Dissent in Kabir and the Kabir Panth

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Over the years, my interest in the Kabir Panth and Kabir has often centered on the social dimensions of the beliefs and practices that they have advocated, and, more specifically on the dissent they have expressed against the more dominant socio-religious ideology of *varnashrama-dharma.* In general I have argued in favor of the view that the social and religious dissent that Kabir and his followers have fostered has had important consequences, even though there never existed much chance for them to break the hegemony of upper-caste dominance. The present essay will criticize some of the arguments that have been used by other scholars to largely discount the importance of the socio-religious dissent promoted by Kabir and his followers against the *varnashrama-dharma* ideology. The essay will also discuss some of the ideas about Kabir’s socio-religious ideology presented by Purushottam Agrawal in his new book *Akath kahani prem ki: Kabir ki kavita aur unka samay* [2009]. First, however, I need to very briefly review a few of the salient features of the dissent found in the compositions of Kabir and the Kabir Panth.

Kabir’s compositions are remarkable for his insistence on the necessity for both religious and social reform. He attacks not only superficial and superstitious religious rituals in both Hindu religion and Islam, but also the sacred authority of religious texts: the Vedas, the Puranas, and the Koran. He also attacks the pretensions to social superiority of high-class persons, particularly Brahmins and kazis, often with amusing but quite vicious satire. Today he would undoubtedly be hauled before a court of justice for his insults to both the Hindu and Muslim religions and for fomenting religious conflict.

The Kabir that most people are now familiar with is the Kabir of popular bhajans, songs whose lyrics were mostly composed in his name long after his death. In these
bhajans, the element of sharp socio-religious dissent is partly muted, although by no means totally absent. To get an idea of the radical nature of Kabir’s message, it is better to turn to the songs of the older collections—most notably those of the Sikh Adi Granth, the Dadu Panthi Kabir-granthavali and the Kabir Panthi Kabir-bijak. Here I will cite only one example, a song that is found in both the Kabir-bijak (ram. 39) and the Kabir-granthavali (ram. ashtapadi 3):

He who taught the Muslim creed (kalaman) in the Kali age
Was unable to seek out the power of the creation.
According to karma, the actor performs his actions.
The Vedas and the Muslim books are all worthless.
According to karma, one became an avatar in the world.
According to karma, one fixed the Muslim prayers.
According to karma, circumcision or the sacred thread.
Neither the Hindu nor the Turk knows the secret.
Water and air were joined together,
And all this turmoil was created.
When surati is absorbed in the Void,
On what basis can our caste be told?

The literature of the Kabir Panth is less well-known than the compositions of Kabir himself (although many popular bhajans attributed to Kabir probably originated among the sadhus of the Panth). Much of the Kabir Panthi literature takes the form of hagiographical legends about events in the life of Kabir. The earliest versions of these legends seem to be those found in the Kabir paracai of the Ramanandi author Anantadas (ca. 1590) and in Priyadas’s 1702 A.D. commentary on Nabhadas’s Bhaktamal. Neither Anantadas nor Priyadas were Kabir Panthis, but it remains likely that the legends first appeared among the followers of Kabir (whether or not they belonged to an organized Kabir Panth). Most of these legends involve confrontations between Kabir and representatives of either royal authority (kings and sultans) or religious authority (Brahmins, kazis and mullahs). I am sure that at least some of these legends are familiar to most of you.
One of the most popular of the legends tells how the people of Banaras—led by Kabir’s own mother and various kazis, Baniyas and Brahmins—went to complain about Kabir’s activities to the sultan, Sikandar Lodi. Sikandar promised to punish Kabir, but various efforts to do so miraculously failed. Sikandar finally had to apologize to Kabir and became his disciple. The social and religious dissent embodied in this legend and most of the other legends about Kabir is never very far from the surface.

At one stage in my research on the Kabir Panth, I had the opportunity to make a catalogue of the manuscripts found in the collection of the Kabir Chaura Math library in Banaras. Among these manuscripts, two texts are of particular interest from the point of view of socio-religious dissent. Neither of the texts is explicitly identified as a Kabir Panthi text, but their presence as manuscripts in the Kabir Chaura library is obviously significant.

