Transgressing Boundaries, Inhabiting Various Selves:
Exploring notions of South Asian religious identity through the poetry of Lalla, Bullah, and Kabir

Jasleen Kaur Bawa
Potomac, Maryland
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University of Virginia

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Dedicated to the ones I love, here and not, with me always.

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Introduction: Overview of Inquiry

Key terms: South Asia, India, Hindu nationalism, Hindutva, Hindu, Hindu-ness, Muslim, religious identity, liminality, syncretism, spiritual discourse, spiritual exchange, Lal Ded, Kabir, Bulleh Shah, Sufi, Shaiva, pre-colonial, medieval, religious categories, hardened, softened, permeable, fluid

Abstract

Modern understandings of the poetic corpuses of three late medieval and early modern figures: Lal Ded, Bulleh Shah, and Kabir, have been appropriated and reappropriated to serve a particular Hindu nationalist agenda, moving far from the self-understandings these poets displayed in their work of either religious ambiguity or of transgressing boundaries between categories of religious identity in favor of spiritual discourse and intellectual exchange. These poets, through their ambiguity or active transgression of religious boundaries, display both a seriousness about categories of religious identity and their dedication to a spiritual practice and an understanding that ultimately these categorizations are to be transcended.

These poets are not interested in political motivations or community formation around a particular religious identity. This is evidenced in how these three figures themselves identified religiously in their poems, the ways in which they inhabit various identities and senses of self, and in their personal relationships with these religious categories. The lineages that spring from their work share a similar seriousness of spiritual practice but do begin to get caught up in the vicissitudes of forming an identity. This is evidenced in the subsequent premodern development of the reception of these poets and their poetry — how groups that received their poetic corpuses and incorporated them as part of their premodern community formation understood categories of religious identity. The discourse of appropriating these figures in the postcolonial period is about politicizing them, creating a public-facing identity and ideology as a means to a particular Hindu Nationalist end, while making the seriousness with which they consider a practical spiritual life

secondary. Thus, the poets whose self-understanding and conceptions of religious identity involved transgressing categorization in favor of spiritual discourse and exchange, who spoke from various senses of self, imbibing and adopting the languages of other identities, are now being categorized as strictly existing within rigid boundaries of identity to serve both Hindu Nationalist framings of South Asian religious identity, as well as minority community *responses* to these framings.

Hindutva, Hindu-ness, Hindu Nationalism

In the last few decades, and with the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, Hindu nationalism has become mainstream in India in the form of *Hindutva*. The term *Hindutva*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "originally: the state or quality of being Hindu; ‘Hindu-ness,’ and now: an ideology advocating, or movement seeking to establish, the hegemony of Hindus and Hinduism within India; Hindu nationalism.”[1] According to Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religions, Hindutva is a concept of "Indian cultural, national, and religious identity" that "conflates a geographically based religious, cultural, and national identity: a true 'Indian' is one who partakes of this 'Hindu-ness.'" This view holds that even those who are not Hindu but who identify with one of the religions originating in India — Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs — share in this historical, cultural, and national essence.[2] Those whose religions are ‘foreign’ to India, primarily the country’s Muslim and Christian communities, can only fall within the boundaries of Hindutva if they return to the origins of their Hindu-ness in a process called *ghar vapasi* (returning home), pointing to an understanding of Hinduism as the

[1] "Hindutva, n.", *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, 2011, retrieved 10 December 2022
[2] Merriam-Webster, Inc; Encyclopaedia Britannica (1999). *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religions*. Merriam-Webster. p. 464

mother religion of all Indians, or the *true* religion of all Indians, sitting latent within all Indians regardless of their current religious identities.

It is Hindutva ideology that frames Muslims as intruders and outsiders, Hindus as the rightful inhabitants of India, and Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists as extensions of the larger Hindu fold, despite their clear distinct doctrines, practices, and beliefs. The larger effect of this has been a hardening of categories of religious identity, especially the categories of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh, and thus, the scramble to sort historical figures into neat categories of religious identity.

One such group of historical figures whose lives and works have now been entered into a sort of religious tug-of-war are popular devotional poets Lal Ded (14th century), Kabir (15th century), and Bulleh Shah (17th —18th century). All three of these figures lived in a time when the boundaries of religious categorization were fluid and permeable. This is not to say that religious identity meant nothing, or was treated with casualness and triviality. To take part in another's religious ritual or practice, to exchange ideas or find spiritual value in another's religious practice, was part of these figures' everyday lives, and it took root in their poetry, as they borrowed language, principles, imagery, and practice from others. But in India's present political and religious climate, participation, exchange, and the permeability of religious boundaries are more and more seen as a threat to one's own religious identity. In other words, to engage with other religious categories in a world of hardened boundaries is to dilute one's own Hindu-ness, Muslim-ness, or Sikh-ness.

Existing Scholarly Discourse on South Asian Religious Identity

It is in part due to this Hindutva framing of Muslims as intruders and to categories of religious identity as hardened and impermeable that scholarship on South Asian religious identity

has largely either read neat postcolonial categories of Hindu and Muslim back into pre-colonial history, or argued that there were no such categories at all. It therefore largely misses a nuanced understanding of religious identity in South Asia that takes these categories of identification seriously, and does not acknowledge that the political and the religious cannot be separated so neatly in these readings of history. Scholars either parrot the Hindu Nationalist talking points that essentialize and homogenize Muslims and Hindus, hardening the boundaries of religious category, or move in the opposite direction toward extreme religious syncretism in an effort to correct those talking points. But this latter move results in an *overcorrection*, and in effect argues that religious categories were seen as casual or trivial identifiers that could easily be discarded and picked up with casualness, rather than offering a more nuanced view of how these categories might have functioned with softer and more fluid boundaries in pre-colonial South Asia.

On one end of the spectrum of understanding is the belief that religious categories Hindu and Muslim have always existed, clear and unchanging through time. This is often carried forward into claims that these fixed communities existed with impermeable boundaries in constant opposition and hostility toward one another, inevitably leading to the Partition of India in 1947 and the creation of Pakistan.[3] This claim is refuted by scholars like Harjot Oberoi, Anne Murphy, and Dominique Sila-Khan, who instead see religious identity as a complex and fluid thing. Oberoi defines religious identity not just as a set of formal beliefs but as a *whole historical process* "by which a cohesive community of believers comes to be produced, consolidated, and reproduced through a cultural fusion of texts, myths, symbols, and rituals with human bodies and

[3] See Talbot, Cynthia "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India" in India's Islamic Traditions 711-1750. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. Talbot argues that understanding earlier forms of Hindu-Muslim identities may help us grasp the "impulses leading to modern communal conflict" and that communities of the past were not identical to those of the present. These identities were not formed in a vacuum, but were instead formed through the presence of the Other, molding the self-definition of both groups.

sentiments, often under the aegis of religious personnel."[4] Oberoi argues that religious identity is an active and changing thing that undergoes a constant process of being *constructed* through community, text, myth, ritual, and symbols. Religious identity cannot be reduced to a simple and unchanging checklist of what makes a Hindu or a Muslim with no acknowledgment of the processes of change and construction that are constantly occurring as communities interact with one another, producing meaning and self-understanding.

Oberoi does provide a useful lens through which to explore religious identity in South Asia. However, his methodology ignores textual and scriptural sources as important data points, arguing that practice ought to take priority over precept, giving primacy to practices that are against core tenets of Sikhi, and falsely claiming that because many Sikhs were illiterate, they had little understanding of the Sikh principles and practices articulated in *Gurbani*.[5] Oberoi disregards scripture almost entirely, invoking Gurbani excerpts only twice in the first 164 pages of his book, and speaking of characteristics and principles of Sikhi[6] without scriptural references to support his claims. His references to various religious communities visiting one another's shrines and temples and taking part in one another's rituals are then used to broadly argue that boundaries between religious categories did not exist, or that religious categories were not taken seriously and religious identity was casually and noncommittally taken up, discarded, and changed. Instead, I am of the viewpoint that boundaries can exist and *also be transgressed* — that the permeability of these boundaries does shift depending on time and context, that what it

[4] Oberoi, Harjot. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994, p.4

[5] Bani was first orally transmitted by Guru Nanak Sahib and Bhai Mardana. All the subsequent Gurus traveled to various communities to sing Sabads (the Word; compositions in the Guru Granth Sahib) and shifted to local languages and colloquialisms to make the messages of Bani more accessible to their audiences. The orality of Sikh scripture is integral to Sikh practice and the Sikh collective's relationship with the Guru as embodied through the Guru Granth Sahib.

[6] Sikhi is the indigenous term for what is commonly understood to be "Sikhism," and refers to a way of life and a religious and political ideology rather than solely a religious tradition.

means to be Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim can change through the contours of historical processes and interactions with various 'Others,' and that the existence of these categories does not then mean that there were not people and communities who did not neatly fall within them, committed to the religious identities they had and the practices and beliefs associated with them.[7]

Sila-Khan complicates the question of "who is Hindu, who is Muslim?" through historical analysis, arguing that the common perception of Hinduism and Islam as two homogenous and perpetually antipathetic faiths oversimplifies the complexity, fluidity, and diversity of religious identity and practice in South Asian history and the present, where Hindu-Muslim interactions can instead be understood as an open doorway through which various traditions meet, exchange ideas, and mix in the threshold. Although Sila-Khan's emphasis on the importance of the exchange of ideas and knowledge between traditions is useful, her oversimplification of certain aspects of religious identity tend to read as advocating for a throwing out of the significance and gravity of categories of religious identification in favor of a view of religious identity as thing treated with great casualness.[8]

This framing of religious categorization is the other end of this spectrum of understanding, which might be explained as an overcorrection as scholars refute previous notions

[7] Oberoi also makes the argument that 'Hindu' as a religious rather than ethno-geographic identity only came into being under the Muslim rulers of India, and that it was in colonial times that the term 'Hinduism' was coined and acquired currency as referring to a collective of variegated religious communities. David Lorenzen addresses in his essay, "Who Invented Hinduism?" where he shows through textual evidence that the claim by main scholars (that Hinduism was invented by the British in the early 19th century) is false. He writes, "If Hinduism is a construct or invention, then, it is not a colonial one, nor a European one, nor even an exclusively Indian one. It is a construct or invention only in the vague and commonsensical way that any large institution is, be it Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, communism or parliamentary democracy…It is an institution created out of a long historical interaction between a set of basic ideas and the infinitely complex and variegated socio-religious beliefs and practices that structure the everyday life of individuals and small, local groups. In this interaction, both the basic ideas and the everyday beliefs and practices are constantly changing…Hinduism wasn't invented sometime after 1800, or even around the time of the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. What did happen during the centuries of rule by dynasties of Muslim sultans and emperors was that Hindus developed a consciousness of a shared religious identity based on the loose family resemblance among the variegated beliefs and practices of Hindus, whatever their sect, caste, chosen deity, or theological school (655).

[8] See Sila-Khan's elaboration on the story of a Hindu priest of a Shiva temple who plucked flowers from a Muslim shrine and then began to behave like a Sunni Muslim as evidence of a united or unifying tradition and the persistence of ritual exchanges between communities and shrines, and the artificiality of religious boundaries which she describes as fragile (Sila-Khan 2).

of static identity. Sila-Khan quotes Guru Nanak's revelation, "there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim," as evidence that these categories did not exist. I believe Sila-Khan is mistaken in that she does not consider that the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh scripture in which Guru Nanak's revelation is recorded) takes religious categorization very seriously while also emphasizing the understanding that the most important aspects of one's spiritual journey and relationship to divinity are beyond categorization. Sila-Khan's oversimplification is just one example of a common thread of understanding regarding pre-colonial South Asia as a utopia in which all religious communities lived in harmony and any conflict was purely political.

