CHAPTER III

MYTHS, RITUALS AND SYMBOLS IN KABIRPANTH

Kabirpanth has a rich tradition of different kinds of myths and rituals. The myths are narrated in verse by the literate disciples, in Pravachana and Satsang. These myths, along with the rituals, form the symbolic order of the panth. Symbol, in a religious community is formed in the course of action and in the elaboration of experience. It differentiates the direct expression and performance of the ritual that relates the subject with the intentional object. It is also performative and this characteristic of the symbol forms a cognizable category called symbolic order in a religious community.

In Kabirpanth, like many other religious traditions, myths occur in association with sacred places, objects, and acts. The content and the structure of the myths in Kabirpanth tend to form an oppositional symbolic order, as most of the Kabirpanthi myths are not just subverted forms of those of Puranic Hinduism. These contain oppositional elements which project Kabir and his reincarnations as the liberators of their followers from the deceptive tricks of Kal Niranjan and the trinity of the Hindu gods.
It seems that the construction of Kabirpanth largely draws upon an oppositional symbolic order and the popular traditions of Nathpanthis and other devotional sects. In this process, Kabir has emerged as a mythic figure around which forces of religious resistance to Brahmanic Hinduism have crystallized. Kabirpanthi disciples have also challenged and contested the hegemonic tradition of sagun devotional groups such as Ramanandis, who have a parallel religious tradition in Mithila.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section presents a brief review of different approaches to the study of myths as an integral aspect of religious ideas and practices. In the second section, I describe some Kabirpanthi myths and discuss their significance. The third section dwells on Kabirpanthi rituals. It begins with the brief discussion of scholarly views on rituals. In the light of these, in the fourth section, I attempt to show how these rituals take on meanings and significance among disciples. Some of the rituals are backed up with corresponding myths. Towards the end of the section, I will discuss the symbolic significance of some of objects and places in Kabirpanth.
Myth, ritual and symbol are three inter-related themes in the study of religion. Each of these has a bearing on the understanding of the symbolic representation of a religion. Ubiquity and diversity associated with these aspects of religion have led to the proliferation of various schools in their study.

The English word, myth\textsuperscript{2}, comes from the Greek word \textit{muthos} which means a 'word' or a 'speech'. In its original sense, \textit{muthos} meant the word which stood for the study of gods and super-human beings. Mythology, a derivative from myth, is used for the entire body of myths of a particular tradition. It also includes the study of myths within its ambit.

Greek thinkers in the classical period developed three forms of explanation of myths\textsuperscript{3} - allegorical, rational and euhemerism. The allegorists viewed myths as depicting or concealing in poetic language a reality or events that could be envisaged behind the text.\textsuperscript{4} The rationalists tried to demonstrate that myths were meaningless and a creation of irrational and feeble minds.\textsuperscript{5} The third explanation came from Euhemeros and his supporters in Greece who believed that myths were basically imaginative stories. These three
views continued to influence the minds of scholars of the Western world till the eighteenth century.

Again, we have at least three dominant trends in mythological studies in the eighteenth century. Based on their studies of the Greek myths and those of West African religion, the representatives of the first group concluded that all the people of the world have the same mental disposition in the construction of myths. The second group consisted of the rationalists who emphasized the causative factors in the creation of myths. The third group, that of the romantics, began to study the elements of emotion, vision and genius in the prevailing myths, and so stressed the value of mythology in the understanding of society. In addition, the theologians of the period interpreted myths as divine creations and considered these as 'historical' representations of the 'supra-historical'. These approaches contributed to the study of myths in the following century.

In the modern period, the evolutionists considered the myth-making faculty of mind among the primitives as a clue to the evolutionary development of mind. They saw fundamental animism as the source of mythic symbols. One of the contributors to evolutionism, F. Max Muller, who worked extensively on Vedic traditions, believed that mythology
began with the human attempt to overpower natural phenomena. He suggested that myth is a 'disease of language' which accounts for its convoluted expression.

A major breakthrough in the study of religions was achieved by Franz Boas.\(^\text{10}\) He collected a large amount of information on myths, legends, tales, riddles, art, magic, song, dance, idioms, traditions, customs and ceremonies to explore and analyse the culture of the American tribes. He found that myths were, in part, culturally determined and, in part, determined by human imagination. He paid much attention to the underlying 'ultimate significance' of myths. Boas also objected to the theory that myths had arisen from a universal tendency to anthropomorphize nature.

Bronislaw Malinowski,\(^\text{11}\) on the basis of his experience among Trobriand Islanders, suggested that myths are neither explanations of natural phenomena nor poetry as pointed out by evolutionists and the scholars of the classical Greece-Roman period. Instead, myths are, in Malinowski's opinion, validations of the social order. The myths, forming the 'charter', validate prevailing traditions and, thereby, strengthen them. For instance, he attempted to show how the myths of origin of the Trobrianders explain the relative superiority and inferiority of different clans among them.
and tend to validate their existing positions. To him, the supernatural figures of the past always have powerful appeal for the believers.

Similarities between the myths and symbols of widely separated peoples and civilizations persuaded Jung, the psychoanalyst, to postulate the existence of a collective unconscious. Its contents manifest themselves in what he called archetypes. Myth is not fictitious; it consists of facts that are continually repeated. He further pointed out that images and symbols communicate their messages even if the conscious mind remains unaware of it.

Raffaele Pettazzoni who regarded himself primarily as a historian, insisted on the historicity of such religious creations as myths, rituals and symbols. In the Indian context, historians like Romila Thapar have argued that myths are selection of ideas composed in narrative form for the purpose of preserving and giving significance to an important aspect of the past.

In the latter part of the 20th century, scholars like Mircea Eliade and Levi-Strauss have offered new insights into the study of mythology. Mircea Eliade emphasizes the sacredness associated with myths which are considered to contain some elements of that sacredness.
Claude Levi-Strauss, the structuralist anthropologist, has argued that if meaning is to be found in mythology, it cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined. For Levi-Strauss, the basic meaning of a myth can be found only in a paradigm obtained through a study of other myths and mental creations. He also suggested that rituals, myths, and other aspects of culture are structured cognitively by processes resembling binary operations. These mental operations finally lie outside all meanings, and simply reflect an autonomous cognitive drive towards order. It involves impersonal logical necessity.

Despite varying and shifting emphases of the theoreticians, it is clear that certain elements of earlier studies came to be incorporated in the later interpretations. For example, the rational approach propounded by the ancient Greeks was refined and presented in strong terms by the rationalists of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Some psychologists adopted the same view. In the Marxist tradition also, the irrationality and exploitative aspects of some mythical narratives are highlighted. Further, the allegorical approach, enunciated by the Greek philosophers, found favour among the Romantics of the eighteenth century.
Thus it can be said that myths represent archetypal and fundamental human feelings; they are an explanation of inscrutable natural phenomena as well as disguised descriptions of social relationships.

The functionalist approach to the study of myth propounded in particular by Bronislaw Malinowski seems to have much relevance for interpreting Kabirpanthi myths. His analysis treats myths as 'a charter of validation' of the social order. In fact, Kabirpanthis set greater value on their myths than the Puranic Hindu myths. To them, Kabirpanthi myths are true stories spoken to Dharmdas by Kabir himself, which can be read in the panth's scriptures. Moreover, with the help of Kabirpanthi myths, they also trace the presence of Kabir back to primordial times. In addition, the mythic events help strengthen their conviction that they are the followers of a true liberator. These emphases lend support to the followers' claim that Kabirpanth is as old and valid as any other religion.

II

The cycle of Kabirpanthi myths begins with the time when there was nothing except an ocean. A formless Satyapurusha or satpurusha was residing on a lotus in the middle of the ocean. Eventually a desire appeared in the
minds of Satyapurusha which took the form of an island called Diplok. He later came to sit on a four-legged throne placed on Diplok. His desire led to the formation of 84,000 islands. As His second wish, a kurma (tortoise) appeared and seated itself around His feet. In course of time, Satyapurusha expressed sixteen desires which took the form of His sixteen sons: Gyan, Vivek, Sahaj, Santosh, Kal Niranjan, Sruti Subhav, Anand, Kshama, Nishakam, Jalarangi, Achint, Prem, Dindayal, Rasala and lastly Yog Santayana. After their creation, He placed each of them on separate islands, as parts of His being.

Of these sons, the fifth, Kal Niranjan, also known as Dharam Rai, deviated from the path of religion but played a crucial role in the formation of the universe. In fact, he practiced penance for 70 years to secure the permission of Satyapurusha to create the remaining parts of the universe. Satyapurusha became pleased with his austerity and sent Kal Niranjan to Mansarovar, one of the islands.

After sometime, Niranjan resumed penance to compel Satyapurusha to reveal the secret of creation to him. Satyapurusha ultimately conceded Niranjan's request, bestowed upon him the three lokas (worlds) - heaven, earth and netherworld, and allowed him to begin the work of creation.
Kal Niranjan, however, had another problem. Even though he had obtained Satyapurusha's permission to create, he had no knowledge of the secret of creation. This secret lay with Kurma, Satyapurusha's second son. In fact, it was Satyapurusha who had imparted the secret of creation to Kurma.

But now, when He had permitted Niranjan to start creation, Satyapurusha, in keeping with his words, deputed Sahaj, his sixth son, to go to Kal Niranjan and reveal to him where to look for the secret. After receiving this information from Sahaj, Kal Niranjan (Dharam Rai) became extremely arrogant. He arrived at Kurma's place and asked Kurma to pass on the secret to him. When Kurma refused, Kal Niranjan attacked Kurma, who had three heads and a twelve-layered body.

On being attacked, Kurma's body released air, part of the sky, the sun and the moon. Heavy rain followed, and fish, snake and Varah (boar) were born. The first and the third were the two incarnations of Vishnu. Later the earth began to take shape. While Varah's teeth emerged as the axis of the earth, it rested on the snake's head. After this, Satyapurusha sent for Kurma and asked him to forgive Dharam Rai for his misbehaviour.
Meanwhile Dharam Rai, who was staying in the Mansarovar, had no clue regarding how to go about with his work of creation. He again resumed his penance. Reluctantly Satyapurusha had to yield to Dharam Rai and arrange for creation. However, He wished to check Niranjan's evil designs. For this purpose, He first created an eight-armed girl named Adya, and asked her to go to Niranjan in Mansarovar. Satyapurusha implanted the seed of creation in her which had the potential to produce 84,000,00 lives, and dispatched Sahaj to inform Dharam Rai about her.

On seeing Adya, Kal Niranjan was mesmerized by her beauty and passionately devoured her. Sahaj heard Adya's cry for help and attempted to rescue her. But he did not succeed. Sahaj remembered Satyapurusha. Satyapurusha could not tolerate Dharam Rai's outrageous behaviour any longer, and cursed him that henceforth Dharam Rai would have to devour 1,00,000 lives and, in turn, give birth to another 1,25,000 lives everyday. He also asked Dharam Rai to leave Mansarovar. To convey this order to Dharam Rai and to ensure the release of Adya, Satyapurusha dispatched Jogjit to Dharam Rai. Jogjit passed on the message to Dharma Rai. He also asked Adya to remember Satyapurusha in order to come out safely from Dharam Rai's stomach.
In view of Dharam Rai's grave offence, Satyapurusha forced him to accept Adya, his sister - for both were Satyapurusha's creations. She was initially unwilling to be the wife of her brother, but Dharam Rai argued that since he himself was the judge of virtue and vice in the world, she should have no cause to worry. Ultimately, she had to yield to Dharam Rai's pressure and became his wife. This marriage is depicted as a punishment to Dharam Rai as, from now on, he was condemned to lead a life of incest.

However, Dharam Rai could not gratify his sexual desire, as Adya had no sexual organ. Dharam Rai therefore used his finger nails to make a hole in the middle of her waist, which developed into her sexual organ. He then had intercourse with her three times, which resulted in the birth of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, the Hindu trinity. These three sons of Niranjan were to be the main source of the five eternal elements: fire, air, water, earth and sky, and the three universal qualities: Sat (truth), Raj (light) and Tam (darkness).