One is a Sanskrit text known as the *Saracandrika* (one copy with a Hindi commentary, and one without). A version of this text was published in 1989. The text is a collection of verses taken from various Puranas and other Sanskrit texts. The purpose of many of these verses is to argue that all persons of all castes have a right to salvation thanks to the virtues of bhakti religion and God’s grace in the Kali Yuga. One such verse is as follows (pp. 6-7, attributed to *Padma-purana*):

Even a Candala is the best of munis,
If he is centered on bhakti to Brahma.
But without bhakti to Vishnu,
Even a Brahmin (*dvija*) is the lowest of Dog-eaters (*svapaca*).

This sort of dissent obviously concerns principally the religious or spiritual rights of low-caste persons (most notably their right to salvation), not their civil rights (i.e., their rights to equal justice and social, economic and political opportunity, or even their right to change their religion). Kabir himself goes much further than this when he attacks both religious and social pretensions to superiority head-on.
Here a comparison with Enlightenment Europe is interesting. In late-seventeenth and the eighteenth century Europe, two of the first and most notable pleas for religious toleration were made by John Locke and Voltaire. In both cases, the main arguments stressed that they were making a plea for religious equality and toleration, not a plea for equal civil rights between either persons of different religions or of different social classes. The first important Enlightenment text to expand the plea for equal rights to both the religious and civil spheres was probably Lessing’s play, *Nathan the Wise*.

The second text found in the Kabir Chaura manuscript collection relevant to the discussion of socio-religious dissent is a Hindi translation or adaptation of a Sanskrit text known as the *Vajrasuci-upanishad*. Some of you may be familiar with this text. It was included, somewhat mischievously, by Radhakrishnan in his edition-translation of the *Thirteen Principal Upanishads*. The history of the text goes back to a Buddhist text in Sanskrit known simply as the *Vajrasuci*, which is attributed to the first-century scholar, Ashvaghosha. This text was reworked into the *Vajrasuci-upanisad* by a Hindu author—sometimes identified as the famous philosopher, Sankaracarya—at an unknown date. The date of the Hindi version is also unknown.

What makes this text, in its various versions, interesting is that it embodies a more or less systematic philosophical argument against the ontological basis of caste distinctions. If a person claims to be a Brahmin, the text argues, where can we locate the essence of this Brahmin-hood? Is it found in the *jiva*, the body, the *jati*, or the *varna*? Or is Brahmanhood based on *karma* or on *dharma*? The text deconstructs each of these possibilities and concludes that the only real Brahmin is the person who knows Brahman, no matter which caste he (or perhaps even she ...) may have been born into.

Several modern scholars have argued strongly against the importance and seriousness of socio-religious dissent in India, not only with regard to Kabir and the Kabir Panth but also with regard to low-caste Hindu religion in general. Louis Dumont and, following his lead, Michael Moffat have claimed that low-caste Hindu religious groups basically “replicate” the beliefs and practices of high-caste (i.e. Brahmin-led) groups.
According to this theory, lower castes create their own sets of rules about social and religious practices based on the same central concerns about the limits of the pure and impure and the importance of hierarchy that lie at the heart of Brahmanic socio-religious ideology. In this way, very low castes set up a social pecking order among themselves that replicates the more general pecking order of varnashramadharma-based society as a whole. Similarly, low-caste groups create their own temples and religious officiants based on the model of upper-caste temples staffed by Brahmins.

This theory proposed by Dumont and Moffat bears more than a passing resemblance to the concepts of “dominant ideology” and “hegemony” that are found among Marxist thinkers, from Marx himself to Antonio Gramsci. Marx argued that the ideas of the ruling class are the dominant ideas of each epoch and Gramsci extended this to emphasize the acceptance of the power of the ruling classes by the lower classes that they ruled. Nonetheless, most Marxist thinkers of voluntaristic Leninist sympathies, including Gramsci, allowed for the possibility of effective dissent against dominant ideologies and hegemony, though often they claimed that this would require a violent revolution. This dissent could come both from the proletarian class, whose material interests were aligned with such dissent, and from a section of the bourgeoisie that would join the proletarian movement and serve as its vanguard and spokespersons.