Present scholarship largely misses a nuanced understanding of religious identity in South Asia that takes these categories of identification seriously, and largely does not acknowledge that the political and the religious cannot be separated out neatly in these readings of history which argue that certain moves or motivations were purely political or purely religious. This scholarly trend disengages hardened categories of religious identity from the scene by imposing a strict dichotomy between religion and politics, and suggesting all conflict arises from purely political sides, categories, and motivations. Murphy discusses encountering difference and identity in South Asian religions by turning to Panjab and early manuscripts depicting Guru Nanak, with special attention paid to his famous revelation, “there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.” Unlike Sila-Khan, Murphy does not take this statement literally as evidence that the categories of Hindu and Muslim did not exist. Without undermining Guru Nanak’s originality or insinuating that Sikhi is merely a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam, she shows that the principles and teachings of Guru Nanak were in part formed in encounter and dialogue with other traditions. She argues that it is possible to “embrace multiple modes: to discover commonalities, discern distinctions, and

reimagine religious self-articulations in new modes."[9] In other words, the mere fact of dialogue and interaction between different identities does not then mean that one's self-understanding of one's religious identity is threatened or diluted. This is the lens through which I will seek to further nuance responses by the first generation of scholars to Hindutva arguments and the hardening of religious categories.

The Poets

Present popular discourse around religious identity in India tends to attempt to lay claim over the religious identities of three poets in particular: Lal Ded (14th century), Kabir (15th century), and Bulleh Shah (17th century). These poets have been appropriated and reappropriated in the myth-building necessary to fuel the current Hindu Nationalist project, Hindutva, and lay claim over identity and homeland. If we can understand how religious identity has been understood, written about, and lived through the poems of Lal Ded, Kabir, and Bulleh Shah, we can start to understand how to reconceptualize and even push back against current notions of what it means to be a Hindu or a Muslim, and what it means to be an Indian. We can start to push back against a Hindu Nationalist project that seeks to demonize, other, and eventually rid India of its religious minorities in some great return to the mythologically homogenous Hindu homeland. We can begin to pull at the threads of this myth, and at scholars' respondent overcorrections.

[9] Murphy, Anne. "Encountering Difference and Identity in South Asian Religions" in Encountering the Other, edited by Laura Duhan Kaplan and Harry Maier, 39-48. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2020, p.39.

Tentative Claim

Popular discourse around these poets' religious identity moves far from the self-understandings they displayed in their work — of either the elusiveness of their own religious identities or of transgressing boundaries between categories of religious identity in favor of spiritual discourse and intellectual exchange. It is not that these poets embraced a kind of neo-spiritualism or syncretic tradition that erased all categories of religious identity or did not take seriously religious difference. Instead, through their active transgression of religious boundaries, they take religious identity seriously, and display both a seriousness about their dedication to a spiritual practice and an understanding that ultimately these categorizations are to be transcended by body, mind, and spirit. In other words, the poets both took religious categories *seriously* in their poetry and *dissolved* these categories in their poetry.

These poets — despite being politicized by the Hindutva project and by *responses* to the Hindutva project by other minority religious groups — are not interested in purely political motivations (especially not of political projects that designate insiders and outsiders, selves and others) or community formation around a particular religious identity. This is evidenced in how these three figures themselves identify religiously in their poems, the ways in which they inhabit various identities and senses of self, and in their personal relationships with these religious categories. These three items will structure the analysis of the primary sources within the poetry subsection.

The lineages that spring from their work share a similar seriousness of spiritual practice but do begin to get caught up in the vicissitudes of forming an identity. This is evidenced in the subsequent premodern development of the reception of these poets and their poetry — how groups that received their poetic corpuses and incorporated them as part of their premodern

community formation understood categories of religious identity. This will be explored through secondary sources that serve as historical accounts.

The discourse of appropriating these poets in the postcolonial period is about politicizing them, creating a public-facing identity and ideology that in popular *state* discourse serve as a means to a particular Hindu Nationalist end, while making the seriousness with which they consider a practical spiritual life secondary. Thus, the poets whose self-understanding and conceptions of religious identity involved transgressing categorization in favor of spiritual discourse and intellectual exchange, who spoke from various senses of self and a multitude of voices, imbibing and adopting the languages of other identities without feeling that their own religious identities were being threatened, are now being categorized as strictly existing within rigid boundaries of identity to both to serve a Hindutva understanding of South Asian religious identity, and to articulate a response by other religious minorities who are also laying claim to these figures. I will order the sections on the poets in terms of most fluid and elusive to least (Kabir, Bulleh Shah, Lal Ded), rather than chronologically.

Warrant: The hardening of religious categories by Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs

The function of the modern state, Saba Mahmood argues, is to engage in a project of political secularism, in which the state exerts its sovereignty to "reorganize substantive features of religious life, stipulating what religion is or ought to be, assigning its proper content, and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks, and quotidian practices."[10] Secularism, then, is not just an organizing structure for what are usually seen as already-existing spheres of social organization (public, private, political, religious), but a "discursive operation of

[10] Mahmood, Saba. Religious Difference In a Secular Age: A Minority Report. Princeton University Press, 2016, p.3.

power that generates these very spheres, establishes their boundaries, and suffuses them with content, such that they come to acquire a natural quality for those living within its terms."[11] It is not just state neutrality or separation of church and state — it also requires the reordering and remaking of religious life and relations between different religious communities "in accord with specific norms, foreign to the life of the religions and the people it organizes." Thus, the secular liberal state, which India still ostensibly is, does not just depoliticize religion, it "embeds it within the social life of the polity by relegating it to the private sphere and civil society." The state is not a neutral arbiter of religious differences, it produces and creates them too.[12]

In the case of the Indian state, the pursuit of the Hindutva project utilizes religion and constructions of time and history to assert sovereignty — through Hindu mythology and scripture, through reimagining space and place, and through cultivating Hindu aesthetics where they have not previously existed. Similar to what Mahmood argues about the modern state's production and creation of religious difference and the redefinition of religions, in *The Secret Life of Another Indian Nationalism*, Shail Mayaram explores how the Indian state in its pursuit of the *Hindutva* project[13] utilizes religion and constructions of time and history to assert sovereignty — through Hindu mythology and scripture, through reimagining space and place, and through cultivating Hindu aesthetics where they have not previously existed. Mayaram argues that the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party partake in a kind of conversion process even when dealing with Hindus, in that they homogenize Hinduism and redefine what it means to be living out 'Hindu-ness' in a way that is acceptable to the larger Hindutva project, erasing spirits, deification, village-level gods and goddesses, and local beliefs.[14] In reference to *ghar*

[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid, p.21.
[13] An ideology seeking to establish the hegemony of Hindus and the Hindu way of life in India.
[14] Mayaram, Shail. *The Secret Life of Another Indian Nationalism: Transitions from the Pax Britannica to the Pax Americana*. India, Cambridge University Press, 2022, p.152

vapasi campaigns geared toward Indian Muslims, Mayaram writes, "were they not converting people who had played a far greater role in the transmission and reproduction of civilisational traditions than any of their activists? Aren't Muslim communities also participants in the making and meanings of the civilisational traditions that came to be called Hinduism?"[15] It is in this project that there is a redefinition of what it means to be Muslim as well, in that Muslims can only exist as outsiders or invaders playing a role in eroding or destroying the Indic civilizational project, making no contribution to creating, sustaining, or reproducing it. Religion and history are used in service of the state — not an already-existing form of religion (Hinduism), but a Hinduism that is constructed in a new way, and engaged in a nonlinear, nonsecular time scale.[16] Time and space are engulfed by national time, and the mythic, literary, genealogical and historical are "brought to bear on the fashioning of the nationalist imagination." Heterogeneous time is appropriated and folded into nationalist time to perpetuate a particular narrative.[17]

While acknowledging this phenomenon as critical to the conclusions of this project, I will still keep my primary focus on Hindu Nationalist reframings while secondarily articulating the ways in which this movement of the State and those who subscribe to its ideology contributes to a similar phenomenon amongst Sikhs and Muslims who are also attempting to lay exclusive claim to these figures and their corpuses. Mahmood's argument is particularly relevant as we see the steady ossification of boundaries of religious categorization across communities, possibly as an act of self-preservation in response to the threat of Hindu Nationalist redefinitions of what it means to be Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim.

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[15] Ibid, 154
[16] Ibid, 143
[17] Ibid, 145

Method

In this project, I will engage in textual analysis of the primary sources — 2 poems by each of the three poets (6 total). I will use Christopher Shackle's *A Guru Nanak Glossary* and The Guru Granth Sahib Project's working dictionary in my analysis of both Bhagat Kabir and Bulleh Shah's works, as well as works on South Asian poetics, Sufi poetics, and Panjabi literature. Although I do not have knowledge of Kashmiri to be used in my analysis of Lal Ded's work, I will rely on Ranjit Hoskote's translations and works on Kashmiri poetics and principles of Shaiva yoga to help better inform my interpretations.

The secondary sources that will offer historical and anthropological analyses on the lives of the poetic corpuses and the transmission, interpretation, and reception of these corpuses will help situate the project in how pre-modern communities formed around these works in comparison to present conversations. For insights into present discourse around these poets, I will refer to current scholarship and to relevant statements by Hindu Nationalist politicians about these figures.

Chapter 1: The Deliberate Ambiguity and Fluidity of Bhagat Kabir

Life and Background

Bhagat Kabir is a widely known and recited poet and figure in religious history who most likely lived in 15th century Kashi (now known as Banaras or the Sanskritized Varanasi), and died in Maghar, Uttar Pradesh (both in northern India).[18] Residents of Maghar have, since at least the 17th century, claimed that Kabir was either buried in Maghar, or that he entered his *samadhi*[19] there. According to one colonial account, Bijli Khan, a nawab in Maghar, built a *mazar*, or mausoleum for Kabir on the banks of the river Ami in 1450 which was later repaired in 1567 by Fidai Khan, a nawab from outside of Maghar.[20] Other accounts, one by missionaries GH Westcott (1907) and FE Keay (1931), show that the mazar stands next to a Hindu temple which is said to memorialize the spot where Kabir entered his samadhi. The maintenance of this memorial is done by sadhus of the Kabir Chaura Math of Varanasi.[21] While so much about Kabir's life is uncertain and debated, including whether he was from a Hindu or a Muslim family, whether he was Bhagat Ramanand's disciple,[22] and whether his use of Hindu and Muslim terms means he can be claimed with more weight and finality by Hindus or Muslims, what is largely agreed upon by scholars is that he was born into a family of weavers, and that the caste terminology he uses in his work is *julaha,* which refers to the Muslim the weaver caste. His

[18] Scholars remain divided on exact dates. Vinay Dharwadker in *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs* says the most plausible claim is that Kabir was born around 1398 and died around 1448 (p.2). Others put Kabir's birth year somewhere between 1448-50, and death year either 1518 or 1504. For more, see David Lorenzen's chapter in *The Sants* (p.287).
[19] Samadhi refers to a meditative state of concentration in which one's mind is completely absorbed in the Divine and they experience complete union with the Divine. This is considered to be the final stage of the devotee's life.
[20] Kabir. *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs*. Translated by Vinay Dharwadker, Penguin Books, 2003, pp.3. This is further supported by the 1985 discovery of a deed in the possession of the Sunni Vaqf Board of Lucknow dated 1698-99, which registers the village of Kabirpura Karmua as a gift 'for the upkeep of the Muslim tomb of Shah Kabir.' Dharwadker explains that this suggests the mausoleum might have been understood during Aurangzeb's reign to be a dargah of a Sufi pir, as Indian Sufis in the regions of Agra, Delhi and Kashmir were all reading Kabir's poetry during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan.
[21] Ibid, pp.4.
[22] Bhagat Ramanand was a Brahmin Guru whose disciples included Kabir, Ravidas, Pipa, Sen, and Dhanna.

poetry often incorporates metaphors related to weaving, and explicitly refers to his status as a 'low-caste' weaver.[23] Kabir's verses incorporate Hindu and Muslim terminology, address Hindus and Muslims, and are part of a long history of South Asian oral traditions. His poetry is sung by Muslims in the form of Sufi qawwalis, by Hindus in the form of bhajans, and by Sikhs in the form of sabads. In the late 16th century, his poetry was incorporated into the Guru Granth Sahib — the scripture of the Sikhs — by the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan.

