

Understanding Kabir in the singing bodies of Malwa

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My fieldwork was filled with lots of love, warmth, care, and compassion. So much so that I needed time to process all the love and heart-bound emotions. Each human I pursued as a researcher took me in their arms with sheer joy and giving. Meeting Tultul and Rajesh from the Eklavya Foundation was a joyous coincidence. I thank them for opening their hearts, letting me into their lives, and unraveling conversations. Tultul had become a friend at first sight.

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Glossary and abbreviation

Bhakti - Devotion

Bhajan - Devotional song

Bhajan mandali – A group that comes together to sing.

EKVBM - Eklavya's Kabir Vichar Evam Bhajan Mandali

Ghunghat – Veil

Guru - Teacher

Kabir Panth - A sect that worships Kabir as God.

Mahant - A spiritual leader

Malwi – A language that is native to the Malwa region.

MMKY - Malwa Mahila Kabir Yatra

Nirgun – Refers to the divine without attributes.

Pad - lines/couplets

Saab - Sir

Sargun – Tradition that worships the divine with form.

Satsang - Informal group gathering to sing and discuss devotional songs.

Tamboor - Five-stringed musical instrument.

Waqueel – Lawyer

Yatra- Musical Journey

Yatri – Participants in the Yatra

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1. Introduction

Research Problems and Questions

This research is based in the Malwa region where Kabir has been orally transmitted for years. In the oral transmission of Kabir's philosophy, the body becomes a carrier and storage. In other words, the body constantly acts as transmitter and receiver and in this process, the body changes in the given time, space, and historical context. The research is, thus, an attempt to understand the embodiment of Kabir in the context of Yatra and the village, where the body operates. In addition to this, I also examine the socio-cultural dynamics of the Yatra and the village.

While numerous studies have examined Kabir's philosophy and its textual manifestations, there is a limited understanding of how this philosophy is lived and embodied by contemporary Kabir singers of Malwa in their everyday lives where the social surroundings hold central importance. On one hand, the ethnographic work of Hess (2015) discusses the oral tradition and examines singing in Malwa but does not pay detailed attention to the attributes of caste and gender in specific. Although Hess (2015) passingly mentions about the issues of gender representation in Kabir singing and poses a question to address the same, "In the Malwa region, Kabir's singing has been largely represented by male singers. It would be worthwhile to examine gender more fully in relation to Kabir, including who sings, speaks, and worships; and how people understand the representation of women and female voices in Kabir's poetry" (Hess 2015, 55). On the other hand, Virani (2016) locates the nature of the new context in which Kabir is sung by singers of Malwa and the emergence of Malwi¹ Kabir singing outside of Malwa. Both their works help in orienting and giving an overview of singing culture but do not look at the detailed embeddedness of Kabir's philosophy with the socio-cultural context of Malwa. Thus, it is worthwhile to study the principles that led to the embodiment of Kabir's philosophy and the vehement presence of the context. It is in this background; that the thesis attempts to answer

¹ A language that is native to the Malwa region. It is also used to describe the people and culture of Malwa (Virani 2016).

how Kabir’s philosophy is embodied by the contemporary singers of Malwa. This further leads to the secondary question of how Kabir’s philosophy is embodied by the lower caste singers in the socio-cultural setting where the caste system is dominant.

Moreover, from gender perspective, for female singers the Kabir singing operates in the context where patriarchy is vehement in their familial network. Kabir singing here functions as a mode of liberation. He is popular among female singers of the Malwa region who follow and sing his verses. Such a phenomenon is interesting to study because of the prevalent discourse in the literature that labels Kabir as misogynistic². The popularity of Kabir amongst female singers in Malwa region, in a way, contradicts the allegation against Kabir and his contribution to the status of women. This makes me curious to understand and explore the basis of this popularity amongst women in Malwa region and what does Kabir's philosophy do to these women? This then takes me to explore how is Kabir's philosophy embodied by the female singers of Malwa, specifically in the context of dominant patriarchal prevalence in the family structure? Thus, the study aims to explore the embodiment of Kabir's philosophy in the contemporary Kabir singers of the Malwa region in totality, as it covers the problem of caste and gender that is present in the socio-cultural environment of singers.

Main research question	
How is Kabir’s philosophy embodied by the contemporary singers of Malwa?	
Sub-question 1	Sub-question 2
How is Kabir’s philosophy embodied by the lower caste singers in Malwa where the caste-system is dominant?	How is Kabir’s philosophy embodied by the lower caste female singers where the patriarchy within the family is dominant?

Table 2. Research question and sub-question.

² Jyoti (2021)

Chapter Outline

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. In the first chapter, I discuss gaps in the literature in order to place the problematic of my research into context. Further, I chart the research questions to be explored followed by locating the problematic through literature. Later in the chapter, the literature review on caste and gender while locating Kabir's stance is incorporated. The second chapter is on the theoretical framework, where I discuss the embodiment theory and its relevance in understanding Kabir in the bodies that sing. In the next chapter on 'methodology', I describe the methods used to conduct my fieldwork such as participant observation, and interviews etc.

In the fourth chapter, I locate and discuss Malwa geographically, its culture, and the historical context in which singing is situated. It is to give the overview of the landscape, socio-cultural background and history of Kabir singing to the readers. The chapter further highlights the Eklavya Foundation's work with the Kabir singers in Malwa and discusses the changing context of Kabir singing in the region. The fifth chapter, engages with the question of how is Kabir's philosophy embodied by contemporary singers in the socio-cultural context of 'Yatra'?

In the sixth chapter, I discuss how is Kabir's philosophy embodied by the lower caste contemporary singers in the context of 'the village' where the caste system is conspicuously prevalent. In doing so, I elaborate the social norms pertaining caste structure of the village where caste defines social behavior and mobility of the people. Further in the chapter, I discuss the village as a habitus, where the singing bodies reside and embody Kabir in their everyday life. The chapter seven answers the next question of how Kabir is embodied by female singing bodies while using the concept of "devotion" and "femaleness" in the familial patriarchal setup. It will also explore the influence of the Kabir's philosophy on their actions, thoughts, and negotiation capacities in their daily lives. In the end, the conclusion sums up the major findings and analysis of the chapters.

1.1 Kabir and caste

The perpetuation of the varna hierarchy hinges on the concepts of "purity" and "impurity" within the Indian caste system, as discussed by Dumont (1980, 139). The label of being impure

and struggle with untouchability has given rise to two notable societal movements amongst lower caste Hindus. One such movement is “Sanskritization”, wherein lower caste communities adopt the practices and traditions of higher castes, a phenomenon explored by (Srinivas 1956). Parallely, there is a counter-cultural movement led by the lower caste in opposition to the Brahmin caste traditions. Jurgensmayer (1980) in his work “What if the untouchables don't believe in untouchability?” comments on the process of this counter-culture movement. According to him, even as lower caste groups adopt upper caste practices, their true convictions regarding these age-old customs may not align with conventional beliefs. The consensus of the lower caste is temporal due to the hegemony of the upper caste in the social setting. Over time, the incongruence between belief and practice culminates in resistance, prompting the emergence of counter-culture as an alternative to the traditional caste Hindu tradition.

Further, Omvedt (1980) writes how ideology is at the center of lower caste groups' replication of the upper caste customs, as a means of challenging the discriminatory upper caste culture. In one of the south Indian versions of Ramayana³, Ravana, the Demon is considered a God (Omvedt 1980); the role reversal or rather a replacement of Ram as deity with Ravana is a direct contradiction to what is considered higher and superior in the upper caste culture. Ravana replaced Ram, thus appropriating Ramayana but not discarding it completely, Lorenzen (1987) explains it when he writes that the counter-tradition of the lower caste group is influenced by the upper caste traditions but differs in ideology. In that sense, they share a sense of cultural homogeneity. This is further discussed based on the aspects that define commonality between the two such as: the myth of the lower caste group's social origin often constitutes some historical ties with upper caste figure. The difference is marked by the practice of devotion which is Nirgun for the lower caste groups (Lorenzen 1987). Moreover, the occupational, and economic status of lower-caste Hindus are also features that mark the distinction between the two categories. Often the peasant groups and economically backward communities are from the lower caste groups. Thus, in such a context of the caste society, the counter-culture comes as dissent due to the social need of the marginalized caste at the time. Specifically referring to the resurgence in the Bhakti movement, Pande (1987) writes that the social assertion was one

³ The epic is quite famous in Hindu mythology and idolizes Ram, the deity and Ravana is the demon here.

of the main vendettas of the subordinate caste saint-poets like Kabir and Ravidas. These poets were treated as outcastes and were experiencing discrimination on the social front. The movement rejected Brahminical oppression by attacking dogmatic practices around caste hierarchy in religious worship, and exclusivity of upper caste Brahman⁴ as priests. Bhakti (devotion) was at the core of the movement; it was categorized into two main forms of worship: Nirgun and Sargun. Sargun bhakti constitutes the devotion to a form of God. Nirgun bhakti means devotion towards the formless, to worship not the form but the formless in the life forms and oneself (Sahajobai 2015).

Kabir speaks of Nirgun devotion. Kabir's Nirgun form of worship buds from his rejection of the orthodoxy be it in the caste or religion. To exemplify the quality in Kabir's philosophy of Nirgun devotion, which speaks of a monotheistic form of worship, Omvedt characterizes the gunas present such as love, compassion, and adoration. Kabir speaks of these characters that mark the differential nature of devotion in the Nirgun form of worship (Omvedt 1980). Kabir stressed on the anubhav (experience) and equalitarianism as the key principles in his couplets. Kabir, in his couplets, contends the caste hierarchy of upper caste temple worship. To contest the idea of the divine in temple he proposes the divine as internalized and residing within all the bodies irrespective of caste, class, or religion, as stated in the couplet, "look in your heart alone, there live Ram and Karim" (Hess and Singh 1986, translation is mine). In this couplet, Kabir says both Ram, the Hindu deity and Karim, the Muslim deity reside in the heart of the seeker. He prompts to think of Ram and Rahim as internalized and not as a representative of any religion. Further, the internalized divine that Kabir talks of is omnipresent in the universe and is Nirgun i.e., formless in characteristic (Sahajobai 2015). His idea of internalized divine originated from the belief and interest in propagating a caste-less society referred to as Premnagar (city of love) in his couplets. Premnagar was Kabir's utopia of a caste-less, class-less society (Omvedt 2008, 18). I see the imagination of utopia as a way to reject or counter the traditional caste-based inequality and a way of proposing counter-culture in opposition to the upper-caste Hindu culture. The internalized divine is Kabir's juxtaposition on the upper caste idea of the divine, a significant marker of the counter-culture tradition (Lorenzen 1987).

⁴ Caste deemed highest in the caste hierarchy.

Overall, Kabir criticized the orthodoxical patterns of religion which have practices like fasting and giving alms but lack deep adoration and love for the internalized divine. He, in lieu, speaks of non-orthodox devotion; a devotion that consists of adoration and love towards the internalized divine and can be practiced by anyone irrespective of their caste.

