



Original Article

A Biographical Exploration of Kabir: Unraveling the Life and Spiritual Journey of the 15th Century Mystic Poet

Dr. Ritu Varshney

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Liberal Arts, Amity University Mumbai

Manuscript ID:
RIGJAAR-2025-020715

ISSN: 2998-4459
Volume 2
Issue 7
Pp.70-74
July 2025

Submitted: 07 June 2025
Revised: 21 June 2025
Accepted: 11 July 2025
Published: 31 July 2025

Correspondence Address:
Dr. Ritu Varshney
Assistant Professor, Amity
Institute of Liberal Arts, Amity
University Mumbai
Email:
rituvarshney77@gmail.com

Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://rlgjaar.com>



DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.16981253

DOI Link:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16981253>



Creative Commons



Abstract

As is well known, one of the most well-known and highly esteemed names in Indian religious traditions is Kabir. Both Hindus and Muslims have long praised him as a great mystic and fearless religious reformer, from Punjab to Bengal and from the Himalayan borders to South India. His name is famous far and wide in the Indian sub-continent. He is not completely unknown even in the West today. Kabir has been fittingly described by sir W.W. Hooter as "the Indian Luther of the 15th century." Kabir also holds a very high position in the literary world. As the "Father of Indian Literature," he has received much praise. Kabir is occasionally compared to Tulsidas, the author of the Hindi Ramayana, the Bible of Northern India. This study delves into the life and spiritual journey of Kabir, the 15th-century mystic poet whose verses transcend religious and social boundaries. This paper aims to discuss Kabir's early life, family life, his teachings, his spirit of inquiry, observation, and experimentation, his logical approach towards life and religion, and his criticism of casteism, idolatry, and empty ritualism. The paper examines his formative influences, philosophical underpinnings, and the socio-religious impact of his teachings, which challenged orthodoxy and inspired movements for social equality. Kabir's legacy, preserved through the oral transmission of his dohas and songs, continues to resonate in contemporary discourses on spirituality, communal harmony, and social justice. Through a biographical and thematic analysis, this work seeks to unravel the enduring relevance of Kabir's life and message in both historical and modern contexts.

Keywords: Mystic Saint, Childhood, Kabir's Guru, Marriage, Family life, Death

Introduction

In the religious landscape of India, Kabir occupies a distinct and revered position. Hindus regard him as a Vaishnav Bhakta, Muslims see him as a Pir, Sikhs honour him as a Bhagat, and for the followers of the Kabir Panth, he is considered an incarnation of the Supreme Being. To modern nationalists, Kabir symbolizes the spirit of Hindu-Muslim harmony, while to the neo-Vedantists, a promoter of the Universal Religion or exponent of the 'Religion of Men'. As will be seen, Kabir steadfastly opposed the superstitious beliefs full of empty ritualism of orthodox Hinduism as well as the dogmatic pride and bigotry of orthodox Islam.¹

Kabir's distinctiveness primarily stemmed from his teachings. In contrast to other Bhakti and Sufi saints, he was not simply shaped by the interaction of Hindu and Muslim ideologies; he embodied their synthesis in its most original and genuine form. Kabir stood out as an early trailblazer and compelling voice for Hindu-Muslim harmony. In order to perform this great task, his teachings had to be different from all other saints. The novelty of his teachings was inevitable, for he tried to divert the attention of the Indians of his time to a religion of the Universal Path above the sectarian level- a road which Hindus and Muslims could tread together. No Hindu or Muslim could take exception to such a religion, or better to say, such a piety.²

Kabir's significance in the modern religious history of India cannot be measured merely by the size of his formal following, the Kabir Panthis, who form a relatively small sect. Rather, his true impact lies in the profound influence his teachings have had on the development of Sikhism, a religion founded by Guru Nanak and his nine followers.

