RITUAL AND REFORM IN THE KABIR PANTH

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Introduction

The Kabir Panth is a religious movement based on the teachings of the north Indian poet saint Kabir (1398-1518). This paper looks at the practice of rituals called *chauka* in the Kabir Panth and a campaign led by the leader of the Kabircaura branch of the Kabir Panth to abolish the *chauka* rituals. The paper starts by outlining the history of the Panth and the role of the *chauka* ritual in the practices of the branches of the Kabir Panth who follow the teachings of Kabir's disciple Dharmdas. It then examines accounts of the life of Vivekdas, the leader of the Kabircaura branch of the Kabir Panth, and his arguments that the *chauka* ritual should be abandoned because it is a corrupt practice which is not based on the teachings of Kabir. I propose that the controversy over the practice of the *chauka* ritual reflects different branches of the Kabir Panth's responses to modernity. The importance of this I suggest it that it shows how a religious movement can become divided into branches with some advocating conservative practices based on localised rituals at the same time as other branches can advocate reformist approaches based on establishing a universal global identity.[1]

Kabir

Kabir (ca. 1398-1518) was a medieval Indian religious teacher who was born and lived most of his life in Varanasi. From his name, which is Islamic in origin and means 'The Great', it is apparent that he was in some sense from a Muslim background. However, in the verses which circulate in his name there is a mix of Hindu, Muslim and Yogic ideas which shows that he was not a conventional Muslim as we now understand the term. Rather, he is remembered for a teaching that all exterior religious rituals and forms of religion were false and that the true nature of the divine was that it is without shape or form and could be found by anybody if they would just search for it within their own self.

The Origins of the Kabir Panth

There are a number of religious traditions which regard Kabir as their founder and such traditions describe themselves in Hindi as a Kabir Panth ('Kabir path') and a follower of such a tradition is called a Kabir Panthi. According to many Kabir Panthi sources the original Kabir Panthi tradition was established at a monastery in Varanasi called Kabircaura at the site of Kabir's house. The Panth consisted of lay householder followers and ascetics (called *sants*) who followed Kabir's teachings. The *sants* spent part of the year wandering and part of the year living together in monasteries under the leadership of a senior monk who was called the Mahant (abbot). Gradually over time the followers of Kabir split up into numerous branches. The reasons for the splits were not always clear but were partly over issues related to practice and belief and partly due to the development of different monasteries over a broad area including UP, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. However, the majority of these branches of the Kabir Panth held that the true teachings of Kabir were to be found in an anthology of verses attributed to Kabir called the Bijak. The word Bijak means, essence or seed, or an account book, or a guide to how to find a hidden treasure. The earliest print editions of this work began to appear in 1868 and it has been in print ever since in one form or another. Monks from the Kabircaura monastery have traditionally been closely identified with the idea that the only true source of knowledge about the teachings of Kabir is to be found in their sacred text the Bijak.

Dharmdas and the Chattisgarh branches of the Kabir Panth

In the early eighteenth century a rich merchant from Chattisgarh in the east of Madhya Pradesh became a follower of the Kabir Panth and took the name of Dharmdas ('servant of the dharma'). In Dharmdas's works he described how he had visions of Kabir in which new teachings were revealed to him (Caturvedi 1972. p. 282). Three prominent aspects of these new teachings were major innovations. First, Kabir revealed to Dharmdas that he was an incarnation of the divine, called the *satyapurus* ('the true being') who had been reborn in each age of the world in different incarnations. Second, Kabir prophesied that forty-two generations of his descendents would form a hereditary married lineage of chief abbots for the tradition. Third, Dharmdas created a new genre of works called *sagar* ('oceans') which contained both accounts of Kabir's new teachings and also of a new set of ritual practices called *chauka* which were to be practiced by the followers of the Kabir Panth. This tradition rapidly followed the pattern of the earlier incarnations of the Kabir Panth and numerous branches developed over time due to disputes over succession and other issues (Caturvedi 1972, pp. 317-20). However, traditions which traced their origins back to Dharmdas's version of Kabir's teachings were very successful in attracting followers and appear to have become some of the most popular branches of the Kabir Panth.

The Kabir Panth

The first attempt to enumerate the numbers of followers of the Kabir Panth was made in the census of India for 1881 in which the Kabir Panth was regarded as a distinct religion. According to this census some 347,994 people described themselves as 'Kabir Panthis' (Plowden 1883, p. 23). By the 1901 census the number of Kabir Panthis was around eight hundred and fifty thousand (Risley & Gait 1903, p. 362). The 1901 census was the last census which gave any data on the Kabir Panth so there is no more recent census data on the number of Kabir Panthis.

