



Kabir Among The Muslims Of Maghar: Reception, Adaptation And Accommodation

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Abstract

The present paper explores the presence of Kabir, an early modern North Indian saint poet, among the Muslims of Maghar and examines how he has become part of their cultural, religious and social life. The previous studies give just passing references to Muslims' attachment to Kabir at Maghar in the context of their visit to the Kabir *Mazar* (shrine). However, no scholar has paid any attention to the Muslims of Maghar town (which itself consists of Kabir's shrines at its east periphery) in terms of their relationship with Kabir. During the course of my fieldwork at Maghar from 2016 to the early months of 2022, I found that the Muslims of Maghar look up to Kabir as one of their own. They perceive him as a Sufi or *Pir* or *Wali* and address him as Kabiruddin Shah. They frequently visit Kabir's shrine, offer *fatiha* (prayer), recognize and claim Kabir to be their own. For their faith in Kabir, they claim to reject the propagation of the orthodox Deobandi and Wahhabi Islamic groups, which give a strong emphasis on purifying Islam of the non-Islamic elements. It is significant to note that in the increasing fire of communalism when religious leaders impose strict segregational codes on their followers shunning mixed religious practices, the Muslims of Maghar have not only preserved the tradition of their attachment to Kabir but also foster this syncretic tradition for the future generations.

Key Words: Maghar, Muslims, Kabir *Mazar*, Deobandi and Wahhabi Islamic groups, syncretic tradition

Introduction

Kabir was an early North Indian iconoclastic saint poet. He is well known for his tirade, especially against orthodox Hindu and Muslim religions, which he saw as a danger to humanity. In spite of this, Kabir had a strong following among the people of both the religions. It is said that at the time of the death of Kabir at Maghar¹ in 1518, his both Hindu and Muslim followers began to fight in order to cremate his dead body according to the funeral rites of their respective religions. This legend suggests that Kabir also had a strong following among Muslims. Tara Chand (1936, p. 165) and James Brown (1949, p. 25) also note that he had numerous Muslim followers.

One of the reasons of Muslims' attraction to Kabir might have been the similarities, which they found between his concept of *bhakti* and *Sufi* Islam. Raziuddin Aquil (2020) points out these similarities: "In the teachings of Kabir ... one can see the clear imprint of Sufi Islam: the criticism of idol worship, of useless ritual, emphasis on equality, emphasis on one God, are all to be traced to Sufism" (pp. 26-27). Ahmad Shaw who first translated the *Bijak* (collection of Kabir's verses) into English in 1917 also notes: "It was because Indian Muslims welcomed Kabir's efforts in combating idol-worship that they claimed him as Muslim, even going so far as to acknowledge him as a *pir*, a Muslim Sufi or saint, for his self-denying and pious life" (see Vaudeville, 1974, p. 15)

Kabir certainly gained popularity among Muslims, but soon orthodox Muslims started rejecting Kabir from the fold of Islam (Hess, pp. 317-18). However, there are sources which attest to Kabir's continuing presence among Muslims. The first study that underlines Muslims' attachment to Kabir is Abu'l Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* [1598] (see K. Dwivedi, 1995, p. 10). Abdul Haq Dihlavi, in his Persian work *Akhbar-al-Akhyar*, composed some years later than *Ain-i-Akbari*, shows that "Kabir's verses were already being read or quoted in Sufi circles in Delhi and Agra at the beginning of the 16th century" (see Vaudeville, 1974, p. 34). The *Dabista-i-Mazahib* by Muhsin Fani of Kashmir (1645-1653) also attest to Kabir's popularity among Muslims: "The

¹ Maghar is about sixteen miles away from Gorakhpur. Previously, Maghar used to be a part of the Basti district, but it is now in the Sant Kabir Nagar district which was formed in 1997 by Ms. Mayavati, the then chief minister of Uttar Pradesh.

testimony of *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* ascribed to Muhsin Fani of Kashmir and probably written in the mid seventeenth century, testifies to the continued prestige of Kabir among Indian Muslims, especially among those who shared the liberal tendencies of Akbar and Abul Fazl" (Vaudeville, 1974, p. 34). John Malcolm (1812, p. 145) too underlines the reception of Kabir among Muslims. Towards the end of the 19th century, William Crooke (1896/1975) finds Muslims claiming Kabir as their own: "Owing to his connection with the weaver caste, many Julahas are fond of calling themselves Kabir Bansi, or Kabir Panthi, without much reference to the special doctrines associated with the name of Kabir" (p. 73). Crooke further notes that Kabir's verses were popular among Muslims too: "Next to *Ramayana* of Tulasi Das, there is perhaps no body of literature which is so popular among the Hindus, as the *Bijak* of Kabir, and his verses and apothegms are ever on the lips of both the Hindus and Musalmans" (p. 74). The above sources attest to the presence of Kabir among Muslims. Moreover, it reflects that there was not such a rigid boundary of religion between the Hindus and Muslims up to the 19th century as it exists today.