Kabir is fluid in his self-presentation, and the larger reception of his poetry is also fluid and permeable. Some claim him as Muslim, some as Hindu. His writing is integral to the Sikh scripture and charter, the Guru Granth Sahib, where he is understood as speaking to all categories of religious identity. I will begin this chapter by summarizing previous scholarship that problematizes the question of 'authenticity' and a singular corpus before delving into the curations and framings of Kabir that exist in the context of Hindu Nationalist narratives as well as past curations of Kabir by *Kabir Panths*. Kabir Panths are the largely Hindu or lineages that sprang up in the pre-modern period, who share Kabir's seriousness and his understanding of the importance of transgressing categories of religious identity, but who soon begin to fall into the vicissitudes of forming an identity in a quickly changing landscape of nascent nationalism. I will use Saba Mahmood's argument about the function of the modern nation-state to understand the ways in which Kabir has been used not just by hegemonic forces of the State, but also by minority communities within India to carve out a more hardened religious identity in response to a changing national landscape. Finally, I will look to Kabir's own words, exploring the Bhagat's self-conceptions through selections of his poetry that center around themes of religious identity. I

[23] ਜਾਤਿ ਜੁਲਾਹਾ ਮਤਿ ਕਾ ਧੀਰੁ ॥ ਸਹਜਿ ਸਹਜਿ ਗੁਣ ਰਮੈ ਕਬੀਰੁ ॥੩॥੨੬॥

I am a weaver by caste, and patient by nature. Effortlessly, naturally, Kabir utters the virtues of the Beautiful One. (Guru Granth Sahib 328). Julaha is the caste designation for Muslim weavers, while Kori is the caste designation for Hindu weavers.

will argue that he takes spiritual and religious practice seriously, speaking to Hindus in their own terms and Muslims in their own terms. Rather than functioning as a religiously ambiguous advocate for a kind of humanism or neospiritualism, he takes seriously[24] the paradigms of these faiths and argues for a personal and meaningful relationship with the Divine rather than a surface-level ritual-based religious practice.

The Corpus(es)

As David Lorenzen elucidates, there are three main early collections that contain Kabir's songs and verses: the Sikh Adi Granth, the Dadu Panthi Panca-vaṇi (the particular section is usually referred to as the Kabir-granthavali), and the Kabir Panthi Kabir-bijak. It is most likely that the earliest written verses were recorded circa 1570, contained in the anthologies of verses that Guru Arjan Sahib was collecting as part of the process of the canonization of the Guru Granth Sahib.[25] There is much overlap in these early collections, especially between the Adi Granth and the Panca-vaṇi.[26] After his death, some of Kabir's followers made him into an avatar and worshipped him in sects grouped under the umbrella term, Kabir Panthis (although there are branches within this larger sect who do not worship Kabir as an avatar). Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus continue to sing his works. Prime Minister Narendra Modi pays a yearly visit to Kabir's samadhi and mazar to incorporate the Bhagat into a national narrative of mutual respect, unity, and tolerance even as the Hindutva project razes Muslim neighborhoods to the ground[27] and

[24] By 'take seriously,' I mean that Kabir treats religious identities with seriousness, takes them in their own terms, and does not reject any category of religious identity as somehow illegitimate or wrong. He uses the vocabulary and paradigms of those he is speaking to in order to make a larger point about religiosity, spirituality, and the self in relationship with the One.
[25] Friedlander, Peter. "Kabīr and the Print Sphere: Negotiating Identity." Thesis Eleven, vol. 113, no. 1, 1 Dec. 2012, pp.46
[26] Lorenzen, David N. "Religious Identity in Gorakhnath and Kabir: Hindus, Muslims, Yogis, and Sants." *Yogi Heroes and Poets. Histories and Legends of the Naths*, 2011, pp.23.
[27] See https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/india-muslims-undeclared-war-neighbourhoods

refuses to prosecute lynchings of Muslims that occur regularly in public,[28] even as interfaith marriage between Hindus and Muslims is policed as 'love-jihad,'[29] even as Sikhs who demand dignity and basic human rights are written off as terrorists and separatists,[30] even as right-wing Hindu politicians and religious leaders call[31] for genocide[32] in the name of a *Hindurashtra*.[33] Kabir's persona and poetry have lived and continue to live many lives at once, with many communities at once, each of whom have unique relationships with Kabir the poet and his corpus.

In her book, *Bodies of Song*, Linda Hess argues that the oral continually transforms the written, and the written equally transforms the oral,[34] thus Kabir's poetic corpus cannot be limited to the written text or even to whatever is meant by the amorphous "oral tradition." Understanding Kabir and his corpus requires an engagement with the "networks of performers, traders, and soldiers that must have been active in spreading his word so rapidly throughout upper India."[35] In other words, Hess argues that the corpus cannot be reduced to just written text, but instead that the corpus as it was and continues to be performed, transmitted, and heard, must also be taken into consideration. She views the texts as "both bounded and unbounded, somewhat stable and unnervingly out of control, created and recreated by individuals, groups, locations, and conditions," created, maintained, and recreated by the continuous singing, writing, sharing, and performing through various religious, textual, musical, social, political, and

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[28] See https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-58406194
[29] See https://www.npr.org/2021/10/10/1041105988/india-muslim-hindu-interfaith-wedding-conversion
[30] See https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2021/feb/05/farmers-protest-calling-us-terrorists-is-governments-propaganda-todestroy-our-movement-2259818.html
[31] See https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/14/asia/india-hindu-extremist-groups-intl-hnk-dst/index.html
[32] See https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/24/india-hindu-event-calling-for-genocide-of-muslims-sparks-outrage
[33] Hindu polity.
[34] Hess, Linda. *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India*. Oxford University Press, 2015, pp.6.
[35] Hawley, John Stratton. *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*. Harvard University Press, 2015, pp.318.

economic contexts through time.[36] This helps to address the common question of the authenticity of the poems, as we deal with diverse and widespread manuscripts of his utterances.

In *The Weaver's Songs*, Vinay Dharwadker reviews the histories of the written texts and the simultaneous tradition of oral transmission and concludes that the Kabir tradition comprises a "community of authors."[37] He argues that it is thus unnecessary to try to pull out the "authentic" voice of the *individual* Kabir who lived in the fifteenth century. Jack Hawley similarly argues that engaging with the life of the corpus requires us to understand Kabir as being "intrinsically a part of the shared *satsang* context that perpetuated and doubtless expanded him in memory."[38]

Thus, although the more ethnographic approach Hess pursues is beyond the scope of my project,[39] the Kabir I will be engaging with is the Kabir who comes to us in the present day through a long history of movement through different communities, manuscripts, traditions, texts, and performances — a construction of those who listened to his words, sang his words, recited his words, and added to his words, with the understanding that there are different 'Kabirs' existing altogether, all at once, in many places. Although my focus is on largely agreed upon canons, pulling from the three manuscripts mentioned (Adi Granth, Kabir Bijak, and Kabir Granthavali), I come to this project with the understanding that the poet, the poetry, and the persona are constantly being curated and shaped by those who engage with this constellation that

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[36] Hess, pp.74.
[37] Dharwadker, pp.60.
[38] Hess, pp.74.
[39] Hess takes a multidimensional approach — studying manuscripts, intertextualities between written and oral sources, present performance of the compositions in question, and tracing the metamorphoses of Kabir through historical documents and ethnographic inquiries, all with no final goal of finding the true 'Kabir' (113). Peter Strnad also touches on this in Searching for the source or mapping the stream - some text-critical issues in the study of medieval bhakti": It may be futile to search for the 'authentic' or original version of a particular poem that has come down to us embedded in the broad current of a living tradition borne for centuries by predominantly oral and performative presentations that involve a significant degree of improvisation. Rather than looking for 'Ur-texts', philological and comparativist methods might be used to map the dynamic flows—the cross-currents and undercurrents—that constitute, in the long term, a particular tradition. See Strnad, Jaroslav, 'Searching for the Source or Mapping the Stream? Some Text-Critical Issues in the Study of Medieval Bhakti', in Tyler Williams, Anshu Malhotra, and John Stratton Hawley (eds), *Text and Tradition in Early Modern North India* (Delhi, 2018; online edn, Oxford Academic, 24 Jan. 2019).

makes up the various 'Kabirs' we have come to know today. Even this project is, in its own way, a project that necessitates a kind of curation.

The Curation and Appropriation of Kabir

Every year on Bhagat Kabir's birth anniversary, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the right-wing Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party visits his samadhi and his mazar. The national narrative surrounding Kabir is a simplification of his poetic corpus into inspiration for feel-good superficial ideas of 'oneness' rather than radical subversions of hegemony, challenges to religious elite, and an urgent call for all people to transcend the fear-based divisions those in power benefit from and profit off of. In 2018, Modi tweeted, "paying tribute to Sant Kabir Das Ji on his birth anniversary. The path shown by him will continue to inspire every generation to move forward with brotherhood and goodwill."[40] Modi and the larger Hindu Right's sanitization and appropriation of Kabir seems to be in part a strategy for gaining electoral support from Dalits and other so-called "low-caste" Indians, incorporating such a beloved figure (particularly for Dalit communities) into the larger Hindu Nationalist narrative.

This Kabir does not challenge normativity and speaking up against tyranny and fear. That Kabir would likely be deemed anti-national today. This curated Kabir is simply interested in a sort of sanitized and defanged unity and harmony that no longer challenges hegemony. Tying *this* Kabir into the Hindutva narrative in turn incorporates those oppressed-caste Indians who have connected to the more overtly political[41] Kabir, encouraged to transgress boundaries of religion, caste, and class, and to be critical of bigotry and othering. This Hindutva-curated Kabir

[40] Raslan, Karim. "Sant Kabir and Spiritual Rationalism in Narendra Modi's India." *South China Morning Post*, 21 May 2019, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3011113/sant-kabir-and-spiritual-rationalism-narendra-modis-india.

[41] When I use the word political, I distinguish it from the word politicized. The Hindutva project is also political, but it appropriates the political Kabir in a way that neutralizes his anti-hegemonical politics. It is this act of neutralizing the poet's politics that I see as a *politicization* of his work and his persona.

has nothing to say about the Prime Minister's part in the 2002 Gujarat massacre of Muslims, or the 2020 riots through Muslim neighborhoods in Delhi that resulted in 53 deaths, or the constant statements by public religious and political leaders advocating for the total extermination of Muslims in India. For those who know Kabir as the fearless, blunt, and irreverent poet who spoke truth to power and shook his listeners by their metaphorical shoulders, there is "no greater irony than watching [people like] Uttar Pradesh's Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, known for his inflammatory and polarizing speeches, spearhead events to mark the mystic saint's 500th death anniversary at Maghar."[42] However, the curation and appropriation of Kabir has taken many forms since long before the Bharatiya Janata Party even existed.

The Kabir Panths

The Kabir Panths are religious movements that trace their origins back to Kabir, though it is not entirely clear what form exactly the early Kabir Panth took. It is likely that the majority of the early followers from the 16th and 17th centuries were from so-called 'low-caste' or 'untouchable' communities. Oppressed social groups in various parts of India were likely attracted to Kabir's teachings due to his challenge against the caste-hierarchy and hegemony that pervaded South Asian society. The early Panth included both Hindus and Muslims. There are several branches of the larger Kabir Panth that all claim connection to Kabir — the two most influential being the Kabir Chaura and the Dharamdasi tradition. Each Kabir Panth has its own independent history, separate lineage of Guruship, and literature.[43] Despite Kabir's vocal

[42] Nair, Malini. "Modi and Adityanath Probably Wouldn't Admire Kabir If They Cared to Read His Words Closely." *Scroll.in*, 30 July 2018, https://scroll.in/magazine/887739/modi-and-adityanath-admire-kabir-because-of-his-popularity-not-because-of-his-philosophy.

