Kabir descended from heaven to earth. The lotus flower was blooming in the place where Kabir was born. The bees were tired of humming. Peacocks, larks and other kinds of birds in their flight passed circling around the tank. Thunder and lightning were in the air when Kabir became manifest in the heart of a lotus flower, in the midst of the Lahar tank. A feeling of thirst overcame Nima, the newly wedded bnde of Niru, the weaver, as after the marriage ceremony she was making her way to her husband’s house. She approached the tank but was much afraid when there she beheld the child. She thought in her heart ‘this is probably the living evidence of the shame of some virgin widow.’ Niru suggested that they might take the child to their house, but Nima at first demurred, thinking that such action might give rise to scandal. Women would ask, ‘Who is the mother of a child so beautiful that its eyes are like the lotus?’ However laying aside all fears they took pity on the child. On approaching the house, they were welcomed with the songs of women, but when the women saw the child, dark thoughts arose in their hearts and they began to ask, ‘How has she got this child?’ Nima replied that she had got the child without giving birth to it and the women refrained from asking further questions.

The mystery surrounding the birth of the child was further deepened when Niru called in a Qazi and requested him to open the Koran and find for the child a name. He found the name Kabir, and also from the same root, Akbar, Kubra, and Kibriya. On finding these names the Qazi was bewildered and bit his nails, for was not the term Kabir a title applied to God? (G H. Westcott 4)

Thus goes the most poetic (not the most fantastic), of the various versions surrounding the birth of Kabir -- one of the greatest mystic poets of the Bhakti movement of medieval India. Most of the legends regarding Kabir’s birth were the likely outcome of
the Kabir Panthis efforts to bring Kabir under the fold of Hinduism. (Kabir Panthis being, the formally recognised followers of Kabir's teachings, and members of the Kabir Panth.) Since the fact that Kabir grew up in a Muslim weaver's household in Benaras, is irrevocable, the legends generally narrate that Kabir's natural mother was a virgin Brahmin widow. To erase the obvious factor of illegitimacy attached to his birth, they add that he was begot as the result of an ascetic's blessing, not from the virgin's womb but from the palm of her hand. The ascetic is often quoted as Ramananda himself. Some legends, like the poetic account narrated at the beginning, completely rule out even the role of a woman. They claim that Kabir was the divine light of the Sat Purush that descended in the Kaliyuga (as the fourteenth incarnation) on the full moon day of Jyeshtha (second month according to Bengali calendar), in the year 1455 of the Vikrama era, at Lahar Talaab near Kashi (Benaras). The Muslim followers of Kabir on the other hand completely deny the theory that Kabir was brought up by foster parents, who were Muslim weavers. They assert that Kabir was the naturally born son of the Muslim couple Nima and Niru. In the absence of any reliable source of information, the debate is simply an unending tussle.

Any attempts to dig further for details are only confronted by a maze of unhistorical writing, legends and a few historical facts and dates. Even the year of his birth and death lack sufficient evidence in history, thus giving rise to numerous versions and theories. (a) A large number of traditional historians are agreed upon 1398 A.D. as the year of his birth and the year 1518 A.D. as the year of his death. This allows the great poet a good span of hundred and twenty years of life. It also accommodates three major propositions, first that he was a disciple of Ramananda (1300 to 1411 A.D.)*,(2) secondly that he was a contemporary of the Emperor Sikander Lodi (1489 to 1517 A.D.), and thirdly, that Kabir and Nanak (1469 to 1539 A.D.) were contemporaries, the latter being his disciple* (3). (b) The other likely period of Kabir's life span is 1338 to 1448 A.D. It supports the assumption that Kabir was Ramananda's contemporary and disciple (which again is quite unlikely). (c) However the years most accepted by recent research, and also backed by historical evidence, are 1440 to 1518 A.D.

Putting aside the uncertainty that surrounds the issue of dates and years; and quitting all attempts at dating Kabir, we can at best take stock of the following with some certainty: (a) that Kabir was found in the Lahar Talaab by a Muslim weaver-couple, Niru
and Nima who brought him up, and they all lived in Benaras. As regards the rest of the stories, their legendary character is clear. As Hedayatullah says, Kabir (1440 to 1518 A.D.) was an abandoned child, probably because of the illegitimacy of his birth. (b) The period of Kabir's life-span that commands popular acceptance and is in circulation among scholars is 1398 to 1448 A.D., and 1440 to 1518 A.D.

Tracing the saga of Arab and Turk raids upon the Indian subcontinent we find that the first forays of Muslim soldiers into India were in the year 712 A.D., in the province of Sindh. These began as looting expeditions but quickly turned into a full scale invasion. The raids and loot campaigns of Mahmud of Ghazni upon the Indian subcontinent, ended in 1030 A.D. with the death of Mahmud. To the myopic visioned kings of India, the Turk noble from Ghazni was just another Mlechcha as had been the Shakas and Huns a few centuries ago. They had come, plundered, and after a while, disappeared. What they did not realise was that Mahmud Ghazni's raids upon the north and northwest of India, had paved the way for further attacks from aspiring Turks, Afghan and Mongolian nobles, desirous of expanding their boundaries, or of setting up new empires.

The saga of Islamic advent and settlement in the Indian subcontinent began in earnest with the invasion led by Muhammad Ghuri at the end of the twelfth century. The Afghan came to India with the intention of establishing an empire and expanding the limits of his original kingdom back home. By 1192 A.D. he had conquered the Indus valley and the rich regions of Punjab, Lahore and Delhi. His assassination later in 1206 A.D. did not result in the withdrawal of Turk and Afghan armies. It only marked the beginning of the Delhi Sultanate or the rule of the Turkish and Afghan Sultans. The thirteenth century Delhi Sultanate was to witness intense political activity and intrigue. While the Islamic impact was felt in different ways by the Indian society at large, at the higher rungs, treachery seems to have been the order of the day, as one sultan after another fell prey to political intrigue and was either assassinated or severely duped by his close confidante in his hour of need. Thus we have the Slave Dynasty founded by Qutub-ub-din Aibak. It ended in 1265 A.D. with the assassination of Queen Raziya Sultan (Aibak's brilliant niece).
Around 1290 A.D. another group of Turks – the Khaljis came to power. By this time the levying of the *jaziya* (the tax on non-Muslims) had become a reality, to escape which many Hindus began converting to Islam. By 1320 A.D. the Khalji dynasty gave way to the Tughlaq line of rulers who ruled ruthlessly but well, for about a span of eighty years. This was also the time when the influx of Sufis was on the ascent and saints like Namdev who spent twenty years in Punjab*(4)*, and Ramananda of Benaras were working with a missionary zeal.

On the north-west Indian border, the Mongols had been threatening to invade from time to time. They had been successfully kept at bay by the Tughlaq dynasty. However in 1398 A.D., the Mongols under the leadership of Timur at last broke through North India. After sacking Delhi, Timur left for Central Asia, leaving behind a nominee to rule over Punjab. The nominee in Timur’s absence, seized the opportunity, captured Delhi and became the founding Sultan of the Sayyid Dynasty. The Sayyids ruled over North and Central India until the earlier half of the fifteenth century. Coincidentally it was also the period that saw the Sant and Sufi movements in India, climax. Such was the political backdrop of the times in which our revolutionary/reformist poets Kabir and Nanak lived. These were the times when both Islam and Brahminism in North India were challenged and ridiculed for their ungodly sentiments of fanaticism and ritual.