We find traces of Muslims' connection with Kabir even in the first half of the 20th century, but Kabir's presence seems to be limiting to the Muslims of Maghar (the place of Kabir's death near Gorakhpur) only. One of my previous studies "Kabir Ka Hindookaran" [Hinduization of Kabir] reveals the dominance of the Mughal Emperor Aurangjeb, Hindi-Urdu controversy and orthodox Islamic reform movements started under the inspiration of colonialism as some of the main reasons of this disappearance.

Towards the early twentieth century, G. H. Westcott (1907/1986, p. 58), Shyam Sundar Das (1928/2010, p. 21), Ramchandra Shukla (1929/2014, p. 65) and F. E. Keay (1931, p. 96) and after the mid twentieth century, Kedarnath Dwivedi (1965/1995, p. 165) and Vaudeville (1974, p. 32) give passing references to the Muslim followers. Das and Shukla note that there were Muslim followers of Kabir in Kabirpanth. Westcott, Keay, K. Dwivedi and Vaudeville mention Muslim followers of Kabir, especially in the context of their visit to Kabir *Mazar* at Maghar. Dharwadker traces this practice in the present context:

This is broadly consistent with the fact documented in Abdul Haq Dehlavi's *Akhbar-al-Akhyar* (composed between 1590 and 1619) and Mohsin Fani's *Dabistan-i Mazahib* (mid-seventeenth century, that Indian sufis in the Agra, Delhi and Kashmir regions were

reading Kabir's poetry during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. The tradition has continued throughout the colonial and post-independence periods, with a family of Muslim caretakers maintaining the mausoleum as a place of sufi worship and pilgrimage down to the present. (2003, p. 4)

Although Westcott, Keay, Dwivedi, Vaudeville and Dharwadker focus on Kabir *Mazar*, they completely ignore the Muslims of the Maghar town (which consists of Kabir's shrines at its east periphery) in terms of their relationship with Kabir. My study fills this gap and reflects how Kabir has become the part and parcel of Muslims' religious and socio-cultural lives.

Kabir among the Muslims at Maghar

At Maghar, Kabir's presence among Muslims can be seen in the following spheres: Kabir's relics and legends among the Muslims of Maghar, Muslims' claim of faith in Kabir, the celebration of *Urs* (the death anniversary of Kabir), Muslims' attraction to Kabir's messages of humanity and his impartiality, and Muslims' appreciation of Kabir's *vanis* (verses).

a) Kabir's Relics and Legends among the Muslims

There are two side-by-side shrines of Kabir at Maghar: Kabir *Samadhi* and Kabir *Mazar*. The first belongs to the Hindus and the other to the Muslims. I visited these shrines for the first time in October 2016 and discovered many Muslims visiting Kabir *Mazar* and offering *fatiha* and looking at the Kabir *Samadhi* from the campus of the *Mazar* and some of them also went to the campus of the *Samadhi* temple. There were also many Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi Hindus visiting and receiving blessings of Kabir from both the places. I observed that Kabir was equally dear to both the Hindus and Muslims who regularly share Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* consisting of Kabir's Hindu *Samadhi*, Kabir's Muslim *Mazar*, Kabir's cave, Lord Shiva Temple, Mosque, banks of Ami river. It is striking to note that the mosque (which is adjacent to the northeast fence of the Kabir *Math*) and the old Lord Shiva temple (which is beside the bank of the Ami on the campus of the *Sthali*) seem less important than Kabir *Mazar* and Kabir *Samadhi*. From the religious perspective, they appear negligible before Kabir in the sense that people mostly visit Kabir, not them to offer their reverence. In fact, Kabir's shrines influence the entire atmosphere of Maghar and have become the main centre of pilgrimage of Maghar. People are more attracted to these shrines.

I carried out my fieldwork at Maghar for the second time in January 2017. I visited Maghar for fieldwork subsequently on many occasions till the early months of 2022. While interacting with Muslims, I found that one of the reasons of their attraction to Kabir was the stories and legends of his miracles performed at Maghar. Here, I will discuss these legends in brief. The first legend is about Kabir's leaving Banaras and settling at Maghar. It is said that due to the curse of a certain hermit, Maghar was attacked by a fierce drought for twelve years. Nawab Bijali Khan Pathan, the ruler of Maghar, was extremely worried at the plight of Maghar. One Sufi saint advised him to plead with Kabir to end the drought at Maghar. Nawab Bijali Khan Pathan at once left for Banaras. He met Kabir and invited him to Maghar. At his request, Kabir came to Maghar and ended the drought with his spiritual powers.

However, Kabir's purpose in going to Maghar was twofold. Besides the drought, he had to challenge a long-standing superstition propagated by the Brahmins of Banaras: dying at Banaras took one straight to heaven or salvation while dying at Maghar led one to hell or a rebirth as a donkey². To prove the Brahmanical superstition false and to end the twelve-year long drought from Maghar, he accompanied Nawab Bijali Khan Pathan to Maghar and settled there in a cottage.