Dharam Rai distributed the five elements equally among his three sons, but the three qualities separately to each one: Brahma received Sat; Vishnu, Raj; and Mahesh Tam. These elements and qualities had the potential to provide materials for further creation.
Dharam Rai, after bestowing these potentials to his sons, disappeared from the scene. At the time of his departure, he told Adya not to reveal his whereabouts to anyone of his sons. He also asked her to send his three sons to churn the sea where various supernatural jewels were hidden. After these instructions, he began to stay in a cave called Shunya, situated near the place of Satyapurusha.

While spending his life in the cave, he once climbed on a mountain and, from the top, released a storm which blew for a long time. At the end of the storm, he breathed out the Vedas and asked them to go into the sea to be churned out by his three sons.

The myth then narrates how, on attaining maturity, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh went down to churn out the sea. Following Adya's instruction, they churned the sea three times and thus obtained three divine women; namely, Savitri, Lakshmi and Parvati, and fourteen Ratans (jewels) which included the Vedas, Amrit (ambrosia) and Visha (poison), among others. Savitri became Brahma's wife, Lakshmi of Vishnu and Parvati of Mahesh. Brahma received the Vedas, Vishnu Amrit and Mahesh the poison.

Till then, the creation of jivas or life forms was held back due to the creators' preoccupations in their own
worlds. Once they became free of these, Adya produced Andaj, i.e., living beings which come out of eggs; Brahma produced Pindaj, i.e., living beings which come out of wombs; and Vishnu produced Ushamaj, i.e., insects such as mosquitoes and bugs. Mahesh was left to empower these creatures with the ability to move. All these creatures are endowed with divine gifts, but only human beings have the potential to actualize them.

The Kabirpanthi origin myth depicts these creatures as the product of Kal Niranjan's evil design which keeps them permanently embroiled in his deceptive tricks. These creatures also received curses from each other and from Satyapurusha.

After completing the work of creation, Brahma began to read the Vedas which he had obtained from the sea. In the Vedas, he noticed a reference to Satyapurusha and his father, Kal Niranjan. Subsequently, he felt an intense desire to meet them. Brahma rushed to his mother and brothers, and asked them about Satyapurusha and his father, Kal Niranjan. His brothers expressed their total ignorance about them. However, his mother, Adya, knew about Satalok, the seat of Satyapurusha and her husband. Still, having been forbidden to reveal their whereabouts, she asked Brahma to give up the search.
Brahma could not resist his urge to meet them and left for Satalok. Vishnu, his younger brother, also wanted to join in this noble search. So, he left for Patal (netherworld) hoping that they might be living there. Vishnu encountered the black snake (sheshnag) in Patal and, as a result, his white-complexioned body turned dark. Tired, he returned to his mother. But Brahma kept on searching Satalok but without success. Finally he decided to practice penance and got lost in meditation (dhyan) in order to have a glimpse of his father and Satyapurusha.

Adya, however, waited for many years for the return of Brahma. Left with no hope, Adya soon gave birth to a beautiful girl whom she named Gayatri. She trained Gayatri to distract Brahma from his quest and Gayatri left for Satalok; on the way, she found Brahma lost in meditation. As per Adya's instructions, she sought to distract Brahma from meditating. Brahma opened his eyes and was about to curse Gayatri. But before he could do so, she hurriedly revealed her identity to him and told him why she had disturbed him.

Brahma persuaded Gayatri to lie to Adya that he had located Satyapurusha and Dharam Rai. At first, Gayatri did not agree. However, as she was infatuated with Brahma, she promised to fulfil his wishes if he consented to be seduced
by her. Brahma agreed and, in due course, Adya gave birth to another Savitri who accompanied them to Adya.

Adya could not, at first, understand the relationship between Savitri and Brahma. Adya came to know the truth. In anger, she cursed them all. Consequently, Brahma was never worshipped by Jivas. Gayatri was to have five husbands, a Vrishabh (bull) being one of them, while Savitri was born as a scentless Kevara flower on earth.

Adya was apprehensive of Kal Niranjan's wrath because she cursed his sons and daughters. Around the same time, Kal Niranjan sent an akashvani (aerial message) to Adya; he cursed her to live with five husbands in the Dwapar epoch, during which she would be reborn as Draupadi.

Only Vishnu succeeded in seeing Satyapurusha. According to the myth, Vishnu soon realized his limitations, which pleased Adya. She then decided to reveal the secret of approaching Satyapurusha to Vishnu. Adya told Vishnu that he should look for Satyapurusha with the help of gyan marg (the path of knowledge). At the same time, she warned Vishnu of the weakness of the human imagination which conjures images of heaven and hell and day and night.²⁰

Vishnu took Adya's preaching to heart. Adya was pleased to see Vishnu's eagerness to follow her teachings.
She predicted that Vishnu would be reincarnated as Krishna in the Dwapar epoch and would always be revered above all other gods.

Adya also granted Mahesh a boon lest he felt ignored. Mahesh wished to be immortalised in every epoch. Although, Adya expressed her helplessness to fully grant his wish, she promised Mahesh that he would survive till the end of the Kaliyug.

Kabir's glory and divine power are at work through these activities. In the Kabirpanthi myth, Kabir is shown as the only true liberator of the jivas from Kal Niranjan. Kabir was shown to be assigned to save jivas from Niranjan's tricks by Satyapurusha. In these myths, Kabir was a form of Satyapurusha himself. Later he, appeared in every epoch, i.e., the Satya, Treta, Dwapar and Kaliyuga, the first epoch associated with the formative period of the universe.

During the Satayuga, Brahma founded 68 pilgrim centres; which, in Kabir's opinion, were sources of illusion. Brahma's glorification of the Vedas was another source of maya. Brahma evolved twelve rashis (zodiac signs) and 27 nakshatras (asterisks), which kept jivas muddled in 84 yonis (cycle of rebirths). Satyapurusha had to send Kabir, a part of his own being, out every epoch to save the world.²¹
In the Satayuga, Kabir's name was Satsukrit or Achint. This was his first appearance on earth, but he remained attributeless (Niranjan) in this epoch. When he descended from Satalok, Kabir received gupt vastu (secret object) and a pan parvana or parman (a certificate of authority) from Satyapurusha. He also carried five Amiya (nectar) which were the key to mukti (emancipation).

On the way to Bhava Sagar (the earth), Achint met Kal Niranjan, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. Kabir, as Achint, told Dharam Rai that he was going down to earth. Kal Niranjan felt threatened. But Achint gave him proof of his indomitable power. Dharam Rai thereupon fell upon Achint's feet. Achint then pardoned him. Dharam Rai thereafter asked Achint for some boons. He asked that till the end of the Dwapar epoch, Achint should allow a large number of jivas to be devoured by him, so he need never go hungry.

Dharam Rai was allowed to keep his deceptive pilgrim-centres in operation to attract jivas. These pilgrim centres formed Dharam Rai's twelve panths for most of the jivas. Dharam Rai said that at the beginning of Kaliyuga, he would take the form of a Buddhist monk and would compel Indrawan, the king of Orissa, to build a mandap for him on the seashore with Kabir's divine intervention. In return for these favours, Dharam Rai promised to prepare the way.
for the wider expansion of Kabir's *panth* in the Kaliyug. While Achint could not turn down Kal Niranjan's requests, he reiterated that he would not desist from warning the *jivas* in any epoch.

Taking leave of Kal Niranjan, Kabir revealed to Brahma that due to Kal Niranjan, he could not see Satyapurusha. To Vishnu, he said that emancipation would be an impossible task for him, as Vishnu, too, had engaged himself in Kal Niranjan's evil designs. Upon seeing that his sons were helpless before Achint, Kal Niranjan roared from the Shunya cave. From the sound of his roaring (ma) emerged the sacred name of 'Ram'.

In Satayuga, Kabir, as Achint, first went to Dhongal, a saintly king, Dhongal soon recognized Achint's divinity and accepted him as his *guru*. Dhongal got the *pan parvana* and took a vow to propagate Achint's preaching far and wide. Achint then left for Mathura where he met Khemasari. Although Khemasari welcomed Achint, he doubted him. To allay his suspicions, Achint took Khemasari to Satalok and unveiled *Satyapurusha*’s true form to him. Subsequently, Khemasari and his kins became Achint's disciples and adopted his divine *panth*. Through king Dhongal and Khemasari, Achint's *panth* liberated a number of *jivas*. Achint himself remained formless throughout the Satayuga.
With the advent of the Treta epoch, following Satayuga, Kabir reappeared as Munindra. Myths describe that in the Treta, while all jivas worshipped Vishnu and Mahesh, their wish for moksha remained unappeased.

Munindra left for Garh Lanka where Vichitra Bhatt resided in Ravana's kingdom. While Vichitra Bhatt could not accept Munindra's super-natural attributes so easily, his wife accepted the same. She narrated to Mandodari, Ravana's queen, Munindra's divine features. Mandodari was keen to see Munindra and sent for him. On his refusal to come into the palace, Mandodari met him, offering him gold jewellery and seeking blessings. She soon became Munindra's disciple and got the pan parman from him.

Mandodari requested Munindra to liberate her husband, Ravana. Munindra had a premonition that he could not win over the arrogant king, but he agreed to meet him. The gatekeeper at Ravan's palace, warned Munindra of Ravana's cruelty. But when Munindra reassured him as to his safety, the gatekeeper informed Ravana that Munindra wanted to meet him at the gate.

An offended Ravana approached the gate in a fury. In anger, Ravan asked Munindra how he dared send for a being who was endowed with Mahesh's blessing. Ravana then attacked Munindra 70 times to little effect. Munindra, finally,
cursed him predicting that Ramchandra would kill him in the same epoch, in such a manner that even a dog would not like to eat his flesh after death.

Subsequently Munindra left Garh Lanka for Avadh Nagar, where, he met a Brahmin named Madhukar. Although Madhukar was a devotee of Mahesh, he invited Munindra to come to his temple. Instead, Munindra, enlightened Madhukar on the true path of emancipation. Munindra's views convinced Madhukar, who adopted Munindra's panth.

Myths dwelling on the Dwapar epoch speak of Kabir as a reincarnation of Karunamaya. Karunamaya first appeared at the fort of Girnar where King Chandra Vijay ruled. The monarch had a wife of saintly character. At the fort, a slave girl first noticed Karunamaya. At the sight of Karunamaya, she rushed to Queen, Indramati, who met Karunamaya.

On Indramati's repeated requests, Karunamaya came into her palace where she offered her throne to him. After washing his feet, she collected the dirty water in a pot and kept it beside her pillow. She became so much engrossed in his bhakti (devotion) that royal wealth and grandeur lost its significance for her. She offered all her property to Karunamaya who declined to accept it suggesting that she spend her wealth serving sadhus.
Karunamaya's capability of making true predictions and his image of a saviour become apparent later in the epoch. Before Karunamaya left her palace, he cautioned her against Kal Niranjan's imminent assault on her. Keeping in mind Niranjan's tricks, Karunamaya spelt some precautionary measures to her. Karunamaya's prediction proved true. Kal Niranjan appeared before the queen while she was asleep as a snake and bit her. Indramati, in retaliation, made use of the Virahuli mantra²⁴ given to her by Karunamaya.

At this point, king Chandra Vijay came to know of the queen's snake bite. He sent for gunis (experts) and offered parganas (small principalities) to those who could save his wife. However, all the efforts of gunis failed to save her, Karunamaya's Virahuli mantra rescued her from the effect of the snake-bite. The miraculous impact of Karunamaya's mantra astonished both the king and the queen.

Yet, Kal Niranjan could not accept his defeat so easily. His messenger (dut) consulted Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh and asked them how to trap the queen. They advised him to colour his entire body in white, which was the usual attire of Kabir's reincarnations²⁵ and then go to kill the queen. The dut did so, and reached the queen's palace.

In the guise of Karunamaya, the dut, asked Indramati to get ready for death. As per Karunamaya's instructions,
Indramati soon recognized the dut and expressed her unwillingness to accompany him. Then the dut, in an attempt to intimidate her, slapped the queen hard. She fell down on the ground, and cried for help.

