troupe rarely perform wearing coordinated costumes and painstakingly wrapped *sāfā*-s when they are in Malwa, and never in the satsang setting. Yet they are aware that their urban audiences will expect colorful, “authentic” village costumes. Marwada and his troupe don Sindhi *ajrak*-patterned clothing whenever they perform in Mumbai, but not in their own region of Kutch. Also absent from Marwada’s Kutch performances is his opening invocation of “*Aaa Rāma*” that has become a signature among his urban fans. Performers are experts at catering to audience expectations, knowing that a positive public response can lead to increased status, monetary gain, and future performance opportunities. However, they are also invested in maintaining the integrity of their spiritual traditions. Tipanya masterfully demonstrated this at the Madhya Pradesh Tourism performance, when he selected songs whose lyrics may serve as either tourism slogans or profound mystical utterances. He simultaneously met the expectations of his patron and his own goal of preaching the Sant-*vāṇī* to the masses.

Parvathy Baul is among the most successful Indian devotional performers on a global scale, and among the most masterful in her engaging performance of difference. Parvathy is a member of the religiously heterodox Baul sect, who are known for their ascetic practices and defiance of “respectable” social values. Krakauer (2015) notes that many female Baul performers

---

<sup>140</sup> In his poetic language, Sardar warns that “We are rushing headling to meet each other on the common ground of nothingness” (Sardar 2005).



have adopted conservative forms of dress, as they are cautious about appearing too flamboyant due to lingering cultural stigmas. Parvathy, however, wears the traditional orange robe of an ascetic and dreadlocked hair that hangs loose all the way to the floor. Interestingly, Parvathy was not born a Baul. She grew up in an educated, progressive upper-class Bengali family. During college, she decided to run away from home and subsequently spent several years being initiated into Baul philosophy and music. There is no deception in Parvathy's Baul identity; her audiences in Bengal are largely aware of her background. In fact, her middle-class origins and facility with English have been significant factors in her popularity with audiences nationally and globally.<sup>141</sup>

However applicable Prashad's criticisms of multiculturalism may be to the current situation of Indian devotional singers, there is a significant point of difference. Minority traditions presented through multicultural initiatives in countries such as the United States may be framed through positive inclusionary narratives, but they are fundamentally perceived by their audiences as traditions of the other "other." By contrast, Indian minority devotional singers, however "other" they may be in terms of socioeconomic circumstances or life experiences, are perceived by their audiences as representatives of a truer "self." They are believed to offer something through which their audiences may construct their own selves, or mend selves fractured through the dislocations of global modernity.

### **The Spiritual and Cultural Self**

In her work on Zulu music production in South Africa, Louise Meintjes invokes Bakhtin (1981) in describing the "discursive link between sound and sentiment" provided by the sense of "authenticity" with which the music is received (Meintjes 2003, 260). Two systems of values, one concerned with "human dignity and personhood," and one concerned with "poetics of

---

<sup>141</sup> Benjamin Krakauer likens this to American middle-class audience's relative comfort with Midwestern suburban singer Bob Dylan compared to blue-collar Southern singer Roscoe Holcomb.

form,” are united in a “mutually constituting heteroglossia” (ibid.). Extending Meintjes’s model to live performance, we may observe it at play in metropolitan Indians’ reception of regional devotional singers. The cultural authenticity of these singers entwines with frameworks of spiritual belief. Ritu Joshi, a lifelong Mumbai resident, summarized this idea as she recalled her initial attraction to artists like Prahlad Tipanya and Mukhtiyar Ali. As we ate lunch in the luxurious surroundings of the Royal Willingdon Sports Club in South Mumbai, Joshi explained that these singers engaged with a desire she had to reconnect with India’s spiritual traditions, but also reminded her of her family roots in Rajasthan:

RITU JOSHI: I’m not very religious at all. For me the memories from growing up of actually going to Rajasthan, being in that environment, that is more like it. I don’t do *puja* (ritual worship) - I don’t do anything at home. The only thing we do is Diwali, or Ganapathi<sup>142</sup> - my children make the [Ganesh] sculptures, it’s more about cultural value as opposed to anything religious...

But the music [of Tipanya and Mukhtiyar Ali], it gets to you. It’s a fantastic medium. Like Prahlad ji always says, “*choṭ lagtī hai*” (it wounds you)... I’m very Indian – as Indian as you can get, in terms of my interests and my family background, but you know it’s shocking that I had no exposure to this [Kabir tradition].<sup>143</sup>

As she describes this process of discovery to me, Joshi simultaneously describes her family’s recent participation in Vipassana meditation and mindfulness retreats based on the teachings of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nath Hanh. For Ritu, participation in these imported spiritual practices blends seamlessly with her spiritual and cultural rediscovery of her self through the indigenous, traditional paradigms of Mukhtiyar and Tipanya’s bhajans. Not only is

---

<sup>142</sup> The yearly Ganapathi (Ganesh) is the largest religious festival in Mumbai. Mumbai residents from many social and religious backgrounds are swept up in the ten-day celebration.

<sup>143</sup> Personal communication at Royal Willingdon Sports Club, Mumbai, April 1, 2015.

there no tension between these distinct forms of spiritual engagement, but they are experienced as parts of a single internal process.

Joshi further explains that bhajan experience must lead to introspection and transformation in one's own life. "Otherwise, why are we doing this? Is it just because bhajans are *fashionable* all of a sudden? Then it just becomes a kind of reverse snobbery." Joshi's remarks reveal the simultaneous processes of cultural and spiritual discovery at play in her own experience of Sant bhajans. Her wariness over the trap of "reverse snobbery" (what we may call "hipster-ism" in contemporary American parlance) reveals that she is aware of the cache accorded to these singers as authentic culture-bearers, and does not want the momentary "fashionability" of devotional singers to eclipse their spiritual messages.

Ashis Nandy claims that the spaces (real or imagined) of village and city, and the journey between these spaces is a central aspect of the Indian self:

[D]uring the [last hundred years], certain core concerns and anxieties of Indian civilization have come to be reflected in the journey from the village to the city, and from the city to the village. Travel through space and time, the known and the unknown and, ultimately, the self and the not-self, get subsumed under these two humble forms of journey. (Nandy 2001, 5)

He further describes the imaginary journey to the village as "a journey to the self," but emphasizes that this is a journey to a fantasy village, one that cannot be returned to and likely never existed. For this village exists to serve urban India's cultural imagination as a contrast to the Indian city in all its aspects. The fantasy village may be perfectly idyllic, hopefully regressive, or both simultaneously:

The growing confidence of the city in its capacity to interpret the village in its own terms only confirms that the Indian imagination of the city is no longer primarily that of the first-generation migrants with living memories of the village, nor of hesitant, self-doubting city dwellers. At the same time, the shared imagination of the village within the urban Indian has narrowed; indeed, it has been radically remodelled by the city to serve the city's own needs.

The Indian village as the symbol of a tyrannical system that obligingly conforms to nineteenth-century left-Hegelian depictions of feudalism, the Indian village as the obstinate symbol of mindless homicidal patriarchy, the Indian village as the depot of 'pure' environmental-cultural sensitivity and people's critique of conventional development, and, above all, *the Indian village as the counter-city and an escape from the city* - these are all markers of the changing political-cultural status of the village. (Nandy 2001, 74-75, emphasis mine)

Indians may now take this journey to the self by traveling to a village in Malwa. They may go vicariously through Tipanya's music, or literally by attending a workshop in Lunyakhedi. For some, this is a reconnection with the romantic idylls of Indian rural life. Sheetal Sanghvi, a close friend from Pune, India, visited Lunyakhedi while I was conducting my research. Walking the plowed fields, drinking fresh cow's milk, eating *chapātī* prepared on a traditional cowdung-fired *chūlā* oven, he commented to me, "This place shows us what we have lost, but we do not realize that we have lost."<sup>144</sup> On the other hand, many members of the urban community are social activists and NGO workers whose romantic notions are tempered by their knowledge of the repressive social realities of rural India, particularly vis-à-vis caste and gender.

The annual Lunyakhedi festival allows a small number of urban Indians to make a literal journey to the village, but an increasing number of festivals, workshops, and *satsang*-s in metropolises allow countless others to make a metaphorical journey to the village. When Indians embark on a "journey to the self" through participation in regional devotional music, they implicitly uphold certain conceptions of what defines an Indian self and, by extension, Indian culture. This self incorporates disparate cultural and theological traditions. After all, most urban participants of the Kabir festival do not have actual family roots in Malwa or Kutch or Bengal, but they nonetheless perceive traditions from these regions as providing a connection to their

---

<sup>144</sup> *Chapātī* is the unleavened bread that is the staple of the North Indian diet.

roots. Deepa Kamath mused on how much her schoolchildren in Bangalore feel connected to songs from Malwa. She explained that she tried teaching them bhajans from India's classical traditions on many occasions, but the Malvi Kabir bhajans were instantly appealing and resonated strongly with the children. Ironically, the classical traditions championed by state and cultural institutions as India's national genres are in this context less unifying than a relatively obscure genre from a specific region that never contributed extensively to broader constructions of national culture until recently. Urban interest in regional traditions suggest the possibility of a new nationalism that defines itself through cultural and religious heterogeneity rather than through the increasingly homogenized traditions of the social elite.

### ***Conclusion***

*February 26, 2015. Bhaklai Village, Khargon District, Madhya Pradesh.*

Parvathy Baul ascends the stage on the second day of the 2015 Malwa Kabir Yatra. The enormous, empty platform is a jarring contrast to the field surrounding it, which is packed with thousands of bodies eagerly awaiting the next performance. Minutes ago, the whole stage was used by a large bhajan mandali from a nearby village, but there is space. Parvathy always performs alone. She accompanies herself on the monochord Baul *ektār* held in her right hand, and uses her left hand to play a *duggi* kettle drum affixed to her waist. Bells tied around her ankles jingle as she steps rhythmically to the song. Tonight, she has asked me to join her on *bāñsurī*, and I happily oblige. The space off-stage was so crowded that everyone is practically sitting on top of each other, but now that I am sitting on stage I can clearly see the faces of the multitude assembled to hear bhajans in a language that they do not understand.

I am most struck by the faces of the women in the audience. Even in the dark, I can see the expressions on the faces of many who are sitting right up against the stage. They watch in amazement as Parvathy sways and spins, her dreadlocks spiraling around her. Her tempestuous

demeanor must seem an incredible contrast to the meek and repressed roles these Malvi women are obligated to perform every day.

After singing several Bengali bhajans from the Baul tradition, Parvathy turns to address the audience. Although her English and Bengali are immaculate, she is not fluent in Hindi. Nevertheless, the audience is captured by her charm and her laughter as she explains that the next bhajan she will sing is from their region: “*Pī le Amīras Dhārā*” (Drink from the Stream of Immortal Nectar), a Malvi Kabir bhajan that she learned from Prahlad Tipanya during a visit to Lunyakhedi a few years ago. These regional singers were brought into contact through the efforts of Shabnam Virmani and other urban cultural organizers, but the contact between them has endured and is now self-sustaining.



*Image 5-11: Parvathy Baul performs at the Malwa Kabir Yatra. Bhaklai Village, Khargon District, MP. February 26, 2015. Photo Credit: Shobhit Sharma.*

After Parvathy’s performance, Mooralala Marwada takes the stage with his group. I start to leave the stage, but he motions to me to join him on harmonium. Once again, I am treated to

a close experience of the performance from the stage. Marwada is joined not only by his own mandali from Kutch, but by Devnarayan Saroliya, the violinist who plays with Tipanya, and Pavan Parihar, a young man who often plays *ḍholak* with Tipanya and many other Malvi singers.

Marwada sings a few bhajans in Kutchi, a few in Sindhi, but mostly focuses on Hindi or Rajasthani bhajans that the audience may understand. Among these is “*Vārī jāuñ re*,” the same bhajan that he recorded for MTV’s Coke Studio. This has become Marwada’s signature song. His urban audiences all know it from watching the Coke Studio recording on YouTube, and his Malwa audiences hear him perform it every year at the Yatra. Ironically, this is not a song from Marwada’s own region of Kutch. It is a Rajasthani song commonly performed by nirgun singers in Malwa. Marwada learned the bhajan while participating in the first Malwa Kabir Yatra, and loved it so much that he began singing it during every performance of the Yatra. After Marwada completes the first verse, I realize that Saroliya, sitting next to me, is playing a familiar melodic interlude. He is playing the exact same interlude used by the session musician in Marwada’s Coke Studio recording; he learned it from watching the video on his mobile phone.

This bhajan has traveled an incredible path. It has gone from Rajasthan, to Malwa, to Kutch, to Mumbai, and now back to Malwa, where it is now being performed by musicians from Kutch and Malwa (and one American). It has been transmitted partially through traditional oral processes, and partially through the distinctly new networks and conduits created by urban cultural initiatives, MTV, and mobile phones. Through these networks, musicians like Tipanya, Marwada, and Parvathy Baul are engaged in enduring spiritual and artistic dialogues. They share poetry, songs, ideas, and deep friendships. Most importantly, in events like the Malwa Yatra they are able to mediate the performance and transmission of their traditions on their own terms, unencumbered by the commercial or hegemonic goals that organizers may have.