My own opposition to the ideas of Dumont and Moffat follows a similar voluntarist argument. In my view, it is in fact possible for individual thinkers and spokespersons to challenge the hegemony of dominant beliefs and practices and lead movements against them, even if the economic, political and ideological dominance of wealthier and more powerful groups puts strong limits on the amount of dissent that can be tolerated short of a violent revolution. These strong limits at times may force potentially dissenting subaltern groups into a pattern of replicating the ideas and institutions of dominant groups, but this is clearly not always the case.

A somewhat similar argument against the possibility of dissent, or at least against original new expressions of dissent, has been made, in the specific case of Kabir, by various
scholars who have argued that Kabir’s socio-religious ideas can only be explained with reference to the socio-religious ideas he inherited from his own family traditions. This argument was essentially initiated in the 1940s by two scholars: P. D. Barthwal and H. P. Dvivedi. They argued that Kabir’s religious and social ideas were largely determined by a family-culture that must have been closely associated with the Nath Sampraday of the Nath yogis, overlaid by a veneer of Islam acquired through the family’s probably recent conversion to Islam. The major part of Kabir’s socio-religious ideas, they claim, must have been inherited from the Nath and Islamic traditions of his family. Roughly this same argument has been adopted by several more recent scholars.

In his new book on Kabir, Purushottam Agrawal has shown that this argument based on Kabir’s family background has some interesting consequences that Barthwal, Dvivedi and others did not directly recognize. One consequence is that the argument makes it very difficult to explain why it is that the most obvious association between Kabir’s ideas and earlier traditions is with the non-orthodox Vaisnavism preached by his predecessors Namdev and Ramanand, not Islam or Yoga. More specifically, most of these scholars have rejected the possibility that Kabir could have been directly associated with Ramanand, whom tradition unanimously claims to have been Kabir’s guru.

According to Agrawal, this family-background argument is ultimately based on an intellectual hubris that reserves the right of independent thinking to contemporary university professors, and not even all of them. Agrawal’s view is that Kabir was—as much as anyone can be—a highly independent thinker who experimented with several different religious ideologies present in late fifteenth-century Banaras and created his own new religious message out of an original intellectual synthesis of religious ideas available in late fifteenth-century India. In this synthesis, the sort of Vaisnavism proposed by Namdev and Ramananda was a particularly important ingredient. Agrawal accepts that Kabir was also influenced by the Naths but argues that Nath influence made only one of several contributions to Kabir’s thought.
Agrawal convincingly argues that the scholarly consensus that claims that Ramanand was an orthoprax and conservative Brahmin who wrote and preached primarily in Sanskrit is, in fact, simply a myth spread in the early 20th century by Ramanandi Sampraday intellectuals as part of their competition with—and ultimately their separation from—the South-Indian Srivaisnavas. According to Agrawal, much stronger evidence suggests that the real historical Ramananda was more likely the Hindi Ramananda who wrote Hindi songs similar to those of Kabir and was the guru of the low-caste disciples Kabir, Raidas, Pipa, Dhanna and Sen. Even this Ramananda, however, should be seen more as a precursor of Kabir rather than as a dominant influence. Kabir, in Agrawal’s view, was his own man.

Another counter-argument that has been used against accepting the importance of low-caste dissent against dominant religious beliefs and practices is the theory that such dissent, when it appears, is mostly a blowing off of steam against oppression and has little further significance. Richard Eaton, for instance, has used this argument in order to minimize the importance of social dissent as a motive for conversion to Islam in pre-British India. Eaton [2004: 109] characterizes “the ‘religion of social liberation’ theory” as one that claims “that the Hindu caste system is a rigidly discriminatory form of social organization and that the lowest and most degraded castes, recognizing in Islam an ideology of social equality, converted to it en masse in order to escape Brahmanical oppression.”