Karunamaya heard her cry and came to her rescue. On beholding Karunamaya, the Kal dut fled and the queen regained consciousness. Later, she requested Karunamaya to initiate her husband into the true panth, as he was also troubled by Kal Niranjan. An unwilling Karunamaya acceded to her request.

From Garh Girnar, Karunamaya left for Kashi where Supach Sudarshanan, a great saint, lived. Sudarshan's faith helped him recognise Karunamaya quickly. He fell at Karunamaya's feet and sought his blessings. Karunamaya blessed him and took him to Satalok where he observed Karunamaya as Satyapurusha. Supach Sudarshan then returned to earth and played a vital role in the successful accomplishment of Yudhishthir's yagyna.

The yagyna was organised at Krishna's suggestion by Yudhishthir, who, along with his brothers, killed many of his cousins in the battle of Mahabharata. The success of the yagyna was to be indicated by the gong of a bell from the sky. Yudhishthir arranged everything as per Krishna's suggestions and, accordingly invited a large number of
Brahmins, sadhus and sanyasis to the yagna where he could not hear bell; a perplexed Yudhishthir asked Krishna why this was so. Krishna made it clear that Yudhishthir's yagyna could not be successful unless Supach Sudarshan, a disciple of Karunamaya, came and partook of food.

Yudhishthir himself brought Supach Sudarshan to the yagyna. As soon as Supach Sudarshan ate, the bell from the sky rang and, thus, Yudhishthir's yagyna was successful. Karunamaya then disappeared from the Bhava Sagar (earth) and went back to Satalok.

Kabirpanthi myths also describe Kabir's reincarnation in the Kaliyug. It was this epoch during which he narrated the stories of his incarnations in all eras to Dharmdas, one of his closest disciples. According to these myths, in Kaliyug, Kabir had to take human form to liberate the larger number of jivas from Niranjan's clutches. But the immediate reason for his reincarnation during Kaliyug was the persistent request of Supach Sudarshan, that his parents, who could not attain liberation due to their ignorance, be liberated by Kabir. Kabir thus was reborn on earth. Supach's parents could not recognise the unmanifest Kabir. Hence Kabir ultimately had to take human form.

Supach Sudarshan's parents in his previous birth, Lakshmi and Suhata, were reborn in Kaliyug in a Brahmin
family as Kulapati and Maheshwari. Initially, they had no issue. So Maheshwari became a worshipper of Surya Devta (sun god). One day Kabir took the form of a new born baby and appeared on the anchal (the lower part of the sari) which she had spread while worshipping the sun-god. Maheshwari could not make out what had happened, but brought the baby back home.

Kulapati scolded Maheshwari for bringing a strange infant home. At this point, Kabir assumed his original form and attempted to tell them about the true path of salvation, to no avail.

After they died, Kulapati and Maheshwari were reborn as Chandan Sahu and Uda. Supach Sudarshan again requested Kabir to liberate his parents from the cycle of birth. This time, Kabir took the form of a baby on a lotus in the pond by which Uda used to pass frequently. Uda heard the baby's cry and picked him up. Seeing a baby in his wife's lap, Chandan Sahu was worried about lok-laj (people's perception). Inspite of Uda's intense desire to keep the baby, she returned him to the pond. So, for the second time, they missed an opportunity to be liberated by Kabir.

Supach Sudarshan's parents had to be reborn again as Neeru and Nima in a weaver's family at Kashi. This time, Nima was a devout practitioner of Barsait vrat which
still occurs in the month of Jyestha. To observe this vrat, she went into a pond named Lahartara where Kabir appeared again as a baby on the leaf of a Purain. Nima picked up the floating baby and took him home.

Neeru, her husband, again objected to her keeping the child, but could not compel her to give the baby away immediately. Kabir stayed with them for a while, but was unable to convince them of who he was. Kabir finally decided to reveal himself to the couple, who became his disciples.

A cursory review of these myths makes it clear that their central purpose was to demean the gods of Puranic Hinduism. Kabir's reincarnations in all epochs are seen as the supreme divine force. The trinity of Hindu gods is shown as the progeny of an evil force, Kal Niranjan. All their deeds are depicted as misleading and designed to trap innocent jivas on earth. Further, they utilised these deceptive tricks to give forms to creatures. While Niranjan and his entourage, including Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, and his wife, Adya, were represented as deceivers, Kabir and his reincarnations were perceived as the saviours of humanity (jivas). Kabir was a source of fear for Kal Niranjan as well as an inspiration for the trinity of Hindu gods. Unlike Kabir's panth, the Hindu trinity acted at Kal
Niranjan's instance, to make jivas swerve from the path of righteousness.

Kabir descended to earth to rescue jivas from the clutches of Niranjan and his agents (duts). Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh are shown accepting Kabir's authority. In the myths, Kabir is closely associated with Satyapurusha, the main source of emancipation for jivas.

To understand the significance of these myths, it is necessary to examine the theoretical perspectives offered by some historians, sociologists and anthropologists. K.K. Datta, tracing the rise of the bhakti movement in India during the sixteenth century, writes that

....., the proselytizing zeal of Islam strengthened conservatism in the orthodox circles of Hindus, who, with a view to fortifying their position against the spread of the Islamic faith, increased the stringency of the caste rules and formulated a number of rules in the smriti works.28

At this juncture, the Brahmins went back to the traditional literature between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This process resulted in the revival of the study of older texts. They also used various myths to assert their status and power, which were both under threat. Kabirpanthis, too, adopted the same device; and in this exercise, their panth reformulated, and added to the Puranic myths whatever suited Kabirpanth's ideology.
Paul Ricour makes a valid point when he stresses that myths exist only when the founding event has no place in history, but is situated in a time before all history. Myths become important vehicles of communication when the traditions of a society are predominantly oral, as in India. A religious community, which exists in an era in which events can be located in history, has to engage with pre-existing myths. The Kabirpanthi myths were formed in this context. A large body of Puranic, epics and Buddhist myths already existed, and were a crucial point of reference for Kabirpanthis in this region.

The heterodoxy of Kabir and his panth remains a predominant theme in their myths, which have an over-arching relationship with the different aspects of Kabirpanth. The construction of Kabirpanthi myths can be viewed in the same context. The emergence of Kabirpanth and its opposition to the conservatism of the two major contemporary religions - Hinduism and Islam - is a well established fact. Kabirpanthi myths are redolent with same aversion to idol-worship, the vain pretensions of the Brahmins and the hypocrisy of swamis and yogis. The denial of divinity to the Hindu trinity of Gods, the recurrent theme of Kabirpanthi myths, seems to be purposefully woven into these myths to express their opposition to idol-worship. To prove
the veracity of these myths, it is suggested that these were uttered by Kabir himself.

By denying divinity to the Hindu Gods, Kabir, in his followers' opinion, stood out as the supreme divine force. Kabirpanthis also sought to enrich their literature so that it measured up to the richer Saguna Vaishnava and Brahmanical traditions.

In the construction of their myths, Kabirpanthis appropriated figures and concepts from Vedic and Puranic scriptures only to reposition them in their own schema. The portrayal of Satyapurusha as the all-pervasive power reminds us of 'Purusha' of the Vedic and Puranic scriptures. Purusha is an all-pervasive figure in the Purush Sukta of the Rig Veda. In one of the sections of the Satapatha Brahmana, there is a reference to Purusha, who created two different sexes, and thereby, gave birth to human beings among other creatures. The same Purusha seems to reappear in the Kabirpanthi myth as Satyapurusha i.e., the true Purusha. The portrayal of true Purusha may have been intended to undermine the Purusha of Vedic and Puranic mythology. It might also be an attempt to distinguish the Kabirpanthi Satyapurusha from the purusha of Hindu mythology, whose pantheon has, in all cases, been shown as subordinate to the representatives of Satyapurusha in Kabirpanth.
The event relating to *Purusha* of Puranic mythology are also reinvented in Kabirpanthi mythology. Purusha of the Satapatha Brahmana was seduced into having an incestuous relationship with his female counterpart, his own creation, to give birth to the human race.\(^{32}\) Purusha transformed himself into a bull, and the woman turned into a cow.

The sin of incest in Kabirpanthi mythology is laid at the door of Kal Niranjan and his son, Brahma, who, as described above, had intercourse with their sisters. The *Satyapurusha* of Kabirpanthi mythology is kept free from such sin. Such portrayals of *Satyapurusha* may have sought to elevate his status in the divine hierarchy.

Equally striking are the attempts to subvert the sacred position of Satayuga and the role of the Hindu trinity described in *Puranic* mythology. In *Puranic* scriptures, Satayuga was an epoch devoid of evil and irreligious activities, while every *Jiva* followed the preachings of the trinity. In the Kabirpanthi myth, during this epoch, which was called Kamod Yuga,\(^ {33}\) *Satyapurusha* reigned supreme. Satayuga, the next epoch, was beset with the deceptive acts of Kal Niranjan and Brahma. Brahma had built several pilgrim-centres and temples in which idol-worship prevailed. In fact, the first incarnation of *Satyapurusha* descended to
earth to check the activities of the Hindu trinity. As Achint, Satyapurusha saved a large number of Jivas from Kal's tricks.

To enrich their mythical literature, Kabirpanthis seem to have employed forms of thought already available in Vedic, Puranic and epic Hindu scriptures. Stories revolving around Kabir's reincarnations in every epoch illustrate the tendency. The Kabirpanthi myths constantly contrasted Kabir with Puranic gods and goddesses, avatars and cosmology.

In particular, the theory of reincarnation in Hindu mythology has been utilised by Kabirpanthis. According to S. Radhakrishnan, the word avatar refers to the act of descending from a higher to a lower material world. In the Mahabharata, it is stated by Krishna that God descends to earth whenever wicked forces raise their heads, to protect pure souls and religion. Some other sources also state that God also descends to free oppressed humans at the mercy of their own ignorance and evil deeds, to put them on the path of bhakti.

In the myths described above, Kabir is described as having descended to earth as a liberator who successfully intervened in the oppression of Kal-Purush in every epoch.
Kabir had to reappear, to show jivas the true path leading towards salvation. Bhakti, to him, was the best way of reaching Satyapurusha.

Instances of the subversion of the avatars of Puranic myths in Kabirpanthi mythology are manifold. Kabirpanthi myths talk of the sixteen sons of Satyapurusha including some of Puranic avatars. Some of them have the same names as their Puranic counterparts e.g., Matsya, Kurma and Varah. In the Kabirpanthi myth, Kurma was the second son of Satyapurusha, out of whose belly came matsya (fish), Varah (boar) and a snake.

Puranic myths consider Matsya, Kurma and Varah as the first three avatars of Vishnu on earth. The Kabirpanthi myth accords superior status to the second son of Satyapurusha, undermining the reincarnation of Vishnu as Matsya and Varah. The trinity of Hindu gods, who were supposedly self-born in Puranic mythology, were products of the incestuous relationships of Kal Niranjan, the epitome of evil. The incarnations of Kabir, on the other hand, have been closely linked to Satyapurusha himself.

Kurma, Varah and Matsya are not considered avatars by Kabirpanthis. Kurma was Satyapurusha's son, who gave birth to the fish, and the snake. In a Kabirpanthi scripture,
entitled *Gyan Prakash*\(^{37}\), Kabir's reincarnations are associated with *Satyapurusha* in the same manner as the part and the whole of an object are related. Thus, his reincarnations, in every epoch, represented a part of *Satyapurusha*.

Uma Thakural recently attempted to evaluate Kabir's reincarnations. She writes that "...the nature of the avatar in the Kabir Panth seems to be inferior to that of the avatars of the Puranas..."\(^{38}\) Her assertion is based on a Puranic belief that *Parameswara* himself descends to earth at different times. On that count, Kabirpanthi avatars, were also direct descendants of *Satyapurusha* himself, who, in Kabirpanthi worldview, was the original form of the most popular Hindu avatar; e.g., Ram and Krishna. In the Kabirpanthi myth, a part of *Satyapurusha*'s being is shown as powerful enough to keep evil forces at bay. Such a portrayal of *Satyapurusha* is of great importance for Kabirpanthis. In their schema, *Satyapurusha* is the ultimate source of creation, and Hindu gods are perceived as the products of evil and degenerate forces. And so, Kabir's reincarnations in every epoch, as part of *Satyapurusha*, represented the superior and ultimate religious power on earth in Kabirpanth. An attempt to pass judgement on the belief-systems of a religious community and establish one as superior to another is not always convincing. Thus, Uma
Thakural's evaluation of Kabir's reincarnations does not seem correct.