My experience with regional devotional performers in concerts, workshops, festivals, and *satsang*-s across many social and ideological contexts suggests that India is experiencing a major sea-change in who participates in the constitution of national culture. People from the metropolitan social elite and from marginalized regional traditions are engaging with each other through shared affinity for devotional music. The resulting networks produce new spaces for artistic transmission and collaboration, and new arenas for cultural and spiritual dialogue.



## Chapter 6

### “ONE WATER IN MANY VESSELS”

#### KABIR IN POPULAR MUSIC

*Kabīra Kuā ek hai, panihāri anek  
Bhartan sab ken yāre hai, pānī sab meñ ek*

Kabir says – there is one well, but many water-carriers  
Each bears a different vessel, but the water in all is the same

- Kabir *sākhī*

#### ***Vedanth and Bindhu: Kabir Unplugged***

*December 6, 2014: Mumbai, MH*

Listen: Vedanth’s fingers slide, strum, and slap across his guitar’s thick steel strings as he plays a twelve-bar blues lick in E major. He allows the chords to ring out, so the audience can appreciate the space between them. His silky, clear voice contrasts with the raw, percussive sound of the guitar as he sings:

*Bhajo re bhaiyā Rāma Govinda Hari  
Jap tap sādhan, kacchu nahīñ lāgat, kharchat nahīñ gaṭharī  
santat sampat sukh ke karan jaso bhool bhayii  
Rām nām ko sumiran kar le, sir pe maut khaḍī  
Kahat Kabir Ram na jā mukh, tā much dhūl paḍhī*

Sing oh brothers, the names of God: Ram, Govinda, Hari  
Chanting, spiritual penance and practice, these require no expense  
Forget progeny and wealth, these will not bring you happiness  
Remember the name of God – for death is standing on your head  
Kabir says: the face that does not go to God,  
That face will become nothing but dust

- Kabir bhajan

His voice swoops over the chords, effortlessly matching the blues progression, while retaining its unmistakably Carnatic character. Bindhu, sitting beside him, joins during the chorus, singing sweeping melismas in the spaces Vedanth leaves between lines. A palpable thrill sweeps through the concert hall as Vedanth calls out the line, “death is standing on your head.”

The two singers sit alone on a large, wooden stage. They are performing as part of a program called Anand Lahiri (Waves of Bliss) organized by a Hindu organization in honor of its Guru. Most of the attendees are upper middle-class Hindus from around Mumbai, although there is a concentrated group of more “hippie” types in the second row: Vedanth and Bindhu’s fans from the Mumbai Kabir family. Within this performance context, Kabir is a devotee, urging fellow devotees to turn their focus to God before it is too late. The bhajan contains many of Kabir’s signature elements: the biting wit, the bold challenge to the listener, the preoccupation with death. Yet, this bhajan is not interested in overturning the status quo or in any other discernible social action. It is purely devotional; the message is think of God and sing His name. The specific names used may even categorize Kabir as a devotee of Vishnu.

Partha Chatterjee has argued that in the process of resisting colonial rule, nationalists conceptually divided social life into two domains: 1) a material/political exterior and 2) a spiritual/artistic interior (Chatterjee 1993). He suggests that in response to their apparent inferiority in the former arena, Indians claimed superiority in the latter arena, appropriating colonial Orientalist perspectives on Indian culture and subverting them for their political benefit. This binary paradigm has been threatened since the time of Chatterjee’s writing by the rise of sectarian and fundamentalist political discourse, but it has endured to large extent; much of India’s middle-class still perceives spirituality as entirely divorced from politics, if only at an ideal level. Anna Schultz refines Chatterjee’s model in her ethnography of *rāṣṭrīya kīrtankār-s* (nationalist devotional singers) in Maharashtra. Schultz suggests that while Chatterjee’s binary

does apply to upper-class Indian society, among non-elite and especially rural populations, political movements have always been characterized by, rather than separated from, spirituality and devotion (ibid., 9-10). Ethnographies of other lower-class, rural, or subaltern devotional music traditions in India support Schultz's claim (Dube 1998; Khare 1984; Schaller 1995; Sherinian 2014; Zelliott 1995).

In the villages of Malwa, Kabir is mystical, devotional, and political all at once. Here, in front of a middle-class Hindu crowd in a modern concert hall, the devotional Kabir is celebrated and the political is excluded (and largely unknown). The urban middle class Kabir joins a pantheon of *bhakti* saints – Meera, Nanak, Surdas – whose messages have been reconfigured to suit India's post-Independence social ideals of inclusivity and “domestic virtue” (Hawley 1995b, Lutgendorf 1995; Pritchett 1995). Vedanth and Bindhu's performance at Anand Lahiri generally falls within this category; songs of Kabir, Namdev, Meera, and Amir Khusrau are presented as the voices of ideal spiritual devotees, not social critics.

However, while their performance upholds the political versus spiritual binary described by Chatterjee's model, this has become de-linked from the related Western/modern versus Indian/traditional binary. Narayanaswamy and Bharadwaj are singing spiritual music, but they are also singing American blues. The only instruments on stage are a guitar and a banjo. This indicates that the Indian middle-class conception of political and spiritual as separate spheres has lingered in the national consciousness, but has become dissociated from the explicitly nationalist concerns that birthed it. In the decades since independence, it has become possible for performers and audiences to relate to “traditional” spirituality through idioms that are simultaneously Western and Indian. The presence of Sant poetry is an important part of this equation, as it legitimizes the performance as part of an established and widely loved spiritual tradition. Born in the early 1980s, Narayanaswamy and Bharadwaj are part of the generation of

Indians whose artistic and cultural sensibilities were shaped during a critical transition period in India's encounter with global popular culture. Both were born in a time and environment in which they perceived the world of Indian culture / spiritual music as entirely separate from the world of Western culture / popular music. Their personal artistic paths illustrate the way that India's urban middle class has begun to embrace "Westernized" popular music as an entirely legitimate context for religious performance.<sup>145</sup> Both Narayanaswamy and Bharadwaj shared accounts of their musical journeys categorized by the presence of cultural boundaries, and the subsequent crossing of those boundaries facilitated, rather than hindered, by their endeavor towards spiritual exploration.

### **A Rebellious Girl from Chennai**

Bindhumalini Narayanaswamy, who goes by Bindhu, was born in Chennai in the early 1980s, when it was still called Madras. "At that time," she explains, "the city was not too city-like." Their house resembled a traditional Tamil house that you would find in a village. No sofas, no telephones, the only distinguishing feature was the gas stove. Narayanaswamy was steeped in music from the time she was born. Her maternal grandmother, Seetha Doraiswamy, was a legendary exponent of the *jala-tarangam* (tuned water-filled bowls). Every one of her uncles, aunts, and cousins could sing, dance, or play instruments, and most could do more than one. Bindhu first learned Carnatic classical music from her mother, not through formal lessons, but through constant exposure and instruction throughout the course of each day:

---

<sup>145</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Western musical instruments or elements were entirely absent from Indian devotional music until now. Devotional songs in Bollywood movies, for example, were arranged orchestrally in the manner of much Indian film music from the 1950s onward. Even Anup Jalota, the model professional devotional recording artist, consistently includes acoustic guitar in many of his tracks. However, I suggest the music under discussion in this chapter crosses into the territory of Western popular music to an unprecedented extent, with regards to its musical structure as well as its presentation and contextualization.

BINDHUMALINI NARAYANASWAMY: While she is cooking, she is singing and teaching. While she is taking me on her cycle, I am sitting behind her or in front of her, and songs are taught to me. While she is sitting on stage, I am sitting next to her or sleeping next to her. While she is singing at the temple, I am on her lap.<sup>146</sup>

To this day, Narayanaswamy claims, although she was never taught the nine-part *Kamākṣhī Navaranam*, she can easily sing it from the years spent on her mother's lap as her mother performed it in the Kamakshi temple. But only the first five parts; she has difficulty with the last four parts, because she would invariably fall asleep before then.

Narayanaswamy started formal training in music at age 11 with a very prestigious Carnatic music family that included *chitravīna* master N. Ravikiran.<sup>147</sup> They provided excellent and dedicated training, she recalls, but she “resisted it from the beginning.” She wanted to enjoy summer breaks instead of sitting inside a room practicing, and also was resistant to applying deliberate effort to something she had always done easily and naturally. “I was like a lost cause for them,” she claims. “I simply did not want to put in the effort.” She continued to train with them for six years, until she completed the twelfth standard and began college. At this point, she had abandoned all plans of pursuing a career as a professional performer. The family that provided her early inspiration and learning environment now seemed discouraging; being surrounded by amazing musicians was starting to become intimidating. Furthermore, the only model of professional performance that she knew was the notoriously ruthless Carnatic concert scene. She had been attending the concerts at the highest standard since childhood, but she never felt at home in that setting.

---

<sup>146</sup> Personal communication in Juhu, Mumbai, December 8, 2014.

<sup>147</sup> The *chitravīnā*, also known as *gottuvadhyam*, is a long-necked lute. The player uses a slide held in their left hand to stop the string, and plucks the strings with their right hand.

I ask if she continued singing in college. “I was actually known in college for my music,” she says, but quickly adds, “But I was not cool or anything. Because Carnatic music was not cool. Western music was cool, but I was not singing English songs.” At least, she was not singing them to an audience. She had developed a taste for Peter Andre and Boyz II Men from the two hours every day that MTV played on Doordarshan. She began to experiment singing songs by Phil Collins, Bryan Adams, Tracy Chapman, and Dire Straits, but it never worked. She felt, and sounded like a Carnatic singer. “It felt very false, and I just could not relate to it. I was just trying to be something I was not. It was a very ‘wannabe’ thing.”

Instead of music, Narayanaswamy pursued visual art. She completed her BA in fine arts, then a graduate degree in visual communication, and began working as a freelance graphic designer. It became easy specifically because it was not fundamental to her definition of self in the way that music was:

NARAYASWAMY: Art became this engagement where it was not traumatic. It was not so infused with my identity that everything became an existential question of what my identity is. There was a lack of passion, a detachment... it’s like having a boyfriend instead of having a husband. Art was the boyfriend, husband was music.

But, she continued her metaphor, eventually she had to return home to her husband and take up music once again. While pursuing graduate studies at the National Institute for Design (NID) in Ahmedabad, she decided that she should explore North Indian, or Hindustani classical music. During the summer of 2007, she earned a scholarship to study under master Abdul Rashid Khan in Calcutta. Although she initially faced challenges overcoming her voice’s Carnatic instincts, she formed a close connection with Khan, and continued to travel to Calcutta for training until his passing in 2016.

Narayaswamy’s first engagement with Kabir came through her older sister, Jaya Madhavan. A writer by profession, Madhavan hosted regular home gatherings themed around

India's devotional poets. In 2002, she held a Kabir gathering for which she wrote a 20-minute play about Kabir, framed as an argument between the warp and the weft of a loom.<sup>148</sup>

Narayanaswamy participated as an actor and a singer. She confesses that she did not really grasp the meaning of the poetry at this time. Even her Carnatic music, she described herself as “lyrically challenged.” Her main engagement was through the music, and she was satisfied with an “essential understanding” of each composition. Kabir bhajans posed an even greater challenge, as Narayanaswamy was not fluent in Hindi. Her inspiration to seriously explore the poetry came later, as Kabir later came to take a central role in shaping her musical future. This happened through Narayanaswamy's collaboration with singer Vedanth Bharadwaj.

### **School Memories of Kabir**

Vedanth Bharadwaj also comes from a traditional Tamil family, and began training in Carnatic music in Mumbai as a young child. When he was eight years old, his family moved to Chennai, where he began training under vocalist Neyveli Santhanagoplan. Although he was firmly grounded in Carnatic music, he had considerable exposure to other genres and styles. His parents loved classic Bollywood music, and would play the songs of Naushad Ali, S. D. Burman, and R. D. Burman at home. His uncle was a sailor, and would bring cassettes of the Beatles, the Beegees, and other Western popular artists. But the biggest transformation in Bharadwaj's artistic life happened at age 15 when, in the tenth standard, he was sent to boarding school.

The Rishi Valley School was founded in 1926 by philosopher and anti-guru Jiddu Krishnamurthi. The school emphasizes Krishnamurthi's values of learning through exploration and engagement with art, music, and nature. It is a drastic contrast to the common Indian school experience, which overemphasizes rote memorization and strict conformist discipline. At Rishi Valley, Bharadwaj heard Kabir through the recordings of Kumar Gandharva. He recalls his

---

<sup>148</sup> Jaya Madhavan was later inspired to expand this play into a novel called *Kabir, The Weaver Poet*.

house master, who used to wake the boys up every morning with a Gandharva's "*Ud Jayega Hans Akela*." He fondly remembers the "tape deck time" each evening, when his peers would play Gandharva's cassettes:

VEDANTH BHARADWAJ: Between 6-7 PM, just after sports, when you're getting ready for dinner, that was the tape deck time. We had 15 minutes when we were allowed to play our cassettes. Most of the time it would just be in the common room and anyone would just play one or two songs. Kumar Gandharva was a very sought-after tape. And even if you are walking around school at that time, you would hear him from different rooms, different hostels.