1.2 Kabir and Gender

Kabir spoke in length on caste inequality, but he did not seem to be concerned with the status of women and gender inequality. Both Lorenzen (2011) and Sangari (1990) write about the hostile attitude toward looking at women in his couplet. Kabir labeled women as Maya (illusion). Maya is personified as a female seductress, which would mean distraction in everyday life. Vaudeville (1987, 39) also writes about how women were seen as an impediment to spiritual advancement in the verses composed by Kabir. Consequently, Sangari (1990, 1541) discusses Kabir's discomfort with women's sexuality when he calls them "a beautiful devouring snake". Thus, in Kabir's philosophy, the representation of women is debated. Women seem to appear seemingly as a distraction and impediment thus allocating the position of subordinate. Pande (1987, 220) confirms such a positioning of women in the composition by bhakti movement saints including Kabir. The subordinate status of women is a prolonged phenomenon in social, cultural, and political spheres in Indian society, as discussed by several researchers such as (Pande 1987) and (Chakravarti 1993). Omvedt (1980) discusses the logic of the sub-ordination of women briefly, where she finds the social categorization of women as subordinate, linked to her association with the samsara (worldly affairs). She births, menstruates, and thus is bound by material life coherently and hence considered impure⁵. It is suggested that anything that is material or samsaric (worldly affairs) is lowly, thus associated with the status of impure and an obstacle in the way to the realisation of Brahman (highest divine consciousness) (Omvedt 1980). Overall, according to this literature, Kabir seems to be

⁵ The same logic is applicable in the varna hierarchy where the caste associated with material culture is considered impure. For example, castes related to cleaning, building funeral pyres, etc. discussed by Omvedt (1980).

echoing the social phenomena of positioning women as subordinates. In the next chapter, I focus upon the theoretical framework employed to analyze the field data.

2. Theoretical framework

In my thesis, I will use the Embodiment theory to comprehend the interplay between Kabir's philosophy, the performance of his verses, and the socio-cultural contexts in which the process of imbibing his philosophy occurs. To understand the presence of Kabir, I observed a moving Yatra site (Malwa mahila Kabir Yatra/ MMKY), which means Malwa Women Kabir Journey, where Kabir's philosophy holds central importance. Post which I pursued some singers to understand the presence of Kabir's philosophy in the everyday contexts of their lives. And understand how the body speaks and responds in the given social context and deploys Kabir's philosophy.

Embodiment theory is entrenched in diverse disciplines like cognitive science, psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience, marking a departure from the Cartesian model that separated mind and body in a dualistic manner. The conventional perspective perceived the mind and body as distinct entities operating independently, irrespective of each other. However, the phenomenological insights of figures like Merleau-Ponty challenge this viewpoint by highlighting the inherent interconnectedness of the subjective body and objective mind. This stance accentuates the unity of subject and object in perception, as expounded by (Merleau-Ponty 1962). This, in other words, suggests that our thoughts, emotions, and perceptions are not solely confined to the brain, but are also influenced by bodily encounters, sensations, and movements at the conscious and unconscious levels. Explaining further Merleau-Ponty writes that the body isn't merely a vessel but a dynamic setting that interacts with the world thus relating it to the surroundings in which it functions (see Merleau-Ponty 1962 as in Csordas 1990). So, the body operates in a socio-cultural setting that determines the practice or aspirations. The manifestation of practice could be various actions, behaviors, and performances as also implicated through perception. Perception and practice are tied together in the body as "being-in-world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 64). The body as a subject acts or practices in synch with perception, and that which is being practiced is sensible and reasonable for the practitioner (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Behind the phenomena of practice is also the unconscious totality that operates in unison with practice and the objective condition of life which Bourdieu refers to as habitus (Csordas 1990). The unconscious totality is not often obvious but operates like an unseen process that is imbibed by the body operating in the given socio-cultural structure. It is the signifier in a culture that exists and is unquestionable, referred

to as “absolute doxa” (Hillier and Rooksby 2016, 7). It is a generative feature behind different unrelated responses to many situations. Bourdieu (2016, 44) puts it simply that a system of shared dispositions i.e., seeing, being, and thinking between people that last long, if not forever, come together to form “habitus”. It can also be defined as a system of long-lasting structures of perception, conception, and action common between people. Habitus is not inborn and thus “non-natural” (Bourdieu 2016, 45). It can be changed by experience, knowledge, and acquiring of different dispositions. Habitus is the product of the same objective condition in which it operates. He further remarks that it changes in the changing society and is a structuring structure in which the body operates. He further discusses that the objective condition and structuring structure of the dispositions can be contradictory which leads to a change in the structure and becomes part of the habitus eventually (Bourdieu 2016, 44-46). Thus, body responds to the objective conditions based on the nature of its habitus.

Consecutively, Wolputte (2004, 252) discusses “bodiliness” as a de-centered subjectivity that originates in the external field of meaning i.e., social, and cultural. Therefore, the body becomes an epistemological issue that is in flux. The flux is the phenomena of the changing body concerning social and cultural leading to the unmaking and making of the self and identity. Further Douglas remarks that the body is a medium of expression that is controlled by the social systems (Douglas 1978 as cited in Wolputte 2004, 253). Thus, the body operates as subjective and is reflexive in its practice. And it functions as intracorporal and intersubjective in the social system.

Coming to the Malwa region, Kabir has been orally transmitted and his philosophy has been embodied for years in a certain socio-cultural setting of the village, within a given historical experience of the caste system and cultural setting of patriarchy. The body becomes a container in the process of oral transmission as it carries and stores a set of knowledge that is culturally shared. The process of being a constant transmitter and receiver develops in the given historical context. This is what Merleau-Ponty (1962) calls the body as a setting in relation to the world. Hence it is integral to look at two components in the dominant habitus: first, the human body, its experience, and response i.e. “bodily sensations” and “behavioral patterns” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 275). And secondly, analyze the cultural structures and objective conditions where it operates. I do not intend to separate the body from the culture but point towards obvious intersectionality between the carriers and context of Kabir’s philosophy. It involves

understanding the body as a site where social, cultural, and individual meanings are inscribed and enacted. So, I will explore how is Kabir's philosophy embodied in this habitus and what is the unconscious i.e., the precept behind following Kabir and the sui genesis for Kabir singing culture. Moreover, I will try to understand the habitus of Yatra and village as a paradigm where behavior surfaces in the context of Kabir singing. In that sense, to study the embodiment of Kabir's philosophy it is relevant to examine the various responses, movements, and experiences of these caste bodies who have also been transmitters of Kabir's oral tradition of singing.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this research involved ethnographic engagement and a combination of qualitative research tools to gain a comprehensive understanding of the embodiment of Kabir's philosophy among the contemporary Kabir singers in the Malwa region. The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted for seven weeks (between February to April 2023) primarily in four villages of Dewas and Ujjain districts in the Malwa region of central India, in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Additionally, I traveled to the cities of Indore and Bhopal to conduct interviews with members of organizations (such as Eklavya Foundation and Kabir Jan Vikas Samuh) dedicated to the study and promotion of Kabir's teachings.

Participant observation⁶ played a crucial role in the fieldwork employing direct observation of the everyday lives of the Kabir singers, immersion in the performances, and interactions with the singers. Moreover, by actively participating in the Yatra and other performance contexts, I could closely observe the singer's expressions, gestures, and overall embodiment of Kabir's philosophy. Furthermore, visual analysis of the sites of performances where the singers performed, 'on stage performance' and 'Satsang performance' helped understand in detail the enactment and embodiment of the singer and the audience.

To gain a broader perspective on the embodiment of Kabir's philosophy in everyday life, I stayed with four different Kabir singers in their respective villages. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the singers' socio-cultural contexts, including the family and village dynamics. I also had an opportunity to witness how Kabir's philosophy influenced on and integrated into various aspects of their life. I interviewed 15 individuals that includes, unstructured interviews⁷ with young singers from the villages, members of organizing

⁶ The definition of participant observation suggested in Calhoun (2002) very well summarizes the spirit in which this study was methodologically carried out. According to Callhoun, Participation Observation is "a method of research in anthropology which involves extended immersion in a culture and participation in its day-to-day activities".

⁷ Check annexure for the details of the interviewees.

committees involved in the Yatras, and individuals from Eklavya Foundation. This provided insights into the transition in the practice and transmission of Kabir singing. Overall, this multi-method approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the embodiment of Kabir's philosophy among the Kabir singers in the Malwa region. In other words, by combining participant observation, interviews, group discussions, and visual analysis, I obtained a rich and nuanced understanding of how Kabir's philosophy is lived and enacted in the performances and everyday lives of singers.

4. Contextualization into research

4.1 Reaching Malwa

One of the days, when the usual Groningen weather was gloomy, I heard a song from Kabir sung by Shabnam Virmani. She is one of the famous female singers who did the work of compiling, documenting, and making Malwa's oral tradition of Kabir alive in places other than Malwa. She also did an extensive documentation project on Kabir singing. Her song acted as a catalyst for me to do the fieldwork on Kabir. I first reached Mumbai and then Indore. Indore is the city where the Kabir Yatra was organized. The Yatra venue was a field behind the famous Ram temple of Indore city. The street was lit, a few cars, some bikes, and two buses stood outside the field. The venue was well lit too, with decorations and posters outside the entry gate. Prahladji received me at the venue. He welcomed me twice, first not as a student from an international university and later as a student from an international university. The first time when he received me, he looked at me and the glance was somewhat indifferent, irrespective I greeted him warmly. He did not recognize me then as a university student. However, shortly after I found a seat, I received a call from him asking about my estimated arrival time. Hearing this, I walked towards the gate where we met again. I told him, 'This is me, I am already here!' He smiled and hugged me this time, and introduced me to a few people around, including his elder daughter-in-law, Sangeeta. Every time he introduced me, he said, "ye beti foreign se aayi hai, research karne", which translates as this daughter has come from a foreign land to do her research. This introduction had some sort of discomfoting effect on my body, sort of making me feel like a guest in my own country. In the initial few introductory meetings with his acquaintances, I would correct him and tell him that I am from India. But he continued introducing me as a foreign se beti, at times foreign would get replaced with amrika (America). Later I again corrected him, stating my university is in the Netherlands and that's a different country than America. Then the introductory country changed from Amrika to Nidarland (Netherlands) for the rest of my stay with him.

4.2 Malwa and its culture

Malwa, the region primarily located in western Madhya Pradesh (M.P.) but also extends into southeastern Rajasthan and Gujarat and has its unique folk version of Kabir Bhajans (Hess

2015). These Bhajans are widely sung by singers in India and Pakistan, showcasing the influence and popularity of Kabir's teachings. Malwi, a dialect of Hindi, serves as the main language of the region. The language and the culture share a commonality in the region. "From the colorful turbans that men wear to the dal-bati⁸ that people eat, to the forms of their local languages and the osmosis of song texts and melodies, this part of M.P. has much in common with Rajasthan" (Hess 2015, 11). Indore and Ujjain are two prominent cities in the Malwa region. Dewas, situated in the center of both cities, holds a significant position in terms of knowledge and understanding of Kabir. Most of the Kabir singers belong to the villages that are in and around the district of Dewas and Ujjain. This is where the research has been conducted.

4.3 Kabir in Malwa: Historical and current context.

This section briefly introduces Kabir. The subsection below briefly discusses his situatedness in Malwa and the people who follow his philosophy.

Kabir Das was born in Varanasi, India, and spoke in the one of the local dialects of the Hindi language i.e., Awadhi. He was a weaver by profession and sold the clothes he used to weave. His writings are the criticism of the experiences he had from being a member of lower caste group. He shared several identities such as being a weaver (also his caste group), a saint, and a rebel, all these experiences helped him understand the construction of the society and provoked him. One can also call him a social scientist, his couplets look more like an enquiry and research into the state of self, religion, culture, and society. Kabir lives in singers and listeners, social contexts, and personal histories.

4.3.a. Kabir singing and his influence in Malwa

In the villages of Malwa where I did my fieldwork, Kabir's status remains ambivalent, whether he is a social voice to be analyzed or a deity to be worshipped remains unresolved (Virani 2022). Virani (2016, 205) writes that Kabir is "mystical, devotional, and political all at once".

⁸ Traditional cuisine made up of wheat and pulses.