The second legend is about Kabir's making the Ami flow close to Maghar with his spiritual powers. It is said that previously, the Ami flowed about one kilometre away to the east of Maghar. At the request of his disciples and followers, he took a dry mango twig and drew a line on the ground with it. The Ami at once changed the course of her flow and began to flow close to Maghar.

The third is about the miracle associated with Kabir's death. It is said that when Kabir passed away, a controversy regarding the cremation of Kabir's dead body ensued between

² Vaudeville sheds light on why Maghar was disdained by Brahmins:

Magahar is an ancient site, reputed to have been seat of the Buddhist hierarches for some time after Kapilvastu was destroyed. Many Buddhist antiquities are to be found in the area. According to the local traditions, the first inhabitants of Magahar were a non-Aryan tribe belonging to the Dom race and called Domkatars. Now Magahar has a large Muslim population, the main group being that of Julahas, who in that area are either weavers or cultivators. The Hindus of Kashi therefore held Magahar in contempt; moreover, according to popular belief, whilst those who died in holy Kashi reached salvation through the god Siva's grace, those who died in Magahar were reborn as asses. Magahar's ill repute, especially in Kashi, a stronghold of orthodox Brahmanism, is easily explained, as noted by Mohan Singh, by 'the prominent association of the place with Buddhism, with Doms, low-caste Sudras, and also with Musalmans among whom first came Julahas. In Brahmanical eyes, impure Magahar was the very antithesis of holy Kashi: a place of perdition as against a place of salvation. But it is easy to surmise that the Julahas themselves, who had a stronghold in Magahar, held the opposite opinion. (p. 45)

Kabir's Hindu and Muslim followers. The Muslims claimed Kabir's body to be cremated according to the Islamic rites, while the Hindus according to the Hindu rites. The situation became so tense that they were to fight each other. Just then, there was a prediction from the sky:

*Kholo parda hain nahi murda
Yuddha mitthya tum kar dali*
(Remove the curtain, there is no dead body;
You have brought a war-like situation in vain.)

When they opened the door of the cottage, they found a heap of flowers and a blanket in place of Kabir's dead body. The Hindus took the flowers while the Muslims the blanket. They cremated the flowers and blanket side by side according to their respective funeral rites. Later, the Muslims got a *Mazar* built on the grave of the blanket while the Hindus got a *Samadhi* built over the ashes of the flowers.

These legends and stories are parts of the lives of Maghar's Muslims and can be heard from them. Kabir's leaving Banaras and settling at Maghar in order to end its curse or prejudice also give them a feeling of superiority, pride and confidence. They feel proud of Kabir and of themselves as being the citizens of Maghar, and express their sincere gratitude to Kabir.

I observed that the Muslims of Maghar perceive these stories and legends of Kabir as the *karamats* (miracles) performed by Kabir. Because of these miracles, Kabir has earned popularity among them as a great Sufi saint. In fact, these miracles have established his authority among Muslims of Maghar and its neighbouring places. Aquil rightly suggests that miracle or *karamat* is the source of authority for Sufis (p. 54). Kabir's shrines remind them of Kabir's *karamats* and spiritual powers. Barbara Metcalf's following observation is quite appropriate in the context of Kabir: "Sufi shrines are sites of institutionalized charisma conceptualized as *baraka* (spiritual power) and *karamat* (miraculous power)" (p. 236).

b) Faith of the Muslims in Kabir

The Muslims of Maghar regard Kabir as their *Wali* or *Fakir* or *Bujurg* or *Pir* or *Baba*. Kabir is addressed as Baba Kabiruddinshah by most Muslims of Maghar. In fact, Kabir is a venerable Sufi figure among the Muslims of Maghar, who love and own him as a part of Sufi Islam as well

as fully express their faith in Kabir. Maulvi Firoj Ahmad (48 years old), the caretaker of the mosque on the campus of Kabir *Nirvana Sthali*, holds that the entire Maghar has faith in Kabir: “We visit the *Mazar* every day. The entire town has faith in Kabir.” Almost all the Muslims of Maghar who I interacted with claim that they regularly visit Kabir’s shrines. This statement expresses their strong attachment to Kabir although they do not visit Kabir’s shrines every day.

On 3 June 2019, at a grocery shop in Maghar, I interviewed Rajaram Yadav (73 years old), a Hindu, in order to record his opinion about whether the Muslims have faith in Kabir. He replied that about 30% Muslims had faith in Kabir. At this, he was immediately interrupted and objected to by Mohammad Shahid Ansari (30 years old):

Why not, they also have faith in Kabir. All have faith in Kabir. You are conveying the wrong information. The Muslims have the equal faith in Kabir to the Hindus.... All people have faith in (Kabir) who walked taking everyone together.... You must have visited the *Mazar* and seen there. The *Mazar* and the temple are standing side by side. They reflect the faith of the people associated with Kabir. I am a Muslim, but have faith in him.