Bharadwaj was introduced not only to Kabir, but also to many other poet-saints whose bhajans were included in the school's morning assemblies. Simultaneously, he was discovering Western rock music as a musician instead of just a listener. His roommate, Ananth Menon, taught him how to play the guitar.

By the time Bharadwaj finished high school, he knew that he wanted to be a musician, and all his teachers at the Rishi Valley School agreed. But he did not know how to go about it. His father insisted he finish his bachelor's degree while figuring things out. In college, he played guitar and sang every opportunity he had. He won second place in a music competition, performing Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" and The Eagles's "Love Will Keep Us Alive." He decided to form a rock band along with the first-place winner, Sanjeev. Their band was called Buddha's Babies, and they played at rock festivals and musical events throughout the country. By now, Bharadwaj had entirely lost contact with classical music; he was not taking lessons, and was not practicing:

BHARADWAJ: [I was] Living the rock life, where there was a lot of booze and substances, and all sorts of things started happening. Then I started to realize that all the paraphernalia was more than the music that was happening. Then I felt a bit bad that I had left my classical music behind. But I had reached a place where I was also hanging around with people who didn't like Indian classical music. They would mock it. So I was



not in a place where I could even discuss classical music. If I brought it up, it would be a joke.

Bharadwaj decided he needed some serious classical music in his life again. Since he was so distant from Indian classical, he decided to take classical guitar lessons. He bought a nylon-stringed guitar and enrolled in a course accredited by the Trinity College; once a year, an examiner would come from London to test Bharadwaj and the other students. Then a friend introduced Bharadwaj to Ramamoorthy Rao, a teacher who had trained in both Carnatic and Hindustani music. Bharadwaj began learning Hindustani music from Rao, and continues training with him today.

At this point, Bharadwaj was freelancing as a session guitarist. Through this work, he met a sound engineer, Balu, who was planning on leaving his job at A. R. Rahman's studio to establish his own production company. Bharadwaj, Balu, and Bharadwaj's school friend Ananth Menon decided to work together as a group called Vaibhava. Bharadwaj set up a studio in his bedroom, and they began to produce commercial music for advertisements, and even landed a lucrative contract for a Telugu film called *Brahmastram*. The experience turned out artistically and emotionally unsatisfying:

BHARADWAJ: So we did music for that movie, the three of us. It was quite a harrowing experience. While we were signing the whole thing, the director said, "Yea, you guys will be given your freedom. You do what you want." Slowly, when we started working, the director said "no, I want it like this," the producer said, "I want something like this," the hero said, "I want some song like this," the choreographer said, "I want this to happen in one song." The lyricist even had his own tune for one song - which we actually ended up using! We had not even composed the tune; it was the lyricist's tune... we felt there is no creativity in all of this. We were sucked dry.

The film soundtrack was a hit, but Bh+aradwaj realized commercial music production was not for him. The group split up, and he found himself wondering what to do next. Then he began to rediscover the devotional songs that he learned in school:

BHARADWAJ: The bhajans that I used to sing were only the songs we sang in Rishi Valley, during the morning assembly. That was songs of Kabir, Mirabai, Guru Nanak, Purandhara Das. I never knew the meanings of these songs, but I would sing them because it was a fond memory. It felt nice to go down that memory lane. Singing those songs brought sweet memories of school. Of course the tunes were also great.

Bharadwaj decided to record these songs in his first solo CD, *Māṭī Kahe* (The Clay Speaks).<sup>149</sup> He included the songs he learned from his morning assemblies at school, bhajans by Kabir, Mirabai, Nank, Tulsidas, and Purandhara Das. He also sang a Marathi *abhang* by Sant Namdev that he learned from his teacher, Ramamoorthy Rao, who studied under Bhimsen Joshi.<sup>150</sup> Previously, he had never tried singing these bhajans with the guitar. Western music and Indian music represented entirely separate worlds for him, artistically and socially. But now he found that they sounded great together, his Western classical training helped him write arrangements and harmonies. Even though he was using traditional melodies, for the first time he felt he was making his own music.

He released the album in 2007, and has been very pleased with its success. To date, he estimates that he has sold over 7000 copies. He organized a launch party for the album's official release, featuring a number of friends and musicians. Among these was Bindhumalini Narayanawamy, whom he had met several years ago through a mutual friend. The two had tried writing and recording songs together many times over the years, but nothing worked out. This

---

<sup>149</sup> The title of the album *Māṭī Kahe* comes from a famous Kabir *sākhī* about death and impermanence: “*Māṭī kahe kumhār se, tū kyā rūṇdhe mohe?/ Ek dīn aisā āyegā, main rūndhūngī tohe*” (The clay says to the potter, who are you to knead me? That day will come when I will be the one kneading you).

<sup>150</sup> See Schultz (2014) for more about Bhimsen Joshi's importance in the contemporary *abhang* tradition.

time, however, something clicked. They sang a Kabir bhajan they both knew from Kumar Gandharva's recording, "*Naiharvā hamkā na bhāve*" (I Do Not Care for My Parent's Home). The result was magical; they loved it, the audience loved it, and they began to sing the song together whenever they had a chance.

One day Bindhu, now a resident of Bangalore, happened to attend a satsang at Shabnam Virmani's house along with her sister, Jaya, and her husband, Vasu Dixit, who is the frontman of a rock fusion group called Swarathma. Bindhu sang "*Naiharvā hamkā na bhāve*" at the satsang, and Virmani loved it. She asked Bindhu to accompany her to Lunyakhedi in early 2008. Narayanaswamy recalls: "Now that people are asking me about Kabir I thought, OK, I'll go and figure out what exactly I am singing." Narayanaswamy fondly recalls that first trip to Lunyakhedi, from the moment she arrived at the train station and Prahlad Tipanya came to pick her up and treat her to hot *pohā* and *jalebī* (flattened rice and a sweet made from fried batter). She confesses that, with her limited fluency in Hindi, she would have been lost during many conversations had Linda Hess not been present to translate.

### **Kabir in the Studio**

A few years later, in 2010, Vedanth called Bindhu when he was working on a CD based on Kumar Gandharva's Kabir bhajans. "I hit a roadblock. I needed some new ideas," he explains. Once Bindhu added her voice to the project, the ideas began to flow once more. They produced a CD of eight Kabir bhajans that was released in 2012 under the title, *Suno Bhai* (Listen, Brother!).

Five of the bhajans on *Suno Bhai* were based on Kumar Gandharva melodies, one was based on a *dhrupad* melody by the Gundecha brothers, and one was Vedanth's original blues rendition of "*Bhajo re bhaiyā*" (loosely based on his teacher's composition in *Rāga Jog-Kauṣ*). The final bhajan was "*Piyā kī suratiyā dekh maghan bhayī*," a Malvi bhajan that Bindhu learned

during her visit to Lunyakhedi. But it took an entirely different style on their CD. “Something about the bhajan made me think of the ‘Hand-Jive’ rhythm. You know, that ‘Dun, dun, dun, ta-DUN. DUN.’” Vedanth explains, “so I just had to add that to the track.” The guitar and vocal parts of that track, performed by Bharadwaj and Narayanaswamy, respectively, are shown below:

$\text{♩} = 112$

Voice

Ma ghan a bha yī ho lā - ḍa lī Ma ghan a bha yī

Guitar

3

Vo.

Pi yā kī su ra ti yā dekh ke ma ghan a bha yī

Guit.

Figure 6-1: Guitar and vocal parts from “Piya kī suratiyā0,” transcribed from album *Suno Bhai* (2012) by Vedanth Bharadwaj and Bindhumalini Narayanaswamy.

Narayanaswamy, trained from childhood to sing in the heavily melismatic style of Carnatic music, sings this song in a highly syllabic style emulating the Malvi nirgun singers from whom she learned it. But there is no mistaking the track for a folk song, as Vedanth’s percussive “Hand-Jive” guitar combines with accordion, cajon, and conga drums to create an upbeat pop sound. The song has been transformed, not just through its journey from the fields of Malwa to a recording studio in Chennai, but through the years of diverse artistic experiences that both artists brought into the studio.

The song experienced another transformation that Narayanaswamy and Bharadwaj likely did not even realize: the bhajan, “*Piyā kī suratiyā dekh maghan bhayī*” is not a Kabir poem at all.

It was written and published by a contemporary author named Ram Bharti, but Tipanya enjoyed it and decided to include it in his repertoire. This involved setting the bhajan to tune and substituting the author's *chhāp* with Kabir's. Now, a whole new audience will have the chance to learn this "Kabir bhajan" through the CD. Perhaps in another generation, it will be an unquestioned part of the popular pan-Indian Kabir repertoire as well.

*Suno Bhai* was a huge success; it brought many new performance opportunities for Vedanth and Bindhu. It also linked them with Kabir, and cemented their status as devotional singers who blend Western instruments and harmonies with Indian classical vocals. They have become mainstays of the Kabir festivals and the Malwa Kabir Yatra. At the 2015 Yatra, they had the opportunity to perform Kumar Gandharva's Kabir bhajans at the Shilnath Dhuni temple in Dewas, the very site where Gandharva learned and sang those bhajans. Bindhu and Vedanth's initial connection with Kabir was largely circumstantial. They were initially drawn to him through musical sound, rather than poetic inspiration. Kabir bhajans served as canvases upon which they may expand their musical creativity. Significantly, the legitimation provided by Kabir's name allowed them to maintain a foothold in traditionally even as they expanded into musical spaces that initially seemed incompatible with devotional singing. Simultaneously, Kabir's iconoclastic spirit provided inspiration to explore in new musical directions.

Over the years, these artists have begun to explore the meaning of the poetry as well, and find ways to contextualize it within their own lives. Now, both of them are now immersed in Kabir poetry, and it forms a major part of their senses of self. Furthermore, their connection to Kabir and the Malvi nirgun tradition has led them to connected them to spiritual networks and presented new avenues of artistic exploration. In 2014, Falguni Desai requested Narayanaswamy and Bharadwaj to perform poetry by the Sufi poet Amir Khusro for the Mumbai Festival. As South Indians with only a conversational grasp of Hindi, they balked at the

idea of singing in Urdu and Farsi. Yet they learned the songs, and the program was a major success that they have since performed many times throughout India along with Ankit Chadha, a storyteller from Delhi, and Ajay Tipanya, Prahlad's son, accompanying them on *ḍholak*. The success of the Khusrao program inspired them to develop an entire *qawwālī* performance in collaboration with all the musicians who usually accompany Prahlad Tipanya: Prahlad's sons, Vijay on vocals and Ajay on *ḍholak*; his younger brother, Ashok on vocals and *manjira*; his nephew, Dharmendra on harmonium; and Devnarayan Saroliya on vocals and violin. Again, the broad social, spiritual, and musical networks created through Kabir bhajans have brought disparate performers into contact, conversation, and collaboration.



Image 6-1: Bindhumalini Narayanaswamy and Vedanth Bharadwaj perform at the Shlinath Dhuni Mandir, Dewas, MP. February 27, 2015.

### ***Kabir Café: Kabir Rocks Out***

*December 14, 2014: High Spirits Café, Pune, MH*

Listen: The squealing feedback of a guitar amp blends with the screams and cheers of young men and women as Kabir Café completes their sound check at the High Spirits Café in Pune. Every Sunday afternoon, High Spirits holds a cookout where they supply beer, barbecue, and live music. This week they have invited Neeraj Arya's Kabir Café, a Mumbai-based folk rock

group, and the venue is full to capacity. After strumming a few percussive chords on his acoustic guitar, Neeraj Arya begins to sing:

*Zarā halke gāḍī hāñko, Mere Ram gāḍīwāle!*  
*Zarā haule haule gāḍī hāñko, Mere Ram gāḍīwāle!*

Please drive my cart gently, O God, my cart-driver  
Please drive my cart slowly, O God, my cart-driver

- Kabir bhajan

This is Prahlad Tipanya's signature song, and among the most popular Kabir bhajans throughout Malwa. Here in Pune, the song does not have nearly the same hit status, but the audience does not mind; they respond with shouts and hoots and begin to dance along.

High Spirits is in Koregaon Park, a neighborhood of Pune that has catered to cosmopolitan tastes ever since new-age spiritual leader Swami Rajneesh (also known as Osho) established his ashram/resort here in the 1970s and drew large numbers of Europeans to the area. Pune's hippest and trendiest restaurants began popping up all over Koregaon Park to serve the eclectic tastes of this new clientele. Many of these restaurants still exist and serve European ashram residents, but today their main clientele is Pune's affluent youth population. Outside the main Koregaon Park grid, new restaurant complexes like ABC Farms cater to the globalized tastes of India's post-liberalization generation. Such venues are often characterized by pastiche, intentional or otherwise, in which a diverse assemblage of hip/modern/Western influences are somehow brought together under one roof. A short walk from High Spirits is restaurant called Shisha Jazz Café, a Persian restaurant that markets itself as hookah lounge *and* a live jazz café. Patrons sit on wide diwans covered with faux-Persian rugs, drinking beer, eating kabobs, and looking at posters of Miles Davis and Ella Fitzgerald. If you go on Thursday, you can hear a local jazz group performing live. Last time I went was a Tuesday, and the restaurant was playing Bob Dylan records.

