

# Kabīr-Panthīs in Kanpur: From sampradāya to Dalit Identity

Maren Bellwinkel-Schempp

(in: Horstmann, Monika: Images of Kabir. New Delhi, Manohar 2002, p 215-232.)

It is generally acknowledged that Kabīr was the most outstanding figure in the bhakti movement of northern India.<sup>1</sup> Medieval bhakti as loving devotion was preached by a number of low caste and untouchable saints like Raidās, Pipā and Sen.<sup>2</sup> It opened up the access of low castes, women and untouchables to a devotion that did not depend on wealth, status or knowledge. Kabir's strict monotheism and the teaching of a purely spiritual religion with God as an all pervading reality that is invisible and does not need any representation,<sup>3</sup> made him quite attractive for a couple of protestant missionary scholars who sensed Christian thought in his teachings.<sup>4</sup> Among them was George Herbert Westcott, an Anglican missionary, who wrote one of the first comprehensive books on Kabīr and the Kabīr-panth in 1907.<sup>5</sup> The following paper tries to trace the (216) Kabīr-panthīs in Kanpur. Although the reception of Westcott's book and the contextual setting is well known,<sup>6</sup> its genesis is not. Besides, there are hardly any references to Kabīr-panthīs in Kanpur,<sup>7</sup> whereas the veneration for the untouchable Sant Raidās is fairly well covered.<sup>8</sup>

The present study dwells entirely on the Dalit community of Kanpur. It will touch the crucial issues of Kabīr's reception, which centres around the notion of caste and untouchability, as they are refracted amongst the Dalits themselves. Western and Indian scholarship has generally accepted that although there is a revolutionary potential in Kabīr's teachings, he was primarily concerned with the relationship between man and God: 'Kabir was a poet, a radical reformer, though society was only the outermost skin of what he wished to reform.'<sup>9</sup> The Dalit view on the other hand holds that the reform of society was a major concern of Kabīr.<sup>10</sup> A staunch advocate for this position was Dr. Ambedkar himself: 'There have been many who have worked in the cause of the abolition of Caste and Untouchability. Of

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Vaudeville, 'Sant Mat: Santism as the Universal Path to Sanctity'. In: Schomer, Karine and W. H. McLeod (eds.), *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, Delhi 1987, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> David N. Lorenzen, 'The Kabir Panth and Social Protest'. In: Schomer, Karine and W. H. McLeod (eds.), *The Sants. Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, Delhi 1987, p. 286.

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Vaudeville, *Kabir*, Oxford 1974, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> Vaudeville, *Kabir*, p. 11; see also the contribution of Bandyopadhyaya in this volume, pp. 000.

<sup>5</sup> George Herbert Westcott, *Kabir and the Kabir Panth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Calcutta 1953, (1<sup>st</sup> ed. Cawnpore 1907).

<sup>6</sup> Vaudeville, *Kabir*.

<sup>7</sup> Nandini Gooptu, 'Caste and Labour: Untouchable Social Movements in Uttar Pradesh in the Early Twentieth Century'. in: Robb, Peter (ed.), *Dalit movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, Delhi 1993, p. 289.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Niehoff, *Factory Workers in India*, Milwaukee 1959, pp. 68-74; Maren Bellwinkel, *Die Kasten-Klassenproblematik im städtisch-industriellen Bereich. Historisch-empirische Fallstudie über die Industriestadt Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, Indien*, Wiesbaden 1980, pp. 205-212.

<sup>9</sup> Linda Hess, 'Kabīr's Rough Rhetoric'. in: Schomer, Karine and W.H.McLeod (eds.), *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, Delhi 1987, p. 144.

<sup>10</sup> For further elaboration on this point, especially Dharmvir's position see Monika Horstmann's paper in this volume, pp. 115-126.

those, who can be mentioned, Ramanuja, Kabir and others stand out prominently.<sup>11</sup> Here I explore the attitude of the Kabīr-panthīs to caste and untouchability.

Although it is generally accepted that the bhakti movement included brahmanical traditions and low caste movements, there were bhakti saints like Sant Raidās whose followers were exclusively from untouchable castes. Sant Raidās became the figurehead of the Ād Dharm (217) movement in Panjab<sup>12</sup> and for the Ādi Hindū movement in Uttar Pradesh.<sup>13</sup>

Today, sharing the broad label of bhakti, progressive social movements as well as Hindu fundamentalist notions are grouped together.<sup>14</sup> In the Kanpur context I would like to show how Kabīr is interpreted in the concert of different political and religious discourses within the Dalit community. What kind of importance is attributed to Kabīr vis-à-vis the other bhakti saints in Kanpur? In the representation of the different discourses, I follow the argument of Rajendrenath Ahervar who has been at the forefront of the Dalit movement in Kanpur.<sup>15</sup> For the history of the Kabīr-panthīs, I rely on the narrative of Munni Devi, who is daughter and granddaughter of two eminent Kabīr-panthīs. Fortunately she has kept all the books, papers and documents from her father's and grandfather's times.