Perusal of these myths further points out that they are constructed as a counterpoint to Puranic Hinduism. The striking feature of Kabirpanthi myths is their attempt to elevating Kabir and his incarnations to the highest place in the order of merit and power, in comparison with the Hindu pantheon. Instead of Brahma, who is the creator of the universe in Puranic traditions, Satyapurusha is accorded that status in Kabirpanthi mythology. In the latter, Satyapurusha's prerogative was taken away by Kal Niranjan and his sons. The Kabirpanthis' attempt to undermine the role of the Hindu trinity was probably made to protest against Brahmanical Hinduism.

The spirit of protest against and emulation of the Brahminical avatar myths by Kabirpanthis also seem to be implicated in their own accounts of the avatars of Kabir, who dominated over the Puranic avatars in all four epochs.

Achint, the first avatar of Kabir, in the Satayuga, helped to Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh understand the power of Satyapurusha. Achint then set out on his mission to liberate innocent Jivas from the tricks of Kal Niranjan and the Hindu trinity. During the Treta yug, Kabir as Munindra, was successful in converting some worshippers of Vishnu and
Mahesh, such as Mandodari and Madhukar. Their conversion to the panth of Munindra took place only after their realization of the righteousness of Munindra's teachings. Munindra's success weakened the social base of Brahmanism. It is, perhaps, an instance of the Kabirpanthi spirit of protest.

Kashi has been depicted in Brahminical scriptures as one of the most sacred and ancient places in Hindu religion. Karunamaya's successful attempt to initiate a Jiva from Kashi is an indication of his overriding power over Brahminical tradition. The same spirit is exhibited in the mythic representation of Supach Sudarshan and the role he played in Yudhisthir's Yagyna.

Further, in the manner of most creation myths, Kabirpanthi cosmogenic myths deal with the sacred and the profane, the two main concerns of the religious beliefs studied by Durkheim. Satyapurusha remains a sacred entity in all Kabirpanthi myths, while his reincarnations as Achint, Munindra, Karunamaya and Kabir represent the sacred force, which liberates jivas from the machinations of profane forces. Although Kal Niranjan was one of his sons, he is shown as steeped in evil.

While Kal Niranjan, along with his sons, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (representing profane forces), are given
subordinate status in Kabirpanthi mythology, Satyapurusha and his reincarnations epitomise all that is sacred, the liberators of Jivas. The profane character of Kal Niranjan and the Hindu trinity is ascribed to their proclivity to incestuous relationships. In the Puranic scriptures, the initial act of incest led to the beginning of life on earth. Kal Niranjan and Brahma, who always led Jivas to hell, are the perpetrators of evil deeds such as incest. Satyapurusha and his reincarnations always play the role of liberators of Jivas from inevitable doom awaiting them if they worshipped Kal Niranjan and Hindu trinity.

No doubt, there are elements of irrationality in Kabirpanthi myths, often pointed out by non-Kabirpanthis and pragmatic viewers. Believers in the panth's ideology, however, consider Kabirpanth's belief beyond the scope of rational interpretation. Instead, they argue that their myths serve certain functions in the panth; these have especially helped them to assert the existence and validity of the Kabirpanthi community which has been derided by the followers of Brahminical Hinduism and orthodox Islam. Moreover, with the help of these myths, they are able to assert the antiquity of their panth.

Malinowski's characterisation of myths as a 'charter of validation' holds true for Kabirpanthi myths. In a setting
of competition and conflict in which various sects seek to validate their position, Kabirpanthi myths seem to provide a semblance of validity to their followers as well as outsiders. These myths lend credibility to the community by proclaiming the sanctity of Satyapurusha and his reincarnations, including the last of them. They were liberators of Jivas from the clutches of Kal Niranjan and the Hindu trinity. Their role as liberators, adding to their sanctity, established their credentials as the founders of a true panth i.e., Kabirpanth. This panth derives its authenticity from the acts of its founder who, as the incarnation of Satyapurusha, not only pointed to the tricks of the Hindu pantheon, but also exposed their evil designs and, helped a large number of Jivas on the path towards emancipation. In other words, the past of Kabirpanth was not as sinful as that of the Puranic gods; it represented all that was sacred forces.

Mircea Eliade's contention⁴¹ that myths reflect a nostalgia for the origins of human society and try to evoke a return to a creative era may be borne out in our study. Nostalgia for the origin of human society has been a dominant theme in all origin myths. Kabirpanthi myths begin with stories of primordial time and, Kabir's reincarnations and teachings are shown as paving the way towards leading jivas to Satalok and the omnipresent and omniscient
Satyaurusha. There are profuse references to Kabir merging with Satyapurusha, the source of all creations.

During my interviews with Kabirpanthi followers, I noted some minor variations in the myths narrated above. Upon compilation, I found these variations were individualistic. However, there are no inter-regional variation. Minor variations in individual retellings do not change the over-all scheme of the myths described above. In view of the limited significance of the variations, I have not mentioned them.

Despite some variations, Kabirpanthi myths, on the whole, constitute an integral element of the community. These myths, on the one hand, inform us of prevailing beliefs, on the other, they also signify the religious idioms in which Kabirpanthis have voiced their protest against Brahminical traditions. In course of time, Kabirpanthi myths seem to have emerged as the bulwark of an oppositional symbolic order.

The Kabirpanthi myths are recounted, and accorded the status of true stories mainly by Kabirpanthi followers. According to them, their religious scriptures containing myths, and Sadguru Kabir, described in these myths, are facts about the primordial state of the universe, when the earth along with the universe had just begun to take its present
shape. Kabir himself is situated in the context of the formation of the universe out of the elementary elements (air, water, fire, sky and earth). Kabir's presence is placed over and above those formative elements, as the inner void (shunya). In addition, some myths also link Kabir with different avatars (reincarnations) in changing mythological epochs like Satya, Treta, Dwapar, and Kaliyuga. Kabirpanthis seem to have formulated these to highlight the value of Kabir and the sect named after him. Kabir, in that worldview, is seen not as a saint, but as a divine force, working behind creation and a crucial figure in different epochs. Kabirpanth is, thus, shown as deriving its strength from that super-human figure.

The core of Kabirpanthi myths is Kabir. He is frequently referred to as Bandichhod\textsuperscript{42} in the religious literature of the panth, an epithet also bestowed upon Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion. In mythic stories, Kabir is conceived as the Satyapurusha, whose partial reincarnations took various shapes in different epochs.

Simultaneously, Kabirpanthis have drawn upon hegemonic and popular traditions to develop their stock of myths. They have also subverted some of the themes and positions of mythic figures in these traditions. On the contrary, Kabir and his reincarnations have been shown as critical figures
in all their myths. Myths have also provided validity to some of their ritual practices.

III

In principle, Kabirpanth and its followers do not attach significance to ritual practices, but, over time, they themselves have developed a variety of rituals. It seems that the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, appropriated from Puranic Hinduism, provides a set of focal points for Kabirpanthi practices. But these rituals mark the panth as a separate religious order, distinct from other Hindu and Muslim sects. Kabirpanth seems to have not only drawn upon the ritual hierarchy of Hindu society, but also to reject some elements within a caste-ridden society.

The description of Kabirpanthi rituals and practices in this section, is preceded by a brief examination of scholarly works on the study of rituals and symbols. I have based my account of Kabirpanthi rituals on my interviews with panth followers, at places, also accompanied by my personal observation of a few rituals. These descriptions have led me to discuss the meaning and significance of rituals in Kabirpanth. Then, I explain the symbolic significance of Kabirpanthi rituals, and some objects used in religious activities.
The word ritual\textsuperscript{43} means a visible bodily involvement in symbolic activities predominantly in the religious domain. One of the most important aspects of a ritual is its repetitiveness, which acts as a constant reminder to its practitioners. Ritual takes on hieratic attributes as it makes its symbolic intention emphatic. Hence the stylized manner of ritual. Recently, some scholars\textsuperscript{44} have pointed out a more striking characteristic of ritual; i.e., ritual actions are prescribed by 'ontological stipulation'. This means, while performing a ritual, only following the rules counts as action. Its proper meaning, however, remains unclear unless we take into account different schools of interpretation.

At the theoretical level, the first major contribution to the study of ritual came from Emile Durkheim\textsuperscript{45}, who stressed the view that societies fashion themselves in their ritual symbols. To him, the 'sacred' is the essential social idea inherent in rituals and, therefore, the study of ritual can facilitate the findings of the structural and cosmological mode of society. The sacred is a set of rituals and objects set apart from the 'profane' by special prohibitions, dispensation, and prescriptions that do not pertain to every day life.
Durkheim's suggestion was mainly based on studies of primitive society in which he found that individuals experience a considerable dependence on society during religious rituals, which persuades them to celebrate a ritual. He also emphasized the re-creative function of these ritual festivities and initiations. He went on to say that it is the human experience of society that injects a sense of transcendence and authoritative power into a religious practice. Functionalists later emphasized that even the most bizarre or apparently harmful practices might be socially constructive.

But it is argued that these functionalists tended to limit their concern to the ideological structures elaborated by particular societies.\textsuperscript{46} In other words, beliefs which relate to a practice can be taken as a characteristic of particular society. These beliefs might have no firm basis at the collective level. In fact, ideological structures are often more or less consciously recognised by the concerned participants and at times, deliberately promulgated by vested interests to serve their own interest.

More recently, Victor Turner\textsuperscript{47} has suggested that ritual acts endow religious significance on important cosmological conceptions and values. These purposes are served by ritual's persuasive emotive force. The experience
of shared belief in ritual performance unifies the individual participants into a genuine community.

To Victor Turner, rituals have existential import and explicit meanings. He disapproved of the social function inherent in the explicit meaning of a ritual, which can be obtained by observation of its action-field context. The action-field context of a ritual generally refers to the place and surroundings in which the actual ritual occurs. He distinguishes between three levels or fields of meaning of a ritual. The first field he calls the level of 'indigenous interpretation' or the 'exegetical' meaning which is obtained from questioning behavior. The lay disciples, in reply to the questions put before them, are supposed to give simple and esoteric answers. The second level is the 'operational meaning', to be obtained by observing the behavior of the participants in a ritual. The third level is the 'positional meaning', which is derived from the relationship of a ritual to other rituals in totality. He further suggests that apart from the wide action-field context of a ritual, the system, as a whole, needs to be studied.

Among the structuralist anthropologists, Edmund R. Leach has somewhat different views on ritual. He suggested that the term ritual should be applied to all 'culturally
defined sets of behaviour', regardless of their explicit religious, social or other context. To him, such behaviour is a form of social communication or a code of information. It can be analyzed in terms of its 'grammar'. Thus, Leach treated ritual as a cognitive category.

In the last decade, studies of Gilbert Lewis and Suzane Hanchett have provided some valuable approaches to the study of rituals. Lewis suggested that it was necessary to examine the motives and meanings people attach to ritual actions. If the responses are sincere, participants' views may be considered as reasons for actions of which the actors are unaware. Lewis, in the end, also warned researchers against the bias underlying their interpretations and advised against misdirected efforts.

Suzane Hanchett opines that rituals have several basic characteristics. First, a ritual is set apart in time and space. Second, it has what might be termed choreography; i.e., a pattern of movement in time and space, including actions which formally begin and end it. These acts are often performed by specifically defined persons, such as men, married woman, virgins, or priests. Thirdly important in the Hindu pattern of rituals is the inclusion of symbolic objects representing the offerings made to spirit or deity, common to almost all religious rituals. Participants, in

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rituals, are believed to be influenced not only by deities or spirits and by ritual actions, but also by each other.