Basing himself in part on Louis Dumont’s ideas about a low-caste replication of a dominant ideology of hierarchy in Indian society, Eaton argues against the “religion of social liberation” theory that it commits the fallacy of reading [equalitarian] the values of the present into the peoples or events of the past. Are we to assume that before their contact with Muslims, the untouchables of India possessed, as though they were familiar with the writings of Rousseau or Jefferson, some innate notion of the fundamental equality of all men denied them by an oppressive Brahmanical tyranny? To the contrary, it
seems that Hindu society of medieval India was more influenced by what Louis Dumont calls the principle of *homo hierarchicus*, or of institutionalized inequality....

Kabir, of course, lived well after Islam had already been well established in north India, but as one of the first low-caste poets whose verses have survived, there is hardly any doubt that he had a vision of basic human equality, without any necessity of his having read Rousseau or Jefferson.

A related and more important argument that Eaton and others use against the “religion of social liberation” theory is that the conversion of low-caste persons to Islam—or in our case the Kabir Panth—has little or no effect on the everyday life of the converts. Eaton comments [2004: 109]:

Moreover, even if it were true that Islam had been presented as an ideology of social equality, there is abundant evidence that former Hindu communities failed upon conversion to improve their status in the social hierarchy and that, on the contrary, they simply carried over into Muslim society the same practice of birth-ascribed rank that they had had in Hindu society.

In other words, even in the unlikely event that the low-caste converts had some idea of social equality, in practical terms their conversion gained them virtually nothing.

When this argument is applied to the strong social and religious dissent expressed in Kabir’s songs and verses, it is essentially claiming that this dissent is no more than a fantasy consolation for the insults and injuries suffered by low-caste persons in the course of their daily life in an oppressive society. Apart from this consoling function, it has no further significance. To me this negative judgment seems not only implausible but also simply wrong.

One must, of course, accepts the fact that economic and political realities impose strong limits on the amount of socio-religious dissent that Indian society has been willing to tolerate. Nonetheless, the “conscious-raising” embodied in the dissent found in Kabir’s
compositions has important practical consequences both as a way of instilling a healthy amount of self-esteem in his followers and also as a necessary prerequisite for any successful effort at social uplift. It is undoubtedly true that most Kabir Panthis in contemporary India have not been able to escape from the grinding poverty and poor educational levels that are the common inheritance of most low-caste persons. Nonetheless, I strongly suspect that on average they have done better than their caste fellows who are not followers of the Kabir Panth. Outside of India, Kabir Panthis—most of whom were originally indentured laborers brought to Trinidad, Guyana and Mauritius—have achieved a measure of economic success in their new countries not shared by most Kabir Panthis in India.

In the Sikh Panth, we have a vivid example of a religious movement that has made remarkable social, economic and political gains both in India and abroad. Kabir’s songs and verses of course form a sizeable and integral part of the Sikh *Adi Granth*. Kabir’s ideas also made an important contribution to the ideas found in the compositions of Guru Nanak and the other Sikh Gurus. Would the success of the Sikh movement have been possible without Kabir’s intellectual and religious influence on it? Any answer to this question has to remain quite speculative. One has to admit that the Sikhs had certain advantages that the Kabir Panthis did not have. Most importantly, a higher percentage of Sikhs traditionally had access to some education, most notably among the Sikhs belonging to the caste of Khatris, and a higher percentage of Sikhs managed to become land-owning peasants, most notably among the many Sikhs belonging to the caste cluster of the Jats. The military traditions of many Sikhs probably also contributed to the success of their community. Nonetheless, it seems to me obvious that the Sikhs were also helped in their rise to economic and political power by the ideology of social dissent fostered by Kabir’s ideas.

The relative lack of economic and political success of the followers of the Kabir Panth as compared to that of the Sikhs undoubtedly probably stems largely from the Kabir Panthis’ average lack of the educational, land-owning and military advantages and possibly also from their weaker sense of community identity. In recent years, however, there have been some signs of change. Nowadays, the Kabir Chaura branch of the Kabir Panth is being
led by a strong personality, the above-mentioned Acharya Vivekdas, who is attempting to put new life into the Panth through a great variety of projects that aim to attract people to the Panth and to Kabir’s socio-religious message. Unlike most Hindu religious intellectuals, Vivekdas’s political and social views are basically leftist, although they are now much less radical than when he took part in the Naxalbari movement as a boy. When he discusses social and political questions, his emphasis is on the contributions of Kabir and other nirguni sants to social uplift and consciousness raising among the poor and oppressed, on their opposition to the social privileges of Brahmins and other high-caste people, on the similar hopes of the Indian Independence movement, and on the need to renew the now largely broken social promises of this movement. In a 2009 essay published in a new edition of his edited volume, Kabir sahiya ki prasangika, Acharya Vivekdas writes (2009: 240):