In fact, there has been an unbroken tradition of Muslims’ faith in Kabir at Maghar. This tradition is even strengthened by their belief that ‘Kabir’s presence ensures a peaceful environment in Maghar. Both the Hindus and Muslims claim that due to the presence of Kabir at Maghar, no religious, social and political controversies or natural calamities occur and they live their lives by the teachings of Kabir. The location of Kabir’s shrines in their whereabouts and their regular veneration by outsider Hindus and Muslims, and Kabir’s strong direct and indirect influences in all the religious, social, cultural and political spheres of Maghar also lead the Muslims to appreciate the greatness of Kabir and increase their faith in him.

Muslims’ faith in Kabir is also expressed at the time of their festivals. The Muslims of Maghar and other places visit Kabir’s both shrines on the occasions of their festivals. On the occasion of Shab-e-Barat³, Muslims in large numbers submit their prayers and recite *fatiha* at the *Mazar* of Kabir like at other *Mazars* of Sufi saints. On the occasion of Eid on 5 June 2019, I recorded many Muslim men and women visiting Kabir’s shrines, especially Kabir *Mazar*.

³ Shab-e-Barat is celebrated by Muslims all over the world. Muslims believe that on the night of Shab-e-Barat, God writes the destinies of all men and women for the coming year by taking into account the deeds they committed in the past. On this occasion, Muslims collectively worship and ask for forgiveness of their wrongdoings. They also believe that their worship will reward them with fortune for the whole year and cleanse them of their sins. Visiting graves and reciting *fatiha* at them form the main components of this worship.

Everyday problems of the Muslims also drive their visits to Kabir's shrine. That's Muslims visit Kabir's shrine for his blessings in order to resolve their everyday problems. They claim Kabir to have the power of intercession. This claim deepens their bond with Kabir and takes them to his shrine. In fact, in Islamic spiritual culture, it is believed that Sufi saints continue to live on even after death and they have the power of intercession; they act as intermediaries between God and followers. They listen to, convey the difficulties, sorrows and wishes of the followers to God and plead with Him to resolve and fulfil them respectively. Since they are pure souls and are close to God, He immediately listens to them. Usha Sanyal aptly points out that "ordinary folk approach a shrine in the hope that the dead man will intercede for them. The chain of intercession starts at the grave of the local pir, and goes right up to the Prophet, who is closest to Allah, and whose intercession on one's behalf will never be denied" (p. 119).

The Muslims who visit Kabir's shrines are mostly Sunni Muslims⁴. The Sunni Muslims associated with Barelvi tradition⁵ pay *ziyarat*⁶ to Kabir and recite *fatiha* at Kabir *Mazar*. However, those associated with Deobandi⁷ and Wahhabi⁸ traditions generally avoid offering *fatiha* at the *Mazar*⁹. The Muslims associated with the orthodox Islamic movements such as Deobandi, Wahhabi, Ahl-e-Hadis¹⁰ etc. generally look at such practices popular in the Sufi circle as a danger to true Islam and emphasize on purifying Islam of these practices. Imtiaz Ahmad writes: "Most puritanical and orthodox Muslims see any form of Sufism or close interchange with other

⁴ According to Metcalf, Sunni Muslims constitute the "majority of Muslims which accept the authority of the whole first generation of Muslims and the validity of the historical community, in contrast to the Kharijis and the Shi'ah" (p. 367).

⁵ Barelvi is a Sunni revivalist movement which developed under the leadership of Sufi scholar Ahmad Raza Khan Barelvi (1856–1921) around 1870-1890, in opposition to contemporary revivalist Deobandi and Ahl-i- Hadith movements. Usha Sanyal notes: "Ahmad Raza's followers were called Barelvi simply because he was a resident of the town of Bareilly, in Rohilkhand [the western portion of present-day Uttar Pradesh]" (p. 8).

⁶ Sanyal explains the term *ziyarat*: "Whether one visits a tomb during an 'urs or at any other time of the year, such a visit is respectfully termed *ziyarat*" (p. 117).

⁷ Deobandi is an Islamic revivalist movement within Sunni (primarily Hanafi) Islam that formed during the late 19th century around the Darul Uloom Islamic seminary in the town of Deoband, India, from which the name derives. Metcalf writes: "the reformist 'ulama,' of whom the most important group is that associated with a theological academy founded in the town of Deoband in 1867" (pp. 12-13).

⁸ Wahhabi is an Islamic revivalist movement and doctrine that started within Sunni (primarily Hanbali) Islam. It is associated with the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Metcalf points out that "Muhammad ibn 'Abdu'l-Wahhab ... had initiated a far-reaching movement that emphasized the elimination of customary practices and a return to principles embedded in scripture" (pp. 277-78). John Obert Voll also writes: "Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab ... vigorously rejected the whole structure of the Sufi devotional practices as being unwholesome innovations. He proclaimed that veneration for any human, however saintly, constituted shirk or polytheism ... [he] replaced the pantheistic style of Sufi theology with a renewed emphasis on the interpretation of tawhid, the oneness of God, that stressed God's transcendence" (p. 61).