When the Westcott brothers came to Kanpur in 1889, the town was still struggling to overcome the trauma of the Mutiny.<sup>16</sup> But miraculously, it was transformed into a prosperous industrial town, the first in India altogether. British enterprise, ingenuity and diligence had made Kanpur a centre of leather and textile industry and the main supplier for the British Indian Army. An industrial labour force developed, which consisted of Chamars, Koris and Muslims.<sup>17</sup> The city was well-connected by water, rail and road to all major ports of India. The town had public water works, a sewage system, garbage collection and night soil disposal, streetlights and a (218) tram.<sup>18</sup> The population of the town according to the Census of 1891 was 188, 000.

Canon George Herbert Westcott was sent by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to Kanpur. He was an Anglican and as such represented the majority of the Protestant Christian denominations in Cawnpore.<sup>19</sup> But he and his brother set out to be 'clergymen of all citizens of

<sup>11</sup> Bhimrao Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste'. in: *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1, Bombay, Government of Maharashtra 1936, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th-Century Punjab*, Berkeley 1982.

<sup>13</sup> R. P. Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself. Ideology, Identity and Pragmatism among Lucknow Chamars*, Cambridge 1984; Gooptu, 'Caste and Labour'.

<sup>14</sup> David N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India. Community, Identity and Political Action*, New York 1995.

<sup>15</sup> He was the founder of the 'Bhāratiya Bauddh Mahasabhbā', long time president of the 'Ravidās Julūs Committee', founder and president of the 'Swāmi Achchutanand Smarak Samiti'.

<sup>16</sup> Zoe Yalland, *Boxwallahs. The British in Cawnpore 1857-1901*, Wilby 1994, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Bellwinkel, *Kasten-Klassenproblematik*, pp. 38-40.

<sup>18</sup> D. N. Majumdar, *Social Contours of an Industrial City. Social Survey of Kanpur 1954-1956*, Bombay 1960, pp. 16-18.

<sup>19</sup> The Anglicans apart, there were Baptists, Methodists and American Presbyterians. Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics had their own congregations. See A. B. K. Sebastian, *A Sociological Study of the Protestant Church Organisation in Kanpur*, DPhil thesis, Kanpur 1982, p. 6.

Cawnpore',<sup>20</sup> which gained them tremendous popularity. Altogether George Herbert spent twenty-one years of his life in Kanpur. Well versed in Hindi and Urdu, he took a keen interest in the religious orientation of the lower classes, which led to the publication of his book *Kabir and the Kabir Panth* in 1907. In the introduction to the first edition he states: 'For help in this undertaking I am principally indebted to my Mali, Badlu Dass, who is himself a member of the Panth. He has visited all places of interest in connection with the Panth and introduced me to many Mahants and conducted inquiries with great intelligence.' If Westcott relied for his research on the knowledge of the local Kabīr-panthīs, Kanpur itself must have had a substantial number of them.

When I came to Kanpur in October 1998,<sup>21</sup> the city had a population of over two million. All the old industrial enterprises were closed. The erstwhile working class had gone over to vegetable selling and private labour. Only shoe and leather factories, together with *pān kā masalā* flourished. Kanpur's eminence as a railway junction was gone. The Ganga had deserted Kanpur and taken a different course. After fifteen years of the Indo-Dutch Environmental and Sanitary Engineering Project (IDSEP), the sanitary problems of Kanpur were not solved. The Ganga barrage is still under construction and water supply is irregular. (219) Electricity cuts are frequent, especially in the hot months. Garbage disposal has reached a new abomination as the municipally assigned garbage collection spots are used as feeding grounds for cows and pigs. Pig husbandry has become a flourishing private enterprise on public grounds.<sup>22</sup> Violence still occurs in present-day Kanpur. The 1931 Hindu-Muslim riots were said to have been the most severe in pre-Independence times.<sup>23</sup> In the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, it came to a three-day, nearly unrestrained killing in Kanpur.<sup>24</sup> Since then, minor disturbances have flared up and on all public occasions the police is alert.

George Herbert Westcott remains unforgotten. Kanpur's middle class knows him as the founder of Christ Church College and even the common man is familiar with the 'Westcott' building next to the college. But even among Kanpur's intellectuals it was not known that George Herbert Westcott wrote a book on Kabīr, although Kabīr is highly thought of by Kanpur's upper middle class.<sup>25</sup>

When I asked about the Kabīr-panthīs in Kanpur, even the aforementioned Rajendrenath Ahervar was at a loss. To his knowledge there were none. But quite willingly he pointed out four Kabīr Mandirs of which the oldest at Karbala is defunct. It was the home of the renowned Mahant Sevak Das, who was amongst Westcott's informants. His grave is on Sanval Das Ghat, constructed in the 1880's by the

<sup>20</sup> Yalland, *Boxwallahs*, p. 331.

<sup>21</sup> From 1972 to 1974 I did fieldwork on industrial labourers in Kanpur. The present study is part of a larger project on 'Identity Construction and the Meaning of Communal Dimensions for Scheduled Castes in Kanpur'.