The unscrupulous razing down of Hindu temples; the levying of the *jaziya* tax and other such unjust measures towards the Hindus had weakened the common man’s resolve to stick to the religion of his ancestors. It anyway offered him little beyond an inferior status, spiritual starvation, and expensive ritual. Often even that was not accessible. As a result, this period saw mass conversions of lower caste Hindus into casteless Muslims. The converts were a section of society that was Hindu in its bearing but Muslim in its identity, following the newly-embraced festivals, dress-code, and the new God Allah, along with their ages old plethora of Hindu deities, customs and food habits. There was thus a large section of people who were both Hindu or Muslim or put differently, a people who were neither Hindu nor Muslim. (Kabir belonged to that same group. We will discuss that later.) They the common masses were potential swimmers (followers) who took to the mystic streams of Sufism and Bhakti, as they flowed across the country, fertilising in their sway the spirit and literature of India.
The Saints made no tall demands on the common man. They spoke of a religion of love, of a God who resided in the temple of the heart. Such an arrangement was very convenient and desirable during the times when political instability, forced conversions and violence of all sorts, were rampant. The emotional appeal, spiritual richness of the experience, the simplification of the divine, the rhythm and joy of community-singing (bhajan-kirtan), which elevated and refined the individual through great poetry and also provided therapeutic release, provided the people with a life-line to hold on to, in the suffusing darkness that had otherwise ravaged them. As William Dwyer observes in *Bhakti In Kabir*:

National consciousness, love of country and pride of freedom were smothered under the weight of a mass of rituals and social connections, a petty-minded vanity and narrow selfishness......as the Muslim power was consolidated the clash between expanding Islam with its official patronage and Hinduism, was to aggravate social and religious unrest in northern India. (9)

The *julaha* community of weavers in which Kabir was raised was one such section of Hindus who had converted to Islam, but whose process of conversion was still incomplete. Dwyer holds such transitional circumstances as responsible for the anti-Islamic stance that Kabir took despite being raised in a Muslim family. This must have been one of the factors, not the only factor responsible. A much higher sense of the divine or a heightened insight into the secular nature of the divine could have been the guiding factor as well. Nanak who was born a Hindu, but opposed Hindu rituals and resisted initiation during the thread ceremony is a similar example. Dwyer's theory would not stand good in his case:

Yet, for a man like Kabir, apparently born in a Muslim family, to indulge in such vitriolic criticism of Islamic practices as he did, with seeming impunity, and still to identify himself with traditional Hindu society, argues strongly for a less clear cut dichotomy between communities and beliefs than we know today, and perhaps, too, for a degree of overlapping of communities by those who willy-nilly had a foot in both camps, or found themselves in a sort of religious no-man's-land. (10)
The following is a poem of Kabir, set in the musical measure (raga) of Bilawal, from the
Adi Granth

This weaver is forever
fetching his clay-pot,
forever plastering his kitchen
He cares not for his loom or shuttle,
He is raptured by the bliss of saying
‘Han, Hari’.

In our family, whoever said ‘Ram’?
Ever since this son of mine
has gotten hold of a rosary,
we’ve had no peace

The Swami of all bliss
is the one Hari;
my guru has given me His name.
He preserved the honour of Saint Prahlada,
and nipped apart Hamakhasa
with His claws.

I have abandoned the household gods
and the traditions of my fathers.
I have been given the Word by my guru.

Kabir says,
‘He smashes all sin,
He saves His saints’.
(Tr. Nirmal Dass 177-178)

Scholarship is agreed upon the fact that Kabir’s weaver clan must have been of very low
caste Hindu weavers, who had undergone conversion just a few generations before
Kabir's birth. Some believe that they had belonged to the Kon caste of weavers. Their statement is based on two factors: (i) that Kabir not only calls himself a Julaha, but at times also a Kori, and (ii) secondly, even today a good number of Koris are Kabir Panthis. Another opinion that many more scholars hold is that these particular Julahas were originally those Nath yogis*(5) who had deviated from the strict Nath code of celibacy and entered the practice of wedlock. As critics like Dr. Dvivedi, Kshitimohan Sen, and William Dwyer point out, Hindu weavers are found at a variety of caste levels including some who, especially in Bengal, call themselves Jugis or Yogis. Kshitimohan Sen in his work (in Bengali), on *Medieval Mysticism*, identifies them as the Nath Yogis:

> ... in the early days of Muslim conquest many Naths became Muslims and Julahas. These Yogis who are said to have forsaken the strict celibate state of the Nath sect, and to have married, were for this reason regarded as of very low status in Hindu society, though as Naths they really fell outside the pale of caste, and even prior to conversion to Islam they had rejected caste, and Brahman domination. There are many facts that incline us to think that the Julahas into which Kabir was born were married Yogis of the Nath persuasion who had become Muslims. (Tr. Manmohan Ghosh 15)

One is inclined to believe the above theory, for it answers a lot of questions regarding Kabir's parentage. I am personally inclined to believe that Kabir was born in the house of a Julaha couple – Niru and Nima – both of whom were more Hindu than Muslim in their faith. Their ancestral history of a dialogue with spirituality and yoga explains a good deal about Kabir's stronger attachment with the traditional Hindu faith, his immense familiarity and respect for the virtues of yogic practices, and his refreshingly original semiotics weaving an interesting text of symbols absorbed from the system of Nath yoga. The influence of the Nath cult was a shared heritage of the Sant tradition beginning with Namdev. A good deal of Nath semiotics appears in the prosody of Nanak's verse as well. The yogic cult therefore, is important for our study. As William Dwyer comments:

> Kabir not only showed considerable familiarity with it, but displayed great respect for the famous yogi, Matsyendranath and his renowned disciple, Gorakhnath. Gorakhnath had lived in the second half of the ninth...
century, [and ] he probably never had a more discerning admirer than the weaver of Benaras who was able to adopt much of his spiritual technique, while rejecting by and large, the aims of the technique (12)

The following Sakhis are from The Bijak Of Kabir, (which is another reliable source of his works today) They illustrate Kabir's involvement with the culture of yoga

38
Snake coiled round the sandal tree.
What can the sandal do?
Every pore choked with poison –
where can nectar go?

42
Flickering, struggling, swaying –
no one is left out.
Gorakh got stuck in Death City.
So who's a yogi?

Kabir's references to yoga in his poetry signify that he took his practice of yoga seriously, that he actually experienced some of the marvellous effects of it as described in yoga literature. (His reference to poison and nectar in the sakhī above is one example). But, as is characteristic of Kabir's Bhakti – all else is subordinate to, and used as a means to, his union with Ram. It matters little to Kabir, how the mystical system hangs together and he uses the yoga terminology, modifies it and consecrates it only to express the idea of merging with Ram. The nectar in Kabir's language becomes the "liquor," the essence, of "Ram".

Some prominent symbols in the yogic text of signification are, (a) the reversal of the man and, (b) the inverted thousand-petaled lotus in the cranium from which the nectar of immortality drips. Drinking the ambrosial nectar dripping from the lotus is supposed to give immortality to the yogi For Kabir, who is not interested in immortality, that nectar is
the way to union with Ram. Often the yogic symbol of the thousand-petaled lotus is also replaced with (c) the metaphor of the sky, to denote the highest point of yogic recession. And lastly (d), the reference to the ‘three strand snare’, meaning the three gunas (i.e. aspects or qualities) of sattva, rajas and tamas (representing subtlety, action and grossness respectively) In the following shabad (i.e. a poem meant to be sung), Kabir plays specifically on the above listed symbol (a), and the result is poetry that is sublime in its very conception.

Saints once you wake up don’t doze off.  
Time can’t eat you, eons can’t swallow you,  
age and decay can’t waste you  
Turned around Ganga dnes up the ocean,  
swallows the moon and sun  
A sick man rests, having toppled nine houses  
A shadow burns on the water

... .................. ...... ...

Turned around rabbit swallows a lion. ..  
An upside-down pot won’t go under,  
a straight pot fills with water  
.. .Turned around earth pierces the sky,  
the great being speaks  
Without a cup nectar is sipped,  
Streams swell with water.  
Kabir says, he lives from age to age  
who tastes the liquor of Ram.  
( Bijak 41 )

In yet another fine reference to symbol (b), the poet writes:

In the middle of the sky temple  
blooms a flower.  
Its petals are down  
and its roots are up  
No tilling, sowing, or watering,  
no shoots or leaves-
just a flower
Beautifully it blossoms, beautifully
the garden-maker ties her knots
If it is destroyed
the bee despairs.

Kabir says, listen saints
the pandits are greedy
for that flower (Bijak 62)

Sometimes Kabir tropes upon the symbol of nectar/ water. The same troping upon is seen in the poetry of Nanak as well. In fact troping is one of the most powerful tools available to poetry, and particularly to mystic poetry which must convey and construct meaning more by suggestion (or lakshana - the term used in Indian poetics), than by statement. B. K. Matilal in his book, The Word And The World, refers to the three broad techniques employed by the mystics of India, “to express the ineffable”. They are: (1) employment of unusual metaphors and symbolic language that facilitates transience, (2) the use of contradictory predicates and paradoxical statements in order to charactense the experience of what is experienced. And lastly, (3) to communicate the ineffable by using the neti neti method of negative dialectics, “..it is believed that if this is done repeatedly several times with a variety of possible descriptions, the general idea will get across” (152). While the first two devices are found profusely in Kabir’s poetic, in Nanak’s poetry we find the first and third approaches more often. In the following poem for instance, we find Kabir using the most surreal of metaphors and bizarre ideas to create an otherwise ungraspable mystic experience.