I will briefly write about the two kinds of Kabir that I observed; one that has to do with deity image and the other that is concerned with voicing out social issues. The deity Kabir is the one that is found in Kabirpanth. It is a sect that sees Kabir as a God and its followers address him as Kabir saab (Master Kabir). Furthermore, the leaders of the sect are claimed to be the reincarnation of Kabir (Hess 2015). The Kabirpanth tradition consists of practices such as Chauka aarti (a specific form of worship), Guru⁹ Vandana (paying homage to the Guru), and other rituals alike. The traditional and dogmatic tenets of Kabirpanth were challenged by non-traditional Kabir or rather 'progressive Kabir' as it is referred to by its followers. These followers make a distinction between traditional and progressive Kabir based on regressive and dogmatic religious practices imbued in Kabirpanth tradition. The progressive Kabir then appears as a voice that challenges the notion of caste and religious dogmas.

To gain a deeper understanding of Kabir's situatedness in Malwa, I spoke with several Kabir followers, singers, and NGO representatives who integrate his philosophy into their work and practices. I write about some of them below, who were part of my reflections and research during the fieldwork.

Prahaladji

The first person I met was the singer Prahlad Singh Tippaniya. He was born in Luniyakhedi village in a Dalit family. He is the first amongst his whole family and siblings, who studied a master's degree. To pursue his study and take care of his family he had to continue the labor job of a Well-digger for a considerable period of years. His parents also worked as bonded laborers. Later he got a job as a school-teacher. His school was based in a village which required him to walk for 6 km. On one of the days while walking back from school he heard the sound of tambour, which struck him. In the process of learning tambour, his teacher asked him to sing. He has been singing ever since, first in the mandali (singing group), later, on stages in the local fairs and, people's houses. Now he sings on big stages in front of politicians, movie-stars and is also invited often by his international followers. As his popularity grew, he was also awarded the Padmashree (fourth highest civilian award by the Indian government) for singing Kabir

⁹ Guru means teacher.

Bhajans. His elder son is now his event manager, and his grandson handles his social media and promotion from Indore. He has recorded many Kabir songs in his own recording studio that was started by his family. Now that the times of cassettes are gone, the songs are uploaded on his YouTube channel.¹⁰

Kaluramji

During my pursuit of knowing Kabir, I met Kaluram Bamaniya, another famous singer who lives in the Tonk Khurd village that comes between Indore and Bhopal city. He was born in a different village but later moved to Tonk Khurd village due to casteism in the village he was born. He is an extremely caring person, he called me twice out of concern when I was on the bus. He came to pick me up from the bus station. It took us half an hour to reach his village. It was a big and densely populated village. In the village, he was commonly referred to as Bamaniyaji by the people. Amongst these people are also the people who once did not let him enter their houses.

Upon arriving at his home, we were warmly greeted by his daughter, Arpita. The residence he lived in was situated directly across from a home belonging to a Muslim family. The two little girls from that family often jovially interacted with Kaluramji. His house has grown from a small mud house to relatively bigger concrete house. In one of the rooms there was a television that was constantly playing. The hall had pictures of Kabir. Here, I wondered if Kabir is formless then why this picture? As I was flowing in my thoughts, his wife in the ghunghat (veil) called for lunch. I was welcomed with Malwa's food. The spice in the food had the capacity to produce a burning sensation in the gut for days and at the same time it can taste very well to the palate.

Narayanji

I met Narayanji on the bus to Indore. Some of the young co-travelers insisted him to sing. In the sound of honks from the bus, shaking petrol cans beneath my seat, and wind he sang. As he

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/@PrahlaadSinghTipanya>

sang it felt as if the tissues were getting unstrung and a sense of epiphany was rising.¹¹ He stopped after two Bhajans, he looked tired. The strong rays of the sun dehydrated the old man's throat. I offered him water from my water bottle. He smiled in exchange. After the bus stopped. He stepped down tired yet looking agile. Clad in a white dhoti (a male clothing attire worn around the waist) and cream-colored Kurta, he walked with a black bag clung to his side.

After some days, I met him again in a garage shop run by his nephew in Maksi village. I had planned to meet Narayanji just for a few hours, ask a few questions, record it, and return to Tonk Khurd (Kaluramji's village). But Narayanji refused to talk on the recorder in the short meeting and invited me to stay in his village instead, to find the answers. The 70-year-old Narayanji practiced Kabir not just in singing but in other aspects of his life. His connection with Kabir dates back to his childhood when their father used to sing Kabir's songs. However, at that time, he enjoyed it as a hobby. The true meaning of Kabir's couplets gradually unfolded over time. His social understanding developed not only through Kabir's words but also through the laws written in the Indian constitution by B.R Ambedkar.¹² During my research, he was among the few individuals who perceived Kabir and the principles of the constitution similarly. He believed that Kabir provided him with an opportunity to challenge blind faith, casteism, and religious orthodoxy, while Ambedkar emphasized the need to establish an egalitarian, non-casteist society through legal means.

¹¹ I discuss these sensorial changes caused by Bhajan in the chapters later.

¹² Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar chaired the constitutional committee that drafted the Indian constitution.



Picture 1: Narayanji sitting on the boundary of the village Well.

Suresh Patel

In the series of meetings with various people related to Kabir's philosophy, I also met Suresh Patel. He founded Kabir Janvikas Samuh, an organization working on including Kabir's philosophy in art and education for children and youth. He is a man in his 60s who retired from a government job and continues to work towards spreading Kabir's philosophy in art, culture, and education. I visited him in Indore to understand his work concerning the conservation of Malwa's Kabir Culture. He was a gentle human who gladly invited me, offered food, and spoke for hours. He also published books on Kabir's pad (lines) and its constitutional relevance that is available in Hindi language at a nominal rate. Of which he offered me a copy as a gift. His work with artists included publishing books, helping Prahladji record his first cassette, and supporting performers in getting performance spaces within and outside Malwa. When I asked him why was his organization's name based on Kabir's name? He replied that Kabir was a person who possessed neither the strength of lineage, nor the strength of caste, religion, or politics. He was such a weak person in caste and class, yet he challenged the mighty forces of tyrant rulers such as Sikander Lodhi, who reigned during his time. He continued, "when people were forced to bow down with their heads covered, Kabir recited couplets to question his autocracy. Kabir said, "Your Lord is deaf, your lord is mute", referring to Sikander Lodhi as deaf and dumb towards the needs of the public. He said such qualities of Kabir encouraged him to take his philosophy to people.

Leelabai and Nimibai

Leelabai is from the Biselkheri village and Nimibai is from Luniyakhedi village. Both sang Kabir Bhajan since childhood. My stay with them helped me understand the gendered struggles in Kabir singing. It was with them that I started looking at the problems of a patriarchal culture where Kabir was sung. Leelabai helped me understand how singing can be empowering and helpful in the claiming the agency (of freewill). Leelabai motivated her daughter to ride a motorbike, simply because she had to go to Kabir Bhajan mandali. Her daughter became the first woman to ride a motorbike in the village. On the other hand, Nimibai helped me look at how singing can be private and yet depict devotional qualities that lead to joy. I discuss their engagement with Kabir in detail in the chapter **focuses** .

4.3.b. Kabir Bhajan and Vichar Mandali (KBVM)

In this section, I discuss the genesis of a platform that was based on Kabir's philosophy, which not only popularized the social aspects of his philosophy but also shaped the thought and behavior of the participating singers.

Eklavya, an NGO that carries out educational work in Madhya Pradesh, started Kabir Bhajan Evam Vichar Manch (KBVM) in 1992. It was a series of monthly Kabir singing sessions that lasted for eight years. Hess (2015, 24) defined this series of Kabir Bhajan and discussion sessions as a platform that generated significant activity and reflection, leaving a lasting impact on the Kabir culture of the region. This platform served as a space for constructing and experimenting with social ideas inspired by Kabir's philosophy. This initiative was carried out under the guidance and collaboration of Siyag¹³ Patel. It was together with other like-minded individuals that the idea of KBVM, as a space for dialogue and exploration of Kabir's teachings, came to fruition.

¹³ Affectionately known as Siyagbhai served as the director of Eklavya during the 1990s, a time when the Kabir Bhajan Evam Vichar Manch (KBVM) was established in 1992.

The foundation of KBVM lies in the already existing Kabir singing culture and Siyagbhai's affinity to Kabir's couplets in books. The eventuality of the formation was supported when he met Narayanji carrying his tamboor¹⁴ and boarding a bus to attend a Satsang.¹⁵ That's when he was introduced to Kabir Panth and witnessed the ritualization of Kabir's teachings, such as the chauka arti (a specific form of worship) and offerings to the Mahant (the head of the sect). This experience raised disbelief and discomfort and led him to the ideation of KBVM. The one of the motives was to challenge the ritualistic practice associated with Kabir in Malwa.

KBVM organized Bhajan mandali¹⁶, where Kabir was sung and followed by the discussions and interpretation of the Bhajan. The platform prompted the use of Kabir's poetry and Bhajans as a tool for igniting discourse and raising awareness about societal concerns such as caste-based discrimination and sectarian violence. The verses were not only sung but also interpreted. This introduced the culture of debate and discussion around pressing samajik mudde (social issues). Siyagbhai also emphasized that the space envisioned encompasses both the phenomena – of inner and outer experiences, which has bearings on self-realization and the transformation of the outer world i.e. work to eliminate inequality, discrimination, etc. These ideas were inspired by Kabir's philosophy. Later, the pamphlet was used as the campaign material to publicize the KBVM platform to the masses. It was distributed in the villages, given to schoolteachers, and so on.

KBVM also influenced singers like Narayanji, Kaluramji, and Prahladji who were associated with Kabir Panth. In the spirit of Kabir Panth, they described their earlier approach to singing as traditional, marked by superstitious beliefs and dogmatic practices of Guru worship. In Narayanji's words, he says that he would travel long distances whenever he was called by the Guru to perform Kabir Bhajan without expecting anything in return. However, he eventually realized that they were being exploited for the Guru's personal gain; the Guru would receive offerings in money and kinds but did not share it with him. He credits the discussions at the KBVM that led him to see the problems in the religious dogmas and practices. This eventually

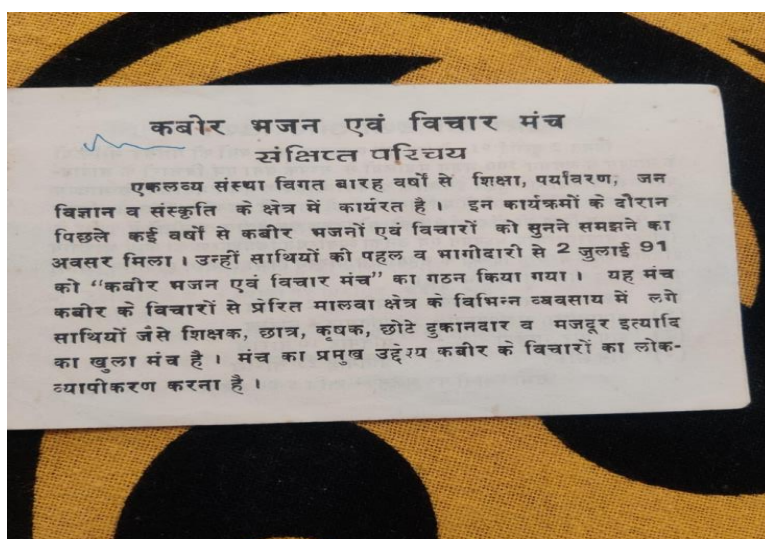
¹⁴ A five-stringed musical instrument.

¹⁵ Informal group gathering to sing and discuss devotional songs.

¹⁶ Devotional singing group.

led him to the process of deconditioning from the orthodoxies of Kabirpanth. These actions were not noticeable or rather not disturbing for him until his participation in KBVM discussions. Thus, one can say he shifted from embodying traditional Kabir's practices to the progressive Kabir's ideas.