⁹ However, all Muslims associated with Deobandi and Wahhabi traditions also visit Kabir and pay *ziyarat* or recite *fatiha* on the occasion of Shab-e-Barat.

¹⁰ Sanyal notes the orthodox nature of Ahl-e-Hadis: "The Ahl-e-Hadis preference for direct access to the sources of religious authority was also transparent in their disapproval of sufism, believed to be 'a danger to true religion'" (p. 39).

religions as a danger to true Islam. For them, the Sufis lacked the appropriate moral rigour” (p. xxii). They consider these practices to be un-Islamic: “Many of the Sufi practices that adherents of Barelvi practice such as visiting the tombs of saints, are opposed by adherents of another school known as Deobandi which regards such practices as being un-Islamic” (Sharma, 2004, p. 114). These orthodox movements tend to emphasize that Islam adheres to the Quran and its ancient form: “[I]n seeking to define individual morality on the basis of a return to true Islam, the movements have eschewed customary practices, tending to be "scripturalist" in returning to the written records of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet” (Metcalf, pp. 5-6).

In spite of the criticisms by the Deobandi, Wahhabi and Ahl-i-Hadis practitioners, Barelvi practices such as visiting tombs of Sufi saints, offering *fatiha*, celebrating *Urs* and treating Sufi saints as intercessors or intermediators between God and followers have flourished and have been popular in Indian subcontinent. Aquil aptly notes the continuity of Sufi practices: “Despite opposition from various quarters, Sufism remains a vibrant movement, attracting devotees from across various strata of society: rural-urban poor, thugs, criminals, politicians and ministers can be seen offering ritual Sufic chadars and prostrating in the dargahs” (p. 69).

At Maghar, Muslims offer *fatiha* at Kabir *Mazar*, but very few Muslims enter the Kabir *Samadhi* temple to offer prayer or *dua*. However, many Muslims take a look from outside at the Kabir *Samadhi* temple and other relics associated with Kabir. It is common on the part of the Muslims to go across the campuses of the *Samadhi* and *Mazar* through a common passage. I have also recorded interviews of a few Muslims visiting Kabir *Samadhi* and offering prayer to Kabir. However, not all Muslims enter the *Samadhi* temple. The orthodox Muslims generally believe that offering *dua* at a temple is not sanctioned in Islam. Ahmad Allah Ansari (60 years old) expresses his orthodox opinion:

A Muslim does not have faith in *Samadhi*. He worships only *Khuda* (God). He visits *Mazar* and offers *fatiha*. According to the *Kalma* (Muslim faith), a Muslim is not allowed to worship any human being. To worship *Mazar* is also not allowed, but to offer *fatiha* at *Mazar* is only permissible, which is prevalent even today? To offer *fatiha* is prevalent in Islam and it has been the trend for years. To offer *fatiha* at graves is permissible everywhere in the world.

Ahmad Allah Ansari gives a scriptural interpretation of Islam and expresses an irreverent attitude to Kabir *Samadhi* temple. However, it is my observation that majority of the Muslims of Maghar and some of other places hold both the shrines in great reverence. Kabir continues to exert a great influence on them. Due to this influence of Kabir, many Muslims have also been associated with Kabir *Mazar* through the *muridi* (*guru* and disciple) tradition and express their profound faith in Kabir. In January 2017, I interacted with one Khadim Hussain (60 years old, not to be confused with the *Mutvalli* of the *Mazar*) and his daughter from Fatehpur, who offered a holy blanket to Kabir after the fulfilment of their wish and informed me that many Muslims from Fatehpur have faith in Kabir and Sufi principles. Shaida Hussain claims that many Muslim venerables along with their large number of followers are associated with Kabir and continue to visit Kabir's *Mazar* with them.

c) Celebration of *Urs* at Kabir *Mazar*

The *Urs*¹¹ is celebrated every year as Kabir Nirvana Divas (the death anniversary of Kabir) as per the Islamic tradition. It is held on 27 of the Arabic month Rajab. I recorded the celebration of the *Urs* in May 2017 and April 2019. In the morning of this day, *Qurankhani* (the recitation of the verses of the Quran) is performed at the *Mazar* by the students of a couple of *madrasas* of Maghar and/or *Hafizes* (the Muslims who have memorized the whole Quran) from Maghar. This continues for about an hour. After the *Qurankhani*, the caretakers, performers of *Qurankhani* and other Muslims present there offer *fatiha* at Kabir *Mazar*. It is followed by the distribution of sweets (*Prasad*) among them and the saints of the Kabir *Math*.

Then, the procession to bring a blanket for the Kabir *Mazar* is prepared at the Katayi Mill Chauraha of Maghar, which is about 2 kilometres away from the *Mazar*. This custom is known as *Chadarposhi*. More than two dozen Muslims participate in the procession. When the procession progresses, more people, especially the Muslims of Karam Kabir Mohalla, join it. Some Hindus and Muslims offer money into the blanket expressing their reverence to Kabir.