...The world is overflowing
with that water.
The water where sound and sea
divide, where Vedas
and six rites are born,
where dwell
both god and soul,
that water holds earth,
The style of the verse above is very similar to the characteristic style of Nanak's poetry, and the way it ends is typical too. The term that Nanak uses most frequently for the divine is “Han”, while for Kabir it is generally “Ram”. It is always Ram and his love that Kabir seeks. His treatment of the yogic states of Pranayam and Samadhi, which is withdrawal from the physical reality, is also of the same nature. All aspects of yogic states and of yogic asceticism are utilised to refurbish the story of Ram, the King.

Meditation and worship
are my earrings,
true concepts, my beggar's blanket.
In the silent cave,
I sit in a yogic posture;
forsaking the world is my sect.

My King, I am the yogi of love;
I grieve neither at death nor separation.

I blow my conch
in all the religions of the world;
this burning world is my ash-pouch.
Up-ending triple Maya is my yogic posture;
therefore I am saved,
though I am a householder.

I have made heart and breath
my two lyre gourds,
aeons are this lyre's neck
Its durable strings
never break.
This lyre plays without being touched

Heanng it, my heart
becomes intoxicated
I am not touched by surging Maya
Kabir says, 'The ascetic
who plays this game
will not be born again' (Adi Granth 83)

The above verse is set in raga Gaun, and has been translated by Nirmal Das in The Songs Of Kabir a collection of Kabir’s verse from the Adi Granth. Kabir’s verse in the Adi Granth has a certain softness about it, while poems collected in the Bijak are harsher and more aggressive in their aspect. (Since the source of Kabir’s poetry is important for the purpose of our study, the poems I have taken from Nirmal Das’s translations, I shall denote, along with the page number, as from the Adi Granth.)

Kabir’s abundant use of the Nath terminology adds to the mystical strength of his verse. In the following sakhis we find his description of the ultimate Brahman, “the bodiless man”, with a reference to the “thousand-petaled lotus” in the “cranium”, and the metaphor of the “sky” signifying the ultimate mystic experience:

347
He has no shape or line,
no flesh no base
In the middle of the sky-temple,
see the bodyless man.

348
Meditated in the sky,
opened the thunderbolt door,
saw his own reflection.
The three filled with joy (Bijak 130)
The reference to the "thunderbolt door" is a reference to the *kundalini* – to the awakening of the serpentine energy coiled at the base of the spine. Coming to the last metaphor, the symbol of the three *gunas* has its house in the *Samkhya* metaphysics which, along with Buddhist philosophy, makes the foundation of the Nath cult. According to the *Samkhya Upanishad*, reality has two aspects, the *purush* (male principal signifying the spiritual), and *prakrti* (the female principal signifying material reality – maya). What constitutes prakrti is, the three *gunas* (essences) of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*:

\[
\text{Reality} \\
\text{Purush} + \text{Prakriti}\\n\text{represents} + \text{represents}\\n\text{Divinity} \quad \text{Material Reality} \quad \text{which is made up of} \\
\text{Sattva + Rajas + Tamas.}
\]

The *guna* are the three qualities which permeate all matter in varying degrees: *sattva* (means light, goodness), *rajas* (means action, passion), and *tamas* (signifies dullness, darkness, sluggishness) They are also virtues, stages and levels of being. The various ways in which these *gunas* intermingle is responsible for the variety, multiplicity and differentiation we find in reality. These *gunas* are subtle though wholly material constituents of reality. The Indian science of medicine – Ayurveda, is also based on the physiological balance/imbalance of *gunas*. In this way Kabir puts the three *gunas* outside the concept of Ram. In theological parlance, *guna* occurs most frequently in compounds (*Saguna* and *Nirguna*), in the perennial debate as to whether to perceive the supreme being as *Saguna* (i.e. having *gunas* – attributes), or as *Nirguna* (i.e. having no guns or attributes of material reality). Kabir however, often addresses the supreme being as Ram, or by other synonymous attributes:

On the moonless day, give up longing
Remember Ram who knows our innermost thoughts
While living, find salvation’s door:
Perceive the real Word and Source of all things.

When you love Gobind’s lotus like feet,
Your heart becomes pure, by the grace of saints
Stay awake day and night
and sing Han’s praise (Adi Granth 117)

The Sant tradition to which Kabir and Nanak belonged, distinguishes itself from the Bhakti movement at large by its complete denial of ritual and idol worship, its insistence on the formlessness of God, and its Nirguna Bhakti (which essentially perceives God as a formless, one, universal being/spirit/essence)

O Nirgun,
to whom can I tell your tale?
who can be so wise?
Kabir says
‘Only those who ignite
see the flash.’ (Adi Granth 75)

He predicates other gunas of Ram (like omnipresence, limitlessness, flawlessness, etc. and also finally the focal point into which all creation tends in its cosmic denouement), but not the three gunas of sattva, rajas and tamas. These attributes belong to the realm of Maya and to the possessor of Saguna. Kabir says: “The three worlds are in these fifty-two letters / All things are in them. / These letters will pass away - / but the letter for Him is not among these” (Adi Granth 107) In this way he distances them from the concept of Ram, and makes them subject to His will, as is the rest of this transient world.

Ram, Ram, so fearless are You
that You Yourself become the raft
in order to save us.

When I exist
you do not;
now you exist
and I do not.
Now you and I are One
seeing us unite,
my heart is filled with pleasure.

When I have wisdom
I have no strength,
now I have neither wisdom
nor strength

Kabir says,
My wisdom was snatched away
and transformed –
and I was perfected (Adi Granth 101-102)

It is easy and safe to conjecture that with the influence of Samkhya on Kabir, arrived the channel of influence of yogis of the Nath cult, with whom he seems to ascertain the exact extent of his acquaintance with Samkhya, but as is evident from his poetry, he understood enough of the theory to exclude the three gunas from his concept of the Divine Being, and to favour the term Nirguna when referring to Him. So far it appears that although Kabir’s verse describes Ram as having attributes, from time to time, it is done more in a poetic/figurative sense—in a moment of profuse love and devotion, as an endearment. Rather than saying (as many researchers do), that Kabir was expressing the sentiment of Bhakti, under the Vaishnava influence, or that Kabir’s Ram is Saguna in concept, I would like to look at it as another incident of how Kabir used the mystic terminology and theological forms of expression available to him, to further his vision of the divine and to implement his idea of inter-textuality in poetry:

Lanka for a castle,
the ocean for a moat—
still nothing remains
of Ravana’s household.

What shall I ask for? Nothing endures.
My eyes see the world pass away.

... ... ................ ................. .......
If by the guru’s grace,
Ram’s name is inside you,
you shall never wander from birth to birth,
you shall become steadfast.
discussed briefly in chapter three, section one, the spiritual career of Ramananda and his relationship with Kabir, I will not repeat myself here. Rather, I shall explore, the possibility of Kabir's having been a disciple of Ramananda, and examine the extent of the latter's influence on him. The promotion of Ram-Bhakti in the north we know is attributed to Ramananda (1300 to 1411 A.D.). He is also known to have founded his own sect, the Ramavat sect. The issue that makes his clique of disciples somewhat controversial stems from the uncertainty surrounding his life span. Suspicion surrounds the largely proposed year of his death. Scholarship suspects he was deliberately updated, to allow credence to legends that declare that Kabir (born 1398 A.D.), was his disciple. The problem is further compounded by the same vagueness about Kabir's dates. More recent scholars as a result, are inclined to think that any connection between Kabir and Ramananda can neither be proved nor disproved for want of sufficient historical evidence.