In 2003 one estimate of the number of followers of the Kabir Panthi was published which counted the followers of various branches of the tradition and estimated that there were about 9.6 million followers of the Kabir Panth at that time in India (Mahapatra 2003).

According to a recent estimate of the number of Kabir Panthis on the website of the Kabir monastery called the *Sadguru Prakatya Dham* in Lahartara Varanasi there are

'an estimated 25 million Kabir Panthis world wide and over 3000 Ashrams world wide' ("Pamphlet," nd.).

David Lorenzen (1981) made a study of the organisation of the Kabir Panth based on field work done in the winters of 1976 and 1979 during which he visited a large number of Kabir Panthi monasteries in UP, Bihar and Chattisgarh. His research indicated that in general the monasteries had affiliations with either the Kabircaura branch of the Kabir Panth or the followers of Dharamdas. However, he found that there were other groups which did not align with either main branch, or which regarded themselves as independent, but were claimed as offshoots by one or both of the main branches.

The Kabir Panth is also active outside of India and in particular in the Indian Diaspora such as Trinidad, Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana and Dutch Guiana (Surinam). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries around half a million Indians, mostly from poor lower caste communities from Bihar and UP, moved to these areas as indentured labourers and there were among them a number of followers of the Kabir Panth (Vertovec 1992, p. 4, pp. 232-243).

The *chauka* ritual
The *chauka* ritual is an important ritual practiced in the Kabir Panth in India and in the Diaspora. In a study of ritual in the Kabir Panthi David Lorenzen has argued that there is no evidence that this ritual formed part of Kabir's practices and that it seems to have been widespread not just amongst Kabir Panthis but also other Eastern Indian low caste movements. Lorenzen argued the only major parallel to the *chauka* rituals appeared to be amongst domestic Hindu practices such as the *satyanarayan vrat* observances (Lorenzen 1996, p. 238).
In his view the earliest reference to it can be found in a work, itself undated but probably from the eighteenth century, called the *jnan gudri*, 'The quilt of knowledge', which appears to be associated with Dharamdas in the mind's of many Kabir Panthi followers. Whatever its origins may have been it is clear that all sections of the Kabir Panth practiced the *chauka* ritual in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and it remains the central practice of the followers of Dharamdas and was also practiced, as a periodic observance, by the Kabircaura branch of the Kabir Panth.

The main features of the ritual are that it is a communal observance at which offerings are made to the Mahant who is considered during the ritual to embody the spirit of Kabir, which is also the spirit of the *satyapurus* himself. Lorenzen (1996) described nine stages to the ritual. It starts by drawing a pattern of five squares and diagonal lines on the ground using flour and setting up in this locations for various items such as a *kalas* (a water pot), a lamp, a banana plant, and coconuts as well as seats for the Mahant and a minister (the *divan*). The next stage is accompanied by music and the singing of devotional songs and in it the Mahant arrives and takes up a special seat in the ritual area. The third stage is the lighting of the lamp and the recitation of various verses. The fourth stage is the making of offerings of coconuts, and other material gifts to the Mahant whilst a range of traditional songs about the ending of life in samsara and the attainment of liberation are sung. The fifth stage is when the Mahant breaks the coconuts which have been offered. This leads to the sixth stage which is where the coconuts and other food offerings are offered to the *satyapurus*, the divine spirit. After this in some branches of the tradition new followers can be initiated into the Panth. In the seventh stage the sprinkling of sanctified water is followed by the eighth stage, the climax, which is an *arati*, a lamp offering, which is followed by the distribution of the *prasad*, the blessed food offerings, which forms the ninth stage of the ritual.

Kedarnath Dvivedi published a study of the Kabir Panth (1965) in which he noted that the *chauka* ritual can also be called a *satvik yajna* ('Pure fire sacrifice') and distinguished four main types of *chauka* ritual associated with four types of aims. The *anandi chauka* is celebrated on the initiation of new members of the Panth. The *janmauti chauka* is celebrated with the intention of gaining male offspring or on the birth of a son. The *calava chauka* which is performed on the occasion of a death and the *ekottari chauka* is celebrated in order to gain peace for 101 generations of one's ancestors. The differences between these forms of *chauka* ritual relate in part to the amount of offerings needed to celebrate them. For instance, whilst for the *anandi chauka* only five to seven coconuts are needed for the *ekottari chauka* 101 coconuts are needed (Dvivedi 1965, p. 198).