Today, the entire audience at High Spirits consists of young Indians. Most appear to be in their late teens or early twenties. The first three or four rows of people closest to the stage are watching the performance intently. Some are even singing along; they are part of Kabir Café's growing fan base and have seen their videos on YouTube. Further back in the audience, some people are watching the stage, while others converse with friends or dance in groups without too much concern for exactly what is playing, as long as it is fast and loud and energetic. All of the attendees are probably from affluent families, considering the steep entry fee and cost of food. Everyone is dressed very well: men in sharp, collared shirts and women in designer sundresses, jeans, and miniskirts. The band members themselves are probably wearing the least expensive outfits: long cotton *kurtā*-s with jeans or puffy *patīālā* pants.



Image 6-2: The audience cheers for Kabir Cafe at High Spirits. Koregaon Park, Pune, MH. December 14, 2014.

Almost everyone in the audience is holding a beer in one hand. With the other hand, some are dancing, some are holding cigarettes, and many are using phones to take selfies or video clips of the performance to post on Facebook. I laugh, imagining how Prahlad Tipanya would react to this scene. On one hand, Kabir's *vāṇī* is reaching a whole new demographic –



that too, through his signature bhajan. On the other hand, Tipanya's Kabir would certainly not approve of the beer, cigarettes, and lamb kabobs.

Kabir Café plays "*Halke gāḍī hāṅko*" using Tipanya's melody, but they render it in their own style. Their instrumentation is entirely different: acoustic guitar, drum set, electric bass, mandolin, and violin. And the tempo is much faster; Tipanya's halting, bullock-cart feel is replaced with an uptempo march rhythm (quarter note at 216 bpm, bass drum on the downbeat). Arya explains, "In Malwa, the carts, the people, the life, everything moves slowly. But where we live in Mumbai, everyone is zooming here and there as fast as they can." Between verses, the band has added bridge sections in which they play new chord progressions and well-coordinated instrumental solos. They finish the bhajan by repeating the chorus several times in *accelerando*, and end percussively on a downbeat accompanied by screams and applause.

I first met Neeraj Arya during the 2014 Mumbai Kabir Festival, when his band was still called the Flameshot Fakirs. We got along instantly; we had similar tastes in music and Arya was eager to speak to the music student visiting from America since, as I found out, he had done undergraduate studies in America. Arya grew up in Delhi. In high school, he joined Manzil, a non-profit for underprivileged youth. Manzil was founded by Indira Gulati and her son Ravi Gulati, an MBA graduate from the prestigious Indian Institute of Management who had left his corporate career in Canada. Manzil's goal is the empowerment of youth through creativity and performance. Through Manzil, Arya played in his first ever band. He describes Ravi Gulati as one of the four greatest mentors in his life. Another is his own father, who transferred his love of poetry (particularly by Kabir, Nanak, and Rahim) to his son. The third and fourth great mentors are Shabnam Virmani and Prahlad Tipanya, whom he met in 2006, at age 18. Virmani was showing early screenings of *Had Anhad*, and Arya was mesmerized. He describes his meeting with Tipanya as transformative: "Before that, I did not know any Kabir songs. I learned in

school, but I could never remember anything from reading it.”<sup>151</sup> But personal experience did for him what reading could not. After meeting Tipanya, he learned many of his bhajans through cassettes and CDs. Later, Virmani gave him the opportunity to perform at a Kabir festival. “It was just me and my guitar,” Arya recalls, “and a crowd of thousands.”

In 2013, Arya moved to Mumbai and met violinist Mukund Ramaswamy through an organization called National Streets for the Performing Arts (NSPA). They began performing Kabir bhajans and popular Sufi songs as the Flameshot Fakirs. The band had a shifting lineup of collaborators, including Raman Iyer on mandolin. In 2014, they decided to restrict their repertoire to only Kabir bhajans and renamed the band Neeraj Arya’s Kabir Café. Raman Iyer became a permanent member, as did drummer Viren Solanki and eventually bassist and singer Britto KC. In many performances, they are joined by professional Carnatic percussionist Mumbai Dakshinamurthy, who is primarily a mridangam player but plays the *morsing* (jaw harp) and *kanjirā* (flexible frame drum) with Kabir Café.

The band finishes “*Halke gāḍī hāṅko*” and Raman introduces the next song, “*Mokoñ kahāñ dhūṇḍhe re bande?*” (Where do You Search for Me?). This is a popular Kabir poem; number of audience members seem to recognize it, either from Kabir Café’s YouTube videos or from hearing it in other contexts. Kabir Café sings it using a melody they learned from Mukhtiyar Ali, presumably during one of his Mumbai concerts or workshops.<sup>152</sup> Next is “*Balā Huā morī mālā ṭūtī*” (How Fortunate that my Rosary Broke) which they learned from the Kabir Project recording of Farid Ayyaz, and then “*Jhīnī re jhīnī*” (Such a Fine Sheet), one of Kabir’s most popular bhajans. This one they sing using the melody and altered lyrics popularized by

---

<sup>151</sup> Personal communication at Café Coffee Day in Bandhra, Mumbai. April 1, 2015.

<sup>152</sup> Mukhtiyar Ali is one of the artists featured on the Kabir Project CDs, but this specific bhajan is not included in the CDs. He does, however, sing it very often in his live performances.

devotional recording artist Anup Jalota, which is also the melody used by Mukhtiyar Ali. The next three songs are all Malvi bhajans they learned from Tipanya, followed by an encore of “*Halke gāḍī hānko.*”

The influence of the Kabir Project and Kabir Festival on the band is clear. All seven songs in their set have been learned directly or indirectly through senior performers featured in those contexts. Yet Kabir Café has a completely distinct style, a unique effect produced by blending folk-style acoustic guitar, rock drum and bass, and Carnatic violin and mandolin. In the two years since I first heard the band, their arrangements have grown increasingly elaborate and well-constructed. They have become experts at working the crowd’s energy through tempo shifts, sing-along passages, and well-placed instrumental solos.



Image 6-3: Kabir Cafe conducts sound check at High Spirits while a mural of Bob Marley looks over them. Pictured: Viren Solanki, Britto KC, Neeraj Arya, Raman Iyer, Mukund Ramaswamy. Koregaon Park, Pune. December 14, 2014.

I catch up with the band after their performance. They are crowded around a table enjoying beer and barbecue. They have saved a plate for me, but as a vegetarian I politely decline.

Neeraj and I converse as a multitude of fans – new and old – approach him to ask about the band. He directs all of them to the official Kabir Café Facebook page and YouTube channel. I congratulate the band on the recognition and success they have found within just a year of forming. They tell me about an upcoming project they have been invited to do for an MTV program called *The Dewarists* (sponsored by Dewar’s whiskey) that sponsors musical collaborations specifically between ethno-pop or fusion bands and produces videos in scenic locations throughout India. The band members are not much younger than me; they were all born in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But the few years make quite the difference. I spent the first years of my twenties in an India that was just discovering mobile internet, and still had difficulty maintaining reliable internet connections in houses. These youth are online 24/7 due to the proliferation of smartphones and rapid improvements in WiFi and 3G connectivity. Vedanth and Bindhu recalled growing up in an India in which Western and Westernized popular music were commonplace, but occupied an entirely disparate social space from Indian classical and devotional music. Less than a generation later, Kabir Café and their audiences have grown up in an era when fusion is the norm, rather than the exception.

I remark in surprise about the crowd, who seem to represent a Pune very different from what I experienced when I lived there five years ago. I learned tabla in Pune from 2008 to 2010, but lived on the opposite side of the city, the traditional Maharashtrian side where all the classical musicians lived. I rarely ever came to Koregaon Park and never saw a crowd like this. The band remind me that India is changing; its youth are all on Facebook now and are downloading the same TV shows and watching the same pop artists as American youth. “It’s a great time to be in a band,” the boys tell me. There is unprecedented demand for a rock sound, especially if it has some “authentic” Indian flavor. And the best part: it attracts *all* the young

women. But we all know they are joking about this last part. Rock band or not, they are all in committed relationships, and they are all good boys.

### **Kabir for Liberalization's Children**

Stuart Hall describes cultural identity as an unstable equilibrium “sutured” together:

[B]etween on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to “interpellate,” speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be “spoken” (Hall 1996: 5-6).

Hall's emphasis on identity as a “temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” is particularly relevant amidst the cultural schizophrenia of globalized India, in which such discourses include the uncomfortable synthesis of traditional and modern, native and foreign, past and future, East and West. Paolo Favero illustrates this poignantly in describing Delhi youth who might launch into a tirade against men who marry “boring” Indian women – and suddenly interrupt it to praise the “traditional” beauty of a passing woman in a *salwār kāmīz* (Favero 2005, 5-6).<sup>153</sup> Chloe Coventry (2013) describes the rock music scene of Bangalore, in which bands are centrally preoccupied with defining themselves in opposition to the “mainstream” sound of Bollywood. Some attempt to do this by adapting an entirely Western rock aesthetic, but the most successful bands are those who blend Indian and Western sounds and influences.

Kabir Café and its success speak to this desire of “liberalization's children,” as Lukose (2009) calls them, to consume cultural products that are simultaneously Indian and Western. Mukund Ramaswamy and Raman Iyer both grew up in traditional Tamil Brahmin families, and

---

<sup>153</sup> A long tunic worn by women in India on informal occasions. Here, it serves as an index of traditionality for the young women who may wear it or other Indian garments instead of the western clothing common among urban youth.

have been trained in Carnatic (South Indian) classical music since childhood. But they have also grown up listening to American and European rock and pop. They are now professional musicians in a rock band, but it is not out of any antipathy to Carnatic classical music. Ramaswamy still regularly performs as an accompanist in classical concerts. The blended or “fusion” model appeals to them more, however, as it is something they can create on their own terms, something that is truly theirs.

I asked Arya about his musical influences, and the list predictably included a number of performers who have been trailblazers in South Asian ethno-pop and ethno-rock: Indian Ocean, Raghu Dixit, Pakistan Coke Studio, and even Vedanth and Bindhu. However, his biggest influence is Prahlad Tipanya:

NEERAJ ARYA: I try to follow Prahlad Ji – the way that he plays tambura and sings. I want to be like him. But it probably will not happen in this lifetime; I will have to come back. The way that he throws his voice, and it directly hits whoever is facing him – that is what I want to do.

While Indian Ocean and other fusion bands represent what Neeraj *is* doing, Tipanya is imagined here as an ideal that remains out of reach. As we saw in the last chapter, the “fantasy village” coupled with the “impossibility of return,” to use Nandy’s (2001) terms, are important components for the self. Although he perceives Tipanya’s affect as unattainable, Arya is able to make a literal journey to the village every year through the Malwa Yatra. He describes this as the most important program of year. After all, where else can you get such a performance atmosphere, where thousands of people are welcoming you warmly and listening intently? But it is also intimidating, Neeraj explains:

ARYA: One thing is that you are going on the same stage as the masters. Prahlad ji will sing, then you go out onto the same stage. The second issue is that the populace there have such a deep understanding of Kabir. And they *really* listen. It is not like here in the city. People here listen a bit, but they want to party and dance and have fun. The

receiving power is much greater [in Malwa] than it is in the city. City people cannot get the same amount [from a bhajan].

The village again becomes the “anti-city,” a symbol for the understanding, the depth, the “receiving power” that has become lost in the modern metropolis.

However much Arya’s beliefs are constructed through the influence of Tipanya and Indian rural life, they are as much of a cultural fusion as his music. Arya consistently describes Kabir’s message alongside that of another major influence: Jamaican reggae singer Bob Marley:

ARYA: The idea of Kabir’s that I like most is that there is something within you. There is a power. And that can be God, or it can be anyone who can bring positive change in society, just like Bob Marley. You know the movie *Marley*<sup>154</sup> – I love that movie, I have seen it at least 25-30 time. The first time I saw it, I realized that person was like a god. He also tried to bring a change in society. At that time the politics were totally corrupt there. At that time there was one voice. Like when Kabir came, in the fifteenth century. There were all this fighting happening between Hindus and Muslims, and he was one voice that came that took everyone together and walked forward. And in my opinion Bob Marley also wanted to do that – peace, love, happiness, togetherness and unity – he wanted to bring that message.

Coventry argues that, “demands for audibly Indian sounds in rock music are primarily indicative of the processes of essentialization of national or ethnic identity that take place as a result of the entrenchment of neoliberal capitalism” (Coventry 2013, 261). In other words, ethnicity becomes a brand, a marketing label for bands to stand apart from the competition. I mostly agree with Coventry’s thesis, particularly as an explanation for Kabir Café’s tremendous success in a short span of time. But I believe cases like Kabir Café indicate that there is more at play than marketing. Performers’ and audiences’ systems of belief are also important factors.

---

<sup>154</sup> *Marley* is a documentary about Bob Marley directed by Kevin Macdonald released by Magnolia Pictures in 2012.