However, there is enough historical evidence to prove that Ramananda was a spiritual genius, and a path breaker. Otherwise, fed upon Ramanuja's tradition of Vaishnava Bhakti, and upon the concept of *avatarvada*, he (a Vaishnav Brahmin) could not have deviated from the beaten track to propagate the liberation of religion that he had pioneered. Perhaps the instinct for reformation emerged from his own religious environment and from the example of the Bhakti movement in Tamilnadu and Karnataka during the eighth to twelfth century period. (The Tamil Alvars and Shaivites, faced by the challenge Jainism posed to Hinduism, had undertaken the task of reforming the Hindu faith, suffering in the cesspool of ritual and caste barriers.) Muslim rule and the *jaziya* tax, in North India had become a reality. The period witnessed the constant tossing/snatching of power among the Turks, Afghans and the Mongols. As one dynasty after another succeeded to grab the Delhi Sultanate, either through political intrigue, homicide, or treachery on the battleground; Ramananda along with Namdev (and other less known bhaktas), was among the first lot of reformers to face the formidable threat of Islam in the Hindu heartland. Islam was gaining recognition not only politically but also on the religious front, supported as it was, with state policies that encouraged large scale conversions among the lower caste Hindus, hounded by the pall of the *jaziya* tax.

It is believed that Ramananda did for north India exactly what Nammalvar and his poems did for the south India. He shed the use of Sanskrit in favour of the vernacular, made
the Hindu God accessible to the common man, by bringing Him out of the Brahmin dominated temple and installing him in the heart of all humanity. Towards the practical implementation of the above, he initiated the regular practice of *satsang* (i.e. community singing — a parallel example in Christianity would be the choir practice), of *nam japana* (i.e. meditation) and of the common kitchen where all sat for meals together. The last practice was the most radical, for it was a practice in erasing caste distinctions. Later it was implemented with as much diligence by Nanak in early fifteenth century, after he settled down in Kartarpur on the banks of the Ravi. Of Ramananda's verse there is very little that we know today, except for a single verse attributed to him in the *Adi Granth*:

O wither should I go.  
There is bliss in my very home.

My mind has stilled.  
It has become,  
a cripple.

One day in my mind, welled up a desire.  
I ground sandal paste and took  
distilled aloe wood, many perfumes.

To the Lord's temple I hurried for worship.  
But that temple, the Guru revealed,  
was within.  

(Tr. Myself, 3941)

The above verse echoes the poem of Basavanna, the *Lingayat* poet of tenth century Karnataka, who describes the body as a moving temple. I have quoted the poem in the section on Shaivites in chapter one.

As can be expected, the orthodox Brahmins excommunicated Ramananda from the elite school of Vaishnavism. But his memory lingered in the modest mud huts of the Gangetic plains. Whether Kabir was a part of Ramananda's physical time, or just belonged to his spiritual time — as a disciple distanced in spatial time, we cannot say for sure. While Virendra Snatak writing in the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*,
represents the former opinion that, "Kabir was known to be a disciple of Ramananda," on the other hand, in some other sources, there is a clear mention of Kabir's name amongst the twelve leading disciples of Ramananda, which evidently establishes that he was a contemporary of Ramananda. On the other hand, William Dwyer is of the opinion that they were not contemporaries:

Kabir was most probably not a disciple of Ramanand, but if, as is likely enough, Ramanand had a deep influence on bhakti practice in the century preceding Kabir's time, then some indirect influence of his thought on Kabir could legitimately be sought. In traditional Ramanand Bhakti, the singing of sacred songs holds a place of importance. With a variety of musical styles, these songs, ...... are chiefly repetitive, perhaps antiphonal, eulogies of God. .... Kabir tells his listeners: 'You must, with constant joy, sing of his glories'. (Bhakti In Kabir 217)

It appears reasonable to see this singing as a community practice, probably as part of the satsang. The songs mentioned are joyful and simple, of which we probably have fair samples in present day bhajan and kirtana singing popularized by singers like Pandit Jasraj, Anup Jalota, Jagjit Singh and Anuradha Paudwal, to name a few. It is difficult to agree with Dr. Ramkhelavan Pandey when he asserts that it was characteristic of the bhajans of the Nirguna bhakta, to extol the glories of a life of renunciation. This theme is found in Kabir and Nanak's works, but more often than not, it refers to the internal renunciation of attachment. If by renunciation, Dr. Pandey means, renouncing worldly duties and life, then I cannot agree with him. For all the Nirguna bhaktas and most of the Saguna bhaktas, were householders and worked to make a living. For them renunciation meant extinguishing from the root all emotions of desire, anger, and lust, and acquiring the state of death in life. This was esoterically called, the Sahaj Marg. Such concerns are the main subject of poetic compositions of the saint-poets. Nirmal Das's translation of one such verse by Kabir, in raga Ramkali illustrates this point.

Meditation leads to salvation's door....

In the house of the fearless One
where music unstruck, resounds,
you shall hear trumpets.
Meditate upon him in your heart

Light a lamp inside you
that does not need any oil.

This lamp will make you immortal;
This lamp will draw out the poison
of lust and anger.

Meditate, meditate, and sing,
'Han, Han' ...... He is limitless
Chants and mantras are useless before Him.

( Adi Granth 204-205 )

After Ramananda, the Sants (i.e Namdev, Ravidas, Kabir, Dadu Dayal and Nanak and the Sikh gurus,) opened a new chapter in Nirguna or Sant Bhakti. Their poetry was highly figurative, sublime in sentiment and scope, reformative with a vengeance, and alive to the fabric of its times (This, as we shall see in chapter six, was not the case with poetry produced by the colonial stock of Indian intellectuals . Fed upon English education/literature, and cut off from their own — except for the Vedas of which they had a vague idea — they by and large produced poetry in English which was pseudo-romantic and immaculate in its imitative aspect. It failed to move or convince for it was completely cut off from the life breath of Indian reality.)

Kabir rejected the concept of avatăravada and denied recognition to Ram as a human form. He carried the concept of religious liberation even further and abandoned both Hinduism and Islam, in favour of the pure essential Ram — that light of divine love in the heart:

...... ..... I abandoned all
the written advice
given me by pundits and mullahs —
took none of it with me.

If love is in your heart
you can behold the Lord
Those who found Him did so
by first finding themselves, O Kabir (Raga Bhairav Adi Granth 231)

Kabir debunked both the Mullah and the Pandit in no uncertain terms

Qazi, what book are you lecturing on?
You never had an original thought
Feeling your power, you circumcise —
I can’t go along with that, brother
If your God favoured circumcision,
why didn’t you come out cut?

If circumcision makes you a Muslim,
what do you call your women?
Since women are called man’s other half,
you might as well be Hindus.

If putting on the thread makes you Brahmin,
what does the wife put on? /

Hindu, Muslim — where did they come from?
Who started this road? (Bijak 69-70)

Hari in the East, Allah in the West —
So you like to dream.
Search in the heart, in the heart alone:
there live Ram and Karim!
Which is false, Koran or Veda?
False is the darkened view.
Its one, one in everybody!
How did you make it two?
Every man and woman born
Kabir was always in search of company of his own kind. He went around meeting bhaktas and wise men of both Hindu and Muslim communities, holding dialogue with the Sants and Sufis of his time. Among the Sufis of his age, he had a very close contact with Shaikh Takki who belonged to the Suhrawardi branch of the Sufis. Whether Takki was his Pir or his rival is not clear, history is confused over the issue. Kabir is also said to have met young Nanak. It is said “On seeing him Kabir remarked that he had no misgivings about the future for he was seeing an able man before his leaving the world.” (Kshitimohan Sen 102) Sure enough, Nanak who shared the same ideology with Kabir, continued the task of cleansing the socio-religious corruption of his times.

According to the sakhis (myths) — mostly fantastic stories about the poet, circulating among the Kabir-Panthis — if on one hand Kabir attracted both Hindus and Muslims following, on the other hand he also attracted the ire and venom of both the mullahs and the pundits, according to whom his followers remained neither Hindu nor Muslim! They looked upon him as a mad man, who often blurted words that made acute sense. There is an interesting sakhi in the chronicles of the bhaktas, according to which:

Once on a joint petition from the Hindus and Muslims who felt much aggrieved at Kabir’s extreme heterodoxy, the emperor Sikander Shah Lodi summoned him to the court. On entering the court, Kabir saw his accusers, the Hindu pundits and the Islamic kazis, gathered in the complainant’s box. This amused him immensely. He burst out into laughter and said that except for some slight mistake regarding the address, things had happened alright. This annoyed Sikander Lodi, and he demanded an explanation. ‘My object your majesty’, replied Kabir, ‘was the uniting of the Hindus and the Mussulmans, but nobody would admit the possibility of such a thing. It pleases me today to see that it has become possible. But if it could have occurred under the throne of an earthly sovereign like your Majesty, could not a far wider place for the purpose have been available under the throne of the Lord of this universe? If it is possible through hatred, is it not all the more possible
through love? Is not love more accommodating than hatred?’ The Lodi emperor was ashamed that he had believed the charge against Kabir and ordered his release (G.H. Westcott 9).