To conclude, KBVM had an integral role in shaping the Kabir singing culture of Malwa into more social-dialogic means. Because of KBVM, singers like Narayanji and Kaluramji credit a change in their mindset due to the space it provides for discussing social meanings embedded in the couplets and Bhajans. Thus, KBVM was functioning as a platform for reflection, dialogue, and social change.



Picture 2: The pamphlet spreading the word about the KBVM platform in the Malwa region.

4.4 The new context of Kabir singing: technology and listening.

The new musical context in which Kabir is sung has undergone remarkable changes and gained popularity through new age mediatization. These changes are evident in the emergence of new performance contexts that attract a diverse global audience, distinct from traditional spaces. Now Kabir is sung in unconventional venues such as marriages, restaurants, and parties by urban bands influenced by Kabir singers from Malwa. These spaces, unlike the traditional performance settings, utilize popular instruments like guitar, banjo, and drum accompanied by a rhythm different from the local Malwi version of Kabir singing. Furthermore, young urban

bands have gained popularity and financial stability through globalized media platforms. This has resulted in shifting the focus of singing toward financial opportunities in the present day.

In the new context, the significance of the song itself, active listening, and direct communication with the audience appears to diminish. The relationship between performers and listeners has also transformed. On the contrary, during performances, Prahladji still holds old styles of singing often begins by explaining the meaning of the Bhajan that is a very talkative style of singing. Such style of singing establishes a distinct connection with that audience which is clearly missing in new style of singing. Attentive listening holds immense importance for traditional performers who seek a deep connection with their audience.

Advancement in technology is another important medium that plays a vital role in spreading the Kabir's music. Previously, limited communication networks and inadequate roads hindered the dissemination of music. But with the advent of modern technology, these challenges have been overcome. In current times, networks, and platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have revolutionized the sharing of music, enabling Kabir singers to instantly reach a global audience. Geographical boundaries are transcended as performances, recordings, and videos can be accessed from anywhere. This accessibility allows individuals to experience Kabir's music either through online platforms or booking singers for live performances at restaurants or private events.

To sum up, Kabir's performances are currently undergoing a significant shift towards new and unconventional contexts. The utilization of diverse instruments, alterations in performance style. The emergence of new performance spaces has brought about a transformation in the Kabir singing culture. To give the readers a perspective on Kabir singing in contemporary times, it was important to discuss the new evolving context where orality is no longer unaltered by media influence, however it is beyond the scope of my research to delve into details of what it does to the existing paradigm of Kabir singing culture in Malwa region.

5. Yatra as a ‘habitus’

While the previous chapter mainly focused on contextualization into research that included the spread of Kabir singing culture in the Malwa region and beyond. In the current chapter I will analyze the embodiment of Kabir’s philosophy in the context of Yatra (journey). More specifically, I, here, try to understand Yatra as a habitus. To this end, I will begin by writing about Malwa Mahila Kabir Yatra (MMKY) and evaluate its “effect” at the level of self and the social (Schaefer 2023, 82). Further, I explore the two major singing formats of Yatra i.e. Satsang which is more informal and unplanned, and other is staged performance which is neatly planned, and organized.

5.1 MMKY: Introduction and unveiling of the singing space.

Yatra in Malwa is not very old, instead it is a contemporary intervention. Yatra here means journey and those who participate in Yatra are called Yatris (travelers). In 2011, the Malwa Kabir Yatra was first organized in Madhya Pradesh which started in the village of Luniyakhedi, the home of Prahladji. The primary goal of the Malwa Kabir Yatra was to conserve Kabir’s oral culture, promote communal harmony, and facilitate self-awareness for future generations through Bhajan singing. In 2023, a new initiative called the Malwa Mahila Kabir Yatra (MMKY) was launched by the Eklavya Foundation. The primary objective of MMKY was to encourage the active participation of women in Kabir's oral culture, which also focused on promoting dialogue and creating a democratic environment for women. Traditionally, the art of Kabir folk singing in Malwa had predominantly been represented by men. Therefore, MMKY sought to address the underrepresentation of women and provide space to engage and contribute to the culture of Kabir singing in Malwa.

Both the Malwa Kabir Yatra and MMKY seemed similar in the skeleton but differed in some ways. For instance, Malwa Yatra had more singers from outside Malwa, both male and female. However, it did not prioritize the mobilization of singers from Malwa. On the other hand, MMKY prioritized female participation that included predominantly the female performing groups consisting of young girls and middle-aged women from the villages and surrounding towns. It also invited some female singers from outside of Malwa but female participation from Malwa was prominent.

Apart from this, the Yatra consists of several other elements such as Bhajans, singers, musical instruments, distinct singing styles of singers, singing spaces, participants, enactments, conversations, and the stage. These different elements come together to form the experience of Yatra. Bhajans are the verses that are sung by the singers together or solely. And when singers come together to sing it, is referred as a Bhajan mandali. The Bhajan mandali constitutes mostly a lead singer and other members who sing along at times and mostly play different musical instruments such as harmonium, khartal, tamboor, majira, and dholak. It was observed primarily in the mandali structures of Malwa. Mandali structure is generally pre-decided and each group operates separately. But in some cases, it is also formed impromptu on stage or Satsang.

In MMKY, as mentioned above, the singing groups were mostly from the villages in Malwa that constituted singers from different age groups and majorly came from the lower caste groups. There were some young girls who started to sing Kabir by learning in their own houses or the neighborhood in the past 5-6 years. The singers from Malwa had a distinct style of singing which was more colloquial and dialectic. Some singers who were from outside of Malwa were not raised or learned to sing Kabir specifically in Malwa. For example, Anubhuti, Anahita, and Ragini, all three female singers grew up outside of Malwa and chose to learn Kabir at a later age by choice and sang Kabir Bhajans in Indian classical style.

5.1.a. Singing spaces: Satsang and staged performance

The last section discussed a brief history of the Yatra in Malwa and the composition of the singing groups. In this section, I will talk about the different singing spaces/formats that I observed i.e. Satsang and staged performances. In Satsang, the singing, selection of songs, dance by the participants, and swaying, were all unplanned. Whereas staged performances were a mix of rehearsed, planned and some other unplanned aspects. For example, some songs were planned, the stage was planned but the responses were unplanned. Both are created due to the cultural disposition of Kabir Bhajan. I will describe the nature of these two formats in detail in the following section.

Satsang can be referred to as the informal gathering where followers of a common sect or people believing in the same philosophy come together to sing and hear Sant – Vani (words of the saint), in this case, Kabir. The emphasis was on reflecting upon and finding joy in the Sant-

Vani, rather than showcasing the musical talent (Virani 2022). The word Satsang can break down into three parts, *Sat* meaning truth, *ka* meaning with, and *sang* meaning togetherness. Thus, Prahaladji defines Satsang as togetherness with truth.

The Satsang I participated in took place in a circular format. The participants and singers sat together on the floor, creating an informal and closely-knit space. There were no distinct seating arrangements for the performers like in the stage performances. In Prahaladji's ashram at Luniyakhedi village, we sat on mats in his garage. As the sound of the Bhajan spread in the vicinity more singers and listeners gathered. Satsang was not planned beforehand; the selection of songs to be sung and who will play which musical instrument were not pre-decided. Men, women, and children behaved in a certain way. They randomly sat in a circular format without anyone instructing or organizing them. Some people swayed, some hum along, and few even danced. This distinct way of behaving or organizing their body in the way one sits, songs that will be sung, and musical instrument players all were operating as if it was known, depicting the embodied behavior.

The knowingness here was the shared cultural knowledge of the Kabir Bhajan and the behavior associated with it that was engrained in the body of the participants. Due to which they were behaving in a certain way such as swaying or sitting in a circular manner. This behavior was not planned and rather operated unconsciously when people came together for Satsang. Children paid close attention to the Bhajan and at times danced, neither were they called nor were they taught to sing. But young children in the villages, specifically in the houses of the singers knew Kabir Bhajans. This was because Bhajans were part of the surroundings. The surroundings included the elders singing, playing musical instruments, and their distinct behaviors including the way they sat and carried their bodies when the Bhajans were sung. Thus, it was getting engrained in their consciousness and showing up in the practice i.e., the knowledge of Bhajan and (un)taught way of behaving in the Satsang.

Staged performances are a modern setting in which Kabir is performed, distinct from the traditional Satsang space. Each aspect of the stage performance was planned and organized. The Bhajan mandalis were selected. There is a clear segregation between who can sing and who is a better singer. Bhajans to be sung were rehearsed. The stage was decorated in a particular way. There was a fee that the singing group charged for singing. The singing group was on the stage and the audience was at a distance, which made it non-dialogic. The stage

decoration was visually attractive and held a touch of vernacularity.¹⁷ There are volunteers in place if a stage performance is to be organized and participants are asked to register.

The stage performances were the most attractive element of the Kabir Yatra. It had different singing groups queued and as compared to Satsang the participation during the staged performance was the higher. Ironically, It was quite a dynamic space but lacked a constant dialogic engagement between singers and the audience like Satsang. It was not possible to ask questions or respond in speech. The line between the performer and the non-performer was clearly demarcated. Yet when the singers sang, the audience responded with their bodies, they swayed, hummed along, some cried, and some enacted. The response was not towards the singer or for anyone else unlike Satsang when in response people asked questions.



Picture 4: The stage before the beginning of the performance on day1 of MMKY.

Additionally, stage performances have become an occupation for Kabir singers. It is also seen as a matter of pride to get an opportunity to sing on stage. Children and youngsters aspire to become famous Kabir singers. It was evident during my interactions in Malwa when some

¹⁷ On MMKY's stage there was a big poster of a woman with long flowing hair, eyes closed, and holding a tambour. It is a symbolic representation of women singing Kabir.

singers enquired whether I could help arrange stage performances for them. In another conversation, one of my interlocutors was requesting a singer to support her granddaughter in obtaining opportunities to showcase her talent on stage, with a strong desire to see her achieve fame. Thus, stage performances were more commercial and varied in expression of Kabir singing within Malwa.

Moreover, it was observed that both the spaces that were integral to spreading Kabir's culture in Malwa differed from each other. One where singing was non-hierarchical, and singers were not chosen. In the other form, singing was planned and performed, and singers were chosen. Satsang had a local origin and staged performances were born elsewhere and traveled to Malwa in past years. Though both had distinct differences in the behavior, setting, and process but both had Bhajan in common and led to some kind of bodily experiences and movements at times, which I discuss at length in the section below.

5.2 Body as being-in-the-world: Embodying Bhajan.

5.2.a. Effect on Self

Bhajan are the verses that are sung and are often combined with musical instruments. Kabir Bhajan is sung and transmitted orally which means they are stored in the body. The body becomes a transmitter and receiver in a given socio-cultural context. Bhajan involves both a singer and a listener. The sound of the Bhajan, for the singers and listeners, creates a distinct feeling. Leelabai describes that her inner calling to sing Bhajan was due to the sound she heard from anhad (infinity). This experience of hearing the sound from anhad (infinity) was personal to her. She calls this voice a connection that she felt in her body; she describes it as calmness in her heart and emptiness in her mind. This experience is her encouragement to sing Kabir.¹⁸ Prahladji shared his experience of being drawn to the sound of tambour when he was present in one of the Satsang gatherings. Several singers describe listening to Kabir Bhajan as a

¹⁸ Kabir in one of his couplets speaks of a sound that reverberates in the sky and can only be heard by those who are wise. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHt2wqkTH64>

phenomenon that leads to reflection or deep thought for the listeners. The songs affect the listener, and this effect is referred to as *shabd ki chot* (struck by the word). Below I write about the experience of a few participants and singers I interviewed, who sing Kabir or listen to Kabir Bhajan to understand how it affects them.