Discussing his beliefs and motivations for the band, Neeraj Arya reveals a deep engagement with Kabir's philosophy and egalitarian message. I ask him if his band has any message, and he responds with a verse:

*Aisī bāṇī boliyo, man kā āpa khoye*  
*Auran ko shītal kare, āpko shītal hoye*

Speak those words in which there is no trace of ego  
Your listeners will be soothed, and you in turn will be soothed

- *Dohā* attributed to Kabir or Rahim

This is the message India needs today, Arya explains, because:

ARYA: You must have seen, being in India now - there is just too much negativity. Whether between brothers, or between politicians, the love is not there. If you ask me how I would imagine India, I would respond with this *dohā*. Because we are the people, and we should live happily and love each other and think positive about each other. That's *my* India. I want India to be like that.<sup>155</sup>

Like the youth rock bands discussed by Coventry, Arya is rejecting what he perceives to be India's mainstream values and aesthetics and suggesting alternatives through musical performance. However, he frames this dissent through structures of spiritual value rather than cultural commodity. The Indo-rock aesthetic with its long hair and long *kurtā*-s may be about an ethnic "brand" presented for consumption, but the lyrics are about his beliefs and spirituality.

It is no coincidence that Kabir has been the single poet chosen by Arya, and that young audiences in India have responded positively. After all, he is a spiritual poet, but also a rebel against traditional categories of identity:

ARYA: A lot of people thought Kabir was completely wrong. They thought "he does not believe in the Muslim or Hindu religion, he is an irreverent man." Muslims thought, "why doesn't he do *namāz* (daily prayers) or *rojā* (fasting)?" Hindus thought, "why

---

<sup>155</sup> Personal communication at Euriska restaurant in Pune, April 10, 2015.



doesn't he go to the *mandir* (temple)?" But I think that all religions – whether he seemed to respect or disrespect them – he kept all religions as one. He's not saying that Hindus are good and Muslims are bad. He's talking about, there's one religion which is *humanity, love, peace, be together*, and there is God in everyone. God resides within everyone."

Kabir allows these audiences to keep one foot grounded in a system of "traditional" Indian thought while encouraging them to reject the identities they may have inherited create new ones. For many of liberalization's children, the most pressing struggles in life is have nothing to do with caste or religious politics. They are more immediately concerned with the generational conflict between the identities their parents and society expect them to assume and the identities that their engagement with global media has encouraged them to aspire to. The invocation of Kabir in music, and particularly folk-rock fusion music, emboldens these youth to forge new identities while allowing them to retain a sense of their Indian self. This was poignantly illustrated when I asked the members of Kabir Café (sans Neeraj Arya) to tell me about their favorite bhajan or *dohā*. Viren Solanki, the normally shy youngest member of the band, was the first to respond:<sup>156</sup>

*Pothī paḍkar jag muā, paṇḍit bhayā na koī*  
*Ḍhāī ākhar prem ke, jo paḍhe so paṇḍit hoī*

Reading book after book, the whole world died,  
But nobody became learned  
The one who read just the two letters of the word "Love"  
That one became truly learned

- Kabir *sākhī*

"Why this specific couplet?" I asked, "What does it mean to you?"

---

<sup>156</sup> Personal communication at Janata bar-restaurant in Bandra, Mumbai, January 14, 2015.

“Fuck, man. It means *don’t do an MBA*. Do what you *love*. Do *music*.” Viren responded with a laugh. I was floored by his response. This is one of Kabir’s most famous verses. It is typically interpreted as a criticism of those who study religious scripture in search of wisdom without imbibing the essential spirit of love. But for Viren, it meant “fuck school, I am going to follow my heart and join a rock band.” I laughed along with Viren, realizing that these youth were not just singing Kabir, they were making him their own. They were interpreting his words for the identity conflicts they experienced in their own lives.

Most of the members of Kabir Café were not very familiar with Kabir’s poetry before they joined the band. Neeraj had a dream of starting a Kabir rock band, but the others originally just dreamed of joining a rock band. The fact that it was a band that blended Indian and Western instruments was essential, but the fact that it focused on Kabir’s poetry was initially a mere coincidence. However, all of them have now learned many Kabir poems, and continue to do so as they expand their performance repertoire and participate in the festivals and Malwa Yatra. Their band has not just been a way for them to express a previously formed sense of belief and ideology through a commercially viable medium. Rather, it has been a means of discovering and creating their belief system. Although media promoters portray Kabir Café as an example of Indian youth using a modern and appealing musical format to share traditional poetry, the reality is that rock music existed in the band members lives before Kabir did. Kabir Café, and their audiences, are not modernizing their tradition through folk rock, but using folk rock to discover their tradition.

### ***Conclusion***

*March 1, 2015: Devi Ahilyabai Vishwavidyalaya, Indore*

Listen: a long wailing guitar note lingers above the shimmering roll of crash cymbals, and a deafening roar of cheers and whistles fills the college auditorium. It is the final performance of

the 2015 Malwa Kabir Yatra, and Kailash Kher has just finished a performance of his hit love song, “*Terī dīvānī*” (Your Madness). The auditorium is filled to standing. Most of the audience are students from Devi Ahilyabai University, but they are joined by an entire bus full of musicians and riders who have been traveling with the Malwa Yatra for five days, since the tour began. This is the final performance, and Kher is the Yatra’s most famous performer.

Kailash Kher is among the most popular singers in India today. His career as a playback singer for Bollywood movies began when he sang a single track for the entirely forgettable movie *Waisa Bhi Hota Hai Part II* (It Also Happens That Way) in 2003. The movie was a failure, but the song “*Allah ke bande*” (God’s Dear Ones) was a runaway hit that brought Kher’s unique voice to the spotlight. To this day, Kher’s distinctive rough and full-throated tone sets him apart from the majority of honey-voiced Bollywood playback singers. Kher is also unusual in that he has simultaneously maintained a successful career in Bollywood and with his own rock band. In the band, Kailasa, Kher is joined by the brothers Paresh and Naresh Kamath, who play guitar, bass, keyboards, and produce Kailasa’s albums. Most of Kailasa’s songs are written and composed by Kher himself, but a number are based on poetry by saints, including Bulleh Shah, Amir Khusro, Baba Farid, and Kabir. The association of these poets, the romanticized language of Kher’s own compositions, and even his “raw” vocal quality have all contributed to Kher being labeled and marketed as a “Sufi singer.”

Kher thanks his Indore audience for their warm reception, and promises he will sing all of their favorites before the evening is over. But first, he wants to make a special announcement, confirming what his fans have only heard has rumors so far. He is working on a collaboration album with none other than Prahlad Singh Tipanya. Kher discovered Tipanya a number of years ago, when he was gifted the Kabir Project-produced CD, *Kabir in Malwa*. Kher claims that for several months, he did not remove the CD from his car stereo; he listened to it every day,

learning all the songs. He was eager to meet Tipanya, whom he now looks to as a mentor figure, and he has since performed in a number of the Malwa Yatras. Just a few months prior to this performance, Kher invited Tipanya and his mandali to perform at his farmhouse in Lonavala for a private family celebration. The event was the fifth birthday of Kher's son, who is named (of course) Kabir.

At young Kabir Kher's birthday celebration, one guest casually referred to Kher as a Sufi singer, echoing the label used most often by Indian popular media. Kher corrected him, saying that he personally considers himself a "nirgun singer."<sup>157</sup> Although he may have been pandering to Tipanya, the distinction makes sense. Although he may sing the occasional Khusrau song, no one would suggest that Kher is a Sufi in the strict sense, i.e., a Muslim.<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, nirgun suits Kher well by being a label that is no label; it does not restrict him to any faith or deity. Regardless of the precise label used, Kher is a spiritual pop star. While many of his songs could literally be interpreted strictly as romantic ballads, his mystical affect is central to his performance persona and particular appeal.

Artists like Kher, Vedanth and Bindhu, and Neeraj Arya's Kabir Café exemplify a synthesis between Indian devotional and Western pop affect that has come into popular prominence during the 2000s. Significantly, none of these artists are *religious* performers in the vein of, e.g., Christian rock bands in the United States. They are not explicitly linked with specific religious communities, but offer *devotion* as a universally appealing and deeply Indian sentiment. Their music offers spirituality in the most general and ambiguous sense, available for listeners to interpret and contextualize as they will.

---

<sup>157</sup> Personal communication at Kher family farmhouse, Lonavala, MH. December 29, 2015.

<sup>158</sup> The blurry line between Sants and Sufis and the sociopolitical baggage surrounding the contemporary usage of the term "Sufi" in popular culture are major issues that I had hoped to explore further in this dissertation, but will be better served by a more thorough treatment in future projects.

The pastiche is not only spiritual, but cultural. Their music is characterized by the impetus toward modern production techniques, audio technology, and social media marketing and distribution that drives all globalized popular music, but a simultaneous emphasis on Indian poetic traditions and authentic Indian sounds. Vedanth and Bindhu's guitar-driven pop production is paired with voices highly trained in Indian classical music. Kabir Café's persona is constructed simultaneously on Western-imported notions of a folk rock band and a repertoire based primarily on the Indian folk tradition of Malvi Kabir bhajans. Kailasa's albums offer extremely polished studio production, extensively using multi-tracking, samples, and tight vocal harmonies sung by Naresh and Paresh Kamath. But these are paired with Kher's signature "raw" voice, romantic "Sufi" lyrics, and abundant use of Indian folk instruments including the *rāvanahatthā*, *ḍholak*, *morchang*, and *khomok*. Pop performers' and audiences' simultaneous drives toward Western modernity and Indian traditionality are not contradictory. Rather, they are the inevitable result of Indians finding their place in the space of globalized popular media culture while retaining a sense of cultural place and Indian-ness.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation began in the remote village of Lunyakhedi, home to fewer than 500 residents. Over the last four decades, Lunyakhedi and the surrounding region of Malwa have seen tremendous social changes engendered by cultural and economic shifts both within and without. These changes have created new spaces for dialogue that may challenge or renegotiate the status quo. Nirgun bhajan performance has been the most prominent arena of dialogue, and the most visible outside Malwa. Nirgun singers from lower castes, once marginalized from Malwa's public artistic life, are now its most recognized and celebrated representatives throughout India as a whole. The nirgun bhajan tradition, a protean entity maintained through oral tradition, has adapted musically and socially to reflect the concerns of its performers as they assume new roles within their society.

Caste systems exist throughout India, but are nonetheless locally constructed frameworks; the matrix of castes that exist in each village is different, as is the relation between them.<sup>159</sup> In Lunyakhedi and other villages throughout Malwa, these local frameworks no longer have the option of remaining isolated from the many, often contradictory, frameworks that are intruding from the nation and the world. It is no easy task to convince a group of its own inferiority and impurity when the group's members' are increasingly established within egalitarian ideologies derived from their Sant tradition and from the secular humanist narratives they are engaging with through increased literacy, university education, and satellite television. The local framework that deems a group as "inferior" must now contend with the reality that

---

<sup>159</sup> Although some scholars have attempted to present hierarchy based on social purity as an intrinsic fact of Indian social life throughout the subcontinent (Dumont 1980), more nuanced studies have recognized that the realities of caste are highly variable from region to region, and even village to village, and have changed dramatically from generation to generation in response to changing economic conditions, land ownership policies, and other forces (Appdurai 1986; S. Bayly 1999; Jaffrelot 2006; Mathur 1964; Mayer 1956, 1970)

members of that group are receiving national awards and prestigious visitors, including scholars, artists, and celebrities from India and abroad.

As performers negotiate these overlapping frameworks, their societal roles and musical decisions change accordingly. The structure of nirgun bhajans and flexibility of oral tradition allow for perpetual mutability and adaptation. Performers alter their musical presentations to suit the tastes of the singers' growing audiences and reinterpret or alter the devotional poetry to speak to their current social concerns. These concerns are increasingly implicated in broader dialogues that extend well beyond Malwa and its local constructions of caste. Malvi nirgun singers now perform in the service of sectarian religious institutions, secular social activism, and moral reform. Their music and their personalities are recruited (in some cases, co-opted) to speak for nation-wide movements of belief and ideology. Amid these transitions, they are also concerned with maintaining their music's original introspective and devotional focus.

Malvi singers and their bhajans are travelling throughout the country, and acquiring new dimensions of meaning within each context. In India's metropolises, these amateur rural singers may be seen as authentic tradition-bearers, cultural curiosities, or heroes in a struggle against oppression. Audiences and artists from regions outside Malwa are increasingly interacting with regional devotional singers, looking to them as spiritual mentors or artistic collaborators. These phenomena illustrate the changing dynamics between rural and urban India, as well as the demand that modern Indians, immersed in globalized popular media, are expressing for authentic culture that reconnects them to their "roots."

This dissertation has focused on the Malvi nirgun tradition, and the journeys of specific persons and songs from the private home satsang to the national stage. These journeys and the societal transformations they represent are remarkable, but not unique. Malvi sant singers represent but a single case study in the dramatic reconstitution of Indian popular religious and

musical culture that is occurring during the twenty-first century, in which untrained farmers may perform on the same stage as veteran classical artists. I expect that, in the coming years, many more case studies of these changes will emerge within the discipline of ethnomusicology, and will hopefully apply different perspective and analytical lenses than I have in my own work.