The episode is a conspicuous illustration of the wit and sharp humour of this great saint of medieval India who also happened to be a great poet of high calibre. The power of his poetry charged with his ability to commune with the divine led to the creation of a poetry amazing in its power, depth and sensitivity — a perfect tool to promote the sort of iconoclasm and reform that Kabir strove towards, all his life. In the remaining part of the chapter we shall examine his poetry merely for the sake of poetry. And attempt to give the poet Kabir his due.

Kabir the Poet.

Each reading of the poetry of Kabir leaves one amazed and gasping for breath. 'Amazed', by the scope and potency of the poet's wide-ranging ideas, brilliant metaphors and the sublime scope of vision underlying it all. 'Breathless', because of his strong vocative, sharp irony and robust questioning which inadvertently draws the reader into an intense dialogue with the poet and with oneself.

Kabir wrote his verse in the simple but vivid poetic forms of the shabad, ramaini and the sakhi. The sakhi is composed in the doha (couplet) metre. It has just two lines, which usually come to four short lines when translated. The lines always rhyme at the end, sometimes they also rhyme in the middle. The following couplets translated by G.N. Das are an example:

(i)

*Boond pare jo samund me, tahi jane sab koi,
Samund samaye boond me, birla boojhe koye.*

In translation: Drop falling in the ocean—everyone knows.
Ocean absorbed in the drop — a rare one knows.
Kabira mun nirmal bhaya, jaise ganga neer

to pache pache han phire, kehet kabir kabir

In translation Says Kabir, my mind has become
as pure as the ganges water
Hari now runs after me,
calling, 'Kabir', 'Kabir'!

(Mystic Songs Of Kabir 11-12)

The ramaini form is usually written in the meter called caupai. Each line has thirty two matras and is split into two units of sixteen matras each. The two units of each line generally maintain an internal rhyme structure, thus erasing the need for the lines to rhyme with each other. At the end of the lyric in caupai, comes a sakhi (couplet), creating a marked change in meter. The ramaini is usually based upon a musical raga. It is descriptive and quite lengthy in character. An example in transliteration (taken from A New Look At Kabir, by Knshna P. Bahadur):

Jina kalama kali mamha parhaya,
kudarate khoji tinahu nahim paya.
Karma te karma karai karatuli,
veda kiteba bhayi saba riti.
karma to so jo bhava avatana,
karma to so nimaza ko dhanya.
karma te sunnati aura janeu,
hindu turaka na janai bheu

pani pauna samjoya ke, raciya yaha utapata
sunnahi surati samaiya, kasom kahie jata.  (136)

When translated the above verse reads like this:

Those who believed that in this kali-age
the Kali ma would bring one near to the divine.
Could not know God themselves,
though they essayed!
Self centered, they did only works that bind
The Vedas and Quran also speak
of works that lead to repeated births and deaths
Not by the namaz is the soul revealed
Can the Hindus sacred thread,
Or the Turks circumcision,
by itself know of race or religion?
Only the man who can diligently search
Inside his own Self, can attain God-vision

The same soul dwells in beings everywhere,
How can it ever be affected by caste
Or by the accursed body formed of water and air?
For the soul is immortal and the body does not last

(Tr G N Das)

The third form, the *pada* or *shabad* is metrically the loosest form. Since it is the popular song form it is passed and gets altered from region to region and from singer to singer, even from performance to performance. Like the *ramaini* form it also has a caesura in each line, but the line lengths vary. Also there are many possible rhyme schemes. The most common is, a series of rhymed couplets. An example.

*Santo jagata ninda na kijai  
kala na khaya kalpa nahi byapai  
deha jara nahi chijai  
ulati ganga samundra hi sokhai  
sasi an surahi grasai  
nana graha mari rogiya baiithe  
jala ma bimba prakasai.*

In translation:

Saints, once you wake up, don’t doze off.
Time can't eat you, eons can't swallow you,
age and decay can't waste you
Turned-around Ganga dries up the ocean,
swallows the moon and sun
The sick man rests, having toppled nine houses
A shadow burns on the water.  

The shabad form is so flexible that often for the purpose of singing kirtana, a couplet here can be added or a couplet there dropped. Since the form of the shabad is not pure, the sakhi and ramaini pattern are also found mixed in it, depending on the requirements of a musical composition.

Most of the vernacular poets of medieval India were also gifted performers. Kabir composed extensively and sang his own compositions too, for besides being a craftsman and a poet, he was also a good singer. He nevertheless, never transcribed his verse on paper. (It is popularly believed that he never had any formal education in his lifetime). The rhythmic, incantatory element in his verse can also be attributed to the fact that from Ramananda's times onwards, the singing of sacred songs and satsangs had become an indispensable part of Nirguna Bhakti. Kabir's works lived on for many years after him by the word of mouth. This allowed scope for additions and alterations to creep in. It was much later, in the seventeenth century, that efforts to compile the saint poet's work got underway. In Kabir's case there are three collections, put together by different sects in three widely separated regions of North India. The modern states of Punjab in the west (the Adi Granth), Rajasthan in the mid-west (the Kabir Granthavali), and Uttar Pradesh/Bihar in the east (the Bijak).

The Adi Granth is the earliest existing record of Kabir's work. There are in all five hundred and forty one poems of Kabir in the Granth. They were assimilated for the first time in 1604 A.D. by the fifth Sikh guru, Arjan Dev when he first compiled the Adi Granth — an anthology of mystic poetry, and brought together the songs of the previous Sikh gurus and other Sant and Sufi poets who shared the same vision. The Rajasthani collection, Kabir Granthavali is part of the larger collection – Pancvani (words of the five), which includes sayings of five saints exalted by the Dadu Panth of Dadu Dayal (Kabir's illustrious disciple). The Bijak, which is the scripture of the Kabir
Panth only contains works attributed to Kabir. The dates of origin of the *Pancvanl* and the *Bijak* are uncertain but both can be assumed to have taken shape in the seventeenth century, rather later than the *Adi Granth* (7). As Linda Hess says in her introduction to the translated version of the *Bijak*:

The three collections have much in common, but show somewhat different characters. In all traditions – eastern and western, oral and written – Kabir is known for his toughness and iconoclasm. But in the western based Guru Granth and Pancvanl, there also appears a softer, more emotional Kabir who sings of ecstatic insight, who experiences passionate longing for and tormented separation from a beloved, or who offers himself in utter surrender, as a servant or beggar, to a personified divine master. Often the western poet's expressions are coloured by the terms and forms of the Knshna Bhakti movement which was then dominant in those regions.

The *Bijak* presents a more austere and dramatic personality, a poet of sudden flashes and jagged primary colours rather than subtle emotional lines. Above all he is the intense teacher, striving to shake his listeners out of their false security, their careless dishonesty, the naive belief that they actually possess and will continue to possess house, body, mate, and family, or that the mind – which Kabir images as a nervous thief or dog howling at its own reflection – is an accurate reporter of what is going on in the world. This Kabir is passionate too; but his passion is to awaken. His personal drama has receded into the background, and the great truth or supreme being he urges us to understand shows almost no trace of anthropomorphism or personality (*The Bijak Of Kabir* 7)

For my chapter on Kabir and for the purpose of studying his works in translation, I have used two standard texts of his translated works: (a) *The Songs of Kabir From The Adi Granth*. Translation and Introduction by Nirmal Dass. Delhi: Indian Books Centre, 1991. and (b) *The Bijak Of Kabir* Translated by Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1986. Even a casual reading of Kabir's poems would enable one to agree with Linda Hess's statement that the poetry volumes compiled in the western region (i.e. the *Adi Granth* and *Pancvanl*), have a softer and more emotional note, compared
to the volumes of poems compiled in the seventeenth century east India. The *Bijak* presents a more crisp, austere and aggressive version of Kabir’s mystic poetry. Added to it is also the fact that Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh have done a better job of translating Kabir’s verse. The following poems dealing with the illusive play of Maya make a good comparative reading. While the *Bijak’s* Maya is painted in brisk, aggressive and erotic undertones, Maya (called ‘bride’), in the *Adi Granth* is more decoratively described. The tone is ‘gentler’ while the erotic element is countered by the underlying tone of morality which is characteristic of almost all the verse of the *Granth*.