Ideally, Kabirpanthis conceive their panth as a non-ritualistic one; but as Evan M. Zuesse says, "Rituals appear in all religions and societies, even those that are nominally anti-ritualist".55 This observation relates to the Kabirpanthi community. There are some rituals performed by lay followers, while others remain specific to sadhus and Mahants. Rituals prevalent among lay followers include bandagi, bhandara, charanamrit, satsang, anguli-chuman, bhajan, and pravachan. Among the rituals performed by sadhus, the most important is that requiring the use of a tikka on his/her forehead. The rituals relating to a Mahant are Guru-prasad, Guru-puja, and the bestowal of tikka on the Mahant's forehead.

An individual person (jiva) becomes a Kabirpanthi disciple in a formal sense, when s[he] is intitiated. In the Kabirpanthi worldview, Kanthi Lena is the usual term applied to the initiation ceremony. An aspirant to initiation has to look for an initiator called Agua in the Krishna Karkhi branch and Guru in other branches.

In practice, before a formal initiation, a candidate has to show his bona fides by maintaining certain forms of behaviour. For instance, a candidate has to satisfy other
followers and also the initiator that s(he) will never take non-vegetarian meals, nor shrink from serving sadhus, a designation generally given to every Kabirpanthi follower. In addition, the candidate has to assure an initiator that s(he) will never deal in his/her earlier businesses of meat selling. If a candidate has ever been involved in such a business, s(he) has to satisfy the concerned followers that s(he) had dropped the business much before his/her decision to seek initiation in Kabirpanth. Ideally, a candidate for initiation is also to abstain from all that is considered unfit for an initiate. Further, it is also stressed that a candidate should have no record of indulgence in acts such as, stealing, violence, sexual promiscuity etc. This underscores Kabirpanth's concern for maintaining social norms and values.

Considering all these prerequisites, an initiator fixes the time and place for holding the initiation ritual keeping in mind the candidate's convenience. It is generally considered that if a candidate is not well-off, he opts to be initiated at a math by a Mahant. At a math, usually, initiation does not cost as much as it does if carried out at a candidate's house. In some other cases, a candidate may seek initiation in a bhandara organized at another follower's residence.
A relatively monied candidate generally opts for initiation at his own house. He usually asks the initiator for when *bhandara* will occur, a ceremony to which he invites a certain number of followers. The number of invited disciples in *bhandara* is generally decided by an *Agua* in the Krishna Karakhi branch, and, by a *Guru* in other branches taking into consideration the economic status of the candidate, who has to bear all the expenditure.

After deciding on the number of disciples to be invited, the candidate personally approaches them to solicit their participation in his/her initiation ceremony. The invited disciples also include *bhajan*-singers, who generally work under an *Agua* or a *Guru*. These singers and musicians sing *bhajans* on such occasions.

A *bhandara* ritual organized for the purpose of initiation goes through three phases: *bhajan*, initiation, and the community feast. The *bhajans* sung on this occasion comprise exclusively of songs of Kabir, taken from *Bijak, Anurag Sagar, Kabir Mansur* and other Kabirpanthi scriptures. *Bhajans* are accompanied by the *dholak, tabla, harmonium, jhal, khajuri* and other local musical instruments. The band of singers generally includes one or two chief singers who have, in most cases, a sound knowledge of music. They set the music for *bhajans* to various *ragas*. Other members in the
band repeatedly sing the main lines of a bhajan and play the instruments. In some bands, the chief singer is the Agua or Guru.

If the Agua is in the band, he sits in the middle of the bhajan singers. The candidate seeking initiation is required to sit by the side of the band, and to understand the bhajans. The number of bhajans to be sung on the occasion is generally left to the will of the Agua. He directs the singers to sing Mangal and Sohar at the beginning of the initiation rite, which have devotional themes. Mangal and Sohar are the two kinds of songs which are sung at the beginning of almost all the ceremonious occasions in the region.

Meanwhile, a disciple is asked to prepare the arati for the Agua and other eminent followers present on the occasion. Before an Agua initiates the candidate, the later has to learn how to prepare and conduct the arati to a guru. For an arati, the candidate has to first wash his/her hands and feet, and wipe them with a dry towel. Also, a brass plate is brought to the ceremony either by the candidate, the Agua or by the singers' band. A chandan, agarbatti and a cotton wick are lit together in a brass plate, called a thali. A Kanthi (rosary) is also put in a corner of the thali.
A senior disciple teaches the candidate how to conduct an _arti_. The _thali_ containing these ingredients is then placed by the candidate before the _Agua_ who is to initiate him. On receiving the _arati_, the _Agua_ blesses him and asks him to present the _thali_ to other eminent disciples.

The _bandagi_ ritual then follows. As this is the first occasion when candidates practice _bandagi_, a distinctive mark of the Kabirpanthi community, special care is taken to ensure that they learn the ritual well. The _Agua_ corrects any error in the candidate's procedure after which he does _bandagi_ to the other disciples present on the occasion. If the number of disciples present is small, he pays _bandagi_ to all. In all other case, the initiator instructs the candidate to do _bandagi_ to those sitting close-by.

After the completion of the first round of _arati_ and _bandagi_, the initiator directs the candidate to sit on his toes before him. The _Agua_ picks up the _kanthi_ from the _arati_ vessel, and keeping the _kanthi_ in his right hand, murmurs a _mantra_. Then, he places the _kanthi_ around the neck of the candidate, upon which he becomes a disciple of Kabirpanth. Subsequently the novice is again required to show _arati_ and _bandagi_ to the initiator. He picks up the same vessel and shows it to the initiator after going through the same rituals. After this, the initiation ritual is considered over, and the _arati_ is extinguished by the novice.
Before the invited disciples partake of the meal arranged in the bhandara, the novice has to also perform the charanamrit ritual. As the bhandara is the first ritual, organized by the novice in his life, special attention is paid to every aspect of bandagi and charanamrit.

Charanamrit is the water collected after washing the feet of the invited disciples. While in the non-Krishna Karakhi branch, novices only wash the feet of the Mahant and the gurus for the purpose, in the Krishna Karakhi branch, the feet of all the invited followers is washed to collect charanamrit in a single bowl. Novices wipe all washed feet with a dry towel which is carried on his shoulder. If the novice is a woman, she wipes feet with her pallu or anchal. The charanamrit, thus collected, is tasted by every disciple. The novice takes the charanamrit bowl to each disciple, who dips one of his fingers in the bowl and subsequently puts it on his/her tongue.

Then begins the actual bhandara. All the invited disciples sit together in rows called pangat, when all the invitees sit together for a meal irrespective of their caste and economic status. If female followers are invited, they sit in a separate row, or in the second round of pangat. Even simple items like boiled rice, pulse and vegetables are given special names by the Kabirpanth sect. For instance,
boiled rice is known as ramras, and pulse as baikunthi. Like other feasts in Mithila, curd and sugar are eaten at the end of the bhandara.

A special ritual during bhandaras, in the Krishna Karakhi branch, is angulichuman. To perform this ritual, a group of disciples start singing a particular type of bhajan. One of them is asked to begin the angulichuman. He spreads one of his fingers in front of each disciple who touches it. The band keeps moving behind the angulichuman—performer. At the end, he sits without washing his hand and eats in the bhandara.

Thus, by organizing a bhandara at his own house, novices expect to learn a number of Kabirpanthi rituals such as bandagi, charanamrit and angulichuman. In case, they are initiated at a math, then, they remain participant in all these rituals; but being newcomers in the panth, novices always find it difficult to understand all rituals, because, they are arranged by the math. Furthermore, Aguas, the gurus, usually advise candidates to arrange initiation ceremony at their residences. This is in the Agua's interest as all the gifts then go to them.

At the time of initiation, novices are required to offer money and materials to the initiator. The money offered varies from Rs.50 to 200 depending on the economic
position of novices. In addition, they need to present a pair of dhoti, towel, kurta and under-garments to their initiators. If the initiation ceremony takes place at a math, all these offerings go to the Mahant. The prospect of these gifts is said to be one reason why some disciples wish to become Aguas in the Krishna Karakhi branch and Gurus in other branches.

In other branches, initiation is, as described earlier, not divided into two phases. Thus, the service of an Agua is not required. Instead, the Mahant of these branches performs the initiation ritual. The Mahant, during his periodical visits to the villages, fixes the date for initiation of aspiring candidates. The method of initiation and expenditure remains the same.

The initiation of vairagis, or sadhus\textsuperscript{56} follows a different path in all branches. First, vairagis have to take a vow to live at a math, and lead the life of brahmacharya. They are required to forego the apparel of common men after initiation for a loin cloth, janeu (sacred thread) and kurta. Vairagis are also required to put on tikkas or chandan, on their forehead. Every Kabirpanthi branch may be distinguished by specific tikkas.
In case, children are initiated into the panth, they take a vow to remain vairagis and remain at the math of their Mahants. They pursue their education there and remain unmarried. The math where children are initiated, bears the expenditure for their education and upbringing.

The ritual of tikka is performed on the occasion of the Mahant's selection and is, therefore, of paramount importance in Kabirpanth. On this occasion, a sadhu prepares tikka from the stick of sandalwood and then smears it in the middle of the Mahant's forehead. The tikka distinguishes a Mahant from other disciples.

In all Kabirpanthi branches, except the Bhagodasi and the Jagudasi, the chauka-pan ritual is especially important. In the Krishna Karakhi and the Vansha-Dori branches, the chauka-pan is the second stage of initiation, ideally given to a disciple who has attained maturity in religious matters. Maturity, in this context, refers to the consistent visit of disciples to their Mahants, Aguas and Gurus. Due to the requirement of maturity, many disciples fail to receive chauka-pan. Chauka-pan derives its importance largely from the fact that only Mahants can conduct this ritual and, as the representatives of Kabir, they play a crucial role in the chauka-pan ritual.
Chauka-pan is generally performed at a math. Unlike the rite of Kanthi lena, in Chauka-pan, participation of followers is restricted. Only disciples who have already received chauka-pan from a Mahant are permitted to attend this ritual. In the ceremony, in the Krishna Karakhi branch, the Mahant sits crossed-leg facing west direction, in the Vansh-Dori branch, the Mahant faces east. However, in both branches, Mahants cover their bodies with white cloth. In the Kabir-Chaura branch, the Mahant keeps his body uncovered, and sits facing north to performing chauka-pan.

In this ritual, a disciple arranges four leaves of betel, coconut, sweets, batasa (a type of candy) and dry fruits including meva, chhuhara, badam, kismis and munacca. All these items are kept in a separate dish to make the Pan-Prasad, called so, because it is prepared by covering the batasa with a betel-leaf. This is then taken by the disciple. Around the Mahant, who sits in the middle, a group of bhajan-singers sing with their instruments.

From the beginning of the chauka-pan to the end, the arati is lit and placed on a table or a similar structure made of clay called a bedi on which the Pan-Prasad dish is also placed. Items like ghee, unboiled paddy, marich and a cotton wick are kept in the arati vessel. On the instruction of the Mahant, the cotton wick is lighted.
The actual rite of chauka-pan begins after the end of the bhajans, in which Sohar and Mangal are sung. Uncovering himself, the Mahant calls the disciple to come close to him, and then feeds the disciple with some pieces of batasa placed between the betel leaves as prasad. It is believed that under his robe, Mahant is in mystical state, merged with the Satguru Kabir. The Mahant uncovers himself only when he feels that he can pass on the mystical energy to the chauka-pan-taking-disciple through Pan-Prasad. The remaining part of the prasad is distributed among the attending disciples at the end of the ritual. While the disciple chews the Pan-Prasad, the Mahant whispers mantras into his ears. After this, the disciple pays bandagi to the Mahant. He also takes an oath not to disclose the mystical mantra to anybody, unless ordered by the Mahant to do so.

Thereafter, begins the pravachan (religious speech) of the Mahant, meant for the disciple taking chauka-pan in particular and the assembled disciples, in general. Towards the end of the chauka-pan, the disciple collects the charanamrit from the Mahant and other eminent disciples sitting in the first row, and at the same time, does bandagi to all of them. At last, he conducts arati in front of the Mahant and seeks his blessings. With this, the chauka-pan ritual ends after which bhandara follows.
In the Kabir-Chaura branch, the Mahant does not cover his body during chauka-pan. Instead, he sits among his disciples in a yogic posture with his eyes shut. A disciple, however, gets chauka-pan in a similar manner from the Mahant.