<sup>22</sup> Maren Bellwinkel-Schempp, 'The Khatik of Kanpur and the Bristle Trade: Toward an Anthropology of Man and Beast'. in: *Sociological Bulletin*, 47.2 (1999), pp. 187-206.

<sup>23</sup> Vibhuti Narain Rai, *Combating Communal Conflicts. Perception of Police Neutrality during Hindu-Muslim Riots in India*, Allahabad 1999, pp. 31-5.

<sup>24</sup> Paul R. Brass, *Theft of an Idol. Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence*, Princeton 1997, p. 214.

<sup>25</sup> I discussed Westcott's heritage with Dr. Munishwar Nigam and Mrs. Santosh Mahendrajit Singh. Dr. Munishwar Nigam is the Chairman of the Kanpur Historical Society. Mrs. Singh is chairwoman of a number of charitable institutions, Spastic Centre and the Inner Wheel Club and also member of the Kanpur Historical Society.

rich tannery owner, leather merchant and Kabīr-panthī Sanval Das (1864-1908). He was a (220) Chamar by caste, and his wealth, generosity and benevolence were so great that he as an untouchable even found mention in Arora's *Kānpur kā itihās*.<sup>26</sup>

The second Kabīr Mandir is situated in the Idgah Colony. The brothers Makkan Das and Dakkan Das built it in 1915.<sup>27</sup> They were Kureels like Sanval Das, rich tannery owners and devout Kabīr-panthis as well. Inside the house there is a shrine, showing Kabīr with his two main disciples Dharmdās and Surat Gopāl. They were famous for the religious celebration, the *caukā* on Kabīr's birthday in August.<sup>28</sup> For that event they invited 25,000 villagers from Unnao district to attend the celebration and the following meal.

The third Kabīr Mandir is in Juhi Labour Colony near to Swadeshi Cotton Mill. It was set up in the 1930s and is a simple structure to house the graves of the two mahants, Laldas and Balakdas. The present officiant is a young Kabīr-panthī who looks after the Mandir.

At Cooperganj, the main grain market in Kanpur, the Kabīr Mandir looks like a feeding place for water buffaloes. It was set up in the 1940s with a dharmshala for marriage parties. It also served as an office of the Republican Party. The Kabīr Mandir is an interesting structure with a decorated front. Stretching over the wall beneath the flat roof, two friezes of male statues are to be seen, approaching the oversized figure of Satyapurush, the primordial man, who nearly covers the whole of the front of the building. Underneath, Hanumān stretches out his arms. A white-clad nun with short-cut hair told us that Baba Sahib was not here. During three consecutive visits I never managed to meet him. Obviously he hadn't much of a parish left in need of his services.

Only when I met Munni Devi, I came to know the history of the Kabīr-panthīs in Kanpur. Her grandfather Hulasi Das left his village in Unnao at the age of ten. He entered Cooper & Allen Tannery and Leather Factory just when it was opened in 1880. Intelligent, hard working and reliable, he became a mistry after nine years. The expression *mistry* (derived from Portuguese *mestre* in the meaning of gentleman) is (221) misleading, because his responsibilities far exceeded supervisory functions. He was a labour contractor, recruiting, employing and maintaining labourers for the factory. He lived for his men and on them. His job was so remunerative that he was able to buy eighteen houses, which he rented out. He was a patron, looking after his workers in sickness and death, marrying off their daughters and caring for the old.

Besides, he became the disciple of Mahant Lal Das in Dalelpurwa, from whom he took the *pañjā* as priest in 1903. This enabled him to resign his job. It is stated in his work certificate,

'This is to certify that I have known Hulasi Dass Mahant for about 26 years. He worked under me as mistry for the last 17 years in Cooper & Allen Factory. I always found him honest, hard working and a man with a certain amount of tact, dealing with the men under him. I was very sorry to part with him. He left about ten years ago on his own request to take up the calling of Padri amongst his class. I very often see him and judging by the

<sup>26</sup> Narain Prasad Arora, *Kānpur kā itihās*, Kanpur 1954, pp. 296-299.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Makkan Das's grandson Kishan Kumar on 5 May 1999.

<sup>28</sup> David N. Lorenzen, *Praises to a Formless God: Nirguṇī Texts from North India*, Albany, NY1996, p. 237.

esteem in which he is held by his followers, he must have kept up the reputation I had of him years ago, Cawnpore, July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1914, J. H. Sannester.'