Medieval Sants initiated the bhakti movement. They opened a front against Brahmanism and prepared the model of a popular movement. By means of the bhakti movement the Sants sent in motion the enterprise of giving birth to the empowerment of the poor, the oppressed, those left behind and without hope and gave them new life. [...] Many sharp-tongued Sants were born among the oppressed classes. The selfishness of the fanaticism and exclusivism of varnashrama-dharma had attempted to keep the majority of the people in ignorance of the truth.

Vivekdas argues that if we follow the Sants, human unity and equality can still be achieved. Citing a song of Kabir, he comments (2009: 244):

Mahadeva and Mohammad, Brahma and Adam, are all messengers of this [truth]. If any differences among them are nothing, only a difference of names, then how can there be opposition between Hindus and Muslims? We all live on this earth. In this matter, Kabir Sahab set before us a great ideal and pervasive doctrine. [...] In reality this spiritual awakening gives birth to the spirit of independence which becomes the cause of enmity against those who commit crimes and oppress us. The oppressors want nothing to do with the spiritual unity of oppressed peoples. [...] The medieval
Sants understood this quite well and initiated a strong movement against those oppressors. This movement was a reawakening of social change and spiritual consciousness. On it were laid the foundations for nation-wide equality and unity.

One can, of course, still argue that the modern struggles in India for the social uplift of the oppressed and downtrodden and equal human rights owe more to Rousseau, Jefferson and other thinkers of the European Enlightenment than to Kabir and the Sants, but this is clearly not opinion of Acharya Vivekdas and his followers. In this matter there is little doubt that Nehru, and perhaps even Gandhi and Ambedkar, were more influenced by European thinkers than by indigenous thinkers and poets like Kabir and the Sants. Nonetheless there is also little doubt that the less western-educated followers of the nationalist movement were more aware of, and influenced by, the pleas for human justice and equality coming precisely from these same indigenous thinkers and poets.

Another important argument about the role of dissent in Kabir put forward by Purushottam Agrawal in his recent Akath kahani prem ki is that the religious and social ideologies of Ramananda and his disciples and of their successors in the nirguni current of religious poets, including the Sikhs and Dadu Panthis, were representative and instigators of an early, pre-colonial modernity that thrived under the Mughals but then mostly fell apart and lost most of its influence under the peculiar sort of colonial modernity imposed by the British colonial administration. Referring back to what Sheldon Pollock has called the “vernacular millennium,” which began in about 1100, Agrawal writes [2009: 30]:

During the vernacular millennium, European and non-European societies were moving in the direction of modernity, each in its own way. Indian society was not a society without history as Hegel thought. Like the Europe of that time, India was travelling on the path of history. Europe and India were similar. The difference between them was that because of European imperialism, the spontaneous, integral development of Indian and other non-European societies met an obstacle. In colonized societies like India, indigenous (deshaj) modernity was blocked. As a result of the colonial situation, modernity took the form of a sharp break from
tradition instead of a surge integral to the flow of tradition. Between tradition and modernity there rose up a dissociation or rupture of sensibility 
(*samvedana-vichchhed*). This dissociation of sensibility stands at the root of many of the problems of these societies. In the context of Kabir, because of this dissociation of sensibility baseless things were given the rank of “historical truths”.

One such baseless thing was to regard Kabir as a marginal voice.