During the procession, devotional Sufi songs are sung in praise of Kabir. About half an hour later, the procession reaches the Kabir *Mazar*. More devotional songs attributed to the

¹¹ Sanyal explains *Urs* as “literally ‘wedding’, celebration of a saint’s death anniversary when his soul is believed to unite with Allah” (p. 343).

greatness of Kabir are sung at the *Mazar* and then, the blanket is offered and spread on the *Mazar* of Kabir. It is followed by more prayers and performance of devotional songs.

The *Chadarposhi* ceremony is followed by the *bhandara* (feast) in which *khichadi*, the main meal (*Prasad*), is served to people. The *Mahant* (head), other saints of the Kabir *Samadhi* temple, ordinary Kabirpanthis and non-Kabirpanthis visiting Kabir's shrines also participate in the *bhandara*. However, most of persons who participate in the *Urs* are the Muslims of Maghar. 300-400 people eat *khichadi* in the *bhandara*. Previously, around 2000-3000 Muslims of Maghar and its neighbouring places participated in the *Urs*. During 1990s, a decline started in their participation. Shivamangal (60 years old), the government caretaker of the *Mazar* and *Samadhi* relates this decline with the emergence of the Deobandi tradition in the Muslim community of Maghar and those of other places. Even some of the relatives of the present *Mutvalli* of the *Mazar* have become Deobandi themselves and they do not participate in the *Urs*.

The modern orthodox Islamic reform movements e.g. Deobandi and Wahhabi are really compartmentalizing Islam attacking Sufi traditions and other those practices which pass into Islam from non-Islamic traditions as well as the shared traditions which bring both Hindus and Muslims in a common space .

Significance of the *Urs*

The celebration of *Urs* at the Kabir *Mazar* is a living tradition of the Muslims' faith in Kabir. The Muslims of Maghar continue to participate in *Urs* which brings Kabir close to them.

It is an Islamic tradition of Maghar to celebrate Kabir Nirvana Divas. In place of Kabirpanthi rituals such as *Chauka Arti* and recitation of *Bijak* along with *Havan Puja*, the recitation of verses from the *Quran* and other Sufi devotional prayers are performed in praise of Kabir and his greatness.

Since the *Qurankhani* is performed by the Muslim students of Maghar and other places, this nurtures the Kabir ethos among them and other Muslims present on the occasion.

The procession of the *Chadarposhi* accompanied by the performance of devotional Sufi songs certainly spreads the message of Kabir among the Muslims and Hindus of Maghar. A

feeling of respect towards Kabir and the procession (*Chadarposhi*) is explicitly seen among the Muslim and Hindu people of Maghar.

Qurankhani at the *Mazar* and the ceremony of the procession of *Chadarposhi* heading towards the *Mazar* through the streets of Maghar dilute Kabir's identity as a Hindu Kabirpanthi god or Hindu saint¹². During the whole celebration of *Urs*, Kabir adopts a Muslim identity. In fact, Kabir had his original Muslim identity till the eighteenth century. However, the process of Hinduizing Kabir in Kabirpanth and outside which began in the nineteenth century under the colonial impact has exclusively constructed a Hindu identity of Kabir. Gyanendra Pandey notes the hinduization of Kabir: "It may be worthwhile to record that the Kabirpanth, which may be thought to have a substantial following among Muslim weavers, given Kabir's own origins and life among the Julahas of Banaras, was by the later nineteenth century being seen as an exclusively Hindu preserve" (pp. 89-90).

On this occasion, Muslims of Maghar and Kabirpanthi saints and followers present at the *Math* participate in the *Urs* and take food sitting together. They have a tolerant and friendly attitude to one another. There also takes place an interaction between Islamic (associated with the *Mazar*) and Kabirpanthi traditions. The *Mutvalli* welcomes Kabirpanthis saying *Saheb Bandagi* to them. Kabirpanthis from other places also perceive the *Mutvalli* as a Kabirpanthi *Mahant*. They also offer *Saheb Bandagi* (a Kabirpanthi greeting) at the feet of the *Mutvalli* in the same way as they offer to *Mahants* and *Gurus* of the Kabirpanth.

d) Muslims' Attraction to Kabir's Messages of Humanity and His Impartiality

I found many Muslims of Maghar and its neighbouring places attracted to Kabir for his messages to humanity and his spirit of impartiality or secularism. The neutral or impartial approach of Kabir towards both the Hindu and Muslim religions appeals to them. Kalamuddin Manshoori expresses his attraction to humanity and impartiality in Kabir:

He talks about humanity. He does not talk about caste and religion. How human beings should live and how they should treat one another, he has taught these ways. All are

¹² However, the offering of flowers, incense sticks and *bhandara* demonstrate a fusion of Hindu and Muslim ways of worship.

good in him. Whatever is good must be accepted. Whatever caste and class one may belong to, it is good for one to follow these messages. If his thoughts (messages) are followed, there will never be any sort of enmity. All his sayings are about humanity.