Kanpur's Kabīr-panthīs all belonged to the Dhamakheṛa line of Madhya Pradesh.<sup>29</sup> In the time of Westcott, there were five *gaddis* in Kanpur which attracted substantial followings among the Untouchable castes, which is very much in line with the social composition of Kabīr's following of Sudras, tribal people and Untouchables.<sup>30</sup> The *sampradāya* was closely knit and strict in its commandments of honesty, faithfulness, cleanliness,<sup>31</sup> vegetarianism and *ahimsā*, education and a self-reliant income. Transgressions were reprimanded and led to excommunication,<sup>32</sup> even in irrelevant cases. Vegetarianism and the strict rejection of any intoxicants set the *sampradāya* very much apart from Untouchable (222) culture.<sup>33</sup> Although Kabīr is considered to be the pre-eminent figure of 'the transcendent and formless nirguna aspect of divinity',<sup>34</sup> his Kanpur followers were quite evasive and blended the belief in the spiritual representation of God with worship of the Devī.

Westcott's research is still remembered by the disciple of Mahant Sevak Das who was amongst those who were summoned by Westcott's Mali. Mahant Jaigur Das does not remember Westcott's name but he told the following story: 'The Angrez Sahib wanted to thank the mahants for their help. So he called them for a meal. But they could not easily follow the invitation because the Angrez Sahib was not a Kabīr-panthī. They gave him the *kanṭhī* and made him a Kabīr-panthī. So they could eat together.'<sup>35</sup>

Hulasi Das was too young at that time to be among Westcott's discussants. What little we know of his biography is paradigmatic for the industrial situation of Kanpur at the turn of the century. Hulasi Das was a Kureel from Unnao. The Kureels are a Chamar subcaste and were treated as Untouchables. They originated from the districts of Kanpur, Lucknow, Rai Bareilly, Unnao and Hardoi.<sup>36</sup> Traditionally landless labourers, tanners and leather workers,<sup>37</sup> the Kureel moved to Kanpur even

<sup>29</sup> Hulasi Das's son Prem Das wrote a history of the Kabīr-panthīs in Kanpur.

<sup>30</sup> David N. Lorenzen, 'The Kabir Panth and Social Protest'. in: Schomer and McLeod(eds.), *The Sants*, 1987, p. 283.

<sup>31</sup> I was told by Rajendra Kumar (Interview on 29 March 1999) that his father, a devout Kabīr-panthī, even used to wash the firewood before burning.

<sup>32</sup> George Herbert Westcott, *Kabir and the Kabir Panth*, Calcutta 1907, p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> David N. Lorenzen, 'The Kabir Panth: Heretics to Hindus', in: Lorenzen, David N. (ed.), *Religious Change and Cultural Domination*, Mexico 1981, p. 161.

<sup>34</sup> Karine Schomer, 'Introduction: The Sant Tradition in Perspective'. in: Schomer and McLeod (eds.), *The Sants*, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Mahant Jaigur Das on 2 April 1999.

<sup>36</sup> H. R. Nevill, *Cawnpore, a Gazetteer*, Allahabad 1909, pp. 105ff.

<sup>37</sup> George Weston Briggs, *The Chamars*, Calcutta 1920, pp. 10ff.

before the Mutiny to work in the harness depot of the British army<sup>38</sup> and were the first to join the newly established leather factories. But not all of them were industrial labourers. Many became leather merchants and tannery owners. As the British had a great demand for leather for the requirements of the Army as well as for export, people like Sanval Das, became exceedingly rich. And the *sampradāya* lived on the patronage of those untouchable entrepreneurs and labour contractors. Kabīr was not the only Sant (223) venerated by the Kureels. Sant Raidās, a Chamar cobbler by birth,<sup>39</sup> was held in equal esteem and gained increasing popularity in Kanpur.

Migrating from Bundelkhand, the Koris entered the textile industry and were preferred by the British.<sup>40</sup> Although they are performing a non-polluting task,<sup>41</sup> in Kanpur they are classified as Untouchables.<sup>42</sup> The Koris considered themselves natural adherents of Kabīr, as he was a weaver like them. But there was no Kori mahant to my knowledge. They gave up worship of the Devī in the Bundelkhandi fashion as little as the Kureel gave up Kālī worship.<sup>43</sup> Followers of a *nirguna* Sant, image worship was still followed, and this they did not perceive to be in contradiction to Kabīr's teachings.

Unlike the Kureels, the Koris had, apart from industrial labour, no entrepreneurial gifts although there were quite a number of labour contractors among them who built substantial houses or *ahātās-* (enclosed wards). Besides, a section of them were even forced to work in the informal sector. They were employed by Khatik pig breeders and bristle manufacturers to do bristle dressing.<sup>44</sup>

The religious notion of equality before God tallied well with the initial experience of Koris and Kureels in industry. The different castes (224) worked 'cheek by jowl'<sup>45</sup> with each other, as a report from 1906 said. For those Untouchable castes impoverishment and expropriation did not accompany the process of proletarization because they had little to lose except their home village. And industrial work was not the only mode of living as long as the contact to the village was maintained. In the pre-war period, workers changed industry freely when they were discontented with the working conditions.<sup>46</sup> And for a few gifted ones like Hulasi Das it led to wealth, esteem and a *samādhi*.