For me, modernity is much too elusive a concept to have much analytical utility. Nonetheless, the central idea of Agrawal’s argument seems clear and persuasive. He is suggesting that from about 1100 to about 1750 or 1800 society in India was developing in a manner that was separate from Europe but also similar in ways that we associate with the movement toward modern institutions and ideologies. The developing institutions and ideologies that Agrawal implicitly seems to be invoking are those of a less hierarchical society, a more religiously tolerant society, a more bureaucratic state with a deeper penetration into the lives of its members and (hopefully) a greater concern for their welfare, a wider distribution of scientific and humanistic knowledge (both literate and oral), and a better organized economic and commercial system using improved technology. In these ideas about modernity, Agrawal is not concerned with the more negative elements of modern life such as massive race-based slavery, religious inquisitions, more systematic military atrocities, and the lack of traditional moral concern for kinsmen and fellow local residents.

The main value of Agrawal’s argument is that it places the social and religious dissent of Ramananda (floruit ca. 1450-1500), Kabir (floruit ca. 1470-1520), Dadu (1544-1603), Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and their followers at the center of the development of pre-colonial Indian society and not on the margins of this development. Agrawal clearly regards the early “indigenous modernity” (*deshaj adhunikta*) fostered by Ramananda, Kabir and their fellows as basically a good thing, and here I fully agree.

What I am less in agreement about is Agrawal’s implied estimate of a similar speed and depth of the overall modernizing trends in Europe and India. Imperialism was not
simply a manifestation of the greed and search for glory of European kings, popes, merchants, and military adventurers. It was a product of profound changes in European institutions—political, economic, scientific, religious, and social—during the centuries after the near collapse of European civilization in the wake of the black-death plagues of the second half of the fourteenth century.

The construction of huge historical generalizations is of course a highly controversial pastime. Nonetheless, I do think that one can conclude that after about 1450, Europe increased the rate of modernizing its commercial, political, scientific, military and humanistic institutions so that by at least 1700, and probably much earlier, most of these institutions had a decisive advantage over their counterparts in India. The dramatic European advances in scientific knowledge and secular humanist thought during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are of course well known. Scientists such as like Copernicus (1473-1543), Kepler (1571-1630), Galileo (1564-1642), and Newton (1642-1727), and humanists such as Machiavelli (1469-1527), Erasmus (1469-1536), Montaigne (1533-1592), Spinoza (1632-1677), Hobbes (1588-1679), Locke (1632-1704), Voltaire (1694-1778), and Diderot (1713-1784) merely represent some of the leaders of this revolutionary transformation of human knowledge and religious outlook. The technology and commercial policies that allowed the industrialization of Europe in the nineteenth century was largely built on these earlier developments.

India certainly had its own leading intellectuals during the period between 1450 and 1750, but fewer of them seem to have had research interests similar to the European scientists and secular humanists. Future historical research such as the work that Charles Needham did on Chinese science may modify this picture, but the contrast between India and Europe in this period is clearly more than simply the result of a lack of scholarly interest in medieval Indian scientists and secular humanists. The comments of Tapan Raychaudhuri about the low-level of Mughal-period technology apply, I think, equally well to Indian natural science in this period [1982: 291]: “In striking contrast to India’s pre-eminence as an exporter of manufactured goods, her technology was remarkably backward.
in comparison with the other advanced civilizations of the period, especially western Europe and China.”

The well-known Indian scholars who perhaps best fit the labels of scientists and secular humanists in this period include the historians Abu’l Fazl and ‘Abdu’l Qadir Bada’uni, the astronomers who worked under Raja Jai Singh II of Rajasthan between 1722 and 1739 when he constructed his famous astronomical observatories, the logician-philosophers of the navya-nyaya school who wrote after Gangesha (ca. 1350), and philosophical grammarians such as Bhattoji Dikshita (ca. 1590), Konda Bhatta (ca. 1640) and Nagesha Bhatta (ca. 1714).11

Agrawal’s argument for an indigenous Indian early modernity depends on an implicit comparison of Ramananda, Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Dadu Dayal as early modern intellectuals somewhat analogous to (and on average somewhat earlier than) Maquiavelo, Montaigne, Spinoza, and Hobbes. Similarly, Agrawal seems to be implicitly comparing the freedom of thought and religious tolerance permitted and fostered by the Lodi sultans and the Mughal emperors, most notably Akbar, with the patronage and toleration of scientists and secular humanists by European monarchs and popes.