I interviewed Ravi, a 24-year-old volunteer at MMKY, who was also a singer. During the interview, he got a call which he initially ignored. However, upon my insistence, he decided to take the call. Later in the conversation, he revealed that it was about his brother being involved in an argument with a gang and sustaining a head injury. Commenting on his brother's behavior, Ravi stated that everything that was meant to happen had already occurred. He further said that he couldn't expect his brother to become a saint and rather recognized that everyone has their own journey. He also mentioned that his previous self was very impulsive because he would engage in physical fights in the past. Ravi further added that he is now able to detach and look at incidents objectively. He further remarks that this objective way of looking helps him to reflect which he has learnt from Kabir Bhajan.

To make sense of it, I will explain Kabir's couplet in which he says, "Be aware of your body, the thief will come."¹⁹ In this couplet, Kabir refers to the body as a subject and thief is metaphor for the emotions such as pride, jealousy, and anger. He simply asks to be aware of what is entering one's body. Coming back to Ravi's example, he stated two major transformations to describe the effect of Kabir Bhajan on his self, one is a shift in his impulsive nature and the other is a state of detachment. Based on what is implied in the couplet, his impulsive nature and state of attachment were the thieves in his body. And due to being aware he could stop the thieves.

To understand this process further, I spoke to a few more participants who shared their experiences of listening to Kabir Bhajan. As Bhajans were being performed, people danced and eventually found themselves drifting off to sleep while still immersed in the Bhajan. Some of them described the experience in Yatra as different. On asking what they meant by different, people frequently used the words ecstatic, joyous, and delightful. Ecstasy means feeling or expressing overwhelming happiness. Joyous and a state of delight relate to ecstasy leading to

¹⁹ Original is "hoshiyar rehna re nagar me chor aawega". Youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOc9JwG821A>

the movement of the hands and feet of the participant. Many participants describe sensations of mood-elevating nature and experiences of elation during the performances which I also experienced. There are a few common movements that I saw people repeating such as hands moving in a circular motion, people clapping at times, and feet tapping on the ground. All these movements are seemingly rhythmic in nature. Often the recipient of the performance closes their eyes for long moments. I asked one of them why do you close your eyes? He said, “I don't know, I did not realize at which moment my eyes closed”. One of the other participants also remarked that participating in Yatra changes something within, it helps in being calm and patient. This feeling grew whenever he came to Yatra.

A possible interpretation is that the body already experienced a certain kind of effect in the past when the Bhajan was heard and with the repeated²⁰ participation in Yatra it operated based on pre-established knowledge of the experience it had. Some individuals like Ravi emphasize their experience of knowing self and the change of consciousness. Such a process was referred to as the “alteration of experiences” by Myerhoff (2012, 245), which occurred at the personal level for Ravi through dedicated practice and engagement with Kabir's Bhajan.

I also noticed two other singers, who were from the village, dancing in one of the Satsang gatherings: one male and the other female. One was a 70-year-old Narayanji and the other was a 40-year-old Devi, who had ghunghat (veil) covering her face. Narayanji was the only male performer to dance during the whole Yatra. And Devi was dancing with her eyes closed as if she was in a trance. Both shared that feelings they had due to listening Bhajans, led them to dance. They also shared this kind of bodily movement i.e., dancing is not common in their village. Schechner and Appel (1990, 4) call such a phenomenon “the transformation of being or consciousness” through performance. The performer, and sometimes even the spectators, undergo a change through the immersive experience of the performance as was evidently observed in the case of Devi and Narayanji’s body movements. This was possible for Devi and Narayanji to dance in the Yatra, but they cannot do the same in the village because they have perceived and embodied the space of the Yatra differently. The body was making an unconscious distinction between being in the village and being in Yatra. Next, the process of

²⁰ Zarrili (1990) discusses how repetition leads to embodying the behavior, body language. He specifically writes about Kathakali dancers and other art performers.

identification and immersion while listening to the Bhajan in the Yatra surroundings led to a certain response or behavior in the body. Thus, marking the distinction between the embodied behavior in Yatra and that in the cultural schema of the village.

5.2.b. Effect on social

“I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 82).”

During the Yatra, the participants were from villages and cities. There were students, teachers, wealthy businessmen, farmers, artists, politicians, housewives, musicians, dancers and so on. Despite individuals coming together from different socio-cultural settings, Yatra could exist or rather host different bodies and managed to produce a behavior that was distinct in the setting. To explain the distinctness, I will write about the behavior observed in the space that implies change when compared to how the same individuals operate in the village setting.

In the village where lower and upper castes reside together, there are several notions related to what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. Food and feast relate to ideas of purity and impurity with a certain set of cultural norms imbibed by both the caste groups. For example, if the feast is organized in the village, the upper caste is served first, and lower caste individuals are served later. But during the Yatra, everyone i.e., men, women, Dalit, Brahmin, rich, and poor all ate on the same kind of plate and washed the plates by themselves.

Another example is based on my observation of the household culture in some of the villages of the Malwa region. The food was served mostly by the female members of the house and served on the seats where the males sat. Later the plates were washed by the females; strongly depicting the gendered role in the household. It was mostly the wife, daughter-in-law, or daughter who served and later washed the plates of the male members/ singers in this case. But in the Yatra space, this culture seemed to be non-existent. In the Yatra setting, each day after the meal, male performers and other participants served meals for themselves and washed their plates post-meal. This task was done irrespective of gender, breaking the gender stereotype, and implying the value of gender equality.

Further, there were no exclusive arrangements or gradation for food, travel, or accommodation based on the class of the person. This also made it different from the everyday context. There were common dormitories and shared toilets for everyone. The facilities accessed by the

economically weaker section were the same as a rich businessman, making it a space that promotes equality irrespective of economic class.

In the above examples, the behavior of the individual changes which implies that the body is multivalent with the culture and tends to alter based on the surroundings it operates in. Moreover, the body is changing based on the co-created social practices that it imbibed as part of the Yatra as a habitus. Yatra by being a habitat where a certain kind of behavior was embodied, emerged as a nudge to the boundary of class and caste, which Kabir speaks about in his vision of Premnagar, the city without caste and class (Omvedt 2008).

Conclusion

The chapter discussed Yatra as a habitus, where the body as being in the world changed the constitution of self and impacted social behavior. The embodiment of Kabir's philosophy in different elements of Yatra such as singing space and experiences were discussed. Moreover, the two central components of Yatra; singing spaces and Kabir Bhajan were observed as leading to different experiences and behaviors. Furthermore, in the occurrence of the Yatra, the aspects that were “unrehearsed”- unplanned, and some parts that were “rehearsed” or planned were detailed (Tuan 2012, 236). Yatra thus appeared as the embodiment of the realities, behaviors, and enactments of Kabir’s philosophy, that only made sense in the Yatra. Similarly, in the village setting, a village becomes the space where the nature of embodied realities changes depending on the geographic, and socio-cultural context in which the bodies operate, that will be discussed in the next chapter.

6. Village as a ‘habitus’

In the chapter above, I discussed the beginning and motive of Yatra and its effect on the body. In this chapter, I will discuss how the village as a habitus operates in which the social behavior of both upper-caste and lower-caste Kabir singers manifest. Consequently, I shall discuss how being a Kabir singer operates in the body of the lower castes.

6.1 Sanskritization

Both (Srinivas 1966), in his book “Social Change in Modern India”, and (Dumont 1980) in his work “Homo Hierarchicus”, have discussed the problems of the caste system leading to social inequality in Indian society. In the Malwa region, the oral transmission and preservation of Kabir singing has been carried out by the Balais, who belong to the Dalit or untouchable community. Balais are considered even more impure than the Shudras who are the lowest in the caste hierarchy of the Hindus and have been subject to discrimination (Virani 2016, 30). The discrimination as observed gives rise to a psychology that seeks upward mobility to align with the socially dominant upper-caste group referred to as “Sanskritization” (Srinivas 1956). The performers, who are the primary respondents in my fieldwork, belong to the Balai community and sing Nirgun Bhajans²¹ but have also been observed to desire social mobility²² to gain acceptance or respectability in the majoritarian upper caste culture’s nexus of power.

The desire to gain acceptance from or associated with the upper-caste group is conspicuously conveyed in the origin myth of Balais. Rajubai, the lower caste female singer, shared an origin myth of the Balai community, that explained how they came to be known as Balais. She shared that the Balais derive their name from King Bali, a mythological character in the Ramayana, who is described as a descendant of the Brahmin sage. She further explained that it is the ‘government documents that categorized them as Dalits’. When I asked her whether she regrets being born as a Balai, she denied it. Whereas her narrative clearly highlights the desire to mobilize with the socially placed upper-caste group. I also observed that, in the household of a

²¹ Devotional songs dedicated to the worship of the formless divine.

²² Social mobility refers to the ability of individuals or groups to move up in the social hierarchy.

few Kabir singers there were altars that had a picture of Kabir and some other deity. All these features depict the homologous nature of practices with the upper-caste culture.

In the above description, the key aspects of Sanskritization were observed. For instance, in the etymological connection of the Balais, the mythological association with the Brahmin lineage suggests an attempt to establish a connection with a higher caste. Moreover, there was a sense of pride in the narration that suggests a desire to align with a higher social status through the use of origin myths to establish a connection with the upper caste.²³ Then the emphasis on the ‘government categorization as Dalits’ was mentioned to emphasize their desire to mobilize and align themselves with the socially placed upper-caste group. The features stated above substantiate the process of Sanskritization in the singing bodies and indicate that the Balais are actively engaged in adopting elements of higher-caste culture, along with actively engaging with Kabir’s philosophy. I briefly discussed the presence of Sanskritization because it is integral in the creation of the village habitus, and to depict the non-isolative nature of Kabir’s philosophical presence in the lives of the singing bodies. Next, I will discuss their experiences of being a Balai in the upper caste village and the outcome of embodying Kabir in a such a habitus of village.

6.2 Untouchability and Social Behavior

In Barandwa village, upper-caste Patels and lower-caste Balai lived in clearly segregated areas. Both sides were separated clearly with stark differences in such a way that the Patel side of the village had tea shops, concrete roads, grocery stores, and temples. The economic center such as shops, and important legal structures such as panchayat and schools were all located on the other side i.e. upper caste. On the other hand, Balai’s settlement of accommodation had no such functional spaces. One could sight lower caste individuals on the other side, mostly for buying milk, groceries, and sometimes at the tea shop. But rarely an upper caste individual was seen on the side of the lower caste settlement. So, it was always the need of the lower caste individuals to go to the other side, very much in synch with the culturally set norms. There was a noticeable segregation between the settlements of the lower and the upper castes in the

²³ Check Kabir and caste.

villages. These observations highlighted the existing demarcations within the village and gave a rough picture of the restricted mobility.

There were several rules that Balai had to follow to maintain the culturally set rules. Puja, Leelabai's granddaughter, is a Balai member. She was not allowed to enter the temple due to her caste. Similarly, when she was called to sew a torn piece of clothing in a Patel household she was asked to sit outside on the floor. These incidents are not a new phenomenon but are the continuation of longstanding discriminatory practices. These discriminatory approach against Balai was also substantiated when Rajubai shared about the practices from the village feast. She shared that during the village feasts, she and her affine from the same caste were only allowed to eat at the end, in a separate queue from the Patels and other upper-caste individuals in the village. Whether it was a wedding feast or a funeral gathering, they were consistently served last. Rajubai also recalled a time when her grandmother had to carry slippers in her hand in front of Patels. She says that the situation has improved but there are still significant presence of discriminatory behavior on part of upper caste in the village. She further shared that because of this prolonged disrespect, they no longer go to the houses of the Patels even if they were called.