Hulasi Das's only son Prem Das was born in 1908. Educated privately by a pandit and a maulwi, he was trained to become a *vaid*, which secured him an income over and above his remunerations as a

<sup>38</sup> Yalland, *Boxwallahs*, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> Winand M. Callewart and Peter G. Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Saint Raidas*, New Delhi 1992, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Molund, .... *First we are people. The Koris of Kanpur between Caste and Class*, Stockholm 1988, p. 47.

<sup>41</sup> Vaudeville, *Kabir*, p. 83.

<sup>42</sup> It has been suggested that the untouchable status has been attributed to them because they once broke off from the Chamar (see Stephen Fuchs, *At the Bottom of Indian Society. The Harijan and other Low Castes*, Delhi 1981, p. 178), a theory which is nowadays repeated by the educated Chamar, because most of them have read George Weston Briggs's book *The Chamar*, either in English or in Hindi. Briggs mentions, among the Chamar subcastes, also the Kori (p. 30).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Kripa Shanker on 4 April 1999 and with Rajendra Kumar on 28 March 1999.

<sup>44</sup> Molund, *First we are People*, p. 119.

<sup>45</sup> S. H. Fremantle, *Report on the Supply of Labour in the United Provinces and Bengal*, Lucknow 1906, p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> Chitra Joshi, *Workers` Protest, Managerial Authority, and Labour Organization. Kanpur Textile Industry 1919-1929*, New Delhi 1985, pp. 5 ff.

Kabīr *mahant*. During the Hindu-Muslim riots in Kanpur in 1931, with the power of his moral command, he saved two Muslim families from the rioters. He also put a ban on *balidān* (animal sacrifice) at the Kālī-tempel in Parmat, much to the dismay of his Kureel brothers.

Only after World War I did a radical trade union movement and a nascent Dalit movement emerge. In 1925 Swami Achutanand (1879-1933), founder of the Ādi Hindū movement,<sup>47</sup> chose Kanpur as the centre of his agitation. And in 1927 the Acharya from Dhamakhera organised a big meeting in Kanpur to propagate the teachings of Kabīr.<sup>48</sup> Kanpur became the focus of agitation because it had a well-developed working class, which as for its Untouchables, was certainly freer in their contractual relationships than their bonded caste brothers in the village. The trade union movement and the Dalit movement were not interrelated at all, because the Dalit identity had to be negated by the communist trade union movement.

In 1935 there was a disputation on the publication of the *Kabir Mansoor*. Amazingly, the invitation was phrased in English and among the honoured guests were, Mahant Prem Das apart, two missionaries from (225) the American Presbyterian Mission. The APM had been present in Kanpur since 1901 and mainly worked among Untouchables with the intention to convert them to Christianity and to secure them jobs in industry.<sup>49</sup> Obviously they were also instrumental in forming a 'Dalit Mazdoor Sangh'<sup>50</sup> which was used against the dominant communist trade union by the British employers as strike breakers with the argument of the brahmin dominance in the trade union movement. The British used caste as an argument to pursue their capitalist interests, though factually they were right. Besides in the 1930s the caste composition of the industrial labour force had changed considerably. Koris and Chamars had lost their numerical dominance in textile industry, as upper castes took up industrial work in large numbers after World War I.<sup>51</sup> The Hindu-Muslim riots of 1931 had additional economic repercussions on the Chamar. They were evicted from Hiramankapurwa where they had their godowns and workshops.<sup>52</sup> This was a great financial setback for them. Giving up the leather business was generally a deliberate Chamar act, in obedience to Ambedkar's teachings.<sup>53</sup> Only nowadays do they realise the economic consequences of this which they voice with an undercurrent of hostility towards the Muslims.

<sup>47</sup> Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself*, pp. 81-87.

<sup>48</sup> Information received from Mahant Gyan Das, Shuklaganj, on 3 May 1999.

<sup>49</sup> Sebastian, *A sociological study*, p. 18.

<sup>50</sup> Pandey, S.M., *As Labour Organized: A Study of Unionism in the Kanpur Cotton Textile Industry*, New Delhi 1970, p. 61.

<sup>51</sup> Bellwinkel, *Die Kasten-Klassenproblematik*, p. 40.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Krishna Kumar Rahi, grandnephew of Sanval Das, on 6 May 1999.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Madan Mohan Chaudhury and Babu Lal Ahirvar on 10 March 1999.

Prem Das was also among Swami Achutanand's followers. There was a vivid spiritual exchange between them, mainly on religious matters. When Achutanand established Raidās as the saint of his movement, the Kabīr-panthīs fell behind in public attention. Girdhari Lal, a Kureel like Makkan Das and Dakkan Das, who lived in the same ward, became (226) Swami Achutanand's patron.<sup>54</sup> He was a rich tannery owner and leather merchant and he gave Swami Achutanand a house to live in. It was surrounded by a beautiful garden, where later on Girdhari Lal had his grave constructed in the form of a little temple, depicting him in veneration at the feet of Sant Raidās. Patronage was an individual affair, but the Swami it clear that he wanted to be supported by the untouchable community as a whole. He used to go from house to house to collect food stuff for his meals. And the caudharis from the different untouchable castes in Kanpur understood his message. Through contributions of all untouchable castes in Kanpur, the first Raidās temple in Harbans Mohall was erected in the 1920s. It served as the meeting point of annual processions, which set out on Raidās Jayantī. When during the 1930s in retaliation to the communist inspired militant strikes the British recruited 'docile' Jaisvara Chamars from Eastern U.P.<sup>55</sup> they brought with them a deeply felt veneration for Sant Raidās which gave a new turn to the movement. The *caukās* of the Kabīr-panthīs, Makkan Das's conspicuous consumption apart, were a private affair. The Raidās procession was not.<sup>56</sup> It was an appropriation of public space, a representation of Dalit culture, which had a provocative effect when the Untouchables went drum beating through wards inhabited by upper castes.