Contemporary Public *chauka* Rituals

The celebration of *chauka* rituals continues to be a key element in the contemporary Kabir Panth and there is an increasing trend for them to be celebrated as part of large scale public events. A search of Hindi newspaper reports from this year indicates that a number of such events have taken place on such a large scale as to be newsworthy. On the first of January the Hindi newspaper the *Dainik Bhaskar* reported that crowds flocked to celebrate a *chauka* ritual at a place called Navagarh in Chattisgarh at which the main Mahant was Prakashmuni Nam Saheb, the leader of the followers of one of the main branches of the followers of Dharmdas. The ritual was described as being both a *Mahayagya* ('great fire sacrifice') and an *ekottari chauka* ritual and was celebrated by 101 Kabir Panthi Mahants. The scale of the event was also reported as being vast, as the main ceremonies were followed by a meal at which food was given to six hundred thousand people from all corners of the country. The report also notes that the planning for the event had taken nine years to complete and it was on such a scale that a school holiday was declared and the health department had put into place temporary arrangements for drinking water and sanitation for the large numbers attending the event ("Ekottari chauka" 2010).

A second notable *chauka* ritual this year was held on the occasion of the Kabir Jayanti, the annual celebration of Kabir's birth, which in 2010 was celebrated on 26th of June. The *Dainik Bhaskar* reported on a *chauka* ceremony which was held under the leadership of Mahant Venidas of the Kabir temple in Banswara Rajasthan. The Mahant was reported as saying that Kabir's message was one of truth and it would be celebrated by the performance of a *Satvik yagya* (a 'pure fire sacrifice') and an *anandi chauka* ritual combined with the singing of devotional songs and the telling of the story of the life of Kabir. A further feature of the celebration was that numerous *sants* from the Kabir Panth from surrounding districts would gather together at a *sammelan* (conference) to celebrate the event and there would be a communal meal ("Kabir Jayanti," 2010).

These two examples alone point to the centrality of the practice of the *chauka* ritual for large numbers of followers of the Kabir Panth who follow the traditions which are derived from Dharamdas.

Vivekdas (b. 1957) and the Kabir Panth

Vivekdas has been the Mahant of the Kabircaura branch of the Kabir Panth since 1999. When I visited the Kabircaura monastery in the mid 1980s he was already a

very active figure in the Kabir Panth and was involved in many activities. One of these was the Kabir Dal ('The Kabir party') which was a sort of political movement. Prajna (1983) in a publication called *Kabir dal kya hai*? ('What is the Kabir Party') described it as having been a movement which had been re-established by Vivekdas. Concerning Vivekdas he wrote that he had learned to read and write in a literacy campaign when he was fifteen. He then began his public life working in literacy movements amongst Santhal tribal communities in Bihar but was not satisfied with the speed of change brought about by such programs and so looked for more radical solutions. This led him to come to Varanasi and take initiation in the Kabir Panth in 1972 (Prajna 1983, pp. 12-13). The aim of the Kabir Dal was to bring about social change and establish universal equality based on Kabir's ideas which were described as also being in accord with those of Marx and Mao.

In 2003 Vivekdas gave a different account of how he joined the Kabir Panth and his relation to politics. He wrote that he was initiated into the Panth because he had been impressed by Kabir's revolutionary attitude but that after he joined the Kabir Panth he realised that the Panth's practices were 'Pauranik' a Hindi term which means religion focused on ritual practices and priestly authority. He said that members of the Panth 'were selling the teachings of Kabir at a cut price and running [the Panth] as their shops' furthermore, 'seeing the utter ritualism ('*karmkanda*') in their life and practices disgust arose in my heart and I began a rebellion against these people' and following this he came to Varanasi and took initiation in the Kabirchaura branch of the Kabir Panth (Vivekdas 2003).

In 2007 yet another picture of Vivekdas's life appeared in a text Shukdev Singh wrote on the lives of the Mahants of the Kabircaura branch of the Kabir Panth. His account of Vivekdas's background showed a radical new edge to the story.

> Vivek is from the Santhal-Pargana district of Bihar. He has had a rebellious nature since childhood. He could not bear to see the way that ordinary people were being ground down by caste distinctions and prejudice, deception and bad customs. Due to this in his youth he joined in the violent Naxal movement with a dream of establishing a fundamentally equal society free from discrimination. He was attracted by the enticing proletariat slogans and announcements of the Naxal path, but his illusions were quickly shattered. After joining the movement

he sensed that there was a great difference between rhetoric and action there. The principles were only for displaying to the people and attracting them, but in practice there was still selfishness and the practice of personal benefit. After becoming disillusioned with the Naxal path he came into contact with some Kabir Panthi sadhus and was introduced to Kabir's teachings, ideas and the Kabir Panth. He was profoundly influenced by the Panth and Kabir's ideas and abandoning the Naxal's violent path to social change and came to Kabirchaura monastery and joining with the Kabir Panth and adopting the path set out by Kabir and began to bring into actuality his dream of bringing about a social revolution and establishing social equality. (Singh 2007, pp. 189-190).