In the description above, there is a display of practicing untouchability towards Puja in two situations. In the incident, the upper caste individual did not allow her presence inside the house and the temple which represents what is considered culturally pure and who is impure. The house and the temple both are pure spaces where a Balai is considered impure in the cultural structure which prohibited her entry. Untouchability has to do with touch and contact and therefore is directly related to the notion of impurity. There are two objects at play here: the toucher and the touched. If the toucher is a Brahmin, his social status remains unhindered but the touched is subject to social stigma and made to feel untouchable towards one's own body (Sarukkai 2009). The untouchability is practiced and followed by both, the toucher and the touched. The toucher forms a practice based on the notion of what is impure. The touched experiences untouchability and responds to it. Both their behavior is set in the habitus of the village where caste rules operate. The touched necessarily does not need a body here to feel untouched. In the case of Puja, she was denied entry inside the house to maintain the sanctity and purity of the house. Here, entry into house becomes that object because of which Puja was untouchable. It is important to mark that the body does not operate devoid of the social

surroundings and includes objects it constitutes. Thus, it is both the material and immaterial objects that come together to create the habitual experience and behaviors.

Moreover, untouchability is practiced when someone does not fit the definition of the “culturally ideal self” (Csordas 1990, 15). A culturally ideal self is defined based on the dispositions that create cultural knowledge and those objects which did not fit the definition of the culturally ideal self are labeled as “demons” (Csordas 1990, 14). In the upper caste culture, the culturally ideal self is linked with those who belong to the upper caste and follow the behavior ascribed in that setting. Lower caste individual is thus considered impure as they do not fit in the definition of culturally ideal self as prescribed by upper caste (Patels). Therefore, untouchability is practiced towards Balais as they were perceived as impure, and polluting based on the cultural definition of the Patels.

Although, the upper caste creates these notions lower caste individuals seem to comply. For example, Puja opened her slippers outside the main door of the Patel household without being asked when she went for sewing. What made her open the slippers was her unconscious behavior with which she unknowingly continued the practice of compliance. The pre-objective for her to embody untouchability was the experiences she might have had earlier in her village.

Another important incident where I observed the embodiment of caste behavior was when I, Leelabai, and Rajubai²⁴ sat on the verandah of her house. The house was situated behind the lawyer's massive land, overlooking a sprawling bungalow in the fields. Our conversation revolved around Kabir Bhajans. But Leelabai paused and asked Rajubai whether Waqueel Saab (lawyer sir) could hear their singing and discussions. I asked her if she cared about it? To which she replied that she didn't. But she smiled while exchanging glances with Rajubai and continued singing the Bhajan in a lower voice. Lowering of voice, here, is a certain unconscious behavior due to operating in a surrounding in which this was implied or suggested. Even if Waqueel Saab did not act in the same way as the upper caste individuals behaved in the past, Leelabai's body had it imprinted. Bourdieu (2016) explains that in habitus the unconscious totality of the practice with objective conditions of life is a basis for the formation of the behavior. Upper caste culture in the village

²⁴ Rajubai is Leelabai's affine and is part of the Bhajan mandali led by Leelabai.

had a set of rules for lower caste groups such as restricted mobility, prohibition of going into the temple, and notions relating to food etc. were the objective conditions based on which the upper caste practiced untouchability and Balai complied with it in their behavior. Eventually, the continued practice of the imposed untouchability became an embodied behavior in the village setting as seen in the case of Puja's opening of her slippers and Leelabai's lowering of the voice.

Moreover, Bourdieu (2016) also says that objective conditions could be contradictory in the cultural schema where the body exists and thus it leads to an attempt to change the structure. So Balai singers respond to situations that cause discomfort by countering the upper caste culture or restructuring the behavior environment in different ways, and one way is to dissent through the voice of Kabir. Jurgensmayer (1980) says that behaving or doing what is asked does not mean that one also believes in the age-old customs behind discriminatory practices, this supports the logic of dissent and non-conformity at the body level. In the following sections of the chapter, I will discuss the dissenting voices of Balais by embodying Kabir's teachings.

6.3 Kabir on untouchability

The section above gives a description of the behavioral paradigm in which upper caste and lower castes operate. It also explains the objective conditions that led to the embodiment of Kabir for the lower caste singers. This section discusses Kabir's verses which were relatable and addressed the problem of caste. This leads to the later section in which the embodiment of Kabir's philosophy in the already embodied experience of untouchability is discussed.

In the villages, restricted physical mobility, segregation of space, and lowering of voice by the lower castes were not visibly unproblematic, or rather no action was performed to counter them. In this context, the arrival of Kabir problematizes the normalized practice of caste behavior and challenges the image of the culturally ideal self. It is observed that Kabir in his verses repeatedly emphasizes the "principle of sameness" and equal treatment of all human beings (Jyoti 2021, 134). As observed in the couplet below, where he mocks the Brahmin who treats Yadav (a Dalit caste who mostly are cowherders) as untouchable. He says the milk that the Brahmins drink comes from the cows domesticated by Yadav and asks why Brahmins still treats them as untouchables. He says that untouchability is the doing of the Brahmins. This can be well expressed in Kabir's following verses:

“Trickling through bones, melting through flesh.

where does milk come from?

That's what you drink after lunch, Pandit.

And you call clay untouchable?

Throw out your holy scriptures, Pandit,

those fantasies of your mind.

Kabir says, listen, Brahmin:

All this is your own doing” (Hess and Singh 2002, 57-58).

‘Clay’ in the verse means the substance with which the body is made. Kabir here questions the act of calling any of the body untouchable as all are constructed from the same clay. It is pertinent that he questions the Pandit who claims to be a knower of holy scriptures and is an abider or practitioner of untouchability. It is observed that Kabir questions the center of power i.e., the Pandit and scriptures. Because Pandit confirms the practices of social discrimination using scripture, so he attacks both the scripture which is the origin of the discriminatory norms, and the Pandit which is the carrier or promoter of what is written in the scripture. Thus, attacking the root cause of social inequality.

In the other verse below, Kabir goes on to exemplify the principle of touch and problematics with untouchability. The verse is a poetic representation of the notion that touch is a fundamental and universal aspect of human existence. It implies that touch is a critical part of our interaction with the world and our human experience. Kabir once again poses the question, “who's untouched?.”

“We eat by touching, we wash

by touching, from a touch

the world was born.

So who's untouched? asks Kabir.

Only she who's free from delusion” (Hess and Singh 2002, 55).

Kabir in the verse calls the norm of untouchability, a delusion. He is essentially asking who or what in this world remains untouched or unaffected by the act of touching. The answer provided in the verse is “Only she who's free from delusion”. This suggests that those who are free from the delusory norms of untouchability are the ones who remain untouched in the real sense. In the verse, he refers to being untouched in a non-derogatory manner and instead uses it as an appreciation for those who don't conform to the practice of untouchability.

Kabir not only questioned powerholders but also physical structures of power that depicted discrimination or uneven treatment based on caste or religion. As temples and mosques represent the segregation of people based on religion and caste respectively, he prompts the rejection of both in the verse, “Where do you try to find God, it is neither in the temple nor in the mosque”²⁵. His pursuit seemingly did not stop at questioning the power structures, but he also went on to criticize the dogmatic practices of the religious institution.

He targeted the non-experiential nature of the religious practices. In the verse below, he calls all the practices that cannot be experienced as ‘pedantries’ i.e., dogma and lies. He said that Pandit's (Hindu priest) utterance of chanting the name of the deity, is a lie. He criticizes all such religious dogma that are not experiential such as simply uttering a deity's name or adhering to religious rituals claiming a path to liberation.

The pandits' pedantries are lies.

If saying Ram gave liberation

saying candy made your mouth sweet

saying fire burned your feet,

saying water quenched your thirst,

²⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6M-R-YGw9U

saying food banished hunger,

the whole world would be free” (Hess and Singh, 54).

In the verse, Kabir uses analogies to demonstrate the inadequacy of merely chanting something for it to become true. He uses the example of candy and says that just by repeating candy it will not result in sweetness of the mouth. Thus, similarly, uttering religious phrases won't guarantee liberation. Kabir says, if it was as simple as reciting phrases, then no one in the world would be hungry by just chanting the name of food. Instead, he insists on self-reflection and looking within the heart by promoting the idea of internalized divine which is formless.²⁶

Based on the analysis above, Nirgun or formless attribute in Kabir's philosophy appears as an outcome of the rejection of the norms of untouchability. He expressed disdain towards going to the temple, and upper caste ritualistic practices such as chanting and making offerings to a certain form of God. He rejects all these practices by calling God formless and something that cannot be touched and is the opposite of pedantry i.e., the truth. He said that “there is a rascally kind of yogi who has no sky or earth, no hand, foot, form or shape” (Hess and Singh 2002, 66). “I offer myself to an image of the great being beyond boundaries” (Hess and Singh 2002, 49 - 50). In both these verses, a connection is implied with a kind of being that is not limited to the boundaries of sky or earth, and which has no body i.e., ‘no form or shape’. This kind of being is referred to as a yogi. Moreover, it is not just something far away but is within. It, in Bhajan, is referred to as Heli Mari²⁷ (my friend). These Bhajans are like a dialogue with a friend in introspection unlike the upper caste prayer tradition in which one prays to someone outside of oneself; where the power lies outside. In contrast, Kabir presents a dialogue with self to prompt change by looking at one's own Swabhav (behavior) during samadhi (meditation) (Hess and Singh 2002). Thus, the instrument of change is the self and the power to change also operates in the body.

²⁶ Refer to page 11 for the details of the internalized divine.

²⁷ Heli is used for female friends in the colloquial language.

6.3.a. Embodiment of Kabir: A way out of untouchability

The section above speaks of the relevance of Kabir's philosophical verses as being employed by lower-caste singers. I proceed to how these singers make meanings of such a philosophy to change the behavioral paradigm in which they operate.

The singing of Bhajan by Kabir singers was mostly sung outside the temple because these singers were restricted from entering the temple. So, untouchability here had to do with touch, voice, and sight. Now when the Bhajans were sung, it was loud, and words were charged with meanings that spoke of caste as a problem. It traveled where the notion of impurity otherwise, refrained the lower caste bodies and voices from traveling. Thus, it appears to be exercising the agency in voice which otherwise was altered when speaking in front of Patels. Another example is from Kaluramji's experience when he worked as a bonded laborer in a Patel household. He had shared that he did not speak or was allowed to sit on the chair. He is now able to freely go to the Patel household, sit on the chair, and speak without feeling fearful. This behavior which he earlier complied changed due to his prolonged singing and reflection.

At the end, it is important to remark that because of Kabir and his singing by Balai singers, it produces a sense of reflexivity and dialogue with self. Such an embodiment of Kabir's philosophy and singing of Bhajan appears to transform social behavior of lower caste group not just in practice but also at the unconscious level. It is now clearly visible in how confidently Balai speak and occupy space in front of upper caste Patel in present times. It thus redefines the pre-objective and creates a new set of cultural behaviors that are acquired based on the rejection of contradictory objective conditions.

Conclusion

It was seen in the chapter that the collective experience of the Balai singers was filled with experiences of discrimination, disrespect, and discontent perpetuated by the upper caste. Thus, the act of Kabir singing was an act of juxtaposing one's own position and voice over the pre-existing upper caste culture. Moreover, the context of the rebelling against caste structure while using Kabir's Bhajan to articulate the social, cultural, and political concerns fits the social canvas of the time when contradictory situations were present for the lower caste groups.

As a whole, this chapter explored the dynamics of untouchability as practiced in the village habitus in which Balai Kabir singers attempt to redefine their cultural behavior by dissenting²⁸ against the traditionally bestowed norms by embodying Kabir. This process led to a change in feelings, expansion of voice, agency in movement, and access to the divine²⁹. Thus, singing Nirgun Bhajan becomes the practice that eventually led to change in the socio-cultural structure of the performers.