After Swami Achutanand's death in 1933, there was a void which was filled by Dr. Ambedkar. He came to Kanpur in 1944 for the second meeting of the Scheduled Caste Federation.<sup>57</sup> In Dalit narratives, this historical event has gained a legendary quality. Everybody claims to have had an important function at that meeting, be it as body guard, usherer or participant in the *sahabhoj*.<sup>58</sup> This community meal was organised on request of Dr. Ambedkar to abolish untouchability. But few caudharies (227) accepted the invitation and the ones who did were ostracised—*hukkā pānī band*—by their respective castes. Praise to the Kabīr-panthīs who solved their issues of commensality with Westcott more elegantly!

Prem Das attended the meeting but not the meal. He considered himself part of the Scheduled Caste Movement, although he leant towards the Congress. He wanted to improve the educational and moral standards of his brethren. In 1947 he founded the 'Depressed Classes Educational Society' and set up a girl's school in Parmat. For this purpose he rented the Kureel panchayat building. Unfortunately the school did not last long.

Tilok Chand Kureel, Municipal Corporator from 1936 and President of the Scheduled Caste Federation and next-door neighbour of Prem Chand, tried to appropriate the school building. A court

<sup>54</sup> I am following Rajendrenath's narrative and the booklet of Swami Achutanand's son-in-law Mangal Singh entitled '*108 Svāmī Achūtānand ki jīvani*'.

<sup>55</sup> Bellwinkel, *Die Kasten-Klassenproblematik*, p. 41.

<sup>56</sup> Rajendrenath Ahirvar, 'Sri Ravidas Birthday Celebration in Anwarganj'.

<sup>57</sup> Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay 1954, p. 362.

<sup>58</sup> Interviews with Rajendrenath Ahirvar (21 October 1998), Madan Mohan Chaudhuri (22 October 1998), Nawal Kishor (23 October 1998), Vijay Sagar Sonkar (24 October 1998) and Suresh Chand Sonkar (30 October 1998).

case began, which lasted for thirty years and ended before the Allahabad High Court. The school had to close down. The same happened with the ‘Nehru Chatravas’, a students’ hostel for Scheduled Caste students studying in DAV College, which Prem Das opened in 1950. Tilok Chand Kureel withdrew the financial support given by the Municipal Corporation and it closed in 1962. Times had changed. Politics in independent India endowed its politicians with new means of patronage.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the resurgence of the Raidās movement. A number of Raidās temple sprung up which were served by *bhagats*. The patrons of these temples were not any longer rich tannery owners but the clerks<sup>59</sup> and babus employed in the telephone exchange and government services. The Raidās procession was celebrated with pomp and splendour, but apart from that Raidās never made an entry into life-cycle rites like in Panjab.<sup>60</sup> Devī worship was still prominent among the Kureels, and it was taken over by the *savarṇa* castes. The old Kālī temple (228) in Parmat used to have a Kureel *purohit*. When he died, a brahmin family took over.<sup>61</sup>

Prem Das knew that he had to lead the Kabīr-panthīs out of the private realm into a public domain. Just at the end of his life he started a unification move amongst the *sampradāya*.<sup>62</sup> In 1969 he called for an ‘Akhil Bhāratīya Kabīr Ācārya Sammelan evam Satsaṅg’ in Kanpur. It was held in Brijendra Swarup Park named after a leading Ārya Samājī family of Kanpur. The objective of the conference was to generate equality, love and good will among the *ācāryas*, saints and *mahants* for the development of the Kabīr-panth. The meeting was well attended and a great success. The Second Conference of the All India Kabir Panthis took place in Kudar Mall in Madhya Pradesh, the seat of the Dhamakherā *gaddī*, in 1971 and could claim to have welcomed delegates from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The third conference took place in New Delhi in 1973. Prem Das’s detailed report tells us of the difficulties he had in organising a meeting of that significance in the capital city and of the reluctance of the Gujarat *ācārya* to attend.

For the heirs of the brothers Makkan Das and Dakkan Das the economic decline only started after Independence. Their urban property was sold to the municipal corporation, which erected a labour colony at that place. Till the 1960s they still excelled in conspicuous consumption on behalf of the

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Meera Dohre on 13 December 1998. Her father Bhagat Singh was a devoted Raidāsī who built three temples in Adi Nagar, a ward predominantly inhabited by Kureels and in close proximity to the area where Swami Achutanand used to live.