Singh then also describes Vivekdas's involvement in political struggle, bringing the monks out of the monasteries in the 1980s and onto the streets to campaign for social equality. He also links the fight against corruption and injustice in society with battles he fought, apparently quite literally, to eject criminal elements who had taken possession of a number of monasteries, including the traditionally important monastery at Phatuha in Bihar. He then went on to describe how Vivekdas then set out to expand the Panth globally by visiting Trinidad and Tobago and other countries. His conclusion was that it has been an important goal in Vivekdas's life to free the Panth from selfish elements who have forced their way into the Panth and that he had adopted an 'extremely aggressive attitude towards those tricksters who had forced their way into the Panth such as the followers of Dharamdas.' (Singh 2007, p. 191).

The value of these accounts of Vivekdas's life lies in the background they provide. This then allows the factors which motivated Vivekdas's attitude towards the *chauka* ritual to be placed in context.

Vivekdas on the *chauka* ritual
In 1995 Vivekdas began to publically articulate one of his key teachings, that the practice of *chauka* should be totally rejected, during his first visit to Trinidad. On the eighth day of his visit at a *chauka* arati ceremony in which he had been honoured as the embodiment of Kabir he made a speech called 'Light up the *chauka* in the body' In his speech he explained to his audience that he had been biding his time since arriving in Trinidad and waiting for the right moment to reveal to the people

honouring him that their practice of the *chauka arati* ceremony was totally misguided and they needed to stop doing it at once. He began by saying.

> I am a *sant*, and like a *sant* I want to spend time with you and what I enjoy is teaching, giving instructions and holding *satsang*. But today you have obstructed me by asking me to sit in this *chauka arati* ceremony. I have never accepted this ritual observance of *puja*, but due to you I have performed the conclusion of this *puja*. This is the first time in my life I have ever participated in such a *puja*. I can never agree with such a *puja* being performed in the name of Kabir. I am also not used to sitting on such an artificial palace like throne. I am here in a foreign land, if I was not I would have walked out of the ceremony, but you people must remember that from today I will not perform such a ceremony again, nor wish to take part in one. The reason I have come needs to be fulfilled. You came here a hundred and fifty years ago. How you practice and believe the Kabir Panth to be, is not the way of Kabir (the literal meaning of Kabir Panth). If you wish to understand Kabir's doctrines you have to abandon all this pomp and do as I say. From the airport to here I have seen that you are so lost in ritual observances that to understand Kabir's teachings will be difficult. It is a week now since I arrived in Trinidad and Tobago but all you are thinking about is *chauka arati* ceremonies. I have never seen such spiritual commerce being carried out in the name of Kabir. Today on the eighth day I say openly to you. It is my duty to speak the truth to you. The *chauka arati* ceremony and Kabir's path belong to two different paths (Vivekdas 2003, p. 37).

Vivekdas explained his understanding of the origins of the *chauka arati puja* in a talk he gave in Holland whilst on that same tour by arguing that it had been invented in order to substitute for animal sacrifice.

> There was a deity of the tribal people to whom it was essential to sacrifice a pig every year. They were not ready to accept that they should give up this practice. This was because it seemed to them that if they did so their deity might be angered and destroy the people's fortune. A Kabir Panthi teacher (*pracarak*) very skilfully persuaded them that they would substitute something else in place of the pig to satisfy the god. He showed the tribals a coconut and said, look, this is a living being, it has two eyes. If we sacrifice this the god will be even happier (Vivekdas 2003, pp. 22 – 23).

However, he views it as now utterly opposed to Kabir's ideas and said.

> The *chauka arati* ceremony is a violent attack on the revolutionary ideology of Kabir. The *chauka arati* ceremony is an utterly priestly ritual and is a feudal ceremony (Vivekdas 2003, p. 25).

He then went on to tell a long story about an earlier experience in his life which had convinced him that the main motivation for the *chauka arati* ceremony was commercial (*vyavasayik*). This related to a visit to Rajasthan where he had been part of the audience for *chauka* ceremony in which a candidate had been installed as a Mahant who was corrupt and the motivation of the organisers was to make a profit by taking offerings from the community (Vivekdas 2003, pp. 26 – 28).