²⁸ To read more about Kabir's philosophy as a form of dissent refer to Lorenzen (2014).

²⁹ If divine resides in temple only then Balai were devoid of it. But Kabir's idea of internalized divine made it possible for them to access the divine outside of the temple.

7. Women who sing Kabir

The previous chapter discusses Kabir's philosophy as a generative principle for the lower caste Kabir singers. This chapter discusses how Kabir is imbibed by the female singers in the villages of Malwa.

7.1 Kabir on women

“Gold, silk, horses, women, a lot of wealth last a little time (Hess and Singh 2002, 81).”

During his time, Kabir compared women to symbols of wealth such as gold, silk, and horses. This comparison implies that women are merely temporary material possessions as gold and silk are considered status symbols. Additionally, since horses can be tamed, it suggests that women can also be controlled. This perspective reveals Kabir's tendency to view women as inferior, submissive, and docile. This view is shared by Sangari (1990), who argues that Kabir considers female bodies as obstacles to connecting with the divine. Overall, Kabir seems dissatisfied with the aspect of female sensuality, often referring to women as seductresses. In the couplet below he also goes on calling women as jealous, who use another innocent's name to plot or manipulate events.

“With her brother, she went to the in-law's house and played jealous co-wife with her mother-in-law. Husband's sister and brother's wife hatched plots and used my name” (Hess and Singh 2002, 43-44).

Even though the meanings are symbolic, they still portray women in a condescending manner. From the couplets, it is conceived that women are labeled as an object, equated with horses, and are jealous and manipulative. And yet Kabir is worshipped, sung, and cherished by women in Malwa who operate in a dominant patriarchal setup within the close family and communal relations. Thus, in the section below, I will attempt to understand the situatedness of the female body and their lived experience of Kabir bhakti.

7.2 Women's body as social, where singing operates.

7.2.a. Space

In this section, I will discuss the women's body operating at the socio-cultural level and the experiences of female singers from the Balai communities, who fall under the intersection of two underprivileged positions i.e., being a woman and belonging to a lower caste group. Their vulnerability is both being exposed to the caste-based discrimination in the society and the patriarchal structure of the village. These women actively embody a behavior that is at the outset of the male-dominant culture. They live and engage in spaces, where their roles are pre-defined many a time. When I refer to space, I consider its physical, social, and cultural dimensions. Physical space encompasses tangible surroundings such as homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, and communities. Social space involves the interactions, relationships, and hierarchies within a specific social context. Cultural space includes the shared values, norms, beliefs, and practices of a particular community or group. A village is an amalgamation of all these spaces, and the struggle to exercise agency starts in their own homes.

Within the space, they inhabit various roles and responsibilities, including being a daughter, wife, mother, or homemaker alongside their Kabir performer's identity. In these roles, they adhere to certain practices, including wearing a ghunghat (veil) and sitting down or standing up when a male member arrives. It was also not uncommon for women to be mostly confined indoors, engaged in household chores, while men gathered under the shade of trees to converse. These practices depict a behavioral surrounding where norms are set, rules are made, and women are consciously or unconsciously adhering to it.

Next, I will talk about Leelabai's house where the space between man and women were segregated and women behaved in compliance. The area of the house where women i.e., Leelabai and her daughter-in-law were seen are the kitchen, backyard, and their own room. The terrace served the regular purpose and was also used by women to take showers when there were many men in the house, like on the days when relatives came for a wedding in a nearby village. The hall was seldom used by the women. It was the backyard that helped me learn and understand women's behavior in the presence of men in the house. This is where Leelabai and I sat for discussions and sang Bhajan. But when there were more male relatives or guests, women without even being asked left the backyard. Their departure from the backyard is an

embodied practice that is governed by the image of the culturally ideal women. Even if they in the moment do not wish to follow the tenets of this image, it still percolates and makes them operate in such a way.

This is another example from the time when I was living in the house of a male singer named Kala and his wife Mala. Mala was always in the ghunghat (veil) in front of Kala and their son-in-law. It was within a fraction of a second that Mala organized her body and her saree. It was as if her fingers knew which part of the saree needed to be grabbed with prolonged practice. Also, it was always Mala and her daughter who organized their body posture, and clothing or even moved physically from the room on the arrival of Kala. If Kala had to watch television and Mala was doing some chore in the same room, she immediately left the room or organized her body based on the space left after Kala occupied the space. Her ghunghat here acts as a signifier of a local-cultural age-old tradition and is unconsciously being followed by her in totality with cultural structure.

7.2.b. Voice

In the MMKY, many female singers from Malwa who sang apologized at the end and the beginning of the Bhajan. The apology was mostly for two famous male singers. Leelabai has been singing Kabir Bhajans since she was a child and yet she seemed conscious and said, “If we make a mistake then please forgive us. I know there are people who know more than us”. In the sentence, she apologized on behalf of the other females in her singing group as well. On another occasion at her home, a male Kabir singer visited he sang some Bhajan and then she sang but, in the end, she apologized again.

The above instances of asking for an apology is an outcome of being in an environment where culturally defined behavior was set. Moreover, by repeating the set norms of patriarchal culture, her body felt apologetic in front of the male singers, as if singing in front of the male is something she should not do. It can be implied that her apology is an outcome of embodying the behavior ascribed to her by the patriarchal culture. Also, in the process of singing voice travels out, which is an act of claiming verbal space. In her household, it was not common for women to speak in front of male members when she spoke through singing her body tended to feel apologetic. The way her body responds depicts the cognitive processes influenced by social and cultural factors.

One more example is from the famous performer i.e., Vyas's household. I heard the sound of Bhajan coming from the kitchen. His wife Nimibai hummed Kabir's couplets while rolling chapatis for the members of the household. The day I left she sang me a song of departure in Malwi and another that asks one to come back with the husband. On asking whether she sings often she shared that singing requires time, and someone had to take care of the family. She mentioned that as Vyas grew famous more people arrived, and the house grew bigger too, so she did not get time. Additionally, she also shared one of the experiences in which her brother-in-law disallowed her to sing on stage. Since then, she has not sung publicly but sang when Vyas was not around. Furthermore, I observed that all the men in Vyas's family sang publicly or played instruments, but not his daughter or daughter-in-law.

The above instance shows Nimibai's desire to sing had to be compromised due to ascribed roles and power central to the male figure, who decided if female bodies were allowed or disallowed to sing. Virani (2022) writes despite the notion of social egalitarianism among Nirgun singers, they operate within repressively patriarchal environments. In rural Madhya Pradesh and other parts of the Hindi-speaking belt, there is a lingering stigma against women performing publicly, often leading them to wear veils (ghunghat) outside their homes. It is within this habitus that the women sing Kabir. This leads to the exploration in the next section, where I discuss the underlying embodiment of devotion to singing Kabir Bhajan with persistence. And its outcome in the behavior of the female singing bodies.

7.3 Is the female body docile? the phenomena of devotion.

This section discusses devotion in women and how it is practiced. The female singers constantly describe Kabir singing as an embodied experience of bhakti bhaw (devotional experience). Novetzke (2007) writes bhakti has two dimensions personal and social; social is publicly expressed but personal is also not always private. The bhakti constitutes an expression of self and is expressed outwardly. It depicts not just as feeling but also as doing in actions, singing, dancing, rituals, and worship etc. Novetzke (2007) further calls bhakti a performance beyond ras (flavor) and charged with emotions. In his view, even when there is no audience there is God or a figure towards whom the devotion operates.

To further illustrate the nature of bhakti as public, Novetzke (2007) talks about the phenomena of death being turned down due to the miracle. What I understand is during the classical times,

bhakti towards grace was performed by the saint-poets in different forms which helped the audience to connect to grace. In the hagiography of Kabir, he is to be killed by the elephant stampede as summoned by the king who is the mighty temporal authority, but he is miraculously saved due to faith and this whole incident is observed by the public (Novetzke 2007, 257). There are two central figures here one is the 'mighty temporal authority' and the other is the divine intervention due to embodiment of faith. Consequently, faith emerges as an aspect of bhakti that is observed by the audience. From the above concept, I gather a few major features of bhakti. That bhakti is always associated with faith and is public, hence it becomes social. Then faith is felt and has to do with emotionality, so bhakti is also experiential (Novetzke 2007, 256).

In the context of Malwa, the mighty temporal authority for female singers is the patriarchal figures in the family or community, and what is saving them is faith in Kabir. Here saving is translated as solace, relief, and quietness that these singers experience. In some cases, the female body charged with bhakti attempts to regain power in the patriarchal context of family. For example, Leelabai has sung Kabir Bhajan for several years despite constant opposition from her husband, she persisted. She informed me that earlier she sang Bhajan hideously. But now she appears non-hesitant in singing in front of her husband. She said that it is the bhakti that she feels gave her the perseverance to sing. Further, she shared that, each follicle of her body felt open and vibrant. In the case of female singer Nimibai, who could not continue to sing at the volume that she wished to and was conscious of her voice but in experience, she felt similar to what Leelabai felt on singing Bhajan. And for her devotion led to solace and stayed between her and the divine. Both phenomena do not explain or assess what changes in the male behavior and the larger cultural schema that expects women to be in a certain way to fit the rules of the patriarchal culture. But the focus is to see what shifts in the body of the women.

Moreover, at the level of social, some young girls who sing Kabir Bhajan are culturally acceptable even when they defy the patriarchal norms. For example, Archana, the first daughter-in-law of the Barandwa village sings without ghunghat (veil). Simran and Arpi, teenage girls shared that post singing Kabir Bhajan on stage they were not restricted to wearing jeans, which is considered culturally unacceptable as attire. These girls also have better mobility in comparison to others who don't sing. In these examples, how Kabir is perceived by

the non-singing guardians and family members contributed to the fulfillment of the desire which the girls had and led to a change in their social behavior.

The nature of their embodiment of bhakti was studied in this section where emotion, and faith operating in the social were the key aspects. It was observed how bhakti was felt, it led to a change in the lives of the female singers. In the next section, the concept of femaleness i.e., the female voice is used to understand the embodiment of Kabir bhakti.



Picture 5: Women in veil

7.3.a Femaleness in devotion

In the given context, the act of singing Kabir was embodied through the feeling of devotion. I discussed in the section earlier how devotion operates. Sangari (1990) discusses devotion in detail, one that operates at a universal level and another that is felt more personally. In the universalized form of devotion, all the devotees operate on the principles of Purusha (masculine) and Prakriti (feminine). Purusha is the spirit and Prakriti is defined as its manifestation. This means that the devotees irrespective of gender connect to the masculine through their female voice. Sangari (1990) further writes that the consciousness imbibed in femaleness stretches into the metaphysical realm beyond the binary of male and female gender and loosens the demarcation of the masculine and feminine in the bhaktas (devotees). Females

are placed as subalterns to males socially, but here devotees irrespective of gender are subalterns to God.

The metaphysical phenomena of femaleness became clearer when Leelabai described her experience of singing Bhajan as a sound she hears from the universe. In Malwa, I heard a Kabir bhajan which refers to such a sound as *jheeni – jheeni* i.e., a mild reverberation that travels from *gagan* (sky). He said that the wise Guru (teacher) listens, to the sound that travels faintly from the sky. This line suggests that the Guru within is knowledgeable and can hear the subtle, divine sound that emanates from the sky. Guru here is the seer, the knower within. Then he further says that the one who doesn't listen is unaware of the unstruck melody being played. This line says that those who are unaware, not listening to their inner self remain oblivious to the mystical and divine sound of infinity. This echoes the metaphysical phenomena of the devotees connecting to the attribute less reverberation.