A comparison:

Now I’ve understood
Han’s magic play
Beating his drum he rolls out the show
then gathers it in again
The Great Han dupes gods, men and sages
When he brings out the sorceress Maya
*she baffles everyone in the house,*
truth can’t enter a single heart.
The magic is false, the magician true –
to the wise its clear
Kabir says, what you understand
is what you are. ( *Bijak* 68)

O my brother,
if there is no wealth
in the house, guests
must go away hungry.
the householder
is not happy;
he is blamed for everything,
being without a bride.

Hail the bride,
for she is most holy,
she has changed the minds
of many sages.

....................... This bride
is extremely beautiful'

her anklets jingle, jingle
as she walks......

The three worlds
are in this bride's grip;
she loves the eighteen Puranas

and place of pilgrimage.
She has ensnared
Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara,
she has pierced the hearts
of kings and maharajas.

This bride has no limits:
She is in league
with the five Naradas.
When the clay-pots
of these Naradas are shattered,
Kabir says,
I was released by my guru's grace (Adi Granth 191-192)

[ All emphasis mine. ]

Kabir writes in a highly figurative language, which bears the mark of genuine one-to-one mystic experience, of a consciousness of the beyond:

Why run around offering water?
There's a sea in every house.
If anyone is thirsty,
by hook or crook, he'll drink. (Bijak 91)
The reference above is to the Hindu practice of offering water to the sun, every morning. Kabir counters it with reference to the untapped mystical sea of divinity in the house of the body — in yogic terminology, the nectar of immortality dripping from the inverted lotus in the cranium. Kabir urges us, to drink from that sea of nectar. All that is required is a thirst to drink that water, he says, the rest is immaterial, for by hook or crook, he’ll drink!

Another favourite mystic symbol for the divine, is that of 'light'. "The endless has no end:/ I am in love with the Supreme Light / I overcame the five senses —/ now I am beyond sin and virtue. (Raga Gauri, Adi Granth 111)" In yet another sakhi (couplet), which is part of a long beautiful composition on the fifteen lunar days, also set in raga Gauri, he says.

10.

The tenth day, bliss is everywhere.

Gone is doubt. Gobind is found:

The matchless, the beautiful Light,

flawless, without malice, without shade or sunshine. (Adi Granth 119)

The "light" that Kabir sees in this state is not material light but one which shines within the heart, as he calls it the 'supreme', 'matchless', 'beautiful', 'flawless light', without shade or sunshine. To be finally absorbed in this light is really an expression of final release from this world. In the last couplet of this composition on the fifteen lunar days, the light and the sea merge, so to say. The sea here is, the sea of light:

The full moon fills the sky,

unfurling all its sixteen parts.

Beginning, middle, end: He is steadfast

Kabir is soaked in the sea of solace. (Adi Granth 120)

At a more mature level the mystic experiences a loss of the "separative consciousness" — a stretching out of the soul through an upsurge of sublime love. It is as Sisirkumar Ghose calls it, a "state of pure unitary consciousness". And Kabir’s use of the metaphor of light is one such expression of deep inwardness and intimacy with the divine. As Sisirkumar Ghosh says:

The Indian classification of knowledge (jnana), works (karma), and devotion (bhakti) is simple but basic. Each has its own field of operation.
and effectiveness, also each tends to be exclusive. At its highest by suppressing the contents of the empirical consciousness, the way of knowledge moves towards an encounter with the nameless All, the One without a second, the Fourth. It is a state of pure unitary consciousness wherein (all) awareness of the world and multiplicity is completely obliterated. Thus at its maturer level, mysticism is not only ascent but an integration (Mysticism: Views And Reviews 18).

The integration however is flanked by a semantic or communication problem. This obviously is caused by the logical impossibility of having to describe the experience or reality of one order in terms of another. In the attempt Kabir often takes liberties with language and the result generally lends to his verse, an opaqueness, a depth, and a sense of the beyond, and the transcendent, a sense of the half hidden and half revealed truths, which further allure the inclined reader. The following two poems illustrate the point well:

71.
Rain-bird, to what far place
are you crying?
The world is overflowing
with that water.
The water where sound and sea
divide, where Vedas
and six sites are born
where dwell
both god and soul,
that water holds earth,
Sky and light.
The water from which all bodies spring --
who knows its secret?
Not even Kabir. (Bijak 64-65)

73.
From the six spheres
a little house was made
in which was placed a thing unique
Breath became its lock and key,
it didn’t take long to make.

Keep your heart awake now,
O my brother.
You’ve already lost your life,
thieves entered and robbed your house

Five watchmen stood at the door,
but they could not be trusted
Be alert and think clearly,
and take in the light
that will cleanse you

When the beautiful woman
saw the nine houses,
she forgot that thing unique.
Kabir says, ‘When the nine houses were robbed,
that which was forgotten went to dwell in the tenth.

(Adi Granth 102)

Although Kabir wrote in the local spoken-language of his times, many-a-times reading his poems one feels like one is moving in the realm of language games, where God (or Kabir) provides needles and we the readers must unravel them. Such is particularly the case above with poem (a), where Kabir seems to have replaced the metaphoric concept of the transcendental divine presence with the water metaphor. At times water here also becomes the regenerative principle behind all forms of life. The other poem (b), is relatively more direct and allegoric in its symbolism. The “house” Kabir talks of here, is the human body, and the “thing unique” is the divine spirit or sea or light that resides in all. Temptations and wrong actions are the thieves that rob the house, the five watchmen are the five senses which have succumbed to the pleasures painted by the beautiful woman, Maya.
Another feature worth noting is the way Kabir’s poems approach their subject. Very often a poem begins with a question (as does poem (a) above), which it either answers or strengthens by piling more questions (as we can see in the following poem). In both cases the effect is to draw the reader into their thought process and provoke in them a deep involvement.

112
This is the big fight, king Ram
Let anyone settle it who can
Is Brahma bigger or where he came from?
Is the Veda bigger or where it was born from?
Is the mind bigger or what it believes in?
Is Ram bigger or the knower of Ram?
Kabir turns around, it’s hard to see –
is the holy place bigger, or the devotee? (Bijak 78)

In yet another poem he attacks the Muslim devotee and cuts the Qazi to size. At the end of each such poem one suspects the poet is enjoying a sense of relish, that sense of a job well done. One can literally imagine Kabir washing his hands off his victim, after the interrogation or the brain-storming session:

49.
Where’s his doorway, dervish?
How does the great king dress?
Where does he travel?
Where does he camp?
What’s this form you bow to?
I’m asking you, Mr. Muslim,
with your red and yellow rags and robes
Now you Mr. Qazi,
What kind of work is that,
going from house to house
chopping heads?
Who gave the order for chicken and goats?
Who told you to swing the knife?
Aren't you afraid to be called a sage
as you read your verses
and dupe the world?
Kabir says, the high-class Muslim
wants to force his way on the world
Fast all day,
kill cows at night,
here prayers, there blood –
does this please God?

(Bijak 87-88)

Kabir profusely applies the interrogative in his work. He pokes questions at the reader either to provoke us into thinking, or to chide us, taunt us, and laugh at us and thereby arouse us out of the spiritual lethargy that lesser mortals tend to slip in. When Kabir is not prodding, he is narrating. Narrating what? A story or a scene that he has conceived at that very moment, or the dramatic exchange of dialogue among characters ('clay pots' as he often calls them,) he has pulled in at random and fired with his genius, wit and dramatic. The following two poems successfully illustrate the point. They are also proof of the poet's great genius. The first poem is an example of the poet's brilliant sense of the dramatic. There are four characters in it, the Qazi, the mystic, an elephant, and the mahout. The Qazi has tied the mystic's hands and thrown him in front of the elephant as a punishment. But the dumb beast refuses to harm the mystic, despite the mahout's goading, and much to the Qazi's chagrin. The second poem has a gentle, mesmerising note.

4
They tied my hands
and tossed me
like a clump of dirt.
In their anger
they hit the elephant
on the head
The elephant screamed
and ran away.
I could sacrifice myself
for that animal

O my Thakur, You are my strength
The qazi said, 'Goad that elephant on

hey mahout,
or else
I'll have your head
cut off!
Make it move!
Hit it! Hit it!
The elephant did not move.