Can we claim that these implicit comparisons are convincing or plausible? In general I think we can. On the other hand, there are some obvious important differences that should be noted. Taken together, many of these differences can help explain why the early modernity of India was relatively unsuccessful when compared to the early modernity of Europe. Furthermore, at least in terms of intellectual change, early modernity in India fell behind that of Europe well before British colonization of India took place, in other words well before about 1750.

At the risk of making even more controversial wide historical generalizations, I want to argue that the main differences between the intellectual development of early modern Europe and early India can be traced to two basic causes. First, the writings of early European secular humanists and scientists tended to be less religious than those of their Indian counterparts, even in cases where the Europeans were religious in their personal life
and sometimes wrote about religious topics. In the period 1450-1750 many intellectuals in both Europe and India criticized existing religious institutions and customs. Here Kabir is certainly an excellent example. In Europe, however, many of the more radical humanists and Enlightenment thinkers wrote directly against religion itself and not just against existing religious institutions. Here Spinoza and Diderot are good examples. As Jonathan Israel has shown in his recent work on the radical Enlightenment in Europe, the number of such radically anti-religious intellectuals was in fact quite large and very influential. I do not think they had many similar Indian counterparts.

A second important difference between intellectuals in early modern Europe and early modern India was that European intellectuals tended to be somewhat less dependent on direct financial patronage from kings and popes than their Indian counterparts. Many European intellectuals were associated with universities that were at least partly independent of both the state and the church. Many important European universities had already been founded in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These included Bologna, Paris, Salamanca and others. The traditional curriculum in these universities was usually divided into four faculties: arts, theology, medicine and law. Although most of these universities were initially tied to the Catholic Church, most of their students aimed at secular careers in law, medicine, business, and government. During the period 1400-1600, these universities increased dramatically in size and number, broke many of their ties with the Church, and accepted increasing numbers of humanist professors who tended to reject traditional scholastic theology, even those like Erasmus who had a religious vocation. By about 1600, many secular-minded mathematicians and scientists had found employment in these universities, the most famous example being Galileo. In 1732 a Catholic missionary to China had founded a Chinese College to teach Chinese language and Chinese culture, the first European institution dedicated principally to the study of Asia. Today this has become the state-financed Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”. By the mid-eighteenth-century university chairs in Sanskrit language had been created in several existing French and German universities.
At a somewhat later date, particularly in eighteenth century Europe, other relatively independent institutions for intellectuals developed including debating salons (chiefly in France), coffee houses, commercial (and sometimes clandestine) publishing houses, secret societies such as those of the freemasons, and scientific societies such as the Royal Society of London founded in 1660. Direct patronage by church and state remained important for most European intellectuals, but such institutions of the incipient “public sphere” made it possible for many intellectuals to live and work more independently.

In India, on the other hand, most highly educated intellectuals remained employed directly in royal courts, temples, maths, khanaqahs and madrasas. Semi-independent universities were fewer and smaller than their European counterparts. Similarly, more independent, “public sphere” intellectual institutions such as commercial publishing houses, coffee houses, debating salons, secret societies and scientific societies evidently were less influential in early modern India. Under an enlightened and generous ruler such as Akbar (ruled 1556-1605), the lack of independent sources of financing for a life as a scientist or secular intellectual perhaps did not matter much, but Akbar was certainly unusual in the way he patronized open religious and intellectual debate. Most Indian rulers of the period were less generous and much less intellectually curious and tolerant. None of Akbar’s successors among the Mughal emperors continued equally enlightened policies in this regard, and his great grandson Aurangzeb is of course well-known for his attempts to impose orthodox, conservative Islamic norms on the intellectuals patronized by the imperial court.

All this leaves the independent religious and intellectual traditions of nirguni poets and thinkers such as Ramananda, Kabir, and Guru Nanak and Dadu somewhat out on a limb. All were relatively free of the need to be financed either by the royal court or by established religious institutions like temples, but all were evidently dependent on alms and contributions from lay followers who expected to receive a religious message, not a lecture about atheism, history or political philosophy. It is also clear that Ramananda, Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Dadu were in fact personally religious thinkers and, with the possible exception of Ramananda, were not deeply learned in the niceties of Hindu scholastic theology,
mathematics, or natural science. They fostered a radical religious and social message among their followers, but this alone—even if their message had received more royal support and even if European imperial powers had not intervened in Indian affairs—probably could not have given the early indigenous modernity of India the ability to compete on an equal footing with eighteenth-century Europe.