Kabir's followers revere him as a divine incarnation and offer him worship accordingly. Unsurprisingly, numerous miraculous events associated with his life and deeds are recounted in their traditions.³

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/), which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work noncommercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

How to cite this article:

Varshney, R. (2025). A Biographical Exploration of Kabir: Unraveling the Life and Spiritual Journey of the 15th Century Mystic Poet. *Royal International Global Journal of Advance and Applied Research*, 2(7), 70–74. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16981253>

Childhood:

There exists a great difference of opinion among scholars about the time of Kabir's birth. But there are some incontrovertible facts based on which the time of his birth can be established. Kabir was known to be a disciple of Ramananda. There is a clear mention of Kabir's name among the twelve leading disciples of Ramananda. It evidently establishes his contemporariness with Ramananda, who flourished in the fifteenth century. The year 1398 A.D. is considered to be the most appropriate year of Kabir's birth.⁴

The life of Kabir is enveloped in legend and myth. One popular account suggests that he was born to a Brahmin widow and, to avoid societal stigma, she abandoned the infant near a pond on the outskirts of the city. The child was later found and raised by a Muslim weaver couple, Ali Niru and Neema, of Uttar Pradesh. The local Qazi gave the child's name, Kabir. According to some other legends, Kabir was born into a Muslim family.⁵

It is believed that a Hindu ascetic named Ashtanand, who was aware of Kabir's true parentage, took a special interest in imparting Hindu principles and values to him during his early years.

From an early age, Kabir appeared deeply engaged in a spiritual search. Conventional explanations about the origin of the Universe and similar religious narratives failed to satisfy his inquisitive mind.⁶

As he grew older, Kabir adopted his father's profession as a weaver, yet he continued to devote time to reflection, moral discourse, and philosophical inquiry.

*No one knew the mystery of that weaver
Who came into the world and spread the warp? The earth and the sky
are the two beams,
The sun and moon are two-filled shuttles
Taking a thousand threads, he spreads them lengthways
Today he weaveth still, but hard to reach is the far-off end.⁷*

Kabir's Guru:

The Hindu saint whose influence transformed Kabir's life was Ramananda (1400-1447). Swami Ramananda was a great teacher. He was a follower of the Vaishnava school of thought. His holy life was a source of inspiration to many. Kabir was one of his twelve disciples. Kabir was very much influenced by him, and from him, he learned the basic principles of life.

Ramananda tried to do away with caste distinctions. He went about visiting holy places, rejecting the doctrine of Maya (illusion) and promoting devotion to Ram and Sita. He was the first saint who employed vernacular languages for the propagation of his doctrines. He rejected the caste system that prevailed in our society and admitted to his discipleship men of all classes without any distinction.⁸

There is an interesting story of Kabir's introduction to Ramananda. Kabir stretched himself across the steps leading to the river Ganges, where Ramananda used to go for his pre-dawn bath. Tripping over Kabir and fearing danger to him, he cried out "Ram, Ram," which Kabir took as his mantra. Kabir's poetry

abounds with passionate appeals to chant the name of Ram, surrender completely to Him, and renounce all else in unwavering devotion.

It is important to note that Kabir's concept of Ram differs significantly from the Ram of mainstream Hindu mythology; he is neither the incarnation of Vishnu nor the heroic figure of the Ramayana. In several of his verses, Kabir rejects this anthropomorphic interpretation of Ram.

Although Kabir occasionally addresses figures like King Ram, Lord, or Hari (a name associated with Vishnu) in his hymns, many of his references to Ram suggest that his understanding of Ram is essentially sonic, a mantra formed by the syllables 'Ra' and 'Ma'. It is believed that he adopted this mantra, possibly imparted to him by his guru, as per popular tradition.⁹

During Kabir's early years, Ramananda was actively spreading his teachings, which emphasized union with God through sincere devotion and compassion. Known for his charismatic presence, Ramananda attracted thousands of devoted followers and was deeply respected by his contemporaries. He valued ritual practices and upheld Bhakti as the primary path to divine realization.