The Parakh-Panthi followers have not been practising chauka-pan for almost ten years. As pointed out by a designate-Mahant at Purnea court math in Purnea, the main reason for dropping chauka-pan was the sycophancy and fake mystical postures it induced among Mahants.

Chauka-pan, as described above, is mainly observed at maths. Some interviewees opined that this was so because most aspirants prefer to avoid unnecessary expenditure incurred and to gain from a math's holy ambience. The Mahant invited for the purpose comes to the house of the initiate accompanied by an entourage. They all have to be presented with dhotis, kurtas and towels and then the feast in the bhandara which follows the chauka-pan ritual. Besides, the disciple has to offer rupees between 100 to 500 with the arati to Mahant. Keeping disciples preferences in mind, the chauka-pan ritual is arranged every year during Ramanavami and Kabir Jayanti ceremonies at every math in Mithila except in the Parkh Panthi maths.
Apart from the major rituals such as initiation, the mode of greetings in Kabirpanth is also an important ritual. Face to face greeting has two distinct forms\textsuperscript{60} with minor variations. Followers on meeting each other first speak out \textit{sahib bandagi} loudly with folded hands in the \textit{namaskar} gesture. The senior members, to whom this phrase is uttered, also respond in the same manner. This is an informal greeting, which is similar in all branches.

Another form of greeting is called \textit{bandagi}, another characteristic of Kabirpanth in Mithila. It is practised whenever two disciples meet each other after a considerable period or a senior disciple meets his guru, Agua, Mahant or any eminent member of the \textit{panth}.

Each branch of Kabirpanth has developed its own form of \textit{bandagi}; therefore, the observation of the \textit{bandagi} performed by a disciple identifies an insider, and the performer's branch of affiliation. Followers in the Krishna Karakhi branch practice \textit{tribar} (three-times) \textit{bandagi}, i.e., they touch the feet of a senior disciple three times using their noses.

Followers of Kabir-Chaura, Jagudasi and Bhagodasi branches also bow three times but in different ways. Followers of the Phatuha branch touch the feet of their seniors only once. Ideally, seniors are also required to
reciprocate; but, in practice, few of them do so. Sometimes, if a junior disciple fails to observe this ritual, a senior disciple takes the initiative in doing bandagi to a junior, to put the latter to shame. It is also said that if a bandagi is performed properly, both participants follow the ritual irrespective of their status.61

Bandagi is characteristic of Kabirpanth. In this ritual, while a senior sits crossed-leg on his seat, the junior disciple comes close to the senior's feet and, then performs bandagi. He squats on, holding the feet of the sitting senior in his hand. After that, the junior disciple bows his head touching the big toe of the senior with his nose. Then, he lifts his head and, if a Krishna-Karakhi disciple, meets the senior's gaze and wish each other sahib bandagi. This way, the junior completes the first round of a bandagi. The junior has to repeat this ritual twice. Senior disciples following set norms, respond in a similar manner to the junior's bows.

In the Vansh-Dori branch, a disciple does not touch the feet of his seniors in bandagi. Rather he bows and touches the ground in front of the senior disciples. While Vachan-Vanshi disciples touch senior's feet with their hands, Vanshi Dori followers keep their hands unfolded, as if they are begging for blessing. Disciples of the Kabir-Chaura
branch also perform bandagi in the same manner as those of the Vachan-Vanshi branch. But in the Jagudasi and Bhagodasi branches, disciples touch the feet of seniors with their hands and then with forehead and chest.

Charanamrit and arati puja are other frequently observed rituals in Kabirpanth. Charanamrit is generally collected and tasted on the occasions of bhandara, initiation ceremony and sant sammelan. However, I observed this ritual only among the Krishna Karakhi and Vansh-Dori disciples. Other branches in Kabirpanth are said to have dropped this ritual on the hygienic grounds. In case, devotees wish to perform the ritual, they are allowed to collect charanamrit from the Mahant's feet in these branches as well.

Arati is conducted in front of a guru or a Mahant during initiation ceremonies. At maths, it is often a part of daily rituals. Prayer takes place in front of the samadhis at many maths. Further, arati vessels, carry various items depending on the occasion.

Whenever the flame of arati is lit, every disciple present has to say sahib bandagi to each other. As part of the regular rituals at maths, a cotton wick soaked in mustard oil, is lighted in the arati vessel, and is shown to the Mahant and around the samadhis. During the initiation
ceremony and *chauka-pan*, instead of mustard-oil, *ghee*, *chandan* and *agarbatti* are lighted. While Krishna Karakhi followers show *arati* facing west, those of Kabir-Chaura and Vansh Dori face east on all occasions.

Recently, other rituals have become prominent among followers of some branches, including the recital of *Bijak* among the disciples of Kabir-Chaura, Bhagodasi and Jagudasi branches, and the emulation of the role of a Brahmin priest by some enthusiastic disciples of the Krishna-Karakhi branch. At Satmalpur math, which is the Acharya Gaddi of the Kabir-Chaura sub-branches in Mithila, the importance of the *Bijak* recital is emphasized by making all assembled disciples recite the entire *Bijak* over eight days during Kabir Jayanti.

The recital of *Bijak*, however, is not accorded much importance in the Krishan Karakhi branch. The contents of *Bijak* are considered important as these are the utterances of *Satguru* Kabir, but they argue that the ritual recitation of the text is like the *Ramayanpath* (recital of the *Ramayana*) prevalent among Ramanandis in the area. So, they eschew such a practice.

The role of a Brahminical priest is emulated among certain sections of the Kabirpanthis, as some disciples still perform *pujas* at their houses. Particularly among the
followers of the Krishan Karakhi branch, I noticed that some zealous disciples act as informal priests in these pujas. These Kabirpanthi disciples justify their activity as a response to the growing religious needs of their followers. According to them, there are some followers who cannot drop Brahminical priests all of a sudden. They need some time, and Kabirpanthi priests prepare them for it by pointing out the futility of Brahminical 'tricks'. These priests do not recite Brahminical texts like the Ramayana or the Mahabharata; at the most, if necessary, they recite Bijak in pujas. While Krishna Karakhi Mahants favour this development, Mahants of other branches tend to disapprove of it.

Rites of Passage, which include various rituals in an individual's life cycle, have also undergone some changes among the majority of Kabirpanthi disciples in Mithila. Many followers prefer to get the mundan ceremony of their sons performed at maths, particularly on the occasion of Ramanavami and Kabir Jayanti. Following the mundan, the blessings from the Mahant are sought by the parents for the child. For his services, the barber is paid in cash or kind.

The Kabirpanthi marriage ceremony has also developed its own forms. As an important rite of passage, marriage in a Kabirpanthi family is an occasion of rejoicing. A
Kabirpanthi family, which has a long anti-Brahminical tradition, does not invite a Purohit (a Brahmin priest) to the ceremony in which no Brahminical rituals are practised. Consequently, the number of rituals practiced on the occasion, and, the time spent on a marriage, are also reduced. This reduction is a result of excluding the Purohit who, it is believed, deliberately delays the completion of marriage rituals to increase his Dakshina. Normally, a marriage ceremony involving a Purohit takes five to six hours to complete. A Kabirpanthi marriage, excluding a Purohit, completes within an hour or so. All rituals are performed by the women of the family and neighbourhood: the exchange of garlands between the bride and the bride-groom, kanya-dan and sindur. From outside, only a barber's service is sought, who prepares bedi and performs a ritual called lah-chhu.

Many Kabirpanthis have also dropped the Brahminical priests in the death rites of their family members. The family invites a band which sings bhajans for a dying person. They believe that hearing bhajans helps a dying person to release his/her atma (soul) without much pain, and, after death, ensures a place for the soul in Satalok. The dead body is, then, carried to the common cremation ground where, in the midst of bhajans, the funeral pyre is lit.
Unlike the non-Kabirpanthi death rites, Kabirpanthis finish all the rituals related to the funeral pyre in one go. They collect the ashes and submerge them in running water. Later, feasts are arranged for kinsmen and villagers on the traditionally fixed days.

Moreover, the son or the kinsman, who lights the pyre, does not wear utari (a belt of white cloth), which is worn by the fire-giver in non-Kabir-panthi families. The Utari-wearer, who has to recite and perform some rituals in the presence of a priest in a non-Kabirpanthi death rite, does not practice any such ritual among Kabirpanthis.

Bhandara, also called dhyan among the Kabirpanthis, seems to have become a part of Kabirpanthi rites of passage. All auspicious occasions like the birth of a child, the fulfilment of one's long-cherished desire or a good harvest, witness the organization of a bhandara in a Kabirpanthi family. On these occasions, too, bhandara begins with bhajans for which a Kabirpanthi band of singers is invited. The expert, normally included in every band of singers, explains the meanings of bhajans so that the audience can easily grasp their inner meanings.
The rituals of Kabirpanth described above can be subjected to study in various ways. On the one hand, some of these seem to be associated with the mythic cosmology described in the second section of the chapter. On the other hand, certain rites of passage registered the followers' anti-Brahminical stance, and, in that sense, reflect the nature of the Kabirpanthi movement as a whole.

The initiation rituals have multiple meanings among Kabirpanthis, which may be called indigenous meanings, an independent level of meaning suggested by Victor Turner. Combined with the analysis in scholarly works on rituals, indigenous meanings enable us to understand Kabirpanthi rituals.

Kabirpanthi Mahants and some other followers, interviewed by me, unanimously asserted that initiation is compulsory for those who want to enter Kabirpanth. According to an informant, 71

'as Kabirpanth is not a part of Hindu, Muslim or Christian religions, it has an independent existence. So, if an aspiring candidate wants to be part of Kabirpanth, he has to break with his past, and initiation is a point of departure for the new member'.

In other words, through initiation, a novice is set on a new journey on the path set by Kabir and his panth.
Initiates have to forget their earlier associations with the Hinduism or Islam. To some other disciples, initiation marks the beginning of a true religious life.

Other informants\textsuperscript{72} tended to emphasize the mythical significance and compulsion of initiation for new members. They referred to the mythical events when Kabir himself asked his followers to receive \textit{Satya Sabda} (true words) through initiation. As described in the section on Kabirpanthi myths in this chapter, Kabir had begun the tradition of giving \textit{Pan-Praman} and \textit{Chauka} to his initiates; namely, Rai Dhongal, Khemasari, Mandodari, Bhatt Vichitra, Madhukar, Yog. Santayan, Indramati, Chandra Vijay, Supach Sudarshan, Rai Bankejee, Chaturbhuj, Sahatejee and Dharmdas.

In similar ways, the Mahants, who are embodiments of Kabir in part, initiate disciples and give \textit{chauka-pan} to deserving members. According to them, the Mahants generally re-enact the same rituals devised by Kabir in mythical times and passed on to Dharmdas in the present age.

Some novices\textsuperscript{73} interviewed by me expressed views, which also reflect the social implications of their initiation. A recently initiated novice at Taraiya explained that he sought initiation mainly because he wanted to be a member of the Kabirpanthi community which has a sizeable number of followers in his village. To be a member
of a dominant religious community in itself was a major attraction for him. Further, after initiation in Kabirpanth, he experienced a cognizable difference in his life. Dropping non-vegetarian food, and wearing a Kanthi (rosary) around his neck, generated a feeling of self-confidence and achievement in his daily life.

An educated novice also offered some explanation of a major part of the initiation ritual. He considered it an occasion for taking a vow before a guru to lead a pure religious life as stated in Kabirpanthi scriptures. To him, the kanthi, given at the time of initiation, acts as a constant reminder of the vow he has taken. Although he has not yet undergone the chauka-pan ritual, as he does not consider himself eligible for it, yet he seemed to be aware of its implication. Chauka-pan, to him, is a ritual which certifies a disciple's satisfactory religious progress. He also explained that chauka-pan is basically meant for receiving the mantra revealed by Kabir to his immediate disciples.

