

Kabir (8 June 1398–1518 CE)^{[2]: 14–15} was a well-known Indian [mystic poet](#) and [sant](#). His verses are found in Sikhism's scripture [Guru Granth Sahib](#), the [Satguru Granth Sahib](#) of [Saint Garib Das](#),^[3] and Kabir Sagar of [Dharamdas](#).^{[4][5][6]} Today, Kabir is an important figure in Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam, especially in [Sufism](#).^[7]

Born in the city of [Varanasi](#) in what is now [Uttar Pradesh](#), he is known for being critical of organized religions. He questioned what he regarded to be the meaningless and unethical practices of all religions, primarily what he considered to be the wrong practices in Hinduism and Islam.^{[4][8]} During his lifetime, he was threatened by both Hindus and Muslims for his views.^[9] When he died, several Hindus and the Muslims he had inspired claimed him as theirs.^[5]

Kabir suggested that "truth" is with the person who is on the path of righteousness, considered everything, living and non living, as divine, and who is passively detached from the affairs of the world.^[5] To know the truth, suggested Kabir, drop the "I", or the ego.^[9] Kabir's legacy survives and continues through the [Kabir panth](#) ("Path of Kabir"), [Sant Mat](#) sect that recognizes Kabir as its founder. Its members are known as *Kabir panthis*.^[10]

Early life and background

[\[edit\]](#)

The years of Kabir's birth and death are uncertain.^{[11][12]} Some historians favor 1398–1448 as the period Kabir lived,^{[13][14]} while others favor 1440–1518.^{[4][15][16]} Generally, Kabir is believed to have been born in [1398 \(Samvat 1455\)](#),^{[2]: 14–15} on the full moon day of [Jyeshtha month](#) (according to the historical Hindu calendar [Vikram Samvat](#)) at the time of [Brahmamuḥarta](#). There is a considerable scholarly debate on the circumstances surrounding Kabir's birth. Many followers of Kabir believe that he came from *Satloka* by assuming the body of light, and incarnated on a lotus flower and claim that the rishi Ashtanand was the direct witness of this incident, who himself appeared on a lotus flower in the [Lahartara Pond](#).

A few accounts mention that Kabir in the form of a child was found at Lahartara Lake by a Muslim weaver called Niru and his wife Nima who raised him as his parents.^[17]

Kabir is believed to have become one of the many disciples of the Bhakti poet-saint Swami [Ramananda](#) in Varanasi, known for devotional [Vaishnavism](#) with a strong bent to [monist Advaita](#) philosophy teaching that God was inside every person and everything.^{[5][18][19]} Early texts about his life place him with Vaishnava tradition of Hinduism as well as the Sufi tradition of Islam.^[20] According to Irfan Habib, the two manuscript versions of the Persian text [Dabestan-e Mazaheb](#) are the earliest known texts with biographical information about Kabir.^[21] The *Dabestan-e-Mazaheb* states Kabir is a "Bairagi" (Vaishnava yogi) and states he is a disciple of Ramanand (the text refers to him repeatedly as "Gang").

Kabir's family is believed to have lived in the locality of [Kabir Chaura](#) in [Varanasi \(Banaras\)](#). *Kabīr maṭha* (कबीरमठ), a *maṭha* located in the back alleys of Kabir Chaura, celebrates his life and times.^[22] Accompanying the property is a house named *Nīrūṭīlā* (नीरू टीला) which houses Niru and Nima graves.^[23]

Poetry

[\[edit\]](#)

Kabir's poems were in [Sadhukkadi](#), also known as Panchmel Khichri, borrowing from various dialects including [Khadi boli](#), [Braj](#), [Bhojpuri](#), and [Awadhi](#).^[24] Kabir also wrote in pure [Bhojpuri](#), for instance his poems like *mor hīrā herāīl bā kichāre me* is written in pure Bhojpuri.^[25] They cover various aspects of life and call for a loving devotion for God.^[26] Kabir composed his verses with simple words. Most of his work was concerned with devotion, mysticism and discipline.^[27]

Where spring, the lord of seasons reigneth, there the unstruck music sounds of itself,
There the streams of light flow in all directions, few are the men who can cross to that shore!
There, where millions of [Krishnas](#) stand with hands folded,
Where millions of [Vishnus](#) bow their heads, where millions of [Brahmas](#) are reading the Vedas,
Where millions of [Shivas](#) are lost in contemplation, where millions of [Indras](#) dwell in the sky,
Where the demi-gods and the [munis](#) are unnumbered, where millions of [Saraswatis](#), goddess of music play the vina,
There is my Lord self-revealed, and the scent of sandal and flowers dwells in those deeps.