[43] Hess, pp.319. David Lorenzen has studied the history and practices of the Kabir Panth more extensively than any other scholar. Colonial scholars such as Wilson, Keay, and Westcott have also written on the subject.

opposition towards ritual, casteism, cleansing, and saguna worship, the Kabir Panths swiftly moved to institutionalize elements of these practices within their communities. As Linda Hess, Uma Thukral, and David Lorenzen all note in their works, the formation of the Kabir Panths led to some branches cultivating a hagiographical tradition that transformed Kabir into a saint. Stories of his miraculous birth were spread, he was made into an Avatar, and he was said to have descended onto a lotus in a ball of light.[44] Lorenzen writes, "principal legends are those which claim that he (1) descended from heaven onto a lotus leaf in the Lahartara pond as an avatar of Vishnu (or alternately was the son of a virgin Brahmin widow); (2) became, by a trick, the disciple of the Brahman Ramananda; (3) was persecuted by Sikandar Lodi, the Muslim Sultan (d.1517) and disputed with a Muslim divine named Shaikh Taqi."[45] This mythologizing of Kabir's life largely functioned as a way to Hinduize Kabir — to make Kabir more Hindu and less Muslim: "Soon there was a story to show that Kabir was not really the son of Muslims, but had been adopted. His true mother? A Brahmin widow, of course! Why not a Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, or "untouchable"? For the same reason that he could not be a Muslim. A great, holy, enlightened being, according to certain hegemonic views, should be a Brahmin."[46] This Hinduizing process gained momentum, as the current Kabir Panth employs "generally Hindu and particularly Vaishnav models and terminology," incorporating symbols, rituals, and structures of authority which Hess lists as "terminology: gurus and mahants, Arti[47]…tulsi beads, occasional

[44] "Avatar Doctrine in the Kabir Panth," Uma Thukral, Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action. India: Manohar, 1996, pp.223.
[45] Lorenzen, David, "The Kabir-Panth and Social Protest." *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India.* India, Motilal Banarsidass, 1987, pp.288.
[46] Hess, pp.318.
[47] Almost all branches of the Panth regularly practice a ritual called *chauka Arti*. Arti is a general term for the most common ritual of Hindu worship, in which offerings are made to the Divine and some items are returned as blessed gifts to those performing the Arti. The ritual ends with the waving of oil lamps before a deity or before the Guru (in this case, the image of Kabir).

Sanskrit chants, and a likeness of Kabir in the place normally occupied by a Hindu divine image."[48]

In the last two centuries, the Kabir Panth slowly divided into the two broad paths of the Dharamdasi tradition and the Kabir Chaura. These branches coexisted as linked networks that were centered around particular local oral and manuscript traditions until around the 19th century, in which the arrival of print and the nascent Indian nationalist movement exacerbated differences and disagreements.[49] As Pieter Friedlander argues, although Kabir's verses circulated widely before the advent of mass printing in North India,[50] the arrival of Kabir in the print sphere brought about a radical transition from local traditions to "nascent national conceptions of Kabir within what Benedict Anderson referred to as imagined communities which developed along with nationalism."[51]

Kabir was constantly at odds with the world around him and its unjust and unequal systems, ready to offer pointed and incisive critiques of religious and political hegemony and the never-ending hypocrisy of religiosity. Although he constantly reminded his listeners that the Divine cannot be named, described, or bound into particular categories and understandings, although he emphasized again and again that Truth escapes our small understandings and habit of othering, and is often encountered "only as a challenge to what we expect…only in conditions of extreme loneliness and death, only in silence or surprise, and with effort and cost,"[52] *still* his verses were bound within the framework of national identity. This occurred as Kabir Panthis of oppressed

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[48] Ibid.
[49] Friedlander, pp.48.
[50] Kabir's verses circulated within both oral and manuscript traditions simultaneously, from the 16th to 18th centuries. However, in the oral tradition, his verses were more malleable and tended to shapeshift through transmission. Verse order changed, and verses were added, deleted, and edited. Manuscripts also differed in terms of order and markers of musical mode (*rag*). The Guru Granth Sahib was the only exception, as it remained almost entirely standardized after its initial compilation by Guru Arjan Sahib.
[51] Friedlander, pp.46.
[52] Hawley, John Stratton, and Mark Juergensmeyer. *Songs of the Saints of India*. Oxford University Press, 1988, pp.35.

castes, or so-called 'untouchables' who considered their identities to be separate from Hindu identity, wrestled with where to place themselves in the national narrative as it was being woven.

In Gujarat, a major center of Kabir Panthi activity, "questions about the role of Muslim and Hindu identities in politics also impacted many untouchables who sought to negotiate the ways in which they could liberate themselves from the oppression of Hindu society."[53] This momentum of developing nationalism and the responses to this movement were widespread. It was not a thing that was easy for one to opt out of. As Saba Mahmood argues, the function of the modern state is to engage in a reorganization of "substantive features of religious life," delineating what religion is or ought to be, "assigning its proper content, and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks, and quotidian practices."[54] The modern national project, the momentum of its creation, the forces that shape it, require a reorganizing or regeneration of spheres of social organization — public, private, political, and religious — and an establishment and hardening of their boundaries. This is a process communities cannot opt out of. Participation in this process is something which the emerging modern state requires of various communities. In short, if a community does not play the game, the game will be played for them. Panjabi Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in the late 19th century were also thinking about how to assert their group identities within nascent nationalist politics.[55] In Mumbai, too, another significant center of publishing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Nationalist political movements were developing, and issues related to concretely defining Hindu identity were "central to conceptualizations of campaigns for Indian independence."[56] Propagating Kabir's works was only one part of a larger movement to propagate Hindi literature in the larger process of constructing a national identity.[57] A key figure

[53] Friedlander, pp.49.
[54] Mahmood, Saba. Religious Difference In a Secular Age: A Minority Report. Princeton University Press, 2016, pp.3.
[55] Friedlander, pp.48.
[56] Ibid
[57] Ibid, pp.49.

in the history of the Kabir Panth, Yugalanand Bihari, cited the criticisms of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement, as a big influence in causing all religious traditions and communities to rethink their place within the fabric of the nation. The Arya Samaj was founded in Panjab in 1875 and was based around the belief in the infallible authority of the Vedas. It pushed the notion that untouchables and Muslims could be 'purified' through ritual and become part of caste Hindu Vedic practices.[58] To advocate their position, the Arya Samaj disseminated their own publications. The Kabir Panth assertion of its own separate identity through the broad dissemination of its own publications was a response to the polarization of both religious and political views in Panjab as a byproduct of this period of the nationalist struggle for Indian independence.[59]

Thus, the significance of the process of collecting, editing, and publishing Kabir's verses in constructing various identities that were all named 'Kabir' cannot be understated. The movement to define and more clearly emphasize boundaries of identity is not a phenomenon of only the last hundred years. The momentum of mass printing and publication as well as the simultaneous nationalist movement tended to curtail the "inherent possibilities for variation and localization in the transmission of the verses within the oral and manuscript spheres,"[60] and hardened definitions of what could constitute a Kabir work. Even in the earlier manuscript tradition, for example in the compilation of the Adi Granth, Guru Arjan Sahib chose particular verses that fit into the larger narrative of what would become the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Charter. In line with the emerging Sikh ethos, Kabir's poems that employed harsher or more crude language were omitted. It is not that these curations are inherently weaponizing or malicious, but that the reality of curating a particular corpus requires the omission of certain

[58] Caste Hindu refers to those whose caste is one of the four listed in the Rig Veda as parts of the body of the primal man: Brahmins (head), Kshatriyas (hands), Vaishyas (thighs) and Shudras (feet). Untouchables are considered to be so polluted that they are outside of this system.
[59] Friedlander, pp.50.
[60] Ibid, p.52.

parts of a larger body of work to fit with the principles and themes of the compilation. Some might argue that if "curating" has been happening all along, and there is not really such a thing available to us as the "authentic" or "original" Kabir, one cannot delegitimize a "Hindutva Kabir." I would argue that the key difference in curation as a method of incorporation into a particular tradition is different in principle and motivation. If the curation project is one that directly contradicts the core principles and themes of Kabir's works, it is not a legitimate project. If it is used to demonize and create otherness, even under the flowery guise of unity of the Nation, it is not a legitimate project. If it strips the anti-hegemonical political stance of Kabir from his works in favor of using him as an advocate for the Hindutva project and the Hindu nation, it is not a legitimate project.

Themes in Kabir's Poetry

Kabir is often described as a *nirguna Bhakti* poet, pointing to a school of Bhakti thought that engages in devotion with a quality-less (nir-guna, without qualities)[61] or formless Divine, as the Divine is believed to be a Reality that cannot be articulated, conceptualized, or seen — but this does not mean the Divine is beyond reach. In fact, it is that the One is nearer to us than any of our attempts at language allow us to describe, and closer to the essence or Reality of life than the limits of our own infinitesimally small and flawed existences allow us to fathom. Bhakti is faith through individual devotion and deep adoration of the Divine in a relationship that is cultivated between lover and Beloved, seeker and One who is sought after. Primacy is given to the internal experience of existing in relationship with the Divine, of that personal relationship and devotion toward the One. This takes primacy over any other source of religious or

[61] In *saguna* bhakti, on the other hand, the Divine is manifested in an anthropomorphic form as an avatar. In this visible form, the Divine becomes an object of devotion for the saguna bhakt.

metaphysical knowledge, which the nirguna bhakt understands to be unnecessary for salvation. Instead, the nirguna bhakt offers themselves in humility and loving submission to the Beloved, engaging in the recitation and remembrance of *Nam*, invoking the names and virtues of the Divine, praising the Divine in devotion, and expecting a salvation not through ritual purification or pilgrimages and cleansings, but through the grace of the One alone. As Charlotte Vaudeville writes, "Bhakti in its purest and highest form is *parapati*[62] (abandon) — total self-surrender to the Beloved,"[63] so that remembrance lives in every breath, so that in every breath is praise of the Beloved.

Kabir's poetry subverts and criticizes religious identities and institutions, the hypocrisy of religious elites, and the judgment of the pious. He invites the listener to reflect on whether their practice has become a thoughtless and mechanical display. His work lives both within and outside of religious categories, and his verses are popularly known all over the subcontinent by people of all classes, castes, ages, and religions. In some compositions, Kabir, always blunt in his delivery, urges readers to awaken from delusion, to challenge the status quo, to break out of their hypocrisy, and to fight religious and political authority. In other compositions, he urges the reader to look further inward, exploring the nature of the mind and the body, encouraging a cultivation of higher consciousness, and an understanding of the vastness of existence and the transience of it, too. I will argue that Kabir was not interested in community formation around a particular religious identity. This is evidenced in how he identifies religiously in his poems, the ways in which he inhabits various identities and senses of self, and in his personal relationships

[62] The correct spelling is prapatti, though it appears as parapati in Vaudeville's work.
[63] Vaudeville, Charlotte, and Harry B. Partin. "Kabīr and Interior Religion." *History of Religions*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1 Dec. 1964, pp. 195.

with these religious categories that point the reader toward a kind of religious ambiguity in favor of emphasis on larger principles and connection with the Divine.

There are multiple themes even within Kabir's poetry regarding religious identity and religiosity. There are some who claim that Kabir's tone is one of condemnation, that he asks his listeners to do away with religious identity altogether in favor of a kind of religious practice amounts only to internal reflection and religiosity. I will argue instead that Kabir takes all spiritual and religious practice seriously, rather than functioning as a religiously ambiguous advocate for a kind of syncretism or humanism or neospiritualism. It is not that he is doling out blanket condemnations of Hindus and Muslims, but instead that he asks his listeners to pursue a different kind of religious practice — one that centers remembrance and identification with the formless One. As David Lorenzen writes, "Kabir rejected both Islam and Hinduism as *commonly practiced*, and sought to construct a religious identity that allowed [him] to straddle both religious identities—to somehow be both Hindu and Muslim and neither, all at the same time…[In order to do this, he] had to recognize the identity categories of Muslim and Hindu, in a clearly religious sense, and also had to attempt to supersede these categories."[64] Kabir's verses demonstrate a complex negotiation of religious identity. He encourages personal reflection and recentering for *all* religious seekers regardless of practice or ideology, toward an understanding of the vastness of the Divine and the importance of a personal relationship with Divinity. He uses the paradigms of Hindus and Muslims to push them to think more vastly about the Divine, more vastly about their relationship to the Divine, and more vastly about their conceptions of their true selves. What use is ritual if it does not result in remembrance? What use is pilgrimage if it does

[64] Lorenzen, David N. "Religious Identity in Gorakhnath and Kabir: Hindus, Muslims, Yogis, and Sants." *Yogi Heroes and Poets. Histories and Legends of the Naths*, 2011, pp. 20. Italicization is my own.

not cleanse one from within? What use is any fear-based paradigm of religiosity if even those enforcing and encouraging it are hypocrites?

