

A faint resonance: on commemorating poet Kabir's 500th death anniversary

Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh's mural that depicts the religions of India is a welcome sight at Mumbai airport. At its right edge is the tiny figure of Kabir, poet saint and weaver which many may overlook. Despite his extraordinary popularity over the last half millennium, no major celebration to commemorate the 500th death anniversary of this poet seems to have taken place in India.

As an academic working on Rabindranath Tagore, I have participated in events remembering him: a commemoration of Tagore's 150th birth anniversary in 2011 and the 100th anniversary, in 2013, of his winning the Nobel Prize.

There have been lectures and conferences linked to these not only in India but across the world resulting in a number of important publications. The only poet who Tagore translated into English (apart from himself) is Kabir.

There have been some local level commemorations and last week Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the [foundation stone of the Sant Kabir Academy](#), but otherwise Kabir's anniversary seems to be drifting along. As a historical fact, we do not know whether Kabir did live till 1518 but having no better alternative, scholars tend to use this heuristic date. Professor David N. Lorenzen's research on Kabir has confirmed that most people whom legends associated with Kabir lived around this time. The book, *Images of Kabir* (Monika Horstmann), is the result of an international symposium held in 1998 commemorating the 600th anniversary of Kabir's supposed birth. Although it is far more likely that Kabir died around 1518 than us being certain that he was born in 1398, the lack of ambition in commemorating his anniversary is puzzling.

Wide acceptance

As a poet, Kabir transcended many of the divisions that existed in India. He can be celebrated as Dalit hero or as a Brahmin. Kabir and the Kabir Panth are accepted as a part of Hinduism. He is one of the Bhagats of the Sikhs and a large corpus of his poems is included in the Guru Granth Sahib. His presence in Indian Islamic thought, Qawwali singing and architecture has also been well documented. His *rauza* in Maghar (Uttar Pradesh) is a part of the architectural heritage of the country. Nineteenth century missionaries noted the similarity of his thoughts to Christianity, speculating that he must have composed his poems under Christian influence. His indebtedness to Buddhist Siddhas has been a subject of scholarship in the last century. Jain poets emulated his style, so much so that the 17th century Anandghan was dubbed as the "Jain Kabir". As far as Parsis are concerned, one of the earliest non-Hindi mentions of Kabir comes from the Dabistan-i Mazahib composed by a neo-Zoroastrian (around 1653).

Kabir has also transcended space and time. In archives in north India, from Maharashtra to West Bengal, one can find his poems almost everywhere. Even modern readers and listeners are fascinated by his couplets and songs as they are a catalyst in creating new poetry. Over the past centuries, the Kabir textual corpus has seen a substantial enlargement as new songs were written bearing his signature.

Depth of study

By 2018, the range of scholarship on Kabir has grown exponentially, with scholars on four continents engaged with his study. *Images of Kabir* for example presents different perceptions, reminding us of the richness and variety of meaning in his poetry. The early Kabir songs are

available while his legends have also been published and studied. There has been new analysis, by Czech scholar Jaroslav Strnad, of the language of his early poems recorded in Rajasthan. Aspects of performed Kabir have been studied in detail by Kabir scholar Linda Hess. Film-maker Shabnam Virmani's "The Kabir Project" has mapped Kabir singers in India and Pakistan. Writer and academic Purushottam Agrawal has presented Kabir in the light of indigenous modernity. Researcher Peter Friedlander has shown how Tagore's interest in Kabir was also influenced by Tagore's colleague, Kshitimohan Sen. Several articles by the academic Jack Hawley have been devoted to Kabir's manuscripts and Vaishnava background while scholar Thomas de Bruijn has studied the shifting semantics in his poems. There are also excellent new translations by Vinay Dharwadker and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. New verse translation appears in Chinese and Hungarian. We must acknowledge that the pioneering works of Shyamsundar Das, Hazariprasad Dvivedi and Mataprasad Gupta in the middle of the 20th century are what prepared the ground for the rich global academic discourse on Kabir.

Several academic bodies abroad have expressed interest in paying tributes to Kabir. There is a discussion about a panel on Kabir at the Annual Conference on South Asia at Madison, U.S. China may also organise an event next year while Oxford is going to have online, one of the earliest available dated manuscripts of Kabir's Bijak.

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