— *Kabir*, II.57, Translated by [Rabindranath Tagore](#)^[28]

Kabir and his followers named his verbally composed poems of wisdom as "bāñīs" (utterances). These include songs and couplets, called variously [dohe](#), [śalokā](#) (Sanskrit: ślokā), or [sākhī](#) (Sanskrit: sākhī). The latter term means "witness", implying the poems to be evidence of the Truth.^[29]

Literary works with compositions attributed to Kabir include *Kabir Bijak*, *Kabir Parachai*, *Sakhi Granth*, *Adi Granth* (Sikh), and *Kabir Granthawali* (Rajasthan).^[30] However, except for *Adi Granth*, significantly different versions of these texts exist and it is unclear which one is more original; for example, *Kabir Bijak* exists in two major recensions.^[31] The most in depth scholarly analysis of various versions and translations are credited to Charlotte Vaudeville, the 20th century French scholar on Kabir.^[31]

There are 82 works attributed to Kabir as mentioned in *Kabir and the Kabir panth* by Westcott.^[32] Shyamsundar Das himself brought to light two marked manuscripts which he published in 1928. One of these manuscripts carried the date 1504 and the other 1824.^[citation needed]

Kabir's poems were verbally composed in the 15th century and transmitted [viva voce](#) through the 17th century. *Kabir Bijak* was compiled and written down for the first time in the 17th century.^[33] Scholars state that this form of transmission, over geography and across generations bred change, interpolation and corruption of the poems.^[33] Furthermore, whole songs were creatively fabricated and new couplets inserted by unknown authors and attributed to Kabir, not because of dishonesty but out of respect for him and the creative exuberance of anonymous oral tradition found in Indian literary works.^[33] Scholars have sought to establish poetry that truly came from Kabir and its [historicity](#) value.^[34]

Authenticity

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Kabir's poems can be found in a wide variety of publications and websites, but the discussion of authenticity is ongoing.^[35] It seems certain that minor changes will have occurred through the centuries and it is also possible that poems written by others have been attributed to Kabir.

[Rabindranath Tagore](#)'s English translation and compilation, *Songs of Kabir*, was first published in 1915 and has been a classic reprinted and circulated particularly in the West.^{[36][37]} One critic (V.C. Mishra) has gone so far as to suggest that only six^[38] of its hundred poems are authentic^[39] and also

raises the question of whether the translator projected theological perspectives of the early 20th century onto Kabir.^[40] The same essay adds that the presumed unauthentic poems nevertheless belong to the Bhakti movement in medieval India and may have been composed by admirers of Kabir who lived later.^[36]

Philosophy

[\[edit\]](#)

Kabir with Namadeva, Raidas and Pipaji. Jaipur, early 19th century

According to Linda Hess, "Some modern commentators have tried to present Kabir as a synthesizer of Hinduism and Islam; but the picture is a false one. While drawing on various traditions as he saw fit, Kabir emphatically declared his independence from both the major religions of his countrymen, vigorously attacked what he considered the follies of these religions, and tried to kindle the fire of a similar autonomy and courage in those who claimed to be his disciples.^[41] He adopted their terminology and concepts, but vigorously criticized them both.^{[42][43]} He questioned the need for any holy book, as stated in Kabir Granthavali as follows:

Reading book after book the whole world died,
and none ever became learned!
But understanding the root matter is what made them gain the knowledge!

— *Kabir Granthavali*, XXXIII.3, Translated by Charlotte Vaudeville^[44]

Many scholars interpret Kabir's philosophy to be questioning the need for religion, rather than attempting to propose either [Hindu–Muslim unity](#) or an independent synthesis of a new religious tradition.^[45] Kabir rejected the hypocrisy and misguided rituals evident in various religious practices of his day, including those in Islam and Hinduism.^[45]

Saints I've seen both ways.
Hindus and Muslims don't want discipline, they want tasty food.
The Hindu keeps the eleventh-day fast, eating chestnuts and milk.
He curbs his grain but not his brain, and breaks his fast with meat.
The Turk [Muslim] prays daily, fasts once a year, and crows "God!, God!" like a cock.
What heaven is reserved for people who kill chickens in the dark?
Instead of kindness and compassion, they've cast out all desire.
One kills with a chop, one lets the blood drop, in both houses burns the same fire.
Turks and Hindus have one way, the guru's made it clear.
Don't say Ram, don't say Khuda [Allah], so says Kabir.