Some of the Muslims cite the following couplets in support of their claim of Kabir's impartiality and concept of secularism:

Kankar pathar jod kar masjid liya chunaya
Ta chadi Mullah baag de kya bahira hua khudaya
 (Mosque is built of brick and stone;
 A Mullah from the top of the mosque starts calling for prayers as if God were deaf.)
Pahan puje hari mile to main puju pahar
Tate ye chaki bhali jaka peesa khaye sansar
 (If one meets God through the worship of a stone, I will worship a mountain;
 A grindmill is better than a stone statue because it provides for the whole world.)

Uttering the above couplets, Mohammad Mustafa (45 years old) from a neighbouring village of Maghar comments:

When both the things are brought together, we like such things. It means that by bringing both the things together, he (Kabir) is making us understand. He means that we are not two, rather we are one. God is just one, but we have created different identities. He is a prominent *Aulia*, prophet and *fakir*. This is the only reason that he is endowed with such things. If he had not been foresighted, he could not have achieved this.

There are certainly a few Muslims who accept and understand Kabir's criticism of Islam in a binary perspective. However, most of the Muslims of Maghar go beyond it and assert that Kabir criticizes the evils of both the Hindus and Muslims in order to establish and spread truth among people. Abdul Mannan cites the following verse of Kabir claims that Kabir criticizes all for their evils but also respect them for their goodness:

Kabira khada bazaar mein mange sabki khair
Na kahu se dosti na kahu se bair
 (Kabir stands in the market and prays for the welfare of all;
 No one is either his friend or his enemy.)

Most of the Muslims of Maghar whom I interacted with construct a friendly image of Kabir towards Islam. According to them, Kabir's iconoclasm was not anti-Islam, but antagonistic to the evils in Islam. Their claim that Kabir does not speak evils against Islam, rather criticizes the evils prevailed in the religion develops among the Muslims of Maghar a sense of association with Kabir. Shedding light on a friendly image of Kabir for Islam, Mehndi Hasan Ansari regards Kabir

as a *Bujurg* with spiritual powers. According to him, Kabir never discriminated between the religions of Hindus and Muslims. He and many other Muslims own Kabir by addressing Kabir as “Our Kabir”:

Our Kabir Saheb was a *Bujurg*. He had spiritual powers. His real name was Ahl Kabiruddin Shah. The district Sant Kabir Nagar is formed after his name. He had faith in both religions. He offered *namaz* and also performed *puja*.... He respected both and therefore, both follow him. Here ... Kabir Saheb never discriminated, rather considered everyone equal.

I observed that Kabir has become an integral part of experiences of the Muslims at Maghar. How Kabir is the part of their life can be best seen in the view of Mehndi Hasan Ansari: “Maghar is a very pure land where there is such a great personality like Kabir! Who else may be such a dearer one than Kabir? Kabir Saheb is our heritage.” I discovered both of the Hindus and Muslims living their lives by the messages and teachings of Kabir related humanity.

e) Muslims’ Appreciation of Kabir in Respect to His *Vanis* (verses)

I recorded the commendation of Kabir’s verses from most Muslims of Maghar. Mohammad Aftab Alam (44 years old) not only appreciates Kabir’s *vanis* lavishly but also finds similarities between Kabir’s teachings and Islamic moral principles:

If we look at him, his real temperament was *Sufiyana* (he had a real Sufi temperament)... the *vanis* of Baba Kabiruddin Shah were poetic. His couplets teach lessons of humanity. All religions irrespective of any community and caste ... have given priority to humanity itself.... In Islam, the same lesson has been taught that no human being should cause any pain and sorrow to others.... Kabir Das has also taught the same.... his *shayaris* (verses) and his couplets are philosophical.

He further cites the following verse of Kabir with a commentary, which reflects that Kabir’s universal messages appeal to the Muslims of Maghar:

Aisi bani boliye, man ka apa khoya
Auran ko sheetal kare apahu sheetal hoye
 (Speak such words which should enchant heart;
 The ones which should soothe others and you too.)

If we speak well (sweetly), most orthodox enemies will be pacified. They would also be acceptable to us, but if we speak harsh words, the weak would be like wrestlers and resist. One day, they would be annoyed. From there a quarrel will ensue. Therefore, first of all, we should rectify our own faults.

Hasrat Ali Khan (29 years old), Mohammad Shahid Ansari and Kalim Ullah Khan (33 years old) who are teachers (lecturers) at the Sant Kabir Acharya Amrit Das Mahavidyalaya, a

private degree college run by Maghar Kabir Math, claim themselves to be influenced by Kabir's *vanis* and messages of humanity. Hasrat Ali Khan claims: "If only two lines of his (Kabir's) are implemented, this world will be really changed." Kabir's verses are so dear to Mohammad Shahid Ansari that he wants to translate Kabir's verses into English.