To most of Mahants, the initiation ritual has great importance for the panth. They opined that initiation enables them to pick up and train deserving jivas on the righteous path of Kabir's panth. Initiation also marks the readiness of a novice to follow Kabirpanthi ideals.
regardless of his/her economic or caste status. It frees novices from all previous bondage and prepares them to proceed on the religious path of Kabir.

Some Mahants also saw initiation as a means to ensure one's place in Satalok (heaven), the abode of Kabir, the Satyapurusha. To them, those who do not get initiation in Kabirpanth are bound to fall into the trap of Kal, and, thus, are doomed to go to hell, the domain of Kal. Uninitiated persons, according to them, are reborn repeatedly in 84 yonis (the cycle of rebirth), and each time, Kal would devour them. Moreover, those who receive chauka-pan, confirm their seats in Satalok, if they do not get caught in the various traps set by Kal Niranjan.

Initiation, therefore, to most Mahants, is a means of entry into the panth of Kabir, who was neither a Hindu, nor a Muslim. In their opinion, Kabir was just a pure form of Satyapurusha, the originator of all creation. In this sense, initiation in the panth of Kabir, introduces a novice to a different religious world in which an initiate loses his/her identity as a Hindu or a Muslim. He becomes a humble jiva who just pursues a path of righteousness as indicated by Kabir.

Scholarly works on rituals also provide deeper insights into the meaning of Kabirpanthi rituals. J.D.
Pee1,75 a sociologist, who has worked extensively on religious change in Africa, notes that religious conversion has both social and psychological dimensions. It is a gradual process by which individuals come to regard themselves as Christian or Muslim. He considers conversion as expressing a change in the experience of social relations, and a highly selective process by which individuals gradually assimilate new attributes and behaviour, rather than as a radical break with the past and a rebirth of human beings.

Certain persons interviewed in Mithila did hint at disturbed social relations having preceded their initiation. At Taraiya, a novice, belonging to the lohar caste,76 had some problems with a member of Dhanuk, a caste which contributes the largest number of Kabirpanthi followers in the village. He hoped that by seeking initiation into Kabirpanth, some social advantages would accrue to him. After initiation, he found himself on an equal footing with other members of the panth at Taraiya. As a member of this community, he hoped he could settle his disputes amicably, with the support of fellow Kabirpanthis.

Another novice at Samastipur also pointed out the psychological changes he underwent after initiation in Kabirpanth. To him, the vow of non-violence, no-theft,
service to parents and sadhus changed his whole perspective on life. Similar shifts in initiates' lifestyles have been reported from other places. At Kurthaiya, I was told of a disciple who was a notorious thief before initiation into Kabirpanth. Afterwards, he not only dropped anti-social activities, but also devoted his entire life in the service of sadhus.

A social-psychological interpretation of conversion, forwarded by R. Robertson among others, regards conversion as an individual's experience of 'self-revision relative to God'. Although his study is based on conversion to Christianity, this view has implications for other religious groups. As far as Kabirpanthi novices are concerned, they do not think in terms of God. Instead they talk of merging with the astral body of Satguru Kabir and Satyapurusha. Kabir and Satyapurusha are their God, but in a different sense. To them, there is no god other than 'parmatma', the eternal form of Satyapurusha; Kabir, too, had the same eternal atma or Parmatma within him. While this understanding of Kabirpanth, does not seem to have many adherents, I did meet some sadhaks who tried to explain Kabir's bhajans and teachings in mystical terms. On the whole, Robertson's interpretation of conversion does not seem to hold good for the majority of lay followers in Kabirpanth.
It appears that an individual's explicit desire for joining Kabirpanth often grew after prolonged interaction with followers. Till today, literary knowledge of Kabirpanth does not seem to stimulate educated persons as much as the power of interaction with an individual or a group of followers. A Deputy Superintendent of Police, initiated four years ago, is a case in point. He accepted that until he met a Mahant at Patna City, his earlier readings of Kabirpanthi texts did not motivate him to seek initiation. On the contrary, the meeting and discussions with the Mahant made it easy for him to understand the meanings hidden in Kabirpanthi texts. The Mahant's magnetic personality was an added attraction for him to reckon with and influenced him to get initiated in the panth.

I have found Victor Turner's concept of 'communitas' useful in interpreting Kabirpanthi festivals. Kabirpanthi gatherings during Ramanavami and Kabir Jayanti resemble Turner's 'communitas'. In these festivals, participants tend to suspend their social, economic and religious status. They all participate as Guru-bhaís in the satsang, pravachana, bhandara and bhajans. As guru-bhaís, their status as members of one community without any other social differentiation is emphasised and the social structure in which they are born gets completely dissolved during the festival. During the festivals, it becomes almost
impossible both for the insiders and the outsiders to distinguish the caste and region of followers.

Initiation rituals also allow a Kabirpanthi access into the realm of the sacred flowing from the mantras and vows which followers try to embrace in their life. In fact, chauka-pan, the second stage of initiation, asserts its sacred status explicitly by excluding those who have not passed through chauka-pan. The meditation observed by the Mahant during chauka-pan is said to be among the most sacred of moments, when he makes contact with Kabir, the Satguru. It is an equally sacred moment for the surrounding disciples and the candidates for chauka-pan. In the opinion of some followers, exclusion of the participation of non-Chauka-pan receivers is taken indirectly as an attempt to keep away profane elements from the sacred occasion.

An element of the 'sacred' seems to be strongly implicated in the charanamrit ritual also. No doubt, many critics of this ritual exist both within and outside the panth, but for observers of this ritual, normal water takes on the quality of 'sacred' and 'charged' water, after it is collected from the feet of Kabirpanthi disciples. This practice contains significant meaning for some groups in Kabirpanth. Some of them considered charanamrit as a life-invigorating drink as it symbolised the sadhus' inner
most power coming through their feet. To some others, charanamrit derives its sacred qualities from the healing effect it has on the charanamrit-taker. It does not heal physical ailments, it rather, heals spiritual and inner turmoils. Yet, in a way, the charanamrit ritual acts as one of their distinctive practices and binds all followers together as a religious community.

Further, the appropriation of charanamrit from vaishnava traditions is a step towards the construction of the oppositional symbolic order of Kabirpanth. It can be seen as another instance of the repositioning of a sign and practice embedded within the divine and ritual hierarchy of dominant Hinduism.

Similarly, anguli chuman, observed when taking meals in a bhandara, is said to have constructive and reformatory social elements. Some of the interviewees explained that anguli chuman is a device on the part of the Kabirpanthis to break caste prohibitions against taking food with lower and untouchable castes and a step towards the establishment of a caste free community. In a bhandara, Kabirpanthis coming from several castes take food in the same rows (pangat). Anguli chuman also helps to strengthen the morale of untouchables who have been debarred for long from communal feasts and other social activities. From the panth's point
of view, *anguli chuman* consolidates its position, for it comprises members coming from various social and economic strata. The ritual helps to inculcate a feeling of brotherhood among *panth* followers.

Kabirpanthis, who have come under the influence of leftist politics in the region, have developed, over a period of time, some reservations on the efficacy of Kabirpanthī rituals. Some of them have no regard for rituals such as *bandagi* gestures, *charanamrit* and *arati puja*. They decry these rituals as nourished and sustained by vested interests represented by the Mahants and the *gurus*. They see elements of exploitation in these practices and maintain that innocent disciples are misguided by Mahants in the name of religion. They try to avoid these rituals whenever they can in Kabirpanthī gatherings.

The *guru's* glory and their worship in Kabirpanth called *arati-puja* is premised upon different symbolic orders. The Hindu religious system, in particular, attributes an exalted position to *gurus*. In Kabirpanth, *Aguas* or Mahants, who initiate a novice, are perceived as *gurus*. Mahants generally renounce their family ties, and become *brahmachari*. They are, therefore, seen as dead to worldly affairs and are embodiments of Kabir's essence. These attributes, in the Kabirpanthī worldview, are believed to
have percolated down to them through the selection process, when the first Vachan given to Dharmdas, or to the founders of other branches, is passed on to the successor Mahants of their respective branches. The sanctity of the first Vachan is kept intact by making brahmacharya compulsory for a would-be Mahant. Observance of brahmacharya is presently the minimum requirement for a Mahant of a Kabirpanthi Nirwan math.

The essence passed on to them by Kabir and his immediate followers gives Mahants the status of a saint, shaman or a healer. It is believed that gurus and Mahants possess the capacity to fulfil the unfulfilled desires of their followers such as the birth of a child, happiness in life and thereafter. The healing powers of a religious figure has been seen by Comaroff as a mode of coping with and transforming an oppressive social order. Kabirpanthi gurus and Mahants along with their band of sadhus are said to have similar healing powers. Their touch or blessing is perceived by disciples as divine. As representatives of Kabir, who has been shown as superior to the Hindu pantheon, these gurus construct an oppositional symbolic order rooted in Kabirpanth.

The purity of body and soul is supposed to be always maintained within Kabirpanth, and rituals practised by
Kabirpanthis are also seen as means of purification. *Bandagi* and its verbal expression *Sahib bandagi*, echoing in Kabirpanthi gatherings, help to keep disciples in a state of purity. *Bandagi* to the Mahants and other senior members is said to play a crucial role in this regard. Different aspects of Kabirpanthi rituals and beliefs thus also acquire symbolic meanings.

Mircea Eliade's observation that symbols hide deeper dimension of reality, generally elusive to our knowledge, seems meaningful here. Among Kabirpanthi rituals, *chauka-pan*, is of great importance. It is said that during *chauka-pan*, the divine energy obtained from Kabir is released through the Mahant to his disciples. Those charged with the divine power of Kabir become immune to the effect of evil spirits.

Kabirpanthis emphasize the presence of divinity in all human beings. Hence they address each other as *Sahib*. *Sahib* is an honorific epithet for the powerful Kabir in the Kabirpanthi vocabulary. In parlance, *bandagi* is the visible expression of their belief that each *jiva* is a form of the eternal element constituting Kabir and *Satyapurusha*. To some disciples, the practice of *bandagi* and the utterance of *Sahib* to each other signify disciples' humility taught by Kabir.
Besides *Sahib*, other terms frequently heard in Kabirpanthi gathering, include *sarkar* and *huzur*. These two terms are mainly used by disciples coming from the lowest strata of village society and are used to address senior members of the *panth*. In the opinion of some interviewees, *sarkar* and *huzur* are used by disciples who speak in the idiom once used in the days of zamindari and *Malikana*. *Sarkar* and *Huzur* were the terms used to address the agents of royal powers and British officials. The continuing use of these honorific terms in Kabirpanth may be resonances from the past among the subjugated sections in Mithila's society.

Through its symbols, Kabirpanth seems to interrogate caste. In this endeavour, it draws upon the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution. It evokes those symbols which define its cultural autonomy. The interrogation of caste is carried out by subverting the hegemonic order. To specify the trajectory of cultural autonomy, Kabirpanth has effected radical ruptures within the evocational fields. In this exercise, it has also rejected elements of the ritual hierarchy within caste society. *Satyapurusha*, the spring of all creation and gods, had sent Kabir to Earth to do away with all the deception spun by Kal Niranjan, the embodiment of all evil, and his sons, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. The sons of Kal Niranjan, the trinity in the Hindu pantheon, are
active members of the Puranic cosmic order, and form a
divine hierarchy. Noting the close connection between
divine and social hierarchy within caste society, the
Kabirpanthi ritual practices reject the devi-devta (gods and
goddesses) who were themselves murti-pujak (idol-worshipper)
and insisted on their own worship by jivas on Earth.

In Mithila, as in other caste societies, an
individual's status is determined, among other things, by
his/her access to the gods within the divine hierarchy.\textsuperscript{83}
The matrix is operated by gods and goddesses both within and
outside people's houses and villages. But Kabirpanthis seek
to abolish their low ritual status by throwing all the
godheads and godlings out of their houses. They counter the
machinations of Hindu gods, village gods and goddesses and
Purohits by rejecting them and, instead, worshipping their
own Gurus. Kabirpanthi figures of Mahants, Gurus and Aguas
have replaced the Brahminical figures of worship.
Kabirpanth has no temple. Instead, the sect operates from
monasteries called maths, jagahs, jhoparas, sthans and
akharas. Its members worship the Mahants and Aguas as their
gurus.