Kabir served his guru with deep dedication, learning from him not only the philosophical foundations of Hindu thought but also the discipline of mystical Yoga, which he appears to have pursued with remarkable perseverance. Kabir was not a scholar in the traditional sense and likely had no knowledge of Sanskrit. However, through attentive listening to the philosophical debates between the learned scholars of Varanasi and his teacher Ramananda, he gained a solid understanding of both Vedanta and Sankhya traditions.¹⁰

Kabir is widely believed to have never received a formal education. His profound understanding came from two primary sources: his own experiences, which he regarded as his true guide on the path to knowledge, and his ongoing interaction with saints, ascetics, and spiritual seekers. He attentively absorbed their discourses to deepen his insight. With a highly perceptive and reflective mind, Kabir readily embraced teachings that resonated with his inner experience of truth. However, he firmly rejected superstition and dogma, regardless of how revered the scriptures that promoted them might have been.¹¹

Although Kabir was not educated, he was acquainted with the basic teachings of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita, and the Bhagavata, and he had a thorough knowledge of the mysteries and rituals of the cults established by the Yogis and saints of the Gorakh sect. Kabir also knew about the chief tenets of the Saiva, Shakta, and Jain religions. Of course, Kabir also knew Islam inside out. But his specialty lay in the fact that he followed none of these religious beliefs blindly. He had his own way of understanding intricate spiritual problems and of solving them.¹²

Marriage:

Unlike other ascetic poets of his period, Kabir believed in leading a normal family life. Kabir was married to a God-fearing maiden named Loi. He had a son named Kamal and a daughter named Kamali. Though Kabir found

little personal fulfillment in his roles as husband and father, he never advocated for renunciation or celibacy. For most of his life, when not journeying, he continued to lead the conventional life of a householder.¹³

Kabir: A Hindu or Muslim?

A question that has baffled all is- 'Was Kabir a Hindu or Muslim?' He was neither of the two. He was only a good human being. A beautiful legend, attached to his death illustrates it. It is said that after his death, his Hindu and Muslim disciples fought over his body; Hindus wanted to burn it, and Muslims to bury it. The legend says that the dead body turned into flowers, which his disciples divided among themselves.¹⁴ One-half of the flowers went to the Raja of Benaras, Vir Singh, who had them cremated in a Hindu fashion, whilst the other half went to a Pathan noble, Bijli Khan, the head of the Mohammedan party, who buried them on the spot at Maghar.¹⁵

According to Dr. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, the story suggests Kabir's lineage from the Nath sect Yogis who turned householder and were later converted to Islam. They had the tradition of first cremating the body and then burying the ashes. Perhaps the so-called flowers were ashes.

Kabir's aggressive style also seems to have been a legacy of his Nath-Sect ancestors. Supporting his theory, Dr. Dwivedi says Kabir calls himself a Kori or Julaha, but never a Muslim. He refers to himself as neither a Hindu nor a Muslim-

*I am neither a Hindu nor a Muslim.
Allah-Ram is the breath of my body!*¹⁶

G.H. Westcott of Lucknow, the most recent writer on the sect, is of the opinion that Kabir was certainly a Mohammadan and that he had at least some knowledge of Sufi teachings.¹⁷

Free From Caste Constraints:

In his lifetime, Kabir felt that castes and creeds are the two main causes of struggle and restlessness among the people. Kabir did not believe in the caste system. He was free from the constraints of castes and creeds. He was also spared the conditioning of mind by a Pandit or a Maulavi. Life itself was his teacher. Freedom and honesty were his guides. His claim that he "never touched ink or paper, never held a pen in his hand," is often taken as a mark of his illiteracy. It is an ironical fling at the scholars who read scriptures or write pedantic statements on God and religion. In fact, they know nothing about God or religion; their knowledge, like a sandal load on a donkey's back, is of no use to them. According to Kabir, true knowledge is an awareness of the self. It lies within and has to be experienced. The seers of yore experienced the scriptures; the scriptures point to the path, but are not the path. Kabir may or may not have studied the scriptures, but he had definitely felt their pulse. His approach to life was scientific.¹⁸

Kabir accepted nothing without observation and experimentation. He scorned blind faith. Diving deep into the mud, he had found the lotus of awareness. His Shlokas or couplets are suffused with fragrance. Kabir preached a very simple religion based on ethical and moral values. His

teachings were based on the authority of his direct realization of God. He directly attacked the priestcraft of both Hinduism and Islam. As a result, he became an eyesore for the priests.