It was enraptured:
In its heart
lived the Dispenser of Treasure.

'What sin has this saint committed
that you tie him up
like a bundle
and toss him in front of the elephant?
The elephant again and again
picked up this bundle
and bowed in obeisance to it
Still the blind qazi
could not figure it out. (Adi Granth 187-188)

6
One tree,
yet countless shoots and branches,
its leaves are filled with nectar.
This is the garden of ambrosia,
O my brother -
The perfect Hari planted it

Only those few,
those very few holy ones,
know the tale of Raja Ram,
Brother,
in whose heart gleams
His light

A bumblebee
drunk with nectar
loses himself in the full-blown petals,
but fanning the air
he flies away
to the sky.

From the gentle silence
a beautiful plant sprouts,
which soaks up
the waters of the earth
Kabir says, I serve those
who have seen this plant.  (Adi Granth 201-202)

One is amazed again and again, by the range and scope of Kabir’s poetic imagination
and sensibility. His facility to travel from the tiniest, most beautiful/fragile of details to the
most sublime, and sometimes the goriest, of realities Commenting on the highly
figurative and sufficiently complex network of metaphors in his poems, William Dwyer
says: "Metaphors, symbols and other forms of figurative expression are the tools of the
trade of poets, seers, and mystics, by which they give utterance to their otherwise
seemingly inexpressible experiences" (Bhakti in Kabir 43)
Kabir has a remarkable range of metaphonic expressions. His *sakhis* (couplets) in particular are crisp examples of these. The clay-pot, the swan, crow, bee, nectar, the ocean or the sea, light, elephant of the mind, and the phantasmal flower are some metaphors that feature profusely in his poetry. Some samples of the *sakhis* taken from the *Bijak*

91

In the garden the bee lingers,
so many fragrant flowers there.
In the senses the creature lingers,
finally it goes out in despair. (99)

118

A raft of tied-together snakes
in the world ocean.
let go, and you'll drown 69
Grasp, and they'll bite your arm (103)
Drop falling in the ocean -
everyone knows.

Ocean absorbed in the drop -

145.
The mind, a mad killer- elephant a rare one knows (66)
They can't be stopped by chants or charts.
When they like they swoop and eat (106)

253

The body's a ship, the mind's a crow
that flies a million miles.
Sometimes it roams on the boundless sea,
Sometimes it shoots to the sky (119)

In the *sakhis* quoted above one notices the fluid interchange of meanings that a symbol undergoes in different contexts (poems). "This also indicates a certain amount of disregard for some types of technical terminology in favour of more stress on intuition and experience. This is typical of all mystics more involved with interiorisation and
sublimation of spiritual faculties" (K P Bahadur 151-153.) Take the ocean metaphor for instance, in sakhi 69, 'ocean' symbolises the divine and the drop that merges with it, the individual soul. In sakhi 118, the ocean metaphor is indicative of the world ocean, which the individual is trying to cross ironically with the help of a raft made from 'tied-together snakes'. Another such feature one can pick from this handful of sakhis is the metaphors used for the mind and maya (the temptress figure in Hindu mythology). In sakhi 145, the mind is a 'mad killer-elephant' while in sakhi 253 it is symbolised as 'a wandering crow'. The symbolism of maya is not as straightforward. In one context it is the 'garden of senses', to which the man/bee succumbs, in another it is 'desires like hawks', and yet elsewhere it is treacherous as 'entwined snakes' that appear to be the helpful 'raft' which will ferry men across the world ocean.

One of the striking features of Kabir’s poetry is its particularly lavish use of animal imagery, and metaphor, which is more in evidence in his ulatbamsi poems (poems that use upside-down language to communicate an altogether different world-order.) But before we go into that I would like to discuss briefly, that aspect of Kabir’s prosody which not only distinguishes him from the other Bhakti poets but also lends him a shade of notonety. Kabir was an aggressive poet, shockingly honest and iconoclastic to the hilt. Even the occasion of his own death was used to prove a point. According to popular belief, by dying in Varanasi (Benaras) one went straight to heaven, while whosoever died in Maghar was sure to be reborn as a donkey. Kabir’s response was typical. Towards the end of his life, he shifted from Varanasi (where he had lived all his life), and settled in Magahar, which was forty miles away.

The following poem, sparkles not only with the poet’s ready wit and wicked sense of humour, it also bespeaks of the passion and integrity of the great poet and mystic:

Shabad 103

........That Maithili pandit said
you’d die near Magahar
What a terrible place to be dead!

If you want Ram to take you away,
die somewhere else instead
Besides, they say
whoever dies at Magahar
comes back a donkey

So much for your faith in Ram
What's Kashi? Magahar? Barren ground,
when Ram rules in your heart
If you give up the ghost in Kashi
is there some debt
on the Lord's part?  
( *Bijak* 76)

What is it in Kabir's poems that gives them such a sense of immediacy and that sense of being an empowered dialogue? *(6).* One, is his sharp and at times intimate vocative, when he directly addresses the subject of his poem, questions him or insults him, thus immediately shocking the reader, arousing his/her interest and drawing him/her into the argument. That does the trick! "Hey, Son of a slut! / There I've insulted you." ; "Read, read Pandit, make yourself clever." ; "Culprit you have missed your human birth." ; "Think, pundit, figure K out: / male or female?"; and much more of such provoking vocative. The second factor, which more or less is a continuation of the first, is his keen sense of drama which induces him to create fabulous characters at the spur of the moment, put words into their mouth and plunge into a dialogue with them, all the time switching between direct and indirect speech, interrogation and metonymy, laced with his brand of irony and reformative zeal. An example.

3
Your time for deeds is over
now you must give account.
Yama's cruel messengers
have come to take you away
'What did you earn?
How did you squander it?
Come quickly ,
the master calls.'
'Come at once, the Master calls
The summons from Hari's court has come.'

You will grovel:
'But I have things still to do
in the village. Let me settle them
by this evening. I will pay
for all your expenses,
and we can say
our dawn prayers
on the road.

... ..... . . . .
Those who sleep while awake
are not reborn
The wealth and fortune
you amassed
is not really yours.
Kabir says, those who forget
the master lie neglected
in the dust. \(\text{Adi Granth~170-171}\)

The last contributing factor in the setup is the poet himself, with the more evolved vision
and abilities of a mystic. Sisirkumar Ghosh very rightly says that.

Instead of accusing the mystics of being dropouts and escapists, it might
be fairer to say that... In the alchemy of awareness they have been the
true scientists of catharsis and conversion, the piercing of the planes
which is another name for the ascent of man. The only radical thinkers,
they alone got to the root of the matter, beyond the various shaky
schemes of mundane perfection, swaying between the worship of the
Fatted Calf and the horror of Organisation Man.\(\text{Mysticism: Views and
Reviews~15}\)
It is this uncanny ability of the mystic poet to utter sublime truths, speckled with flashes of insight, and to create great transcendental poetry that makes for a very sound basis in his thesis.

Having surveyed the various aspects of Kabir's poetry, we shall now look at his ulatbamsi (upside-down) poems. They are better read as the framework of an ongoing ancient tradition of tantric verse-writing. The tantric writings originally draw there sublime conceptions from the Upanishads and are associated with Hatha yoga and early tantric Buddhism, which finally shaped them. As Linda Hess writes:

Expressions similar to Kabir's upside-down language predate him by three thousand years in Indian religious literature. But it was in the millennium before Kabir that this sort of language became associated with the main movement in Indian religion, generally spoken of under the heading of tantrism. Cryptic and paradoxical expressions abound in the Hindu and Buddhist tantras, the texts of hatha yoga, the vernacular poetry of the Buddhist 'siddhas' who lived between the tenth and twelfth centuries. Study of Kabir's ulatbamsi poems can shed light on the whole sadhabhasa (intentional or hidden language) tradition of medieval India. (Bijak 136)

There was a time (roughly 700 to 1200 A.D.), when Indian religion was dominated by tantrism. Teachings were dense, crowded with rituals, diagrams, sounds and (yogic) postures, and language was concrete. There was a general thrust upon the concept of non-duality, a pulling together of opposites, and a prevailing opinion that the individual mind and body were aiding agents on the path to enlightenment. Thus the body as a vehicle, an instrument. Around this time around the tenth century, we have the development of Hatha yoga – a minutely detailed literal and symbolic anatomy of the body, and a technique for attaining liberation through physical postures and breathing exercises often combined with meditation and austerities.