I interacted with a number of Muslims of Maghar who welcomed the verses of Kabir and his criticism on the negative elements (evils) prevailing in Islam. However, Ahmad Allah Ansari and Gulam Kibriya Ansari (78 years old), the two orthodox Muslims, reacted to the following couplet of Kabir and corrected him though they remembered and cited many couplets of Kabir. At some points, they also appreciated Kabir. Ahmad Allah Ansari argues:

Whatever couplets and quatrains are there in the name of Kabir in writing and print, all are correct, but there is one which he has spoken about the Muslims:

*Kankar patthar jori ke masjid liya banaya
Ta chadi mullah baag de kya bahara hua khudaya*

The Muslims will certainly reject it. This *baag (azan)*¹³ which is given, is an announcement of the time for *namaz*. It is better than calling people from one house to another. This was also in trend during the time of the prophet. It would be heard from the mosque and Muslim people would come. This is performed for the same purpose. The one who gives *azan* (address) does not address God.... According to it, this couplet proves to be incorrect.

It reflects an ideological pain or grudge of the orthodox Muslims, stimulated by the couplet of Kabir. However, many Muslims of Maghar are in favour of Kabir in the context of this couplet. Supporting Kabir, Shaida Hussain Ansari explicates that Kabir has spoken the truth and he is correct:

Prayer is performed in privacy. When the world sleeps, you should wake up. You should not make the show of that. He uttered such things to attack the corrupt practices and there is nothing else. As far as his *vanis* are concerned, whether they are seen according to the Hindu *Dharma Shastra* or according to our Islam, they never prove to be wrong. Therefore, both people (Hindus and Muslims) have faith in Kabir in their own ways. I follow him according to the Islamic way.

Mehndi Hasan Ansari also affirm that no Muslim objects to Kabir for this couplet. He appreciates Kabir with his following verse and asserts that there have always been such *vanis* of Kabir Saheb which have always made friends for him. He had no enmity with any one; Kabir Saheb has always given the message of humanity:

¹³ A call for prayer (*namaz*) from mosque.

Kabira khada bazaar mein sabki mange khair

Na koi se dosti na koi se bair

(Kabir stands in the market and prays for the welfare of all;
No one is either a friend or an enemy.)

The Muslims of Maghar also transmit Kabir's messages and stories from one generation to the next generation. I found many Muslims accepting the fact that the teachings of Kabir have been told to them by their elders. Shamshad Alam (70 years old) testifies to this fact:

I like Kabir Saheb's way of living. Whatever our ancestors have told about the manner of his living and about his goodness show that he was a noble man. My ancestors told me. I agree with them. I follow his personality. He was a good human being. According to our religion, he is a *Wali*. It is propitious to visit his *Mazar*.

Thus, Kabir has become part of everyday social and religious life of the Muslims of Maghar and its neighbouring regions. Maghar's milieu is so intermeshed with Kabir culture that there will remain a continuity of Muslims' devotion or faith in Kabir and they will continue to be exposed to Kabir's teachings, verses, stories (legends), and the traditions of Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* and Kabir's shrines.

Conclusion

To sum up, Kabir has been a strong presence among the Muslims of Maghar. From Kabir's time to the late twentieth century, the economic status of the Muslims of Maghar had been low. Most of them were associated with weaving clothes, which Kabir himself had practised. Weaving clothes might have brought them close to Kabir when he approached Maghar. On the other hand, Nawab Bijali Khan (the leader of the Muslims of the time) himself was a devout devotee of Kabir and so, naturally, other Muslims of Maghar also became Kabir's followers. Thus, there developed a strong tradition of Muslims' faith in Kabir at Maghar and it still continues.

Kabir's legends associated with Maghar have developed the image of Kabir as a prominent Sufi saint among the Muslims of Maghar. Identifying Kabir as a *Wali* or *Fakir* or *Bujurg* or *Pir* or *Baba* and addressing him as Baba Kabiruddinshah by the Muslims of Maghar testify to this fact and their faith in Kabir. Their beliefs that 'Kabir came to Maghar for their welfare; misfortune does not come to Maghar due to Kabir's presence or no riot or controversy occurs'

bring them close to Kabir. Praying to Kabir for the fulfilment of their wishes, getting jobs and freeing from their everyday problems reflect their strong faith and attachment to Kabir.

Their faith in Kabir has always been nurtured by Kabir *Mazar* which is a living tradition of Muslims' faith in Kabir. Offering *fatiha* by the Muslims in large numbers on the occasion of Shab-e-Barat and other festivals testifies to the fact that the Muslims of Maghar continues to have their faith in Kabir.

Regular visits of Kabirpanthi and non-Kabirpanthi followers (including Muslims from different places), and different programmes associated with Kabir and Kabir *Nirvana Sthali* also increase their acceptability of Kabir as almost the whole Maghar is overshadowed with Kabir culture on the occasions of these programmes.

In spite of a very few orthodox Muslims (the followers of Deobandi or Wahhabi Movement)' disapproving attitude towards Kabir's criticism of Islam, its acceptability by the majority of Muslims of Maghar makes them accept Kabir as one of their own and strengthens their bond with Kabir. Kabir continues to be part of their everyday cultural, social and religious life.

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