Now, Leelabai embodied femaleness in her devotion to Kabir. She embodies the devotion of both the higher and lower natures. Sangari (1990,1541) categorizes devotion into two categories of femaleness; the term higher refers to her sense of duty and devotion towards the divine, while the term lower pertains to her duty and devotion towards her husband i.e., *pativrata*. What becomes apparent within a female body is at times the competitive nature and at other times co-existence of both kinds of devotion can occur. Leelabai's journey illustrates initial disapproval from her husband regarding her devotion to singing and the remembrance of Kabir, but she continued singing secretly. In devotion towards her husband, she complied in appearance and sang hideously. Parallely in her devotion to Kabir, she persisted in singing. Even in the case of Nimibai, she left singing in devotion to her husband but continued to sing Bhajan in the kitchen or private space. The femaleness of two kinds seem to act differently in the women and their actions are based on the kind of femaleness they internally devote themselves to.

Moreover, Kabir is seen to emphasize higher femaleness in devotees, be they male or female to reach the divine. He states that an individual can reach higher femaleness by accessing their female voice. Kabir in his verses is seen talking to the *heli*, a female friend. The *heli* genre of songs resembles the voice of a beloved singing to the lover (Hess 2015, 161). In the verse, Kabir accesses the female voice and asks his *heli* to communicate with the formless divine. Now this female voice is an act of embodying higher femaleness in males. And it functions

differently when embodied by a male. In males, the female voice leads to the reversal of their behaviors formed in the patriarchal structure. A male singer embodies being a female when he sings the verse below.

“My body and my mind are grieved for want of Thee;

O my Beloved! come to my house.

When people say I am Thy bride, I am ashamed; for I have not touched

Thy heart with my heart. Then what is this love of mine?

I have no taste for food, I have no sleep;

My heart is ever restless within doors and without.

As water is to the thirsty, so is the lover to the bride.

Who is there that will carry my news to my Beloved?

Kabir is restless; he is dying for sight of Him” (Tagore 1916 as cited in Sangari 1990, 1543).

In the verse, Kabir refers to himself as a bride, who is dying for the love of a male beloved. Kabir says he felt restless like a bride who is madly in love and dying to touch and be touched by her beloved. When male singers sing these verses, they embody the voice of the beloved and a bride while calling the divine. Such an exercise of femaleness leads them to feel like a woman. Moreover, access to such a voice does not require them to negotiate with gender-based norms to practice devotion towards the beloved i.e., the divine. Furthermore, being the female voice of a bride, the male singer automatically disconnects from the maleness that is formed by the patriarchal attributes.

Now the same voice that is inherent to the female body on singing such a verse has a different impact and leads to different experience of devotion. First, it is met with the complexities of gender roles and societal expectations in the patrilineal cultural space. When a female singer seeks to surrender to the divine, she has to negotiate within the household. For example, singers like Leelabai found a way to assert their identities and carve out a space for themselves within a male-dominated society. And by accessing the female voice via practice of devotion she could persevere and negotiate the obstacles. Hence implied that between males and females, the female voice acts based on patriarchal norms and both bodies behave differently.

Moreover, her devotion had two expressions, one that she experienced and expressed in the form of singing received from the sound of Anhad (infinity) and the other was in the physical space i.e., the sacred altar in the corner of her room. Her altar had pictures of different deities kept neatly next to each other, along with Kabir placed next to Vishnu's (a Hindu deity from the Sargun sect) image. And all these deities were worshipped regularly. There was a picture of Kabir among the other Gods. There were incense sticks and sandalwood for worshipping Kabir along with the other God's picture on the altar. This is the demonstration of her devotion as the public. Novetzke (2007) discusses the practices associated with public expressions of Sargun bhakti which is the same as the features that represent Sanskritization. Such as going to temples for worshipping, making visual contact with deities in the pictures, and doing ritualistic offerings. Such a feature was observed in Leelabai's bhakti; she worshipped the form and did ritualistic offerings such as burning incense etc. Thus, it appears that devotion felt and practiced did not operate in a binary of Nirgun and Sargun for some of the female singers and were influenced by the values of Sanskritization.

Overall, the section was an attempt to understand the nature of bhakti that operated in female singers and the difference in embodiment of femaleness. Moreover, devotion as a public was discussed and devotion which has the quality of femaleness was analyzed in the singing context of Malwa.

Conclusion

It was observed that the social roles and responsibilities associated with the role of female singers engaged them so much that it became difficult to sing Bhajan. It was also marked that their agency in singing Kabir often rested not in their own hands, but rather in the hands of male counterparts. In the case of Nimibai, this lack of autonomy is exemplified by the disapproval of the brother-in-law, which ultimately prevented her from singing on stage. Consequently, it can be inferred that female singers seeking to exercise their agency as Kabir singers, within a specific socio-cultural context must confront significantly greater obstacles than male singers. For example, Leelabai waited for her husband to come to agreeable terms with her singing. Thus implied, female Kabir singers from Malwa had to struggle with societal norms, cultural traditions, or gender expectations that placed limitations on women's freedom and agency.

The gendered nature of agency is evident and manifests in the choice of Kabir singing. These constraints impact their behavior and their ability to sing Kabir and to access what they desire or wish to experience. In this context, embodying devotion gave perseverance to continue singing and to feel elated. This chapter elaborated upon the embodied devotion that leads to social action and the claiming of space. Through the observations, the intricacies of the power struggles, that the female singers constantly negotiated and navigated to sing Kabir was discussed. Later the act of claiming agency behaviorally, within their own families was understood, which appeared as an outcome of Kabir singing and feeling of devotion.

8. Conclusion

The thesis focuses on the embodiment of Kabir's philosophy in the singing space and everyday context of the Malwa region. The attempt was to unravel the nuanced ways in which Kabir's philosophy permeates the lives of the singers, who are the inhabitants of the caste society and subjects of patrilineal culture.

In the chapters, I explore how the body speaks and responds in the given social context and deploys Kabir's philosophy. This forms a counter-voice, resistance towards the upper caste traditions. In this habitus of caste structure, the role of Kabir's philosophy was traced thriving as a counter-culture tradition on the same ground where Sanskritization was also persistent. To further investigate this process, I looked at individual's subjective experiences and behaviors within their social and cultural contexts while highlighting the constant interplay between the body, mind, and environment in shaping response and social interactions. I tried understanding the body as a site where social, cultural, and individual meanings were inscribed and enacted.

I found that there were two distinct habitus of Yatra and the village, where the body perceived and practiced Kabir's philosophy. In both spaces, Bhajan played an integral role. Bhajan led to an experience that mediated ecstasy and joy in the participants. It also had an implicit impact on the self and the social realm of the singers and participants in the yatra.

Moreover, there was a distinct environment in Yatra, which shaped the practice i.e., behavior, and movements of the body. The response and feeling that was produced by the body can be seen as an outcome of the "body as being in the world", 'world' here refers to the habitus of Yatra. In Yatra body was impacted at the level of self and thus there was a transformation in the behavior of the singers and participants exhibited through the practice of equalitarianism during Yatra.

Similarly, in the village, the lower caste body responded based on the culturally defined practices at a conscious or unconscious level. Here, Bhajan impacted the realm of social too, the body that behaved differently in the village surroundings i.e., abiding by the caste and cultural norms had a change in their behavior. In both settings, the change in the behavior was evident which justifies the nature of the body being changeable and intracorporal.

Moreover, in the habitus of the village, I found that two cultural movements were operating, one of Sanskritization and the other one of counter-tradition. Some singers followed progressive Kabir and echoed his idea of rejecting caste and class. Some singers depicted the practices of Sanskritization. And, for some singers, Sanskritization and counterculture operated together, thus they practiced devotion towards Kabir but also worshiped the Hindu deity. Kabir's philosophy and Bhajan were used to claim agency in speaking and in mobility upper castes spaces. It also challenged the notion of untouchability by enabling an embodiment of another kind.

Consequently, for female singers, the singing Kabir was a practice that impacted them kinesthetically and in physical movement such as extending the physical dimension that they could occupy. As seen above, some singers who were not allowed to go out of the house, were later able to go out. The embodiment of Kabir's philosophy through the unique experience of devotion led to the claiming of space within their own body which otherwise behaved in accordance with the patriarchal norms. The women were struggling in their own families and close networks to navigate the gender roles and patriarchal structures imposed upon them. In such a situation devotion towards Kabir led them to occupy space, agency and enabling them to break away from patriarchal structures.

Overall, the embodiment of Kabir served a different purpose for male and female singers from the same caste community. The struggle of female singers was with the power structures within their household whereas the struggle of male singers lay in the power structures outside the house. So, Kabir acted differently on both the bodies. The value of equality from Kabir's philosophy that the male singers voice out is limited to claiming equality and assertion in the context of the caste system and not concerned with the patriarchal behavior within their own family. Whereas the embodiment of bhakti towards Kabir in female singers appeared as an emancipatory tool in the context of patriarchy. The findings also depict the difference in the agency of practicing a culture i.e., singing Kabir that varies for males and females within the Malwa region. This was thus addressed by Eklavya's initiative of MMKY.

Further Scope of Research

The globalization of media has had a significant impact on the transmission of Kabir's teachings and poetry. The emergence of new modes of transmission, such as CDs, cassettes, phone

recordings, and online videos, has facilitated the wider dissemination of Kabir's music and messages. These mediums have made it easier for Kabir singers and performers to reach a larger audience and share their interpretations of Kabir's works. The studio tradition of recording Kabir's music and performances, which gained prominence in the 2000s, has provided a platform for producing high-quality audio recordings that capture the essence of Kabir's music. Print media also plays a significant role in the transmission of Kabir's teachings. NGOs like Kabir and Kabir Janvikas Samuh are actively working in the Malwa region and beyond to promote Kabir's speech through print publications. Books on Kabir's poetry, philosophy, and social teachings are being written and published, making it easier for scholars, researchers, and enthusiasts to study and reference Kabir's works. However, it is important to recognize that the influence of media platforms on the authenticity of the oral culture of Kabir is a complex phenomenon. While media platforms provide accessibility and reach, they can also introduce new interpretations, commercialization, and commodification of Kabir's teachings. It is crucial to approach the study of Kabir's transmission in the context of media with a critical lens and an understanding of the dynamics between orality, media representation, and the evolving nature of Kabir's cultural heritage. The inflow of mediatization is seen to be changing the context of embodiment in the past years (Hess 2015). It requires a different study to enquire into the nature of the embodiment of Kabir Bhajans in the popular band and new-age media.

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Annexure

Date	Yatra	District/Village
24/02	Malwa Kabir Yatra	Indore
2/03 - 5/03	Malwa Mahila Kabir Yatra	Luniyakhedi, Tonk Khurd, Sonkatch, Indore

Date	Name of the key respondents	Profession/ Organisation	Village	District
24/02 - 2/03	Prahalad Singh Tippaniya	Singer	Luniyakhedi	Ujjain
	Shanti Devi	Housewife		
8/02	Siyag Patel	Retd director (Eklavya foundation)		Bhopal
12/03	Tultul Biswas	Eklavya Foundation		
15/03 - 20/03	Kaluram Bamaniya	Singer	Tonk Khurd	Dewas
	Arpita Bamaniya	Student/singer		
21/03 - 24/03	Leelabai	Housewife/ singer	Biselkheri	Dewas
	Rajubai	Housewife		
	Maya	Housewife		
25/03 - 28/03	Narayan Delmia	Singer	Barandwa	Ujjain
	Devnarayan Sarolia	Violin player/ singer		
	Archana Solanki	Housewife/ singer		
28/03 - 2/04	Anu, Arvind	Incharge of the Kabir's work in 1992		Dewas
7/04	Suresh Patel	Kabir foundation		Indore