— *Kabir, Śabda 10*, Translated by Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh^[46]

In *Bijak*, Kabir mocks the practice of praying to avatars such as Buddha of Buddhism, by asserting "don't call the master Buddha, he didn't put down devils".^{[47][48]} Kabir urged people to look within and consider all human beings as manifestation of God's living forms:

If God be within the mosque, then to whom does this world belong?
If Ram be within the image which you find upon your pilgrimage,
then who is there to know what happens without?
Hari is in the East, Allah is in the West.
Look within your heart, for there you will find both Karim and Ram;

All the men and women of the world are His living forms.

Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram: He is my Guru, He is my Pir.

— *Kabir, III.2, Translated by [Rabindranath Tagore](#)*^[49]

Charlotte Vaudeville states that the philosophy of Kabir and other [sants](#) of the Bhakti movement is the seeking of the Absolute. The notion of this Absolute is *nirguna* which, writes Vaudeville, is same as "the [Upanishadic](#) concept of the [Brahman-Atman](#) and the monistic Advaita interpretation of the Vedantic tradition, which denies any distinction between the soul [within a human being] and God, and urges man to recognize within himself his true divine nature".^[50] Vaudeville notes that this philosophy of Kabir and other Bhakti sants is self-contradictory, because if God is within, then that would be a call to abolish all external [bhakti](#). This inconsistency in Kabir's teaching may have been differentiating "union with God" from the concept of "merging into God, or Oneness in all beings". Alternatively, states Vaudeville, the *saguna* prema-bhakti (tender devotion) may have been prepositioned as the journey towards self-realization of the *nirguna* Brahman, a universality beyond monotheism.^[51]

[David N. Lorenzen](#) and Adrián Muñoz trace these ideas of God in Kabir's philosophy as *nirguna Brahman* to those in [Adi Shankara](#)'s theories on [Advaita Vedanta](#) school of Hinduism, albeit with some differences.^[52]

Influence of Islam

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Lorenzen in his review of Kabir's philosophy and poetry writes, "the extent to which Kabir borrowed elements from Islam is controversial. Many recent scholars have argued that he simply rejected Islam and took almost all his ideas and beliefs from the Hindu tradition. Contemporary Kabir Panth sadhus make roughly the same argument. Most of the vocabulary used in his songs and verses are borrowed directly from the Hindu tradition. Some scholars state that the sexual imagery in some of Kabir's poems reflect a mystic Sufi Islam influence, wherein Kabir inverts the traditional Sufi representation of a God-woman and devotee-man longing for a union, and instead uses the imagery of Lord-husband and devotee-bride."^[53] Other scholars, in contrast, state that it is unclear if Sufi ideas influenced Bhakti sants like Kabir or it was vice versa, suggesting that they probably co-developed through mutual interaction.^[54]

Kabir left Islam, states Ronald McGregor.^[6] Kabir, nevertheless, criticized practices such as killing and eating cows by Muslims, in a manner Hindus criticized those practices:

We have searched the *turaki Dharam* ([Turk's religion](#), Islam), these teachers throw many thunderbolts,
Recklessly they display boundless pride while explaining their own aims, they kill cows.
How can they kill the mother, whose milk they drink like that of a wet nurse?
The young and the old drink milk pudding, but these fools eat the cow's body.
These morons know nothing, they wander about in ignorance,
Without looking into one's heart, how can one reach paradise?

— *Kabir, Ramaini 1, Translated by [David Lorenzen](#)*^[55]

Persecution and social impact

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Kabir's couplets suggest he was persecuted for his views, while he was alive. He stated, for example,

Saints I see the world is mad.
If I tell the truth they rush to beat me,
if I lie they trust me.

— *Kabir, Shabad - 4*, [\[9\]](#)

Kabir response to persecution and slander was to welcome it. He called the slanderer a friend, expressed gratefulness for the slander, for it brought him closer to his God. [\[56\]](#) Winand Callewaert translates a poem attributed to Kabir in the warrior-ascetic *Dadupanthi* tradition within Hinduism, as follows: [\[57\]](#)

Keep the slanderer near you, build him a hut in your courtyard —
For, without soap or water, he will scrub your character clean.

— *Kabir, Sākhī 23.4*, [\[57\]](#)

The legends about Kabir describe him as the underdog who nevertheless is victorious in trials by a [Sultan](#), a [Brahmin](#), a [Qazi](#), a [merchant](#), a god or a goddess. The ideological messages in the legends appealed to the poor and oppressed. According to David Lorenzen, legends about Kabir reflect a "protest against social discrimination and economic exploitation", they present the perspective of the poor and powerless, not the rich and powerful. [\[58\]](#) However, many scholars doubt that these legends of persecution are authentic, point to the lack of any corroborating evidence, consider it unlikely that a Muslim Sultan would take orders from Hindu Brahmins or Kabir's own mother demanded that the Sultan punish Kabir, and question the historicity of the legends on Kabir. [\[59\]](#)