### **The Recurring Role of Saint Poetry**

From my perspective, a few issues emerge as particularly intriguing. First is the simultaneous newness and oldness of the role that Sant bhajans are serving within Indian society. I observed Indians using Sant bhajans to explore their personal spirituality, create communities of belief, oppose *or* uphold the status quo, and most importantly, construct understandings of self. None of these are new functions of Sant bhajans; to the contrary, much scholarship attests that devotional saint poetry has served this role in South Asia for centuries, likely since its very beginnings. Since the sixteenth century, the repertoire of Kabir bhajans has, across many regions and in many contexts, been used in the creation of communities of ideology and belief (Barthwal; Hess 1987; Lorenzen 2006; Singh 1982). Many of these communities have defined themselves in opposition to the status quo, emphasizing their status as oppressed or subaltern (Dharmvir 1997; Wakankar 2010; Westcott 1907). Others have existed fully within the fabric of caste or sectarian Hinduism, and viewed Kabir as a member of an all-inclusive canon of Hindu poet-saints (Dvivedi 1965; Hawley 2005). As Purushottam Agrawal reminds us, the importance of the Kabir corpus is not that it represents an anomalous intervention in medieval Indian society, but that it reveals the progressive and pluralistic spiritual ideas that existed and were celebrated within medieval Indian society (Agrawal 2009, 2010).

Yet the communities and dialogues facilitated by Sant bhajans that I observed were distinctly modern. They are mediated through WhatsApp, Facebook, and mobile phone networks. When they engage in social activism, they may invoke the words of poet-saints, but



their perspectives are heavily constructed through contemporary social humanist ideoscapes and twentieth-century Indian political movements. Musical performance of Kabir and the Sants has taken modern form, even though some are perceived or presented as timeless. More intriguingly, the public association between the Sants and particular types of voices, instruments, and performance personalities owes much to contemporary discourses and anxieties about Indian cultural and its relation to globalized media culture. All the while, Sant bhajans retain their importance as tools for individual spiritual exploration and devotional expression, but even these functions are increasingly brought into contact with global spiritual networks and ideas. In emerging nonsectarian spiritual communities, Kabir occupies a similar inspirational space as Rumi, Khalil Gibran, or Eckhart Tolle.

### **Saints and National Culture**

Another distinctly modern element of contemporary Sant bhajan performance is its establishment within the framework of nation. Although Kabir and other saints have historically existed in distinct and often contradictory regional traditions, the overwhelming majority of participants in Sant bhajans today understand the Sants as pan-Indian figures whose voices have simply been preserved and interpreted in different ways by local traditions. Mumbai bourgeois seeking to better understand Kabir look to performers from Rajasthan, Malwa, Gujarat, Bengal and other regions, implicitly accepting that all of these performers are talking, at some level, about the same thing. Audiences further assume that all rural performers, at some level, may connect them to their Indian roots, rather than thinking in terms of their specific, Malvi, Gujarati, Marathi, etc. roots. This assumption may be viewed negatively, as the gradual development of a homogenizing model of saint-poet traditions that elides minority and divergent opinions. But in my experience, it seems to be having the opposite effect. It is allowing many previously socially, culturally, and even ideologically disparate traditions to enter into

dialogue with one another. Representatives from these traditions are sharing performance spaces, collaborating in new performance ventures, and forming nation-wide spiritual networks.

Observing these phenomena has led me to inquire: which people and groups are able to contribute to the formation of India's national culture, and how might this be changing in the twenty-first century? Most scholarly narratives of the formation of the Indian nation have emphasized the role of social elites in determining narratives of culture, values, and religion (Chatterjee 1986, 1993; Guha 1997; Lal 2006). Scholars have particularly emphasized the role of the educated administrative class of Indians, described by Lelyveld (in a musical pun) as the "subdominant," whose values and Colonial/Orientalist-influenced cultural perspectives dominated Indian political life after independence (Joshi 2001; Lelyveld 1994). The privilege of access to national narratives was restricted not only by class divisions, but by regional/ethnic divisions. Regions such as Maharashtra and Bengali were able to contribute significantly to the national culture from the earliest imaginings Indian nation. These regions had well-established upper-caste literary and performance traditions, and were also major seats of colonial administration. Malwa, despite its geographical and historical significance, could not boast any of these qualities, and was marginally important to the cultural imagination of the nation. The Malvi language, its lower-caste speakers, and their spiritual traditions certainly did not have a voice at the national level.

But this is changing. In the space of less than a decade, the names of "Kabir" and "Malwa" have become linked in India's public imagination. This has already had very significant effects on cultural production within Malwa. It is no coincidence that the Malvi performers who have risen to national prominence are those who label themselves as singers of Kabir, rather than Tejaji, Ramdev Pir, or other poets who are relatively unknown at the national level. Accordingly, younger generations of aspiring performers are emulating the model of

celebrity Kabir-singers, and many existing nirgun bhajan groups are rebranding themselves as Kabir singers. This has also altered the national understanding of the Kabir tradition. On more than one occasion, I heard urban audience members react in surprise at the mention of Varanasi. “Kabir lived in Benaras? I always just thought he was from Malwa.” Bhajans from the Malvi oral tradition have become part of the national Kabir repertoire. As these bhajans are performed by multiple artists in different genres, many might even lose their particular association with Malwa and become a regular part of the popular national Kabir corpus.

The case of Malvi Kabir singers is not unique. New frameworks of social organization, economic mobility, and cultural production are allowing many Indians from previously marginalized groups to contribute their voices to the construction of national culture. Of course, the process is far from complete. Often, the traditions and performances of regional performers are appropriated in the service of agendas or ideologies that the performers themselves may not support. These may include neoliberal consumer capitalism and caste-based Hinduism or other orthodoxies. Nor is the economic mobility attained by select celebrity performers available to the overwhelming majority of the underprivileged or oppressed communities that they represent. Nonetheless, I am optimistic about the fact that more people than ever before are learning about the struggles of these communities and hearing the narratives of their own representatives. I believe that, in the coming decades, these voices will effect significant changes in Indian society.

### *What Kind of Imagined Community?*

*July 19, 2015: Ramkabir Mandir, Carson, CA.*

Listen: I tune my tambura. It has been less than a month since I returned from India, and in some ways it feels like I have not left at all. I am at the Ramkabir Mandir in Carson, south of Los Angeles, where I have been invited to sing bhajans for a special event. The temple members have organized seven days of non-stop bhajan-singing, a program that will break the Guinness

World Record for longest singing marathon by multiple performers.<sup>160</sup> They have invited bhajan singers from different groups, temples, and sects all over the country to participate in this event. They have asked for me, accompanied by my own bhajan group, to conclude the week-long program with two hours of bhajans from different traditions, including Malvi Kabir bhajans.

The Ramkabir Bhakta Samaj is a Sant sect based in Gujarat. Poet-saint bhajans, often in Gujarati translation, form the core of the sect's beliefs and practices. This includes both Vaishnava and nirgun poets, such as Surdas, Tulsidas, and Kabir. Members of the sect assume the title of *bhakta* (devotee), and worship Kabir and Ram as a single entity. The Ramkabir temple in Carson is a beautiful, open hall with ornately decorated statues of deities. It resembles a caste Hindu temple in every way, but for the large central statue of Kabir flanked by smaller statues of Rama and Krishna.

I met one of the event's organizers, Niranjan Patel, for the first time today as I entered the temple, but I have known his name for months. In fact, I grew accustomed to seeing it every day; it was on a plaque outside my room in Lunyakhedi. Niranjan Patel and other members of the Los Angeles Ramkabir Mandir donated money used to construct the upper floor of the Kabir Ashram, where I lived for most of my fieldwork. They also provide ongoing support for the Kabir Academy, the school for lower-caste children founded by Prahlad Tipanya, where I would teach every afternoon while I was in Lunyakhedi. Once Tipanya's name became nationally synonymous with Kabir, many *bhakta*-s from the Ramkabir community decided to visit Lunyakhedi during their trips to India, and to support Tipanya's endeavors.

The lives of lawyers and businessmen in Southern California seem a world apart from those of farmers in Malwa. In truth, their theologies are very different as well. The Ramkabir sect is highly Sanskritized; chants from the *Bhagavad Gītā* and other caste-Hindu scriptures form a

---

<sup>160</sup> See Lal (2008) for an exploration of Indians' obsession with Guinness World Records.

major part of their regular worship. This Hindu Kabir in an opulent *mandir* seems to be a separate entity from the nirgun Kabir whose bhajans are sung in the fields of Malwa, or the revolutionary Kabir invoked by Marxist activists. Yet the mere name of “Kabir” is enough to bridge these worlds.

We return to Appadurai’s claim, that “there has been a shift in recent decades, building on technological changes over the past century or so, in which the imagination has become a *collective, social fact*” (Appadurai 1996, 4, emphasis mine). This dissertation has demonstrated how the imagination of Kabir and the Sants has created networks and communities from disparate social groups, and how these communities are impacting cultural production within India and even globally. It should be no surprise that such communities have the potency to reshape the Indian nation; after all, a nation is itself a community of the imagination (Anderson 1982).

This brings us to the central paradox of my study. At its core, *Sant-vāṇī* represents a radical opposition to all social divisions and conceptions of “other.” In other words, it is antithetical to the very logic of the nation-state. And yet, the spiritual communities I discuss in this dissertation, centered on shared affinity for Sant poetry and music, have formed through the unifying structures of the nation-state. 20 years ago, Appadurai claimed that “the nation-state, as a complex political form, is on its last legs,” as Appadurai claims (1996, 19). Is it possible that, in those twenty years, we have seen the nation-state begin birthing the mechanisms of its own dismantling, as British colonialism created the class that eventually dismantled it in India (Chatterjee 1986; Guha 1997)? Whatever the case may be, the performers and communities discussed within this work suggest that Indians are resisting the homogenizing narratives of culture and religion endemic to nationalist political discourse.

In a country where the daily news is full of conflict, quarreling, and violence, and where the logic of division and “other” seems so endemic to social discourse, I find the existence of these emerging spiritual communities reassuring for the future. They suggest a system of religious or secular values in which individual lives and experiences are esteemed over totalitarian grand narratives or ideologies. They suggest the possibility of inclusive dialogues. They suggest a redefinition Indian culture as heterogenous, and of the Indian self as plural. They suggest that their country’s ideal form might not be found through the framework of nation-state, but through the *desh* sung of by the Sants.

*Hum to sabhī kī kahī, moko koī na jān*  
*tab bhī acchā, acchā ab bhī, yug yug ho, houn na aan*

I speak for all, yet no one knows me.  
This was fine then, and it is fine now.  
The ages shall pass, but I shall remain.

- Kabir *sākhī*, *Bījak* 181

## GLOSSARY OF FOREIGN TERMS

*Antara*: Refers to a section of a vocal or instrumental performance. In bhajans and other strophic songs, it refers to the verses.

*Āratī*: A form of ritual worship. Many Kabir Panths engage in a form of this called the *chaukā āratī*.

*Bhajan*: Devotional song. Used most often, but not exclusively, to refer to Hindu songs.

*Bhakti*: Devotional love. Often used as a categorical term to describe a number religious sects and spiritual movements throughout South Asia.

*Brāhmin*: One of the four divisions of society according to the VARṆA system. Generally considered the highest and most ritually pure division, Brahmins are wielders of spiritual power who have the authority to conduct rituals.

*Chakra*: The junction of several energy currents, or NĀḌĪ, within the body. Most commonly used in reference to the eight principal *chakra*-s along the spinal column. Any symbolic reference to the number eight in Sant poetry (e.g., eight lotuses, eight huts) refers to these *chakra*-s.

*Chhāp*: Literally “signature.” Used in reference to the name of an author at the end of a poem or song. May also refer to the line or verse that contains the name, which are formally called “*bhaṇita*” in poetic terminology.

*Dalit*: Literally “oppressed” in Sanskrit. A term popularized by B. R. Ambedkar and other activists to refer to people considered untouchable within the caste system.

*Desh*: Literally “country.” Commonly used as a metaphor in Sant poetry to refer to an ideal, monistic state from which all beings have originally come.

*Ḍholak*: a double-sided, barrel-shaped membranophone.

*Dohā*: a couplet; a poetic form common in medieval North Indian poetry. A *dohā* consists of two lines of 24 morae each, with a caesura after the 13<sup>th</sup> mora. Often sung unmetered before BHAJANS. In the Kabir tradition, this is referred to as *sākhī* (witness).

*Ektār*: Literally “one string,” is the name given to a number of rather different chordophones from different regions of South Asia

*Iḍā* or *Ingalā*: see NĀḌĪ

*Jāti*: Caste. This refers to the countless endogamous social groups that determine social organization in India. Originally based on occupation, but in modern India the link between *jāti* and occupation is usually only nominal. Most *jāti* are classified under one of the four VARṆAS. Those outside the VARṆA have traditionally been considered untouchable, or DALIT.

*Kartāl*: A pair of clappers made from wood or plastic. In Malwa and other regions, these have cymbals embedded in them.

*Krishna*: A form of Vishnu. One of the most worshipped deities in devotional Hinduism. Referred to by many different names, including Govind, Gopal, and Hari.

*Kurtā*: A type of tunic. Different styles may be worn by men or women in casual or formal settings.

*Mahant*: A priest or ritual authority figure within a PANTH.

*Mālvī*: A language indigenous to the Malwa region. Also used as an adjective to describe the people and culture of Malwa.