> Make your mind Mecca and your body the Ka'ba.
> This [soul/self], the speaker, is the greatest Pir.
>
> O Mullah, utter the call to prayer.
> There is one mosque with ten doors. Pause.
>
> [In the name of Allah], sacrifice your ignorance, illusion, and inner-filth.
> Devour the five vices[65] and become patient.
>
> The Hindu and the Turk's Master is one.
> What can the Mullah do? What can the Sheikh do? OR Why become a Mullah, Why become a Sheikh?
>
> Kabir says: I have gone mad.
> Slaughtering, slaughtering my mind, I am absorbed in *sahaj*.[66]

Kabir uses the vocabulary and paradigms of Islam to offer a new perspective on the interiorization of exteriorized rituals and institutions. There is no explicit ask on the part of the listener to do away with these rituals and institutions altogether, but instead an implicit argument that without the *internal* work described, all *exterior* religiosities are worthless. Importantly, the Muslim being addressed here is the Mullah — the one with religious power and authority, one who is learned in theology and law, who teaches and imparts wisdom. The Mullah is urged to do the internal work of making his mind Mecca, his body the Ka'ba, his body the mosque with ten doors. The *rahau* line, or the line where the listener is asked to pause and reflect, instructs the Mullah to utter the call to prayer and, in some way, *answer* that call to prayer by understanding that the body itself is the mosque with ten doors, and that it is within the body itself that one can engage in prayer. The ten doors referred to here are the ten openings of the body as described in

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[65] Vinay Dharwadker translates 'panchai' as the five senses. Mahan Kosh, Shackle, and Sahib Singh all define panchai as the five vices. Based on this and the context of the poem, I have amended this line.

[66] Dharwadker, pp. 121. Dharwadker translates mus musi as "quietly, quietly, like a thief, my mind has slipped into the simple state." Given the earlier context of sacrificing and devouring and the couplet's statement about going mad, this translation did not resonate. I amended this translation based on the definitions provided by Shackle and Mahan Kosh.

the Bhagavad Gita the Katha Upanishad. Nine of these openings are physical, and the tenth door is above the head — the door to Divinity, and the place through which the smaller self (atman) can experience union with the larger Self, the Ultimate Reality, the Essence, the Divine (Brahman).

Kabir lists what it means to engage in this kind of inner prayer: the sacrifice of animals is replaced with self-sacrifice — with the killing of the five vices (lust, anger, greed, attachment, ego) that lie within the body, and the consumption of that sacrifice is to devour the five vices within. The Mullah is asked to rethink the exteriorized rituals and institutions of Islam, in favor of an interiorized individual relationship with one's inner self, the greatest *Pir*, or spiritual teacher. The pursuit of this relationship in turn is the pursuit of a relationship with the larger Self that dwells within all beings. This larger Self, the Divine, is the *Sahib,* the Master or Sovereign over both Hindus and Muslims. Thus, ultimately these categories of religious identity do not mean anything.

To read this as a lack of acknowledgment of existing religious categories or as an urging toward dissolving religious categories altogether is to simplify Kabir's message. Instead, there is explicit acknowledgment of these categories *and* a larger message that ultimately, they ought to be transcended spiritually — that if one understood that the Self, the Divine, is the same for all people regardless of religious identity, one would make more of an effort toward their internal relationship with the Divine. This message itself is what causes Kabir to call himself *divana* — mad or intoxicated, entering a state of *sahaj.* He states that he slaughters and slaughters his mind, because the mind is what gets in the way of this understanding. This seems to be a reference or an internalization of the ritual of both Hindu and Muslim animal sacrifice. The mind in its stubbornness is what keeps us in our illusions of duality and binaries, in our fear of the other,

devoured by our vices. It takes a slaughtering of the mind and an experience of this Truth to enter a state of sahaj. Many scholars translate sahaj as a simple state. I would like to dwell on this term a little more carefully.

Christopher Shackle defines sahaj as "natural state; inborn nature, naturalness, ease, effortlessness, spontaneity, freedom, [and] the practice of a mysticism which does not rely on unnatural efforts." Professor Puran Singh describes sahaj as effortless effort, eternal peace, spontaneous joy and enlightenment, and deep repose.[67] Sahaj is not just a simple state that one enters without effort. Importantly, this effort is not external. It is not effort made through ritual, or service, or pilgrimage, or even the mechanical motions of prayer and meditation. It is a state that one enters through the deep effort of the very same internal work Kabir lays out in the aforementioned composition. It is through this great effort that the seeker experiences a spontaneous feeling of sahaj — this is where it becomes *effortless* effort. The seeker enters a new state of understanding and becomes like a lotus, sitting steadily on the waters of life, unaffected by the scum on the surface. This is what some scholars have described as a state of equipoise and enlightenment. It is our natural state, if only we would make the effort to return to it. Kabir has entered this state through understanding the unity in all things, and the existence of the One Divine, present within all. This is a thing one can logically understand, but the *experience* of that knowledge through great effort is what slips one into 'the simple state.' This is particularly important because there might be a misconception that Kabir's works are not asking us to make any effort at all — that what is being communicated is a kind of dead statement of oneness or unity. Instead, Kabir's guidance requires great effort to follow — a legitimate and serious effort

[67] Singh, Puran. Spirit of the Sikh: Meditations on Religion and the Spiritual Experience. India, Punjabi University, 1978, pp.136.

in one's own spiritual life and a dedication to that effort in pursuit of not just the logical knowledge of oneness, but the *experience* of it.

This same use of already existing paradigms to communicate a message to Hindus and Muslims can be found in the *Kabīr-granthāvalī* version of Ang 856 of the *Ādi Granth,* translated by David Lorenzen:

> You stay fixed on yogic postures and breath-[control]. But, madman, it is mental impurity you should renounce. What's the use of going about with horns and earrings? What the use of smearing all your body with ashes?
> He whose creed (īmām na) is fit and proper,
> He is a Hindu, he is a Muslim.
> He who preaches knowledge of Brahman,
> He is a Brahmin.
> He who knows Rahim,
> He is a kazi.
> Kabir says: Don't do anything else. Just repeat the Name Ram,
> and you'll get what you want.

Kabir uses the outward appearance of the Yogis and the disciplines to which they adhere to argue that true religion comes from within, from an effort made towards changing one's inner state, from an effort toward inner spirituality. It is clear from his language that he *does* recognize basic differences between Hindus and Muslims, and uses their own paradigms to urge them to transcend their categories, their rituals, and their religiosities. There is an implication that in some way, all paths are true and good if this inner work is pursued. As Lorenzen argues, "Kabir is neither an opponent of Hinduism, Islam, and hatha yoga nor an 'apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity.'…He opposes these three religious traditions *as practiced,* but does not advocate conversion from one tradition to another."[68] The underlying message, then, is that if one rejects the hypocrisy and exclusionary politics of these traditions and rejects ritualism in favor for a personal relationship with the Divine, one can experience the kind of connection with Divinity

[68] Lorenzen (2011), pp. 35.

and spiritual enlightenment and liberation one seeks.[69] In the following composition from the Guru Granth Sahib (Ang 1349), versions of which exist in the Kabir-vani (Pada 69) and the Goindval Pothis (Pada 30), Kabir uses religious categories to point to their absurdity in the context of the ultimate unity of all existence:

> O Allah-Rama, I live by Your Nam.
> Show me Your mercy, O Master. Pause-Reflect.
>
> If Allah resides inside a mosque, then to whom does the rest of the world belong?
> The Hindu claims Nam dwells in the idol. I do not see the truth in either [of these beliefs].
>
> [They say] the southern country is Hari's abode, Allah's seat is in the West.
> Search your heart, your heart of hearts [and you will find] that is the abode, that is the seat.
>
> The Brahmin fasts once a fortnight, the Qazi fasts for Ramadan.
> Each devotes eleven months to himself, then looks for rewards in a month of fasts.
>
> Why go off to Orissa for ritual cleansing? Why bow your head in a mosque?
> If there is deception in the heart, what use is performing prayer? What use is going on hajj to the Ka'aba?
>
> All these men and women are nothing but Your forms.
> I am a child of Rama-and-Allah, all the gurus and pirs are mine.
>
> Kabir says, listen, O men and women: seek the sanctuary of the One.
> Recite the Nam, O mortals. Only then will you swim across [the world-ocean].[70]

Here, Kabir brings Allah and Rama together as one single name of the singular Divine and addresses that unified Divinity. Here, many might object to my non-literal reading of Kabir's use of Hindu and Muslim terms. A common misconception is that the use of particular terms associated either with Hinduism or Islam within the poetry of Kabir is evidence of religious affiliation. To put it another way, some might suggest that presence of Hindu terms is evidence that Kabir was a Hindu. Others might suggest that presence of Muslim terms is evidence that

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[69] Lorenzen makes the following important point: Whether such a soteriological strategy has in fact any chance of success, depends on how intrinsic the social and political ideologies of religious traditions are to their existence. Can the Hindu religion exist without ascribed social hierarchy? Can Islam exist without an exclusionary social identity? Can either exist without ritual display? Can either exist without the hypocrisy intrinsic to any ideology, religious or secular, that attempts to legitimize social, political, and economic institutions?

[70] Dharwadker, *Weaver's Songs*, pp. 129.

Kabir was a Muslim. However, I argue that on the contrary, his use of specific religious terms from Hindu and Muslim contexts functions as a way of stepping into a particular identity to make an argument about religious communities or practices, or as a way of stepping into a particular identity because he sees value in that framing. In other words, these terms are invoked either to point to a fluidity in religious experience and a kind of transcendence of religious categorization, or to take categories of identity seriously and speak to particular religious communities and particular religious experiences, for example, to call out the hypocrisy of Muslim Fakirs and Qazis, or Hindu Pandits (Brahmins, religious priests and lawmakers with great influence).

Ram, rather than being a reference to an incarnation of Vishnu, can be defined as the beautiful or all-pervading One. Hari, rather than being a reference to an incarnation of Vishnu, can be defined as the all-pervading One or the One who removes suffering. The use of these divine names in the context of Kabir's larger statement on the multiplicity of forms of the one unified and singular Divine is reason to interpret this poem not as an exaltation of particular 'Hindu' or 'Muslim' gods, but as an exaltation of the attributes of an ultimately infinite-qualitied Divine, or even a Divine who *transcends* all qualities.[71] What does it mean to live in the Nam of the Divine? Nam can be interpreted as name or identification with the One, a thing that happens through praise and remembrance of the One's many attributes. To live in this identification and remembrance is to live in relationship with and connection to the Divine. Kabir also goes after

[71] Kabir also clarifies his invocations of various divine names that are more popularly understood to be references to particular avatars in his poem the ten avatars, translated by Dharwadker (pp. 157). David Lorenzen also writes, "Ram, for Kabir, often appears to be synonymous with mystical experience itself. Ram is the experience of Ram. Ram becomes the unman (the higher mind); the hearing of the anahad-nad (the unstruck sound), the sahajavastha, (the spontaneous state), or simply surati (great bliss)…For Kabir, the experience of Ram is there for the taking, without the need to first do more than reject hypocrisy and deceit." (Lorenzen, pp. 43). Ram then refers to the *experience* of the Divine itself — feeling the all-pervasive presence of the One, knowing the One to be present.

rituals and institutions and religiosities, questions Hindu and Muslim beliefs, and points to contradictions within these two traditions, highlighting the pretension and hypocrisy embedded in adherence to these practices without cultivation of the principles they are meant to be founded upon. Without this inner work, external actions become meaningless displays and performances of piety allocated to particular times and particular spaces.