Path of Righteousness:

In his young days, Kabir was deeply drawn to the spiritual essence of Hinduism. His couplets and verses emphasize the importance of becoming a virtuous human being and treating everyone with equality and respect. His teachings effectively guide individuals toward a life of moral integrity. For Kabir, the divine resides within every human being, making all people inherently equal, beyond distinctions of good or bad-

*God first created light; all else to his might subject,
Since from one light is the whole world created.
Who is noble, or who is inferior!*¹⁹

In his lifetime, Kabir realized that the essence of religion lay not in observing empty rituals. He strictly condemned the priesthood in religion. Besides loving devotion, which is the main and dominant theme of Kabir's hymns, Kabir sought to liberate individuals from the destructive forces of ego, deceit, and other vices rooted in superstition and baseless beliefs. He was a vocal critic of caste discrimination, idol worship, and hollow rituals. In pursuit of his vision, Kabir boldly rejected all practices and customs that lacked spiritual depth and did not contribute to the elevation of the human soul. In a hymn included in Guru Granth Sahib, Kabir ridiculed the idea of mundan (the ritual of shaving off a Hindu child's hair). He said how a mundan ceremony could lead to God's realization. According to him, if it was so, the sheep would have attained liberation several times in her life since it had undergone the mundan ceremony several times.²⁰ Similarly, Kabir criticized Brahmins for taking pride in their high caste. To undermine the prestige and authority of the Brahmins in the eyes of the common man, Kabir used the most potent weapon-ridicule. The Brahmins behaved in an overbearing manner, projecting themselves as a repository of ancient wisdom. Kabir showed them up as a pompous fool as they took interest only in sectarian disputes.²¹ For example, Kabir says -

*Thou claim to be a Brahmin
By thy birth from a Brahmin woman, Why was thy birth
Not from a different source?*²²

While citing another example, Kabir refused to accept the superior status of the Brahmins and said -

*How are you, Brahmins and we Sudras?
How were we made of mere blood, and you of milk?
Saith Kabir: among us, he alone is Brahmin
Who the Supreme Being contemplates.*²³

All his life, Kabir continued to expose false pride based on a century-old caste system and tried to eradicate it. During his lifetime, Kabir also emphasized the need to have faith in God, who is the Supreme Lord and the Creator of this universe. To Kabir, God was the underlying essence and origin of all existence. The marvels of nature,

the mysteries of life and death, he saw them all as expressions of the Divine's cosmic play. Kabir believed that God pervades all things, present in every joy and sorrow of everyday life. He held a firm conviction in the soul's immortality and the ultimate union with the Divine. For he said: "As the river enters into the ocean, so my heart in Thee."²⁴

Kabir firmly believed that the path to attaining God is narrow and hard, and so many fail to see it. It could not be followed with anything less than complete commitment. According to Kabir, partially crushed sesame seeds are useless, though either whole or pressed to oil, they have great value. Those who choose to walk on this path must be like the heroic warrior holding his ground even though his body is hacked to pieces. Such is the courage that is required to attain God.²⁵

In Kabir's time, people boasted by proclaiming that they belonged to a high family, high caste, or high status, but to Kabir, all these were of no consequence on the path of God realization; rather, they became hindrances. Kabir was a very simple person. He was firm in his convictions. To convey his message to his followers and ordinary people, he used very simple language and avoided the use of terminology that an ordinary human being could not understand. For example, in one of his couplets, Kabir conveys the message of attaining closeness to God by drawing examples from simple, everyday life-

The Lord is like sugar scattered in the sand,

That the elephant cannot pick up.