Whatever might hypothetically have happened if the Indian indigenous modernity fostered by Kabir and other nirguni poets had been allowed to develop further, the failures of this indigenous modernity made the impact of colonial modernity, in the form of European scientific and philosophical thought, much more disruptive to Indian society and culture than the modernity that otherwise might have been. Agrawal is undoubtedly correct to suggest that in early modern India there was once a possibility that a radical intellectual and social movement could evolve out of the compositions of Kabir and other nirguni poets, but Agrawal arguments about why and when this potential largely failed to be realized seem less convincing.

Turning to present-day India, moreover, it remains to be seen whether or not Kabir’s ideas still have the potential to be used as an important resource for a new radical intellectual and social movement. As far as the present-day Kabir Panth is concerned, despite efforts to foster intellectual independence and social uplift on the part of a few contemporary leaders, there remain the sizeable obstacles of the great weight of more orthodox Hindu tradition and the long-established vested interests of Indian society. Another obstacle is the gradually diminishing role of religion in modern society, the very gradual process of secularization. Whatever one wants to make of the recent rise of fundamentalist religious movements—Christian, Islamic, Jewish and Hindu—throughout the world, I think it is fairly obvious that today religious beliefs and practices generally play a smaller role in the daily life of most people, including most Indians, than they once did, and I am pretty sure that this is also the case of most other traditional Hindu sects in North India. New Hindu sects have undoubtedly arisen in this period, but they seem to me to be mostly superficial and probably ephemeral movements even in the case of the strongest ones such as those of Sai Baba and Osho.
In these circumstances, what will happen to the Kabir Panth in the future? My rather pessimistic guess is that over time influence of the Panth over the lives of its followers and the total numbers of these followers will continue to decline. In terms of legal rights, both religious and civil, many of the battles of low-caste persons that Kabir fostered have already been won through the creation of the modern Indian nation-state and constitution. Nonetheless, it is also obvious that in practice, most of the economic, social and even religious disabilities of the Kabir Panth’s low-caste followers still remain. Whether or not Kabir Panthi reformers like Archarya Vivekdas will be able to strengthen the community and have a significant impact on the social, political economic and religious uplift of its members remains an open question.
Bibliography


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2 It is, however, interesting that the small number of songs (48) common to all (or almost all) the oldest manuscripts that W. Callewaert used for his Millennium Kabir mostly contain very little social and religious dissent. Since Callewaert could not find any very old manuscripts of the Kabir-bijak, he did not include this text for establishing his short list of 48 songs. Many of Kabir’s most critical songs are in the Bijak. On the other hand the large collections of early Kabir songs in the Adi-granth and the Dadu Panthi Kabir-granthavali also contain many critical songs. Perhaps the only explanation for the lack of such songs in Callewaert’s short list is that this is simply an accidental artifact resulting from the small number of songs in the short list.


5 A short study and translation of the Hindi version of the text in the Kabir Chaura collection is found in Lorenzen 2000.

6 See Radhakrishnan 1953: 935-38. The best edition of the Sanskrit text is that found in Mukhopadhyaya 1950.

7 See Barthwal 1946 and 1978; also Dvivedi 1971.
See especially Vaudeville 1974.


I am using the term “secular humanist” in a general way to refer to a wide range of intellectuals whose main concerns were neither with natural science nor with theology. Some of these persons (including scientists) are often classed as “humanists” in the more technical sense of the intellectuals of the European Renaissance (ca. 1400-1600) who wrote about non-religious topics, often topics related to the revival of knowledge about pre-Christian Greek philosophy. On these Renaissance humanists, see Lafaye 2005.


Israel 2010 presents a convenient summary of his more detailed discussions in earlier books.

Convenient discussions of the development of European universities can be found in Rudy 1984 and in Ridder-Symoens 1992 and 1996.