What would it mean to truly live in Nam — in recitation, praise, remembrance, and identification with the One regardless of time and place? The Divine does not live only in temples or mosques or specific idols or specific months. The Divine is all-pervading, permeating all places and all times, and all of creation is simply a manifestation of the many forms of the formless One. Kabir identifies as the child of Rama and Allah, the Hindu and Muslim names for the Divine, and claims all Gurus (Hindu) and Pirs (Muslim) as his teachers *because* he understands that all of creation ultimately originates from the one Creator — *because* he understands that the One is in all beings, in all places, in all times. This is made all the more urgent when placed in conversation with another common theme in Kabir's verses: the reminder that all beings will die.[72] For Kabir, death, or the reminder of our limited time, seems to be a thing that has the potential to take us out of the problematic characterizations of self and other that they might perpetuate in our day to day. If we are all going to die, why are we busy stuck in our rigid categories of religion and performing piety externally without cultivating remembrance within? If our time is limited, why are we unable to see the absurdity of our own bigotry? When we are not in remembrance, we become stuck in the illusion of these binaries. It is only through

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[72] *There are yogis, celibates, ascetics, and renouncers who make many pilgrimages. The Jains with shaved heads, the silent ones, the ones with matted hair, they will all die in the end. So serve, live as commanded by Ram. What can the Messenger of Death do to one whose tongue savors the Nam of Ram? Pause-Reflect. Those who know the Shastras and Vedas, astrology, and the grammar of many languages, those who know tantra and mantras and medicines, they too will die in the end. Those who enjoy kingdoms and canopied thrones, who have beautiful women, betel, camphor, and fragrant sandalwood — they too will die in the end. I have searched the Vedas, Puranas, and Smritis. None of these can save anyone. Kabir says: so meditate on Ram, eliminate births and deaths, comings and goings. (Guru Granth Sahib Ang 476)*

seeking the shelter of the Divine within the self itself, within the home-heart, that one can swim across this world-ocean, or make their life fruitful here and now.

> The Vedas and the [Abrahamic] books are aspersion O siblings; they do not rid the heart of worry.
> Take one breath fixed on the Creator, [you will find] the ever-present Presence.1.
> Humble servant, search within your heart each day, not ambling in confusion.
> This world is a magic-show; there is no handholder.1. Pause-Reflect.
> Reading and chanting falsehood, people become happy, swelling with untold pride and ignorance.
> The Eternal Creator is that which lies within creation, not the idol of the dark-skinned [Krishna].2.
> Within the skies lies the melody of the sea for you to spiritually bathe in.
> With each thought constantly inward, seeing all of existence.3.
> Allah is the purest of the pure; doubt it only if there is another.
> O Kabir, Grace flows from the Compassionate; only the Creator knows [what the Creator] does.4.1.[73]

Kabir, an unwavering critic of those religious figures who wield textual authority, begins by labeling the Vedas and the texts of Abrahamic faiths as aspersions or attacks on one's integrity. These texts will not rid the heart of worry, and so Kabir urges his listeners, Hindus and Muslims, to turn away from these scriptures and sit in a fixed state — to take a breath and practice remembrance of the one Creator. It is in this state that one can find or experience the ever-present presence of the Divine. So many of the popular religious and spiritual paradigms of Kabir's time are implicated here. These paradigms require so much effort and discipline, repetition of mantras, pilgrimage visits, completing particular rituals at particular times in particular places, asceticism, silence, renunciation, particular garbs, particular jewelry, particular physical movements. There is something deeply exhausting about going through these external motions of religiosity, and the exhaustion only increases when even after going through the motions, one is still being unable to feel the ever-present Presence. Engaging in these practices might make one happy for a moment, but Kabir says that these accomplishments of 'leveling up' spiritually only

[73] Guru Granth Sahib Ang 727, translation retrieved from the Sikh Research Institute: https://sikhri.org/articles/o-siblings

fill people with pride. None of this makes us wiser or more enlightened. One does not need to go looking for the Divine.[74] The Divine is not in idols of particular avatars. The Divine is not accessed through hypocritical intermediaries. The Divine is permeating all places, living within all of creation but not bound by it. One only needs to sit and make an effort toward remembrance and awareness, turning inward. If one begins to experience that presence, it is at once a result of great effort and at once a result of great ease. This is the experience of sahaj that Kabir often refers to. The attitude of the devoted one is one of humility — of giving oneself over to the Beloved in submission and love, knowing that the experience of the Beloved happens through the Grace of the Beloved. Kabir encourages a transgression of religious boundaries and categories for state *beyond* the physical world — a state found through a different engagement with and experience of the Divine. All people, regardless of religious identity, can experience eternal connection to the One within their own hearts, unfolding the vastness within to know the infinite qualities of the Creator.

Kabir Unfolds the Self Within

Kabir reminds his listeners again and again that truth can be found by anyone if they make the effort to search for the Divine within their own heart-homes, within their own bodies, within their own selves. What happens when Kabir does this kind of internal work that he encourages of his listeners? He speaks to his Beloved with great intimacy and candidness, expressing the ways in which this separation has caused him to suffer. For Kabir, separation itself

[74] Don't go to the gardens outside, don't go:
your body itself contains a bower in bloom.
There you can sit on a thousand-petalled lotus,
and gaze upon the ultimate infinite form.
(Dharwadker pp.197, Kabir Vani, Pada 4)

is an illusion — it is not that the presence of the Divine is not yet within, it is that he has not yet been able to feel it.

> How can I get
> to see You now?
> Why should my heart be pacified
> if You don't let me have a vision of You?
>
> Am I a bad servant?
> Or are You
> merely oblivious of me?
> Between the two of us, Lord,
> whose fault is it?
>
> You're said to be
> master and king
> of all three worlds —
> You're the one who fulfills
> all the heart's desires.
>
> Kabir says,
> Hari, reveal Yourself.
> Either tell me
> to come to You
> Or bring Yourself to me.[75]

The process of living in remembrance and relationship with the Beloved is one that is logically simple but emotionally and experientially difficult. This is in part why the definition of sahaj as a simple state is, in my view, incomplete. Even the devoted one who preaches devotion as the key to liberation and connection experiences the frustration of that connection not yet being felt, and the challenge of maintaining that closeness at every moment. Is it that the devoted one did something wrong? Did the servant not serve in remembrance? Did he fall into the same hypocrisies and motions of external practice that he speaks out against? Kabir ends his reflection by asking for Grace from the Beloved, as Grace is the only thing that can cause the experience of

[75] Dharwadker, pp. 140.

union. In a separate composition, Kabir writes from the perspective of the Beloved, inhabiting that identity to in some way respond to the wail of the separated seeker.

> Why look for Me anywhere else, my friend,
> when I'm here, in your possession?
>
> Not in temples, not in mosques—
> not in the Ka'aba, not on Kailash.
>
> Not in rites, not in rituals—
> not in yoga or renunciation.
>
> Look for Me and you'll find Me quickly—
> all it takes is a moment's search.
>
> Kabir says, Listen, O virtuous beings[76]—
> He's the very Breath of our breaths.[77]

Kabir inhabits the Beloved's identity to address himself before switching back to his own voice as a seeker at the end, addressing those other seekers who struggle to feel the presence of the Beloved. There is a theme of suffering in the relationship between lover and Beloved that is evident in these two compositions. There is a mystery in this play, at once full of effort and effortless, at once simple and complicated. Charlotte Vaudeville calls this suffering a "privileged path to the divine" in Kabir's framing. It is as if the suffering of separation itself is evidence that we "have access to the truth of life."[78] Kabir is seeking *jivanmukta,* the experience of liberation that happens while one is still alive. This is the liberation of the seeker who conquers the five vices within, rids themselves of ego, and kills the mind and its stubborn belief in illusions. *This* liberation happens through devotion even when in pain, even when suffering. This death of the self is "the condition for a true 'life' in God.[79] Kabir is not advocating for a kind of philosophical intellectualization of experience. He speaks of the visceral experience of separation from the

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[76] Dharwadker translates 'sadho' as brothers. I chose to retain the etymology of the word a bit more with 'virtuous beings': Old Panjabi - sādhū/sādhu; Prakrit - sādhū/sāhu; Sanskrit - sādhu (साधु - best, supreme, complete).
[77] Dharwadker, pp. 195.
[78] Vaudeville, pp. 199.
[79] Ibid, pp. 200.

Beloved, of the self from the Self, and the pain it inflicts. He speaks to the Reality that he has discovered in the deepest parts of his soul — the Reality he has glimpsed in his devotion. Guided by his own intimate inner experiences, he understands the Divine as both immanent and transcendent, with no attempt to make sense of that apparent paradox. For him, the core truth is that the all-pervasive One dwells within the body, always with us. The body, as it is, is the key to salvation, because the body, as it is, is the dwelling place of the One. A devoted one need only search within their own heart to find that Beloved. This happens through the Grace of the Beloved.

Unity and Neither-ness

Kabir's constant emphasis on the unity of the Divine is reflected in how he conceives of his own self. He emphasizes a Divine beyond categorization and thus mirrors that in his own self-perceptions:

> An illusion of this sort
> is a great misunderstanding.
> What's the difference between
> Veda and Qur'an, holiness and hell.
> male and female?
>
> You've turned this body —
> this pot of clay —
> into a means to an end.
> You've falsely confused
> echo with sound,
> effect with cause,
> progeny with seed.
> When the pot disintegrates —
> when the body dies—
> what's it called?
> You moron!
> You've lost sight
> of the true search, the true end.
>
> We're all one skin, one bone,
> one shit, one piss,
> one blood, one intestine.

All of Creation's composed
from a single point of origin—
then who's a brahmin, who's a shudra?

Brahma is impulse, energy—
Shankara is darkness, inertia—
Hari is truth and light.
Kabir says,
Remain submerged
in the Rama without such qualities—
no one's a Hindu,
no one's a Turk.[80]

Kabir goes after Hindu orthodoxy and generally breaks down various binaries we take as truths. These binaries are part of the great illusion, or the great misunderstanding. There is no difference between Veda and Qur'an, holiness and hell, male and female. This is not to say that there is no difference in the material realities of these categories, but it *is* to say that those realities are themselves an illusion — that the true Reality is one in which there are no dichotomies or separations. These differences between apparent opposites are actually differences of our own making, as all things come from one common Origin. We have confused the infinite manifestations of this Origin for the origin itself. We have divided ourselves up, named our gods, and drawn a line in the sand. But Kabir again reminds us of our own temporariness — when this body dies, then what? We have become so caught up in these illusions of difference that we have lost sight of the true work: union with the Origin. There cannot be any real or essential difference between a privileged-caste Brahmin and an oppressed-caste Shudra. We have created hierarchies of purity and pollution in our own illusions of difference. There cannot be an essential difference between the three main gods of Hinduism, Brahma, Shiva (Shankara), and Vishnu (Hari) — the Creator, Destroyer, and Preserver. We have separated out these roles or attributes to small gods when they are all part of the movement of creation by the One Creator. Kabir does not mean that

[80] Dharwadker, pp. 172.

there is *literally* no Hindu[81] or Muslim,[82] but rather that there is no essential difference between them. There is no essential difference between the gods, there is no essential difference between the people. Thus, Kabir says, we ought to immerse ourselves in the quality-less unified Divine, the source of all things. He reflects this understanding of the fundamental unity of existence in his self-perceptions as well:

> I'm neither pious nor impious—
> I'm neither an ascetic nor a hedonist.
> I don't dictate and I don't listen—
> I'm neither a master nor a servant.
>
> I'm neither a captive nor a free man—
> I'm neither involved nor indifferent.
>
> I haven't been estranged from anyone—
> and I'm no one's close companion.
>
> I'm not going to a place called hell—
> and I'm not going to heaven.
>
> I'm the agent of all my actions—
> yet I'm different from my deeds.
>
> A few in a million can grasp this notion—
> they sit with poise, ensconced in immortality.
>
> Such is the creed of Kabir—

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[81] David Lorenzen summarizes that in the case of Hindus, Kabir sometimes mentions specific religious groups including Vaishnavas, yogis, and Shaktas and often "addresses Brahmins, Pandits, and Pandas as the principal sponsors of the Hindu practices he criticizes such as animal sacrifice, empty Vedic recitation, the rules of caste purity and untouchability, and the worship of idols." He criticizes yogis for their penances and exercises, mentioning them by name more often than any other group. Lorenzen gives the following word frequencies in the *Kabīr-granthāvalī*:13 Hindu (him̐ dū, hindū, him̐ duini, thirty), Brahmin (babhanīm̐ , bām̐ mhan, bām̐ hman, bābhan, brāh- man, bhāmini, thirty-seven), Pandit (pam̐ ḍit, pam̐ ḍitā, sixty-three), Panda (pam̐ ḍā, pam̐ ḍiā, pām̐ ḍe, twelve), Shakta (sākat, seventeen), yogi (jogini, jogiyā, jogī, yogī, etc. fifty-two), Gorakh (goraṣ, goraṣanāth, fifteen), Vaishnava (vaiṣnav, baisanaum̐ , three). Kabir virtually always uses Hindu in a religious, not ethnic, context: "For Kabir a Hindu is a person who follows Hindu religious beliefs and practices, not a native of the Indian subcontinent. For Kabir Hindus are usually those who worship idols, worship Shiva and Vishnu, sacrifice animals, recite the Vedas, practice untouchability. They are often identified as Pandits and Brahmins, or at least these are taken as their leading representatives…The yogis and Saktas, however, are set somewhat apart by Kabir, and it is not clear whether he regards them as Hindus or as separate groups" (Lorenzen 2011, pp. 29).