<sup>60</sup> Communication by Kapil Dev, former District Magistrate of Kanpur and devout Raidāsī from Panjab.

<sup>61</sup> Communication by Dr. Anand Srivastava from Parmat.

<sup>62</sup> Mahant Prem Das, *Let the Kabirpanthis of the World Unite. A Brief History of All India Kabir Panthi Sangh, registered 1971.*

Kabīr-panthīs. Nowadays Krishan Kumar, their grandson, is struggling hard to get his harness business going.<sup>63</sup>

In 1974 Prem Das died and soon after his wife, a Brahmin widow whom he had employed as school teacher in his Depressed Classes Girls School, followed him. Theirs was a great love. Prem Das took her as second wife as his first wife was issueless. Munni Devi, their only daughter, was left alone with her stepmother, unable to finish her MBBS studies. She married a close relative of her stepmother and became a mother and housewife. After her father's death the Kabīr-panthīs in Kanpur lost their focal figure. And Munni Devi became more and more (229) isolated within the Kureel community, being left with her grandfather's *tāj* and *kāñthī* and the memories of a more distinguished past.

Buddhism in Kanpur has an interesting history, because even before Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956, there was a Buddhist congregation in Kanpur<sup>64</sup> which goes back to Acharya Ishwardatt Medharthi, a Garheria (shepherd) by caste. In the 1940s, during his quest and search for a new religion for the Dalits,<sup>65</sup> Dr. Ambedkar visited Ishwardatt. But when Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956, there was little response in Kanpur. The Census of India in 1961 records only 610 Buddhists. The educated Dalit used to go to Sarnath or Bodh Gaya to take *dikṣā* there.

In 1973 Jagjivan Ram inaugurated the first Dr. Ambedkar statue in Nanaraao Park. This was a big success for the Dalit movement. The Nanaraao Park was the former Memorial Garden of the British, which was set up to commemorate the outcome of the Mutiny. After independence the colonial image was put aside and the Indian hero of the Mutiny set up. Erected in a historically charged public place, Ambedkar's statue now attested to the new significance of the Dalits.

Thereafter, in every Dalit ward Dr. Ambedkar statues came up, like the Raidās temples in the 1960s. The Ambedkar movement became powerful when it finally linked with Buddhism. This happened through Bhikshu Deepankar who set up a monastery in 1980 in Juhi Labour Colony. Against all odds he started preaching Buddhism with considerable success.<sup>66</sup> Nowadays, there are about five thousand committed Buddhists in Kanpur. For them Buddhism is a complete negation of Hinduism and (230) the caste order. Although they prefer to marry among themselves, they still have not formed an endogamous group. Buddhism has developed its own life-cycle rites and rituals and transformed the political Dalit culture into a splendid representation of perfection and grandeur. Besides, the former Dalit woman chiefminister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayavati,<sup>67</sup> set unprecedented standards with the creation of 'Lord Buddha Parks', of which Kanpur's park fortunately got completed on 26 July 1997.

Kabīr and Raidās, as *nirguna* bhaktas, are considered to be the predecessors of Buddhism in their teaching of love, brotherhood, equality and their attack on the caste system and the *savarna*, although

<sup>63</sup> Interview on 5 May 1999.

<sup>64</sup> Niehoff mentions a Buddhist temple, built in the 1920s. According to his estimate there were twenty-five Buddhists in the 1950s. See *Factory Workers*, p.70.

<sup>65</sup> His book *Bhārat ke ādimvāsi-pūrvjan aur sant dharm*, claims Buddha to be the fountainhead of the Sant Dharm, which was the non-literate religion of the original inhabitants of India.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Bhikshu Deepankar on 3 May 1999. He told me that there was an attempt to poison him. This is an interesting hagiographic detail, as Swami Achutanand is said to have been poisoned by the *savarna*.

<sup>67</sup> Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Viczany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 228-31.

their public representation within Dalit culture has taken different paths. Although the Raidās procession has lost its splendor in comparison with Dr. Ambedkar's Jayantī, the Raidās temples are well kept and one of them, built in the 1950s, was renovated in the 1990s.<sup>68</sup> In public representation Raidās is depicted as the founding father of a Dalit lineage with his 'son' Buddha and 'grandson' Dr. Ambedkar. Although Kabīr was considered to be the 'fountainhead' of bhakti culture, within the present Dalit discourse in Kanpur, he has receded into the background.

Sadhvi Kumari Bandhni, self-styled president of the 'Satya Guru Raidās Pariṣad', tries to establish a personal Dalit religiosity with the focus on women. In the labour colony Allenganj, she has transformed one quarter into a temple. She sings songs on Raidās, Kabīr, Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar. When I asked her to allow me to take a picture of her altar, she quietly put the picture of Kṛṣṇa away, to maintain the purity of the Dalit pantheon, consisting of Kabīr, Raidās, Mīrā Bāī, Buddha and the Rājā of Benares.