Vivekdas then told his audience of the practice that he wanted them to take up instead of the *chauka arati* ceremony that they were practicing and said that the true teaching of Kabir was 'the *chauka arati* ceremony within the body. The *chauka arati* ceremony which is struggle going on constantly within us' (Vivekdas 2003, pp. 26 – 28). He then explained that what he meant was that we are constantly in an inner struggle with a whole range of phenomena within us which bind us to worldly existence. He then made a play on words in order to connect the *chauka* ritual and his notion of inner struggle. This is possible as the word *chauka*, is based on a word for 'four' and can describe both the square in which the *chauka* ceremony is carried out, and the notion of sets of fours. This allowed Vivekdas to then describe sets of 'fours' which bind people, four forms of birth, four castes, four Vedas, etc. etc. and with which we need to struggle both externally and internally.

From this it can be seen that in the end Vivekdas not only rejects the external rituals of the *chauka* but argues instead that what is needed in followers of the Kabir Panth is to internalise the social struggle that typifies his approach to Kabir's teachings in order to free the individual.

The local and the global in the Kabir Panth

From the history of the Kabir Panth it is evident that it has constantly changed and developed over time and continues to do so to this day. I would argue that in examining how ritual is regarded in the Kabir Panth what is revealed is how the branching structure of the Panth allows it to negotiate approaches to change.

Furthermore, I propose that the one possible model for understanding what is taking place is in terms of how some branches are stressing localisation whilst others are emphasising globalisation.

The branches of the Kabir Panth which follow Dharmdas are trying to maintain the relevance of the Kabir Panth by stressing the local relations between the Kabir Panth and the areas in which it is active. This is evident from the way that the newspaper reports all stress the relationship between the celebration of *chauka* rituals and the locations in which they are taking place. This might possibly be compared with one key strategy adopted by the Hindi press during the last twenty years which has been to enlarge its audience base by localising news so as to appeal to a broad based audience.

Vivekdas has, however, adopted an approach which stresses the universal and global nature of the Kabir Panth. This was indeed a key point made by Singh when describing Vivekdas's motivation for his program of international travel and teaching.

> After taking up the position of Mahant Vivekdas has visited many countries with the aim of establishing the global expansion of the Panth (Singh 2007, p. 191).

The connection between the notion of the universal and the global is also very strong in Hindi as the Hindi word *vaisvik,* which literally means universal, has now also become the standard Hindi term for global, as in the Hindi word for globalisation, *vaisvikaran* (Friedlander 2009).

Haridas is a Kabir Panthi activist from Trinidad who has written a description of Vivekdas's visit to Trinidad and its impact in an article in a Kabircaura publication from 2007. In this he stressed the universality of Kabir's teaching and the importance of the fact that Kabir went to Maghar to die. This is a major theme in Kabir's tradition as whilst dying in Varanasi was believed to automatically grant liberation, dying in Maghar was seen as resulting in an ill fated rebirth, being born as an ass. However, Haridas said that Kabir went there to show that he had no concern with such issues.

> 'This sacred site of Maghar tells us that as long as God (*isvar*) lives in our hearts it does not matter where we live, or where we die, God is universal and

present everywhere and cannot be kept imprisoned in any place' (Haridas 2007, p. 82).

In the context of the Diaspora this statement I suggest takes on a particular meaning; that the teachings are as valid in Trinidad as they are in India. He then continued.

'For the oppressed, and those ground down by society and the general populace Kabir opens the door to heaven. By his passing away (*mahaparnirvan*) in Maghar he has proved that neither place, nor the teachings that were previously believed in have any importance, but the real matter of importance is discerning awakening (*vivekpurn sambodhitva*) concerning the essence of life, faith, and spirituality' (Haridas 2007, p. 82).

I would argue that this shows that Vivekdas's interpretation of Kabir's teachings in Trinidad is being taken up by some Kabir Panthi followers as showing that the Kabir Panth without ritual can be seen as a universal and global religion. Newspaper reports also indicate that as well as Haridas a number of other Kabir Panthis in Trinidad were moved by Vivekdas's teachings to abandon the practice of *chauka* and bought land to establish a training and practice centre for the teachings of Kabir as advocated by the Kabircaura branch of the Kabir Panth ("Sant Kabir Jayanti," 2009).

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how the *chauka* ritual has played a central role in the practices of the Kabir Panth from at least as early as the eighteenth century onwards. My conclusion is that the split in attitudes to the *chauka* ritual in the Kabir Panth continues the pattern of the growth of branches in the traditions of the Kabir Panth. Whilst one branch, the followers of Dharmdas, maintains the tradition of affirming group identity through the practice of the *chauka* ritual, another branch, that of Vivekdas, is able to assert the possibility of a radical universal reform in the tradition that would return it to its original roots in the teachings of Kabir revealed in the Bijak.

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