[82] David Lorenzen summarizes that in the *Kabīr-granthāvalī,* Kabir mentions Muslims in various ways with various frequency: pir (*pīr, pīran,* twenty-three), kazi (*kajī,* nine), Sufi sheikh (*seṣ,* seven), mullah (*mulā, mullā,* seven), prophet (*paigam̐ bar. paigam̐ bhar,* three), saint (*auliyā,* two), sayyid (*saiyad,* two), sultan (*sulatāmṇa,* two), dervish (*daravesā*, one), *badshah* (*bādasāh,* one). He does not mention or distinguish between Sufi schools (*tariqas*), nor does he mention or distinguish between Sunnis and Shias. The words Kabir uses for Muslims in general are Turk (*turakā, turakin, turuk, turka, taruk,* etc., thirty-six) and Musalman (*musalamān, muusalamām̐ na,* etc., five). "The context in which these titles and the words *Turk* and *Musalma*n occur is virtually always a religious one. Kabir never uses the word *Turk* in a principally ethnic sense and he clearly uses Turk and Musalman as synonyms." (Lorenzen 2011, pp. 28).

> some things it builds, some it destroys.[83]

Unfolding the vastness of the singular Divine with infinite attributes within means embodying the apparent contradictions of that essential unity. Kabir not just stresses that all *external* markers of religious identity, beliefs, and practices are essentially meaningless without devotion and direct relationship with the One, but also that all the ways we conceive of our own selves as falling within particular categories and classifications are also ultimately meaningless. In the many versions of 'Kabir,' the various curations and compilations that make up his various simultaneous personas, some speak primarily of the Kabir who is religious, who teaches devotion through Nam, through remembrance, concentration, praise, and stillness. Some speak of the Kabir who constantly reminds his listeners of their temporariness, of the reality of death and the urgency of forging ahead on a spiritual path. Others speak of Kabir as a threat to hegemony, as solely political, a truth-teller who challenged caste-hierarchy and religious hierarchy, who took religious elites to task and called out hypocrisy — Hindu, Muslim, or otherwise. Even in our attempts to understand Kabir who so deliberately and cleverly evaded categorization, we box him in. The Kabir who urges inner reflection and effort is in no way contradictory to the Kabir whose words are deeply political. The Kabir who is devoted is also crass and blunt and incisive in his criticisms. These things are far from opposed to one another — they are instead symbiotic, dependent, impossible without one another. The spiritual is political, the political is spiritual. The worldly and the transcendent must be in conversation with one another. The internal and the external are interdependent. True reflection brings revolution. Kabir is everything and nothing. He is neither this nor that. He is beyond categorization just as his Beloved is beyond

[83] Dharwadker, pp. 204.

categorization. He is boundless just as his Beloved is boundless. And he is inviting his listeners to work becoming boundless, too.

Conclusion

Kabir's poetic corpus and personality has been variously understood by the different religious traditions that revere him. For Sikhs, Kabir becomes part of the story of Guru Nanak Sahib. For Muslims he is placed within the lineage of the Sufi tradition. For Hindus, he is placed in the story of Vaishnavites. For the Kabir Panth, found across northern and central India, whose members are often Dalits, Kabir is their Guru. This exploration of Kabir's works continues to push the question of what it means to lay *absolute* claim to a figure versus what it means to *incorporate* a fluid figure into one's own narrative — to find importance and reverence for that figure with the understanding that they shift in meaning and role as they make their way through various communities and traditions.

The discourse of curating and appropriating Kabir did not begin in the postcolonial period. It began soon after his death as Kabir Panths attempted to organize themselves into coherent groups with unified text, ritual, and beliefs. It gained momentum in the nascent nationalist movement, with the search for a new sense of Indian selfhood by intellectuals and seekers alike: "for modern India, Kabir represents the ultimate telos—an ability to simultaneously acknowledge irreducible differences and overcome them; an unflickering flame of faith that burnishes the gold of an equally precious skepticism; the strength to stand firm in a stance of confident rationality even while gazing unblinking into the abyss of violence. To proceed toward an enlightened, humane, inclusive nationhood even with its almost unbearable

burdens of caste conflict, communal hatred, and sectarian prejudice, India itself has to approximate to the condition of Kabir—the coherent, charismatic, autotelic Self."[84]

Postcolonial appropriations of Kabir are about incorporating him into a Hindutva narrative through the mollification of his message, and containing him within a rigid and unchanging public-facing identity and ideology. His life and work become about brotherhood and unity as a surface-level principle in the National narrative even as brotherhood and unity between the Hindu-nationalist majority and religious minorities has all but disappeared. Tracing his ideas to particular Hindu schools of thought strengthens the Hindu claim over him even as he refuses to make such claims about his own identity in his verses. And in this game of claiming, minority religious communities also employ Kabir to respond to the forces of Hindu Nationalism that have redefined what it means to be Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh.

Scholars continue to debate the origin of Kabir's ideas, tying him more tightly to particular schools of thought over others.[85] It may seem an easy way out to say that I do not think this exercise is one which Kabir would endorse. We are going to die (of this, Kabir makes sure to remind us). Why waste our time trying to place him into a category? Kabir attempted to rise above both Islam and the Hindu tradition. He accepted them as legitimate paths, and took them seriously with the constant reminder that none of these paths are useful if they are centered solely around ritual and the motions of performing piety. They are certainly not useful if they have become motivated by bigotry, superiority, otherness, and fear. The most important thing a seeker of any religious identity can do is to cleanse themselves from within, to search for the One within.

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[84] Ananya Vajpeyi, quoted by Hawley, *Storm of Songs* pp.317.
[85] See Lorenzen's summary of ongoing discussions of Kabir's ideas and their origins in Lorenzen (2011) pp. 48.

The legend surrounding Kabir's death is similar to the story that Sikhs tell about Guru Nanak Sahib. As he draws his last breath, his followers divide along lines of Hindu and Muslim and confront one another over the question of ritual. What will they do with the Bhagat's body? The Muslims want to bury him to the sound of Qur'anic verses. The Hindus want to cremate him to the sound of Vedic mantras. When the turn toward the body, it has disappeared, and flowers lie in its place. The Hindus and Muslims divide the flowers up. Half are buried, half are burned.[86] Bhagat Kabir and Guru Nanak both utter their own versions of the statement: *there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.* These communities existed, and they often engaged in conflict. But the constant reminder was that the Truth is deeper than these identities, that the essence of Being and the Origin of all of creation is only One. We are people in a world of categories. We unite under them — they give us direction, bind us through practice and belief and sometimes even ritual. These identities can be useful to us, and these paths fruitful, if we walk them in devotion. Kabir asks us to become vaster than our religious identities — to transcend these categories in pursuit of a deeper Truth, and a more intimate relationship with the Divine. It all begins in the heart.

[86] Hess, pp. 316.

Chapter 2: The Unambiguous Sufi Islam of Bulleh Shah

Life and Background

Bulleh Shah is a widely-known and recited 17th century poet and figure in religious history, revered by Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs alike. In Panjab, he has long been regarded as one of the greatest masters of Sufi lyric, and cannot be left out of any discussion on the history of Panjabi literature. His words are etched into the collective psyche of Panjabis regardless of religious identity, and seem to be floating in the air, waiting for an average person to recall them and speak them into being once again. Panjab is a state split more than once — the first time in the 1947 Partition, resulting in the creation of East Panjab (India) and West Panjab (Pakistan), and the second time in the 1966, with the creation of Haryana and the allocation of the hilly regions of Panjab to Himachal Pradesh. It seems fitting that the poet who comes from land that has been divided again and again along religious and linguistic lines still occupies an important place in the hearts of all Panjabis — regardless of artificial borders, geopolitical tensions, and ever-increasing communalism. Bulleh Shah has always been a boundary-crosser, and those who sing and recite his words call that way of being into the present — whether they are everyday Panjabis, or well-known figures like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Rabbi Shergill, or Abida Parveen. His is a poetry that is without a doubt *of* and *for* the people, with distinguishing features such as accessible vocabulary and colloquialisms, imagery from everyday life, and references to the folklore of Panjab.

Like Bhagat Kabir, the details of Bulleh Shah's life remain elusive. Neither the exact date nor the precise place of his birth is known for certain. However, unlike Kabir, Bulleh Shah is unambiguously Muslim. Most scholars agree that he was born into a family of Sayyid Muslims,

who trace their lineage back to the family of the Prophet Muhammad.[87] The title "Bulleh Shah," by which the he is commonly known, is the "honorific form proper to a Sayyid descendant of the prophet Muhammad," while his poetic signature, "Bullah," is the familiar form of his given name, Abdullah.[88] His poetry, through its references, is evidence of a deep familiarity with Islamic law, the Qur'an, and the Persian Sufi literary tradition.

Bulleh Shah lived during a time of great social and political turmoil in Panjab. The Mughal empire was weakening due to increasing challenges from the Sikhs and other local rulers asserting their own sovereignty. The instability of this historical period is referenced in Bulleh Shah's poetry both directly and indirectly, as he seems to attempt to understand the state of the world around him through his religious practice, through his personal relationship with the Divine, and through the Sufi principle of the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). He also consistently invokes his spiritual guide, Sufi master Shah Inayat (d.1728), in displays of utter devotion. In this chapter, I argue that Bulleh Shah, contrary to some scholarly framings, is unambiguously Muslim in his self-conception, although his larger reception is quite fluid and permeable, as Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs all lay claim to him. Bulleh Shah is not a Sufi who advocates for secularism, nor is he a 'Vedantic Sufi,' nor did he go through an 'evolution' that took him from Islam to something more like an embodiment of syncretism that incorporated a 'superior' Hinduism. The poet inhabits various 'selves' in his poetry, sometimes a Hindu, sometimes a Muslim, sometimes a devoted Sufi impatient with religious orthodoxy and structure, sometimes a Muslim invoking the importance of *shari'a*, sometimes a man, sometimes a dancing girl, sometimes a bride. Although I will be touching on only a few poems in which religious

[87] Rinehart, Robin. "The Portable Bullhe Shah: Biography, Categorization, and Authorship in the Study of Punjabi Sufi Poetry." Numen, vol. 46, no. 1, 1999, pp. 57.
[88] Shackle, Christopher. Bulleh Shah. Sufi Lyrics: Selections From a World Classic. Harvard University Press, 2021, pp. viii.

identity is a theme, it is important to mention the plethora of identities he takes on. It is as if Bulleh Shah speaks from various registers and perspectives to address various layers of the self, while also inviting his listeners into these universal experiences so that they too may reflect on their personal relationship with the Divine.