*Mandir*: A Hindu temple.

*Manjirā*: A pair of small metal cymbals, often brass or bronze, played with the hands. Used extensively in BHAJANS.

*Masjid*: A mosque, or Muslim temple.



*Mūrti*: A statue or idol.

*Nāḍī*: In YOGA, these are the invisible channels that carry life-force energy throughout the body, much in the way blood vessels carry oxygen throughout the body. The three central *nāḍī* (*iḍā*, *pingalā*, and *sushumna*) are frequently referenced in Sant poetry.

*Nirguṇ*: Without describable qualities; formless.

*Panth*: Literally “path.” Used to mean a religious sect. Most commonly used for nirgun or lower-caste sects, as upper-caste sects are more often labeled SAMPRADĀYA.

*Pūjā*: Ritual forms of worship.

*Rām*, *Rāma*: A form of Vishnu who is worshipped extensively in devotional Hinduism. In North and Central India, he is most often associated with the poetry of Tulsidas (1532-1623).

*Rāvanahatthā*: A bowed chordophone ingenious to the Rajasthan region, named after the mythological figure Ravana.

*Pingalā*: see NĀḌĪ.

*Sadguru*, *Satguru*: Literally “the true teacher.” This is a common name for God in Sant traditions.

*Sādhana*: Activities or practices that facilitate spiritual growth.

*Saguṇ*: Having describable form or qualities.

*Sākhī*: see DOHĀ.

*Sampradāya*: A religious sect.

*Satsang*: Literally “true company” or “company of the truth.” This refers to a gathering for spiritual purposes.

*Śhaiva*: Relating to the god Shiva.

*Śhūdra*: The lowest of the four divisions in the VARNA system, although still higher than people considered caste-less or untouchable. Many *shūdra*-s have begun to identify as DALIT as well, beginning in the later part of the twentieth century.

*Smarana, Sumiran*: Literally “remembrance,” refers to chanting or singing names of God.

*Tamburā* or *tamburo*: A long-necked lute used to accompany vocal music. Plucked open strings are tuned to the tonic and one or two other notes (frequently the dominant).

*Ṭek*: The chorus in a BHAJAN or other form of strophic song. Formally called “*dhruva pada*” (the fixed verse) in poetic terminology.

*Ṭimkī*: A pair of wooden cylindrical membranophones resembling bongo drums. Played with sticks.

*Vaiśhnava*: Relating to the god Vishnu and his different forms.

*Vāṇī* or *bāṇī*: Literally “voice” in Sanskrit. Used to refer to the message or teachings of saints.

*Varṇa*: Four-fold system of social divisions explicated in Hindu texts, most notably the *Manusmṛiti*. The system was prescriptive; it described an ideal society rather than reflecting social realities. See also: BRAHMIN, DALIT, ŚHŪDRA.

## REFERENCES

- Agrawal, Purushottam. 2009. *Akath kahānī prem kī: Kabīr kī kaviyā aur unkā samay*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan (Hindi).
- . 2010. "But for Kabir in this *Kaliyuga*." *India International Centre Quarterly* 37 (2): 36-45.
- Alam, Javeed. 1999. "The Composite Culture and its Historiography." *South Asia* 22 (Special Issue): 29-37.
- Alter, Andrew B. 1998. "Negotiating Identity in the Garhwali Popular Cassette Industry." *Journal of South Asian Studies* 21 (1): 109-122.
- Ambedkar, Bhimrao R. 1946. *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables*. Mumbai: Thacker.
- . 1948. *The Untouchables: Who were they and why they became Untouchables?* New Delhi: Amrit.
- . 1949. *Who Were the Shudras?: How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society*. Mumbai: Thackers.
- . 1957. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Bombay: Siddharth.
- Amin, Shahid. 1988. "Gandhi as Mahatma." In *Selected Subaltern Studies*, edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 288-351. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Anderson, Benedict. (1983) 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1986. "Is Homo Hierarchus?" *American Ethnologist* 13 (4): 745-761.
- . 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Ayyagari, Shalini. 2009. "'Small Voices Sing Big Songs': The Politics of Emerging Institutional Spaces Among Manganiyar Musicians in Rajasthan, India." PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley.
- Baily, John. 1994. "The Role of Music in the Creation of an Afghan National Identity, 1923-73." In *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, edited by Martin Stokes, 45-60. Oxford: Berg.
- Bakhle, Janaki. 2002. "Two Men and Music: Nationalism, Colonialism and the Making of Hindu Modernity in Western India, 1843-1926." Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Ballal, K. D. 1965. *Census of India 1961 Volume VII: Madhya Pradesh, Part VI: Village Survey Monograph, No. 5: Naharkheda, Tahsil Mhow, District Indore*. Delhi: Manager of Publications.
- Bandyopadhyay, Ranjan, Duarte B. Morais, and Garry Chick. 2008. "Religion and Identity in India's Heritage Tourism." *Annals of Tourism Research* 35 (3): 790-808.
- Banerjea, Akshaya Kumar. (1962) 1999. *Philosophy of Gorakhnath: With Goraksha-Vacana-Sangaraha*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Barthwal, Pitambar D. 1936. *The Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry: An Exposition of Medieval Indian Santa Mysticism*. Varanasi: Indian Book Shop.
- Bayly, Christopher A. 1985. "The Pre-History of 'Communalism'? Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860." *Modern Asian Studies* 19 (2): 177-203.
- Bayly, Susan. 1999. *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Bhardwaj, D. S., O. P. Kandari, Manjula Chaudhary, and K. K. Kamra, ed. 1998. *Domestic Tourism in India*. Kurukshetra, Kurukshetra University Department of Tourism Management.
- Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. 2003. *Vande Mataram: The Bio graphy of a Song*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Bhattacharya, Shahana. 1996. "Caste, Class, and Sect: A Study of the Balahis in Malwa, circa 1940-1994." M.Phil. thesis, University of Delhi.
- Bigelow, Anna Barry. 2004. "Sharing Saints, Shrines, and Stories: Practicing Pluralism in North India." PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Boyes, Georgina. 1993. *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Music Revival*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper. 2000. "Beyond 'Identity.'" *Theory and Society*, 1–47.
- Callewaert, Winand M., in collaboration with Swapna Sharma, and Dieter Taillieu. 2000. *The Millennium Kabīr Vāṇī: A Collection of Pad-s*. Delhi: Manohar.
- Capwell, Charles. 2011. *Sailing on the Sea of Love: The Music of the Bauls of Bengal*. Calcutta: Seagull.
- Chand, Tara. 1963. *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*. Allahabad: Indian Press.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1986. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* London: Zed Books.
- . 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Chaudhuri, Shubha. 2009. "The Princess of the Musicians: Rāṇi Bhaṭṭiyāṇī and the Māṅgaṇīārs of Western Rajasthan." In *Theorizing the Local: Music, Practice and Experience in South Asia and Beyond*, edited by Richard K. Wolf, 97-112. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Cohn, Bernard S. 1996. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Coventry, Chloe Louise. 2013. "Los Angeles Rock Bands / Rock Brands: Mediation and Musical Performance in Post-Liberalization Bangalore." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Das, Vivek. 2003. *Ghaṭ kā chaukā*. Varanasi: Kabir Prakashan Kendra (Hindi).
- Deliege, Robert. 1993. "The Myths of Origins of the Indian Untouchables." *Man* 28 (3): 533-549.
- Dhali, Rajshree. 2004. "Popular Religion in Rajasthan: A Study of Four Deities and their Worship in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century." PhD diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- Dharmvir. 1997. *Kabir ke alocak*. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan (Hindi).
- Dhattiwala, Raheel, and Michael Biggs. 2012. "The Political Logic of Ethnic Violence: The Anti-Muslim Pogrom in Gujarat, 2002." *Politics and Society* 40 (4): 483-516.
- Dirks, Nicholas. 1992. "Castes of Mind." *Representations* 37 (Winter): 56-78.
- Djurdjevic, Gordan. 2005. "Masters of Magical Powers: The Nāth Siddhas in the Light of Esoteric Notions." PhD diss., University of British Columbia.
- Dube, Saurabh. 1998. *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Dubey, K. C., and M. G. Mohril. 1965. *Census of India 1961, Volume VIII: Madhya Pradesh. Part VII-B: Handicraft Survey Monographs, No. 2: Fairs and Festivals*. Delhi: Manager of Publications.
- Dumont, Louis. 1980. *Is Homo Hierarchus? The Caste System and its Implications*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Originally published in French in 1966.
- Dvivedi, Kedaranath. 1965. *Kabir aur Kabir-panth: tulanatmak adhyayan*. Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan (Hindi).

- Dwivedi, Hazari Prasad. (1943) 1993. *Kabīr: Kabīr ke vyaktitva, sāhitya, aur darshānik vicāron kī alocana*. Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan (Hindi).
- Eisenstadt, S. N., Reuven Kahane, and David Shulman, ed. 1984. *Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and Dissent in India*. Berlin: Mouton.
- Fiol, Stefan. 2010. "Dual Framing: Locating Authenticities in the Music Videos of Himalayan Possession Rituals." *Ethnomusicology* 52 (1): 28-53
- . 2011. "From Folk to Popular and Back: Musical Feedback between Studio Recordings and Festival Dance-Songs in Uttarakhand, North India." *Asian Music* 42 (1): 24-53.
- Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gandhi, Mohandas K. (1909) 1938. *Hind Swarāj or Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House.
- Ghimire, Krishna B. 2001. "The Growth of National and Regional Tourism in Developing Countries: An Overview." In *The Native Tourist: Mass Tourism within Developing Countries*, edited by Krishna B. Ghimire, 1-29.
- Ghosh, Jayati. 1999. "Perceptions of Difference: The Economic Underpinnings." In *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, edited by K. N. Panikkar, 107–130. New Delhi: Viking.
- Gladstone, David L. 2005. *From Pilgrimage to Package Tour: Travel and Tourism in the Third World*. London: Routledge.
- Guha, Ranajit. 1997. *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "Who Needs 'Identity'?" In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, 1-17. London: Sage.

- Hawley, John Stratton. 1995a. "The *Nirguṇ* /*Saguṇ* Distinction in Early Manuscript Anthologies of Hindu Devotion." In *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, edited by David N. Lorenzen, 160-180. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 1995b. "The Saints Subdued: Domestic Virtue and National Integration in Amar Chitra Katha." In *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, edited by Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley, 107-134. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- . 2005. *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas, and Kabir in their Time and Ours*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hedayetullah, Muhammad. (1977) 2009. *Kabir: The Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Henry, Edward. 1991. "Jogīs and Nirgun Bhajans in Bhojpuri-Speaking India: Intra-Genre Heterogeneity, Adaptation, and Functional Shift." *Ethnomusicology*, 35 (2): 221-242.
- . 1995. "The Vitality of the Nirgun Bhajan: Sampling the Contemporary Tradition." In *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, edited by David N. Lorenzen, 231-250. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hess, Linda. 1987. "Three Kabir Collections: A Comparative Study." In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 111-142. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- . 2009. *Singing Emptiness: Kumar Gandharva Performs the Poetry of Kabir*. London: Seagull Books.
- . 2015. *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hess, Linda, and Shukhdeo Singh. 2002. *The Bijak of Kabir*. New York: Oxford University Press. First published 1983.
- Hood, Mantle. 1982. *The Ethnomusicologist*. Kent: Kent State University Press.



- Hussain, Hamid. 2007. *Sufism and the Bhakti Movement: Eternal Relevance*. Delhi: Manak Publications.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 1996a. "Interpreting Madhya Pradesh Voting Patterns." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31 (6): 3207-08.
- . 1996b. "Setback to BJP." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31 (2/3): 129-137.
- . 2003. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jairazbhoy, Nazir A. 1977. "Music in Western Rajasthan: Continuity and Change." *Yearbook of International Folk Music Council* 9: 50-66.
- Jamison, Stephanie W., and Joel P. Brereton. 2015. *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jayashankar, K. P., and Anjali Monteiro, dir. 2009. *Do Din Kā Melā* (film). Mumbai: Tata Institute of Social Sciences.
- Joshi, Sanjay. 2001. *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. 1980. "What if Untouchables Don't Believe in Untouchability?" *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 2 (1): 23-28.
- . 1987. "The Radhasoami Revival of the Sant Tradition." In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 329-358. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- . 1995. "The Social Significance of Radhasoami." In *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, edited by David N. Lorenzen, 67-93. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kabir, Humayun. 1946. *The Indian Heritage*. Mumbai: Asia Publishing House.