Saith Kabir: Such is the Master's noble teaching,

That it can be consumed by turning into an ant.²⁶

In his lifetime, Kabir realized that God could be attained by following a True Guru, discarding egoistic and beastly temperament, and inculcating humility.

Kabir Humiliated: Sikandar Lodhi:

Kabir lived during the reign of Sikander Lodhi. As a fearless voice of truth, his uncompromising honesty and bold critique of religious hypocrisy offended both Hindu priests and Muslim Qazis, who harbored deep resentment toward him. When Sikander Lodhi visited Benaras, Kabir faced numerous indignities, instigated by the leaders of both religious communities who had turned the ruler against him. Under royal command, Kabir was bound to boulders and thrown into the river Ganges. But he is believed to have floated to the surface, sitting on a mat. He was even thrown before a wild elephant that just bowed to him and left. This incident is reflected in his poetry.²⁷

Ultimately, Sikandar Lodhi was impressed by his personality, and respecting his old age and wisdom, he acquitted Kabir.

Emphasis on Householders' Life: A Charter of Demand:

As is well known, Kabir led a householder's life. He was married and had children. He considered that by living in a family, one could lead a highly responsible life. Family life is focused on earning one's own livelihood. By doing so, one also served society and contributed to its welfare. Kabir believed that family life also inculcated many qualities and virtues, such as a sense of responsibility, the

spirit of sacrifice, tolerance, mutual appreciation, and following the principle of sharing and caring.

Kabir thus endeavored to inspire humanity with the virtues of love, compassion, and mutual support. Like many enlightened souls, he emphasized the value of a householder's life, believing it to be a vital means through which individuals learn to live harmoniously and practice coexistence. It unites man with the others more intimately. Kabir had no hesitation in submitting to his loving Lord the 'A Charter of Demands' for a happy household life.²⁸

In a hymn, included in Shri Guru Granth Sahib under Raag Sorath measure, addressing the Lord, Kabir pleads in a very straightforward language that it is not possible to recite His name with an empty stomach. He holds that for a smooth living, he needs flour, ghee, dal, and salt, along with a wife. To Kabir, a house to live in and a dress to cover the body were the minimum necessities. For a respectable family life, a cot and bedding were also required. Kabir defends his requests by clarifying that he seeks not out of greed, but for the basic necessities of life, and no one can truly live without them. He eloquently conveys the principle of engaging in honest labor while keeping one's heart devoted to God

Death:

In his lifetime, Kabir continued to be bold, outspoken, and straightforward. The hymns composed by him, even during the last years of his life, reflect his revolutionary spirit.

Kabir died in the year 1518 A.D. His life span is replete with many miraculous events, stretched over a period of 120 years. Before discarding his bodily vesture, Kabir shifted his residence to Maghar. At that time, it was popularly believed that one who dies at Kashi enters heaven, whereas one who dies at Maghar undergoes sufferings in hell.²⁹

In one of his hymns included in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Amar Das strongly supports Kabir's stand and makes it clear that visiting holy places and breathing one's last at one such place carries no meaning: God resides within every human heart, remembrance of His Name is equal to visiting all the sixty-eight holy places of pilgrimage: -

The sixty-eight water-edges shall ever be by his side,

Who has lodged the Lord in his heart?³⁰

Kabir an ardent devotee of the Absolute One, discarded his bodily vesture, reciting:

O Lord! Nothing is mine; all that exists is Thine alone

I lose nothing in rendering to Thee what is Thine.³¹

Such, indeed, was the great Bhagat Kabir, whose Shlokas constitute the subject matter of our study.