Hatha yoga propagates the theory that through physical exercises, the normal tendency of the body's energy to flow downward and be depleted can be reversed, and the coiled serpent-power (kundalini) at the base of the spine can be drawn upwards until it strikes the "thousand-petaled lotus" in the cranium and all distinctions disappear in a burst of
light The *tantric* yogic text of concreteness, reversals, and apparent obscurity derived from such yogic science is the immediate source of the upside-down language we find so frequently in the works of Kabir. The body is thus not just flesh, blood and bones, but an entire cosmos — a microcosm complete with flowers, light, breeze, sound, serpent, swan, hawks, music, the skies, mountain sea and the seventy two thousand passageways (‘*nadis*’ to which I have referred earlier in this chapter). In light of the above, terms like semen, moon-drops, liquor, nectar, sky, lotus/flower and other such symbols in Kabir’s poems can either be literal or symbolic or both.

101

I looked and looked — astonishing!
(only a rare one hears me sing)
The earth shot backwards to the sky,
an elephant fell into an ant’s eye,
mountains flew without a breeze,
souls and creatures climbed the trees,
in a dry lake the waves lashed,
without water, water-birds splashed.
Pandits sat and read the law,
babbled for what they never saw.
Who understands Kabir’s rhyme
is a true saint to the end of time. (Bijak 75)

It’s a confounding world where all sane orders are reversed. Kabir’s poems intrigue because to the reader who is not a Nath yogi they are absurd, paradoxical, crazy, impenetrable, and yet they purport to be meaningful. Such verse (referred to as *ulatbamsi* — literally meaning, “upside-down”), generally strikes one dumb with amazement or makes one laugh, or worst, leaves one feeling like a fool: “...*One frog ate five snakes.* /Kabir shouts: /both together one!"

There are many types of expressions associated with the term *ulatbamsi*, such as: (a) the obvious paradoxes and upside-down situations as in a “cow drinking milk from the calf”, the “rain falling from the earth to the sky”. Situations that reverse apparent patterns; (b) poems full of animal characters placed in upside-down situations (eg. “a snake guards a frog”, while “fish hunt in the forest,”) or mainly humorous situations.
where “the fly shaves his head” and “the heron gnashes his teeth”; (c) tangled domestic relationships with incestuous sons and mothers conspiring with in-laws, (d) Images related to the anatomical system of Hatha yoga. For instance the sun, moon, and the thousand-petaled lotus symbolized as the sky. And lastly, (e) the use of mystic numbers. An instance is “the cow that drinks through nine tubes, is locked in seventy two rooms, and eats from four trees with six branches and eighteen leaves”.

Based within such an ancient and rich tradition of verse writing and added to it Kabir’s own mystic genius, both as poet and as an ascetic, his *ulatbarnsi* poems are highly figurative, resonant with sounds and allusions and inter-textual exchange at various levels of all sorts. They read like an orchestra and often have a fable like quality about them. What with Kabir constantly fetching comparisons from the animal world, as he unmasks the layers of masks men live in. Let us read the following composition, where Kabir attacks hypocrisy, crookedness and false vanity.

104

*How will you cross, Nath
how will you cross,*

*so full of crookedness?*

Look how he meditates
serves and prays.

Look: the white plumage,
the cranes sly ways.

*Mood of a snake, look!* 
utterly lewd,
utterly quarrelsome
utterly shrewd.

Look! a hawks
face, and the thoughts
of a cat.

*Schools of philosophy*
like a cloak furled.

Look! the witch vanity
gulps down the world.  (*Bijak 76*)
While symbolism in the poem above is not so difficult to interpret; perfect clarity in decoding the meaning of most *ulatbamsi* poems is near impossible. For a symbol can be polyphonic in its connotations, it need not be necessarily singular and simplistic in its implication. In fact as the Indian *dhvani* theonsts like Anandavardhana insist, a mystic poet’s language is different from ordinary language. “It conveys more than what it says”. “Polyvalence” is the way meaning works in these poems. Another requirement of the *Rasa-dhvani* theory of Indian poetics is that the poets can communicate adequately, provided the readers are also *sahridaya* (sensitive), and poetically inclined. It would be best to leave Kabir’s poems at that, rather than attempt at pinning them down simplistically. The best way to read his poems would be a one-to-one approach. Any expert, single interpretation would only diminish their dialogue which can only begin and begin again.

To sum up. The above chapter begins with the fact and fiction surrounding the birth of Kabir the mystic. (a) It traces the saga of the Islamic advent upon the Indian sub-continent. And (b) it traces the simultaneous fanning out of the Bhakti movement as it evolved gradually. Both (a) and (b) provide significant context to Kabir’s poetic text. Another system which has been discussed in some detail is the semiotics of Nath terminology, which performs a major role in Kabir’s poetry, in particular in his *ulatbamsi* verse.

Besides analysing Kabir’s highly figurative and dramatic style of verse writing, an attempt is also made to cull from the poems, his ideology in relation to concepts like “God as manifest and non manifest”, “worship as an external and internal practice”, the idea of liberation, maya (illusion), nature, yoga, religion, woman, and so on. In short, an attempt is made to “locate” and to “weigh”, Kabir the poet and social reformist, in the continuing tradition of Indian poetry which is predominantly characterized as being mystical, incantatory and highly figurative.
Notes

(1) The *Kabir Kasauti* was published in 1985, Bombay. Written in Hindi it is the joint production of five members of the Kabir Panth and is based upon information gleaned both from books and the oral tradition.

(2) There is an uncertainty about the dates of Ramananda's birth and death as well. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Muslim rule was well established in North India, during his time. His teachings on religion and related social problems provide the first available evidence of the impact of Islam on Hinduism in the heartland of the country. *Guru Nanak To Guru Gobind* 15.

(3) There are two opinions on this. According to McLeod in *Guru Nanak And The Sikh Religion* the two sants never met, that the influence of Kabir on Nanak was indirect, gleaned through the Sant channels. The Bhakti movement in its later stage, wherefrom it drops idol worship and becomes deeply mystical and internal, is referred to as the Sant Tradition. Scholarship identifies Namdev as the first Sant.

(4) Namdev's influence extended into northern India as a result of his Hindi works and possibly also as the result of an extended visit to the Punjab. Doubts have been expressed aplenty regarding whether it was Namdev. According to this tradition, Namdev spent twenty years in Ghuman, a village in Batala tehsil of Gurdaspur district. In Ghuman itself, the tradition is both strong and old, and there is nothing impossible in a Sant wandering so far from home. (154). W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak And The Sikh Religion*. Delhi: OUP, 1968.

(5) The Nath sect was founded by the semi-legendary yogi Matsyendranath who lived in the tenth century. The tenets of Nath yoga are rooted in the Samkhya system of philosophy codified by Patanjali as Yogadarsanam. It is an ascetical theory which furnishes for yoga, the categories for metaphysical and psychological analysis. Another major fabric woven into Nath asceticism is from Tantric Buddhism which contains a variety of elements like (i) the power of mantra (mystic syllables) whose repetition can lead on to mystical states (ii) belief in the quasi-magical power
attributed to mudras (postures of body and limbs) and (iii) their capacity to awaken the latent potencies in man's psycho-somatic complex

(6) A few sakhis of Kabir's verse on knowledge from the Bijak, translated by Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh:

All these people
very proud of their own heads,
very far, from Han –
They'll never stumble on knowledge. (109)

Knowledge in front, knowledge in back,
knowledge right and left
The knowledge beyond knowledge
is my knowledge (112)

(7) The Kabir Granthavali, was first published in 1930 A.D., by Nagari Pracharini Sabha, Varanasi. According to the Encyclopaedia Of Indian Literature, brought out by the Sahitya Akademi, the text of the work is "based upon the manuscript which was compiled in 1504 A.D., fourteen years before the death of Kabirdas. It is supposed to have been penned by some Malookdas, but it is not certain whether, he was the same famous disciple of Kabir...". "That which Kabir preached in the last fourteen years of his life was compiled in the Granth Sahib by and large, in the year 1604 A.D. Before the publication of the Granthavali, Bijak or Kabir Bijak was regarded as the most authentic account of the poet's teachings." (Vol III 1904)


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