Moreover, by rejecting Brahminical priests Kabirpanthis
have taken another step towards abolishing divine hierarchy.
The place of priests and their function are closely tied to
the ritual hierarchy within caste society. While Satyapurusha and Kabir are seen as mythic figures who contested the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, Aguas, Mahants and gurus have replaced priests in Kabirpanthi religious rituals. In places, Aguas and some eminent followers conduct life-cycle rituals, and other celebrations.

A cursory look at the stock of Kabirpanthi myths and rituals makes it clear that they have drawn upon diverse symbolic orders. The worship of Kabir, Mahant and Aguas as gurus underscores the Kabirpanthi appropriation of certain Vaishnava bhakti elements. Two of its defining rituals, bandagi and kanthi Lena, in particular, are taken from Vaishnava traditions, such as Gorakhpanthis, Ramanandis and Har Vilasi. These appropriations while show Kabirpanth's proximity to the Vaishnavas, also signify their difference from the Shaktas, Ramanandis and other sant tradition. Kabirpanthi kanthi and bandagi are re-positioned and have different forms.

Abstinence from meat, liquor, tobacco and lime within Kabirpanth drew upon both the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and pre-existent Vaishnava traditions. It seems that the development of Kabirpanthi ideology and practice occurs within a symbolic universe already filled with
polysemic and multiple referential points. However, Kabirpanthis situated these symbolic forms in a new context. The repositioned signs formed new relationships with each other and pressed new associations within the sect, reinforcing each other as markers which defined the boundary of Kabirpanth in relation to other groups. The appropriation of rituals like charnamrit, for instance, is a step in this direction.

Moreover, the panth emphasises the purity of body, which invests its members with signs of ritual purity. In the ritual hierarchy of caste society, the body of a person is a repository of signs of purity and pollution. Kabirpanth largely draws its strength from the rejection of divine hierarchies and priests and thus interrogates the hegemonic symbolic order. It has provided a new 'self' for the panth followers. The pure and new body, in a way, marks the transformation of the dominant symbolic order.

Besides, some individuals and objects have symbolic significance in the panth. Prominent individuals include the Mahants, Aguas and Gurus. Similarly, objects like coconuts, betel leaves, nuts and kanthis have been accorded great importance in the Kabirpanthi worldview. The Mahants are seen as embodiments of Sadguru Kabir. To honour the Mahant, Kabirpanthis have devised specific rituals like arati-Puja.
It is said that in arati-puja, Sadguru Kabir, who resides within each Mahant, is indirectly worshipped. As the Agua and the Guru represent the Mahant, they are also worshipped on certain ceremonial occasions. Thus, the Aguas and Gurus are also perceived as having some elements of Sadguru Kabir. Devotion to these figures is believed to be the primary obligation of all followers.

Among the sacred objects imbued with symbolic significance, kanthi is the most important. A kanthi, once placed around a disciple's neck, can be removed only after the death of the bearer. After this, the kanthi is placed beside the head of the dead body. If the dead disciple is buried, the kanthi is placed beneath his head. To an outsider, the kanthi, indicates in no time that the bearer is a Vaisnhava (vegetarian). At times, the kanthi also suggests that the bearer may have saintly and non-violent character. The kanthi acts as a reminder of the vow taken at the time of initiation and a marker of his/her identity.

Coconuts are also accorded sacred status in Kabirpanth. Most of the interviewees believed that the physical structure of coconuts and humans are very much similar. Like the coconut's crust, the human body is made up of hard limbs; the delicate sentiments existing in human beings are like the fresh liquid within the crust of a
coconut. The use of coconuts during chauka-pan is performed to exhibit the dual aspect of the coconut and the individual. That is why coconuts are required during chauka-pan. Disciples are advised to let go of their bad nature by breaking the hard shell of ego, and are persuaded to develop purifying habits similar to the pure liquid of coconut.

The betel leaf, another object used in initiation ceremonies, is seen as the marker of a happy life. Its colour (green) symbolises the need for initiates to develop positive attitudes. Life, if lived according to the principles of Kabir, would acquire qualities, similar to the way in which betel leaf which, if chewed in a right way, turns lips red and, thus, beautifies one's face.

Besides these figures and objects, maths, akharas, jagahs and sthans derive their symbolic significance as sacred places in Kabirpanth. During ceremonies like Ramanavami and Kabir-Jayanti, disciples are obliged to visit any of these centres. From the religious point of view, a visit to the math purifies the body and adds to the religious character of a visitor.

Thus, Kabirpanth works towards the creation of a pure body which, in turn, invests its members with ritual purity. Kabirpanth has appropriated and repositioned the signs and
practices of ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, and the symbolic forms of other traditions. Through its myths and rituals, it has rejected the divine hierarchy and the figure of the priest, who represents an oppressive social structure. It seems that the creation of a new 'self' within Kabirpanth, is associated with the transformation of an unjust world held in place by the dominant symbolic order.
Notes


4. Among the allegorists, the names of Theagenes, Heraclitus, Permenides and Plato are prominent. For details on their views, see, Bolle, ibid., pp. 269-270.

5. The rationist explanation was associated with Cicero, Lucretius and Xenophone; ibid, p. 271.


7. Bernard Bovier Fontelle and Charles de Bosses were the main exponents of this view, which was derived from the comparative study of Greek myths and West African religions; Bolle, ibid., p. 272.

8. The evolutionary views of Darwin, Hegel, Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte can be seen in Bolle's essay in Mircea Eliade (ed.), ibid.


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16. For Claude Levi-Strauss, the most fundamental problem is the understanding of modes of human thought for cross-cultural comparisons.


18. The lotus has been accorded very high status in various religious scriptures, particularly in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Kabirpanthis seem to have appropriated the lotus symbol for their Satyapurusha from Puranic scriptures.


20. Anurag Sagar, ibid., P.83.

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स्कृणमपूष कोल्मा अनंत देशले | मनकहै देशक कोई नही पायें।

(Heaven and hell are the creation of the mind; an unstable mind is undisciplined. In a spur of a moment, it plays many games; however, it cannot be controlled).```

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21. Anurag Sagar, ibid., P.61; also see, Kabir-Krishna-Gita, Venkateshwar Press, Bombay 1952, P. 9:

(The Almighty gave me the secret vastu {object}; He recognised me and handed Pan-Parvana to me along with the authoritative stamp). Also see, Kabir-Krishna-Gita, ibid, p.9:

(I hail from the immortal abode where every body gets pleasure; whenever Niranjan devours humans, I descend to foil the triumph of evil).

22. Both these names of Kabir appear in religious scriptures; my interviewees could not account for the two names of Kabir.

23. Anurag Sagar, op.cit, p.72.

24. In various parts of rural India, snake-bites are treated by Gunis (experts in mantras) who recite mantras over their patients, in which, the snake-god is addressed by the name of Virahuli.

25. Kabir Sagar, op.cit., vol. VII, P. 70:

(Both isles and surroundings are white, temples and their gates are coloured white, the swan (Hans) is also white, adding to pleasure and happiness).

26. In popular perception as well as in most literary sources, Neeru and Nima are said to have been Kabir's real parents.

27. The plant Purain usually grows inside ponds. Its leaves remain above the surface of the water.


32. W. J. Wilkins, ibid., p. 286.


37. 'Gyan Prakash' in Kabir Sagar, vol. 4, p. 57:


42. Bandichhod means a liberator from ties. To understand its meaning in Kabirpanthi scriptures, one can consider the following couplet in *Anurag Sagar*, p.50:

"अश्रुदास कहूं मुनि बंदीकोशा | मैंतो मौर्य सरमाय प्रभु कैरा।"

(Dharmdas asks Bandichhod, to set at rest his suspicions).


45. Emile Durkheim, op.cit., p.127.

46. There are some variations in the Functionalist approach to religion.


48. ibid, p. 91.

49. ibid, p. 124.


56. Information on Vairagis' initiation ceremonies and practices was gathered from interviewees at Rosara, Satmalpur, Turki and Bidupur maths.

57. I saw some child novices at Turki math, Bagicha math and at splinter group Mahadeo math at Rosara. As these minors were not able to relate their experiences, I interviewed the Mahants who had initiated them.

58. The reasons for differences in the initiation rituals were not adequately explained to me. The main reason may have been to maintain internal distinctions between different branches of the panth.


60. The description of different forms of *bandagi* is based on my observation at various maths.

61. I noticed some discrepancies in the performance of *bandagi* amongst senior members at certain places; however, some of them tried to stick to their principles in my presence.
62. I observed prayers and aratis before Samadhis attached to the main building of the maths at Satmalpur math, a splinter-group math at Rosara, and Bagicha math, Rosara.

63. I met zealous disciples of Taraiya and Kurthaiya. At Taraiya, Shobhit Das acted as an informal priest in many pujas at some Kabirpanthi houses. Shib Sharan Raut of Kurthaiya also performed similar role of a priest in pujas in his own and neighbouring villages.

64. The mundan ritual is generally observed for male children under 12 in the intermediate and lower castes of Mithila. The child's hair is shaven first time. Subsequently, his hair can be cut whenever necessary.


66. Kanya Dan is a ritual in which a senior and close blood-relative of the bride gives her away to the bride-groom's family.

67. The sindur ritual in the marriage ceremony is of great importance. In this ritual, the bride-groom puts some sindur (vermillion) in the middle of bride's parting three times; the ritual signifies that after sindur, the bride becomes the wife of the sindur-giver.

68. Lahu-Chhu (exchange of blood) is a ritual which is observed in marriage ceremonies amongst upper and lower castes in Mithila. In this ritual, a barber makes a minor cut in a finger of both the bride and groom. Their blood is then mixed in blood-stained cotton, which is then placed in betel leaves and fed to the bride and bride-groom.

69. In a non-Kabirpanthi death ceremony, the cremation of a dead body is followed by the mediation of Brahmin priest for thirteen days. Even the ashes of the dead body are kept in bowls for twelve days; these bowls are submerged into water after the observation of specific rituals. Kabirpanthi death ritual does not allow these Karm Kand (ritual).
70. *Utari* is a symbol of death occurring in one's family. It is worn usually by the eldest son of the dead person; in case, the eldest son is not available, his younger son can wear it. *Utari* can be worn only by the man who cremates the dead person. If the dead person has no son, one of his closest kinsmen, can light his pyre and then he has to wear *Utari*. In non-Kabirpanthi families, the man wearing *Utari* has certain rituals with the *Purohit* for nine consecutive days after which, his *Utari* is thrown into the water.


73. Bambholi Thakur, Taraiya, interviewed, 1 March 1996.

74. Suresh Yadav, Kurthaiya, interviewed, 29 August 1995. He is a graduate and was initiated in February 1995 at Kurthaiya Uttarwari Patti math.


76. Bambholi Thakur, a Lohar at Taraiya and Rup Lal Yadav, at Utara, expressed similar views in this regard.

77. Shiv Shankar Mukhiya was a notorious figure at Kurthaiya in 1970s. He is said to have been implicated in various cases of theft and burglary.

79. Sadhaks in Kabirpanth are very few in number. Siyadhari Das at Taraiya also claims that his esoteric experiences are obtained by the practice of meditation as described in Kabir's teachings. Several Mahants of the Jagudasi branch in Mithila are said to be Yogis who took 'Jal-Samadhi' voluntarily. In this regard, the names of Baba Nirmal Das and a Muslim Mahant at Konaharaghat, Hajipur; and Baba Doman Das at Bidupur math are prominent. Another such Mahanat is Vishwanath Das at Jullighat, Patna math. During my interview with him, he claimed that, by dint of his meditative strength, his surgery of kidney was conducted without any anaesthesia, as he made himself unconscious.

80. I met him in the chhawani of a Krishna Karakhi branch in Sonepur fair. He had come there with his family members; interviewed, 5 November 1995.


84. The new context for Kabirpanth was informed by its focus on carving out a place in a society dominated by Brahminical Hinduism; it had to strike its roots and widen its social base amidst multi-pronged competitions. Further, the spread of its influence depended mainly on the material and physical support of lay disciples unlike Ramanandis who prospered under royal patronage in this region.