Conclusion:

In retracing the life and spiritual journey of Kabir, the 15th-century mystic poet, this exploration reveals a figure who transcended religious, social, and linguistic boundaries to articulate a vision of divine truth rooted in personal experience and universal love. Kabir's biography, though shrouded in legend and oral tradition,



offers profound insight into a man who challenged orthodoxy, both Hindu and Muslim, and rejected ritualism in favour of inner realization. His verses, rich in metaphor and piercing in clarity, continue to inspire seekers across centuries, reminding us of the transformative power of simplicity, compassion, and devotion.

Kabir's life exemplifies the syncretic spirit of the Bhakti and Sufi movements, reflecting a deep engagement with the social realities of his time, particularly caste hierarchies, religious hypocrisy, and the alienation of the marginalized. Through his words and actions, Kabir not only redefined the contours of Indian spirituality but also carved out a path of resistance, reform, and awakening. This biographical journey ultimately underscores that Kabir was not just a poet or saint but a revolutionary voice of timeless relevance, one who continues to speak to humanity's enduring quest for truth, equality, and inner freedom.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the successful completion of this work. My heartfelt thanks go to my mentors, colleagues, and well-wishers for their valuable guidance, encouragement, and constructive feedback throughout the course of this study.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References:

1. Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1993, p.11.
2. Md. Hedayetullah, *Kabir: The Apostle of Hindu Muslim Unity*, Motilal Benarsidas Publishers, Delhi, 1977, p.197.
3. J.C. Oman, *Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India*, Oriental Press, Delhi, 1973, pp.126-127.
4. James Hastings, Ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. VII, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, New York, p.633.
5. S.A.A. Rizvi, *The Wonder That was India*, Part II, New Delhi, 1987, p.361.
6. L.F. Rushbrook Williams, *The Great Men of India*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1996, p.519.
7. Ahmed Shah, *The Bijak of Kabir*, Hamirpur, 1917, p.67.
8. Ishwari Prasad, *History of Medieval India*, The Indian Press, Allahabad, 1948, p. 582.
9. Linda Hess, Tr. *The Bijak of Kabir*, North Point Press, San Francisco, 1983, p.4.
10. L.F. Rushbrook Williams, *The Great Men of India*, op. cit., p.520.
11. Amresh Dutta, Ed. *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature*, Vol-III, Sahitya Academy, 1989, p.1905.
12. Parasnath Tiwari, *Kabir*, Tr. by J. P. Unival, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1967, p.40.
13. S.A.A Rizvi, *The Wonder That Was India*, op. cit., p.362.
14. Sushila Mahajan, Tr. *Says Kabir: A Collection of One Hundred and Ten Poems of Kabir*, New Delhi, 2003, pp.4-5.
15. Charlotte Vaudeville, *a Weaver Named Kabir*, op. cit., p.19.
16. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, *Kabir*, Rajkamal Prakashan, Delhi, 1971, p.21.
17. G.H. Westcott, *Kabir and the Kabir Panth*, Calcutta, 1953, p.37.
18. Sushila Mahajan, Tr. *Says Kabir: A Collection of One Hundred and Ten Poems of Kabir*, op.cit., p. 5.
19. Shri Guru Granth Sahib, p.1349.
20. Ibid., p.324.
21. Savitri Chandra Shobha, *Medieval India and Hindi Bhakti Poetry: a Socio Cultural Study*, Har Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1996, pp.19-20.
22. Shri Guru Granth Sahib, p.324.
23. Ibid., p.324.
24. Rabindranath Tagore, Tr. *One Hundred and Ten Poems of Kabir*, Chronicle Books, New Delhi, p. xxxiv
25. Monika Horstmann, *Images of Kabir*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 208- 209.
26. Shri Guru Granth Sahib, Shlok-238, p.1377.
27. Ibid., p.870.
28. Sarup Singh Alag, *An Introduction to Shri Guru Granth Sahib*, op.cit., pp.103-104.
29. Ibid., p.105.
30. Shri Guru Granth Sahib, p.491.
31. Ibid., Shlok-203, p.1375.