The Kabīr-panthīs were the puritans of the early Dalit movement. With their strict emphasis on truth, cleanliness, vegetarianism and *ahimsā*, they considered themselves the elite of their respective community. As long as they (231) were rich and could give freely to their caste brothers, their moral superiority was accepted. Prem Das's life set an example in that respect. Their religion was basically inwardly oriented and there was no scope for public representation, which is essential in present day political discourse. Besides, the uncompromising righteousness of the Kabīr-panthīs does not fit into modern politics, which is based on networks of shifting alliances. What was handy, has been absorbed into Dalit culture: Mayavati has named a whole district after Kabīr.

Where have all the Kabīr-panthis gone? They have moved to Shuklaganj on the other side of the Ganga where the river still has water. In new suburbs *pān kā masālā* is produced and plots are cheap. The *mahants* followed their disciples. Mahant Jaigur Das holds his *caukā* there. Mahant Gyan Das, a great yogi who took *samādhi* for six months, has also moved to rural Unnao, just opposite the Karbala and Sanval Das Ghat.<sup>69</sup>

In Chamanganj Koriana there were ten Kabīr-panthī families twenty years ago and nowadays there is only one.<sup>70</sup> Kabīr is not forgotten. The educated young generation learns about Kabīr in school and college. They take Kabīr as their family name<sup>71</sup> like so many educated Chamars take Ambedkar's name. The surname becomes a caste marker . Kabīr and Ambedkar are signifiers of dalitness among

<sup>68</sup> This goes to the credit of educated Dalits from the Panjab, as in the case of the Raidas temple in Kalyanpur for which Om Prakash, former Professor of Psychology at IIT, and Kapil Dev, former District Magistrate of Kanpur, were instrumental.

<sup>69</sup> Mahan Gyan Das went to school in Budhpuri, where Acharya Ishwardatt Medharthi had established a school.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Lalta Das on 28 March 1999.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Swami Maiku Lal's granddaughter Suchitra Kabir on 10 March 1999.

Koris and Chamars. The ‘Kori Samāj Sevā Samiti’,<sup>72</sup> places Kabīr, Dr. Ambedkar and Jalkārī Bāī<sup>73</sup> in their pantheon. As Buddha’s mother, Māyā, belonged to the Koli lineage, the (232) Koris were originally Kshatriyas<sup>74</sup> and have a natural adherence to Buddhism.

Kabīr is considered to have incorporated the remnants of Buddhist teachings of his times, Vaudeville suggests.<sup>75</sup> Some subscribe to this view.<sup>76</sup> Rajendrenathji puts it more cautiously: ‘*Kabīra dharma Buddha kā jānā, kara ācarana gayo śabda gyāna*’ (‘Kabir understood the religion of Buddha, he acted accordingly and he obtained the knowledge of the word’). On the other hand, as Ambedkar has shown in his autobiography, paradigmatic for the educated Dalits of Kanpur, there was a personal development of Ambedkar as son of a Kabīr-panthī, to Buddhism. Buddhism is the ultimate rationale, the stringent logic of that development, because only Buddhism sets you free from the caste system, oppression and discrimination.

Buddhism is a liberating religion for Rajendrenathji. Only Buddhism leads the Untouchables out of caste and untouchability. For Munni Devi that is different. The Kabīr-panthīs were free of caste within their *sampradāya*. But the *sampradāya* has dwindled away. Discussing caste with Munni Devi, Rajendrenathji holds that unless one changes religion, one cannot escape caste and untouchability. For Munni Devi liberation is only possible as a spiritual aim, as unification with Satyaguru Kabīr. In her view, present-day Dalit culture is only paying lip-service to Buddhism. For her, the daughter of a Kureel father and a Brahmin mother, the Dalits as the ‘other’ drink alcohol and eat meat; they maintain all the vices of untouchable culture. Unless one changes one’s behaviour, a spiritual quest is meaningless. And Kabīr, although he is good to quote, but difficult to live by, has disappeared from the public representation of the Dalits. But out of sight is not out of mind. Kabīr has been superseded by Raidās and both have been absorbed into Buddhism.

---

<sup>72</sup> Interview with K. K. Verma, R. K. Verma and Gauri Shanker on 10 April 1999.

<sup>73</sup> Vīrānganā Jalkārī Bāī was the servant of Rāṇī Lakṣmī Bāī of Jhansi, who fought with her in 1857 against the British. Jalkari posed as Rāṇī Lakṣmī Bāī, misled the British, and helped Rāṇī Lakṣmī Bāī escape from Jhansi Fort with her adopted son on her back.

<sup>74</sup> Article in *Kuṭumbikā* entitled ‘Pride of Kabir Sahib and Koli Society’.

<sup>75</sup> Vaudeville, *Kabir*, p. 85.

<sup>76</sup> D. C. Ahir, *Heritage of Buddhism*, Delhi 1989, p. 231.