

Purnendu Ranjan. *Kabirpanth til the end of the Medieval India*. Chandigarh: Gyankosh Publishers: 2016. 250 pages. ISBN 978-81-932755-9-7. Price: INR (Indian Rupees) 695. Available from: <http://www.orderyourbooks.com/>

Modern scholars have produced a mountain of studies about the history of religious sects and movements in India, but virtually all these studies have suffered from the lack of archival data about the relevant social, political, and economic activities of these institutions. What historians do have is a massive amount of religious literature produced by the intellectuals associated with the sects and movements, including hagiographies of their founders and leaders. The Kabir Panth is a good example. It seems likely that it was gradually organized by his disciples in the sixteenth century CE, probably well before 1550, but there is no clear documentary evidence that this is the case. Kabir himself must have died sometime near his traditional death date of 1518. Most of the earliest manuscripts containing his songs and verses are associated not with the Kabir Panth but with the Dadu Panth and the Sikh Panth. The earliest dated manuscript, however, is a 1582 CE collection of mostly Sur Das songs that also contains 15 Kabir songs. The two surviving Goindval Pothi manuscripts of the Sikhs, which include 50 Kabir songs, apparently are copies of an anthology assembled in 1570-1572, but only one date, corresponding to 1595 CE, appears in one of these manuscripts. The remaining so-far-discovered early manuscripts of Kabir songs and verses are all from Rajasthan and the Punjab and belong to the seventeenth century. The earliest hagiographies of Kabir are those of Ananta-das's *Kabir parachai*, written about 1590 CE, and Priya-das's 1712 CE commentary on a verse about Kabir in Nabha-das's *Bhaktamal*. None of these sources give any significant information about the early Kabir Panth, although they clearly indicate the continuing popularity of Kabir's songs and verses.

The earliest direct documentary evidence for the existence of a Kabir Panth, or at least institutions associated with Kabir, are two Mughal documents. First is one that registers a gift of the village of Kabirapur Karmua for the upkeep of the Muslim tomb of Shah Kabir located in Magahar in northeastern U.P. It has a date equivalent to 1698-1699 CE during the reign of Aurangzeb. The second document is in the possession of a Kabir math in Satmalpur in northwestern Bihar. It bears the seal of the Mughal Ahmad Shah (1748-1754) and confirms an earlier donation of land to a follower of Kabir named Lal Sahib by the emperor Akbar (1556-1605 CE). It is also worth noting that Abul Fazl, Akbar's

great minister and chronicler, mentions two tombs of Kabir, one at Puri in Orissa and one at Ratanpur (probably in Awadh). The latter tomb no longer exists, but in any case Kabir Panthi tradition (and Aurangzeb's document) are unanimous in making Magahar the site of Kabir's death.

Despite the lack of written historical documents, by the end of the seventeenth century various branches and many maths of the Kabir Panth existed throughout northern India (including Nepal and Pakistan), maths that were connected with several separate branches of the Kabir Panth. The problem of how to document the founding and history of these maths and branches of the Panth is formidable. Only about a dozen scholars have so far attempted either to write a history of the Kabir Panth (or of one or other of its several branches) or to make a survey of its principal maths and shrines. Six studies are particularly noteworthy: G. H. Westcott's 1907 book *Kabir and the Kabir Panth*, F. E. Keay's 1931 *Kabir and His Followers*, Kedarnath Dvivedi's 1965 *Kabir aur Kabir-pantha*, Parashuram Chaturvedi's 1964 (2nd ed.) *Uttari Bharat ki sant-parampara*, and two more recent books by Purnendu Ranjan, a 2008 *History of Kabirpanth* and his present *Kabirpanth till the end of the Medieval India* (2016). I reviewed Ranjan's 2008 book in IESHR, vol. 47 (2010).

Ranjan's new book covers much of the same ground as his 2008 study but includes discussions of many additional maths and shrines based on fieldwork carried out under the auspices of a 2013 grant from the University Grants Commission. In addition to discussing the documentary evidence that exists, Ranjan presents many oral testimonies of traditions collected from sadhus and mahants of the many sites that he and his team visited. Most important are the guru-pranalis that give genealogical lists of the former mahants of the maths, sometimes with stories about events that occurred in their reigns. Also discussed are the tombs (samadhis) of these former mahants found on the grounds of some maths, particularly those of the Dharamdasi branch (a branch centered in Chhattisgarh but also with maths as far afield as Gujarat, Bihar and other states). Ranjan's new book also includes a section of photos of many of these maths and samadhis and of some of the written materials offered in support of the oral testimonies collected from them.

Collecting this material is undoubtedly an important task, but there remain serious questions about what a historian can do with it apart from collecting it. A one-fact-after-another history does not get us very far, especially when the reliability of these "facts" is questionable. Ranjan organizes his material in chapters dedicated to the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, within each, by geographical region. It might have been better to organize the chapters by region or by Kabir Panthi branches since the older maths have mostly continued to exist until today and since the branches have important religious and organizational differences. A more theoretical and in-depth

study of the Kabir Panth maths and shrines is still much needed, as Ranjan himself admits, but his two books do provide much basic data indicating where future historians might want to start.

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