- Kapchan, Deborah. 2007. *Traveling Spirit Masters: Moroccan Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Khare, Ravindra S. 1984. *The Untouchable as Himself: Ideology, Identity, and Pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krakauer, Benjamin. 2015. "The Ennobling of a 'Folk Tradition' and the Disempowerment of the Performers: Celebrations and Appropriations of Bāul-Fakir Identity in West Bengal." *Ethnomusicology* 59 (3): 355-379.
- Kumar, Richa. 2009. "The Yellow Revolution in Malwa: Alternative Arenas of Struggle and the Cultural Politics of Development." PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Lal, Vinay. 1994. "The Discourse of History and the Crisis at Ayodhya: Reflections on the Production of Knowledge, Freedom, and the Future of India." *Emergences* 5-6:4-44.
- . 1999. "The Politics of History on the Internet: Cyber-Diasporic Hinduism and the North American Hindu Diaspora." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 8 (2): 137-172.
- . 2003. *Of Cricket, Guinness and Gandhi: Essays on Indian History and Culture*. Calcutta: Seagull.
- . 2006. "Intolerance for 'Hindu Tolerance': Hinduism, Religious Violence in Pre-modern India, and the Fate of a 'Modern' Discourse." In *Religion und Gewalt: Konflikte, Rituale, Deutungen (1500-1800)*, edited by Kaspar von Greyerz and Kim Siebenhüner, 51-84. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- . 2009. "Living in the Shadows: Injustice, Racism, and Poverty in the Indian Diaspora." In *Global Civil Society Yearbook 2009: Poverty and Activism*, edited by Ashwani Kumar, Jan Aart Scholte, Mary Kaldor, Malies Glauss, Hakan Seckinelgen, and Helmut K. Anheier, 146-165. London: Sage.
- Lamb, Ramdas. 2002. *Rapt in the Name: The Ramnamis, Ramnam, and Untouchable Religion in Central India*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Lele, Jayant. 1981. "The *Bhakti* Movement in India: A Critical Introduction." In *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, edited by Jayant Lele, 1-15. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Lelyveld, David. 1994. "Upon the Subdominant: Administering Music on All-India Radio." In *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, edited by Carol A. Breckenridge, 44-65. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lorenzen, David. 1987. "The Kabir Panth and Social Protest." In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 381-304. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- . 1991. *Kabir Legends and Ananta-das's Kabir Parichai*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 1996. *Praises to a Formless God: Nirgunī Texts from North India*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2006. *Who Invented Hinduism? Essays on Religion in History*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.
- Lorenzen, David N., ed. 1995. *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lukose, Ritty A. 2009. *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lutgendorf, Phillip. 1991. *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1995. "All in the (Raghu) Family: A Video Epic in Cultural Context. In *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, edited by Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley, 217-253. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lynch, Owen M. 1969. *The Politics of Untouchability*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Majumdar, Ramesh Chandra, and A. D. Pusalkar. 1953. *The History and Culture of the Indian People, Volume 2: The Age of Imperial Unity*. Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

Manuel, Peter. 1993. *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 2008. "North Indian Sufi Popular Music in the Age of Hindu and Muslim Fundamentalism." *Ethnomusicology* 52 (3): 378-400.

Marcus, Scott. 1989. "Arab Music Theory in the Modern Period." PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles.

———. 1993. "Recycling Indian Film Songs: Popular Music as a Source of Melodies for North Indian Folk Musicians." *Asian Music* 24 (1): 101-110.

———. 1995. "On Cassette Rather than Live: Religious Music in India Today." In *Media and the Transformations of Religions in South Asia*, edited by Lawrence Alan Babb and Susan S. Wadley, 167-185. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Markoff, Irene. 2002. "Alevi Identity and Expressive Culture." In *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 6: The Middle East*, edited by Virginia Danielson, Scott Marcus, and Dwight Reynolds, 789-92. New York: Routledge.

Mathur, K. S. 1964. *Caste and Ritual in a Malwa Village*. Mumbai: Asia Publishing House.

Mayer, Adrian C. 1956. "Some Hierarchical Aspects of Caste." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 12 (2): 117-144.

———. 1970. *Caste and Kinship in Central India: A Village and its Region*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. First published 1960.

McLeod, W. H. 1987a. "The Development of the Sikh Panth." In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 229-250. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

- . 1987b. "The Meaning of 'Sant' in Sikh Usage." In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 251-264. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Mishra, Vijay C. 1987. "Two Truths are Told: Tagore's Kabir." In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 167-180. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Mohamed, Malik. 2007. *The Foundations of the Composite Culture in India*. Delhi: Aakar Books.
- Murthy, Dhiraj. 2010. "Nationalism Remixed? The Politics of Cultural Flows between the South Asian Diaspora and 'Homeland.'" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33(8):1412–30.
- Nandy, Ashis. 1983. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . 1995. "An Anti-Secularist Manifesto." *India International Quarterly* 22 (1): 35-64.
- . 2001. *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nandy, Ashish, Shikha Trivedy, Shail Mayaram, and Achyut Yagnik. *The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*. 1995. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. (1946) 1994. *The Discovery of India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Neuman, Daniel M. 1990. *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Originally published 1980 by Wayne State University Press.
- Ogden, Chris. 2012. "A Lasting Legacy: The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance and India's Politics." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42 (1): 22-38.

- O'Flaherty, Wendy. 1987. "The Interaction of *Saguṇa* and *Nirguṇa* Images of Deity." In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 47-52. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Olivelle, Patrick. 2005. *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Omvedt, Gail. 1980. "Adivasis, Culture and Modes of Production in India." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 12 (1): 15-22.
- Pandey, Gyanendra. 1990. *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . 2005. *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Panikkar, K. N. 1999. "Introduction: Defining the Nation as Hindu." In *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, edited by K. N. Panikkar, vii-xxxv. New Delhi: Viking.
- Patel, Jabbar, dir. 2005. *Hans Akela: Kumar Gandharva* (film). New Delhi: Films Division.
- Patwardhan, Anand, dir. 2011. *Jai Bhim Comrade*. Mumbai.
- Pennington, Brian K. 2005. *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Prashad, Vijay. 2002. *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2012. *Uncle Swami: South Asians in America Today*. New York: The New Press.
- Pritchett, Frances. 1995. "The World of *Amar Chitra Katha*." In *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, edited by Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley, 76-106. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Qureshi, Regula Burckhardt. 1997. "The Indian Sarangi: Sound of Affect, Site of Contest." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 29 (1997): 1–38.
- Radhakrishnan, Smitha. 2008. "Examining the 'Global' Indian Middle Class: Gender and Culture in the Silicon Valley/Bangalore Circuit." *Intercultural Studies* 29 (1): 7-20.
- Rees, Helen. 2000. Rees, Helen. 2000. *Echoes of History: Naxi Music in Modern China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Redfield, Robert. 1956. *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rodnitzsky, Jerome L. 1976. *Minstrels of the Dawn: The Folk-Protest Singer as a Cultural Hero*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Russell, Robert V., assisted by Rai Bahadur Hira Lal. (1916) 1969. *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*. Oosterhout: Anthropological Publications.
- Sardar, Ziauddin. 2005. "Postmodern(ising) Qawwali." In *Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures: A Ziauddin Sardar Reader*, edited by, Sohail Inayatullah and Gail Boxwell, 219-29. London: Pluto Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 2005. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. New York: Picador.
- Schaller, Joseph. 1995. "Sanskritization, Caste Uplift, and Social Dissidence in the Sant Ravidās Panth." In *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, edited by David N. Lorenzen, 94-119. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Schomer, Karine. 1987a. "Introduction: The Sant Tradition in Perspective." In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 1-20. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Schomer, Karine. 1987b. "The Dohā as a Vehicle of Sant Teachings." In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 61-90. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

- Schomer, Karine, and W. H. McLeod, ed. 1987. *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Schultz, Anna. 2012. *Singing a Hindu Nation: Marathi Devotional Performance and Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2014. "The Livenesses of Pandit Bhimsen Joshi's Popular *Abhangas*." In *More than Bollywood: Studies in Indian Popular Music*, edited by Gregory D. Booth and Bradley Shope, 276-299. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shah, Rajula, dir. 2007. *Sabad Nirantar / Word Within the Word* (film). Distributed by Magic Lantern Movies LLP, New Delhi.
- Sharma, Krishna. 1987. *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Sherinian, Zoe C. 2014. *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Shukla, Ramachandra. (1929) 2001. *Hindī Sāhitya kā Itihās: Saśhodhit Saṁśhodhit evam Pravardhit Saṁskāraṇ*. Allahabad: A to Zed Publishing (Hindi).
- Singer, Milton. 1972. *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Singh, Sant Ajaib. 1982. *The Ocean of Love: The Anurāg Sāgar of Kabir*. Raj Kumar Bagga, Translator. Sanbornton, NH: Sant Bani Ashram.
- Singh, Kavita. 2003. "Museums and the Making of the Indian Art Historical Canon." In *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art*, edited by Shivaji K. Pannikar, Parul Dave Mukherji and Deeptha Achar, 333-357. New Delhi: D. K. Printworld.
- Sinha, Surajit. 1958. Tribal Cultures of Peninsular India as a Dimension of Little Tradition in the Study of Indian Civilization: A Preliminary Statement. *The Journal of American Folklore* 71 (281): 504-518.



- Slawek, Stephen. 1988. "Popular *Kīrtan* in Benares: Some 'Great' Aspects of a Little Tradition." *Ethnomusicology* 32 (2): 77-92.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" From *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, 271-313. Basingstoke: Macmillian.
- Staal, Fritz. 1987. "The Ineffable *Nirguṇa Brahman*." In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 41-46. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Srinivas, M. N. 1952. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of Southern India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1966. *Social Change in Modern India*. Reprint, Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2014.
- Sweers, Britta. 2005. *Electric Folk: The Changing Face of English Traditional Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thapar, Romila. 1999. "The Tyranny of Labels." In *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, edited by K. N. Panikkar, 1-33. New Delhi: Viking.
- Thukral, Uma. 1995. "The Avatar Doctrine in the Kabir Panth." In *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, edited by David N. Lorenzen, 221-230. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tiwari, Parasnath. 1961. *Kabir-granthāvali*. Allahabad: University of Allahbad Press (Hindi).
- Toor, Saadia. 2000. "Indo-Chic: The Cultural Politics of Consumption in Post-Liberalization India." *SOAS Literary Review* 2: 1-33.
- Turino, Thomas. 2008. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Varghese, Bijumon, Mathews John, and Nelson Samuel. 2009. *The Malvi-speaking People of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan: A Sociolinguistic Profile*. Dallas: SIL International.

- Vaudeville, Charlotte. 1974. *Kabīr*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 1987. “*Sant Mat*: Santism as the Universal Path to Sanctity.” In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 21-40. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Virmani, Shabnam, dir. 2008a. *Chalo Hamara Des: Journeys with Kabir and Friends* (film). Bangalore: The Kabir Project.
- . 2008b. *Had Anahad: Journeys with Ram and Kabir*. Bangalore: The Kabir Project.
- . 2008c. *Kabir Khada Bazaar Mein: Journeys with Sacred and Secular Kabir*. Bangalore: The Kabir Project.
- . 2008d. *Koi Sunta Hai: Journeys with Kumar and Kabir*. Bangalore: The Kabir Project.
- Vivekananda, Swami. 1893. “Welcome Address at World’s Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1893.” Retrieved from <http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/>
- Wakankar, Milind. 2010. *Subalternity and Religion: The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Westcott, G. H. 1907. *Kabir and the Kabir Panth*. Kanpur: Christ Church Mission Press.
- Zelliot, Eleanor. 1970. “The Nineteenth Century Background of the Mahar and Non-Brahman Movements in Maharashtra.” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 7: 397-415.
- . 1981. “Chokamela and Eknath: Two Bhakti Modes of Legitimacy for Modern Change.” In *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, edited by Jayant Lele, 136-156. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- . 1982. “A Medieval Encounter between Hindu and Muslim: Eknath’s Drama-Poem Hindu-Turk Samvad.” In *Images of Man: Religion and Historical Process in South Asia*, edited by Fred W. Clothey, 171-195. Chennai: New Era Publications.

- . 1987. “Eknath’s *Bharuds*: The Sant as a Link between Cultures.” In *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, edited by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod, 92-110. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- . 1995. “Chokhāmēlā: Piety and Protest.” In *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, edited by David N. Lorenzen, 212-220. Albany: State University of New York Press.

### News and Popular Media

- Ghatwai, Milind. 2015. “Veg Chouhan Blocks Eggs in Anganwadis.” *The Indian Express*, June 1. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/veg-chouhan-blocks-eggs-in-anganwadis/>
- Joshi, Namrata. 2016. “For the People, of the People, by the People.” *The Hindu*, January 4. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/for-the-people-of-the-people-by-the-people/article8064059.ece>
- Khalid, Saif. 2015. “Indian Mob Kills Man over Beef Eating Rumor.” *Al Jazeera*, October 1. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/indian-mob-kills-man-cow-slaughter-rumour-150930193719666.html>
- Press Trust of India. 2014. “Narendra Modi Does Not Reflect Composite Culture: Kabir Mutt Chief.” *The Economic Times*, May 2, 2014. [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-05-02/news/49578612\\_1\\_narendra-modi-modi-and-bjp-kabir-mutt](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-05-02/news/49578612_1_narendra-modi-modi-and-bjp-kabir-mutt)
- Punwani, Jyoti. 2016. “The Kabir Blockbuster.” *Mumbai Mirror*, January 10, 2016. <http://www.mumbaimirror.com/others/sunday-read/The-Kabir-blockbuster/articleshow/50515675.cms>
- Rajagopal, Arvind. 2003. “Gujarat’s ‘Successful Experiment.’” *Open Democracy*, March 20, 2003. [https://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-india\\_pakistan/article\\_1056.jsp](https://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-india_pakistan/article_1056.jsp)