Robin Rinehart calls Bulleh Shah a 'portable' figure,[89] and importantly points out that his location in various contexts "helps us understand something about Bulleh Shah the poet but also something about his audiences and the ways in which they respond to his poetic corpus and his life."[90] Scholarly analyses of Bulleh Shah as understood through his *corpus*, Rinehart argues, largely fall into two major groups: one places him firmly within the Islamic tradition, and the other locates his true inspiration in the Hindu tradition (therefore arguing that he was more Hindu than Muslim). There are subsets within these groups, some in the first group which portray him as a Sufi advocate for the immiserated, others as a pious adherent of *shari'a*. In the second group, some classify him as *Vedantin*, others as *Vaishnava Vedantin.* This is due to questions around whether he is a Muslim Sufi invoking Vedantic ideas, or a Hindu invoking Sufi ideas.

Key to these classifications are ideas around what 'true Islam' is — an oversimplification of Islam as static, dry, and legalistic and inherently at odds with the Sufism of Bulleh Shah.[91] At the 2016 World Sufi Forum, Prime Minister Narendra Modi referenced Bulleh Shah in a speech emphasizing unity, peace, tolerance and love. His speech implied that the tolerant Sufism was a much-needed bulwark against the intolerant 'version' of Islam on the other side of the border in Pakistan. Paraphrasing Bulleh Shah, he said, "the Lord exists in every heart. [Bulleh Shah's]

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[89] Rinehart, pp. 56.
[90] Rinehart, pp. 57.
[91] The tendency to classify Sufism as somehow separate or contradictory to Islam is common. Sufism is often referred to as 'moderate' in contrast to 'orthodox' or 'radical' Islam, and despite the inextricable relationship between the two, Sufism is often simplified and de-Islamicized, as are beloved Sufis who were learned in Islamic law and theology, as are their writings which reference Qur'anic verses. See Rozana Ali's *New Yorker* article titled "The Erasure of Islam from the Poetry of Rumi": https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-erasure-of-islam-from-the-poetry-of-rumi

values are the need of our times. This is reality of nature. We learn this wisdom in perfect balance and harmony that exists in vast diversity of our forests."[92] Despite Modi's rhetoric of tolerance, belonging, and harmony, three years after this speech, the BJP government enacted the Citizens Act Amendment, which threatened to make India's Muslims into second-class citizens, many of whom became effectively stateless as a result. A month later, in January of 2020, anti-Muslim riots broke out in Delhi. In April and May of 2020, mass disinformation campaigns pushed an anti-Muslim conspiracy theory that accused Muslims of spreading the Coronavirus, resulting in harassment, assault, and violence perpetrated against Muslims by Hindu mobs.[93] Invocations of Bulleh Shah as an example of a version of Islam that is 'digestible' or 'compatible' with India perpetuates a distinction between Islam and Sufism, with Sufism being the more modern and acceptable of the two, rather than a practice that is inseparable from Islam.

Scholars who sort Bulleh Shah into a category more associated with Hinduism are especially eager to demonstrate a perceived 'evolution,' in which the poet eventually came to "transcend what they consider the dry legalism of Islam at a young age as he moved towards a higher level of spiritual comprehension (Vaisnava Vedanta or Vedanta)." [94] Scholar Amit Dey boldly claims that "in respect of both the thought and style," Bulleh Shah was influenced more by Vaishnava Vedanta than by the works of Sufis like Ibn 'Arabi, and frames the four stages of the Sufi path as a larger evolution toward a way of being more in line with Vaishnava Vedanta.[95] Sikh scholars Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal, write extensively on Bulleh Shah's

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[92] Read more at: https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/news/india/none-of-99-names-of-allah-stands-for-violence-modi/articleshow/51449407.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

[93] This bigotry has been normalized and encouraged through ruling party propaganda against Muslims. In March 2020, politician Amit Malviya, who heads the BJP's IT cell and serves as its chief propagandist, tweeted to his nearly 500,000 followers: "Delhi's dark underbelly is exploding! Last 3 months have seen an Islamic insurrection of sorts, first in the name of anti-CAA protests from Shaheen Bagh to Jamia, Jaffrabad to Seelampur. And now the illegal gathering of the radical Tablighi Jamaat at the markaz. It needs a fix!" For more, see: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/22/india-muslims-coronavirus-scapegoat-modi-hindu-nationalism/

[94] Rinehart, pp. 58.

[95] See Dey, Amit. "Locating Bulleh Shah (d.1757) in the Mystical Tradition of South Asia." Calcutta University, 2016.

"romantic defiance of Muslim shari'a," and are of Lajwanti Ramakrishna's view that Bulleh Shah's mysticism passed through three stages: 1) His discipleship under Shah Inayat and his adherence to *shari'a* and the Sufi path; 2) His change under the influence of Vedantic philosophy; 3) His mysticism "shining at the height of beauty," as some ultimate combination of Hinduism and Islam. (more specifically, *bhakti* and *tasawwuf*).[96] It is important to note that Ramakrishna took the liberty of ordering Bulleh Shah's *kafis* according to stages he perceived in the development of Bulleh Shah's thought, despite there being no evidence as to the order in which they were composed.

Claims around Bulleh Shah's Muslim-ness or Hindu-ness are often made to perpetuate a narrative of insider and outsider religions, superior and inferior religions, influenced and influencer religions. Importantly, this style of interpretation permeates much of the works on Bulleh Shah, even by scholars who "presumably are not primarily concerned with a particular communal or nationalist program."[97] This tendency can in part be attributed to the larger ideas about Hinduism and Islam in the subcontinent that persist even today — Hinduism as peaceful and fluid, Islam as the dry and rigid religion of oppressors and invaders, and Sufism as a separate more tolerant 'strain' of Islam. The purpose of many scholarly works on his corpus is to categorize Bulleh Shah, to parse out what factors most greatly influenced him to both determine and explain the content of his poetry. In the pursuit of categorization, Bulleh Shah is seen solely as a historical figure living in a particular time and place, party to the influence of various social, political, and religious factors that can then be assessed to argue for a particular classification of the poet (for example: *if Bulleh Shah's poetry is this influential, surely it must be because of the influence of the greater tradition of Hinduism*).

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[96] Duggal, Kartar Singh, and Sekhon, Sant Singh. *A History of Punjabi Literature.* India, Sahitya Akademi, 1992, pp. 33.
[97] Rinehart, pp. 72.

Influence, then, seems to work only in one direction. As Rinehart rightly points out, for those who define Bulleh Shah as a Vedantin of some kind, Islam was clearly subject to influence from Hinduism, but Islam is not considered to be an influence in any way on Hinduism. In this framing, Hinduism is inherently superior to Islam, and the ability to exert influence is afforded to Hinduism alone: "Influence only 'flows' downward; religious traditions only 'borrow' things which they are lacking.[98] In *The Secret Life of Another Indian Nationalism*, Shail Mayaram explores how the Indian state in its pursuit of the *Hindutva* project[99] utilizes religion and constructions of time and history to assert sovereignty, and that the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party partake in a kind of conversion process even when dealing with Hindus, in that they homogenize Hinduism, redefining what it means to encompass 'Hindu-ness' in a way that is acceptable to the larger Hindutva project, erasing spirits, deification, village-level gods and goddesses, and local beliefs.[100] In reference to *ghar vapasi*[101] campaigns geared toward Indian Muslims, Mayaram writes, "were they not converting people who had played a far greater role in the transmission and reproduction of civilisational traditions than any of their activists? Aren't Muslim communities also participants in the making and meanings of the civilisational traditions that came to be called Hinduism?"[102] It is in the Hindutva project that there is a redefinition of what it means to be Muslim as well, in that Muslims can only exist as outsiders or invaders playing a role in eroding or destroying the Indic civilizational project, making no contribution to creating, sustaining, or reproducing it. Although my focus in this project is on Hindutva as the primary culprit here, I do want to mention that a comprehensive accounting of

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[98] Rinehart, pp. 70.
[99] An ideology seeking to establish the hegemony of Hindus and the Hindu way of life in India.
[100] Mayaram, Shail. *The Secret Life of Another Indian Nationalism: Transitions from the Pax Britannica to the Pax Americana*. India, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 152.
[101] Literally, 'return home.'
[102] Mayaram, pp. 154.

such problematic categorization cannot ignore the influence of colonialism and colonial categories (not just of "Hindu" and "Muslim" but also of "religion" and "spirituality" more generally), many of which are (unknowingly) imbibed by these various communities who seek to categorize these poets thus. These ideas and redefinitions are not new and did not only spring up in the birth of Hindutva ideology.

Here too, in readings of Bulleh Shah's corpus as being largely influenced by Hinduism, the framing becomes one that implicitly hierarchizes the two traditions, allocating Islam to 'influenced, outsider, and inferior' and Hinduism to 'influencer, insider, and superior.' The question of 'influence' plays a large role in making claims about Bulleh Shah, as some scholars present him as an advocate of Hinduism and others as an exemplary Muslim, while some argue he has been greatly influenced by Sikhi.[103] Thus, I argue, although Bulleh Shah is unambiguously Sufi in his self-conception and presentation, the borders or boundaries of his corpus are themselves amorphous and fluid, as are the ways in which various communities relate to and understand him.

In India's present political and religious climate, participation, exchange, and the permeability of religious boundaries are increasingly seen as a threat to one's own religious identity. In other words, to engage with other religious categories in a world of hardened boundaries is to dilute one's own Hindu-ness, Muslim-ness, or Sikh-ness.[104] But Bulleh Shah lived in a time where to take part in another's religious ritual or practice, to exchange ideas or find spiritual value in another's religious practice, was part of his everyday life, and it took root in his poetry, as he borrowed language, principles, imagery, and practice from others. Bulleh

[103] Rinehart, pp. 55.
[104] See Shail Mayaram's *The Secret of Another Indian Nationalism* for more on how the Hindutva project redefines Hinduism, eliminating localized traditions and acting as a homogenizing force to unite Indians under 'true Hinduism.'

Shah exemplifies for his listeners what it means to take religious practice and categories of identity seriously while also understanding that at the level of the spirit or the soul, ultimately there is no essential difference between any of these categories.

The Corpus(es)

Bulleh Shah's verses were never systematically preserved by an organized religious community, and were largely recorded and assembled in printed collections only in the late nineteenth century.[105] The first manuscripts are transcriptions done at least 150 years after his death, of musical performances that "contain dialectal variations, apparent interpolations, and elaborations from the performers themselves, and sometimes verses or entire poems found in the work of other poets, often with the signature line of another poet preserved intact."[106] Thus the corpus is problematized, as no single identifiable corpus exists with complete certainty, just as no single narrative of the historical details of Bulleh Shah's life exists with complete certainty. We are left with bodies of work that vary in content and language and presentation, all attributed to one figure without a sure sense of who this singular historical figure is. Just as the compilations of Kabir's works are in some way a form of curation, so too are the multiple interpretations of Bulleh Shah's works. Outside of academic interpretations, Nationalist narratives incorporate Bulleh Shah as a representation of a type of Islam that is more compatible with the Hindutva project (often framed as tolerant or a voice of peace, often framed as a secularist), though Muslims are fundamentally considered to be external to the 'dharmic' community that will come to make up the Hindurashtra as envisioned by Hindu Nationalists.

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[105] Shackle, pp. ix.
[106] Rinehart, pp. 59.

Thus, like Kabir's corpus, we cannot uncritically assume a singular and agreed upon corpus for Bulleh Shah, or even that we are talking about a single person behind the corpus.[107] Just as it is impossible to find the 'real' *person* Kabir, it is impossible to find the 'real' *person* Bulleh Shah amidst the multifarious compositions and corpuses available to us. Bulleh Shah, like Kabir, and like Lal Ded, is no longer a single individual located in a specific time and place. There are multiple 'Bulleh Shahs' — not solely due to the various compilations of his works, but also due to the ways in which readers and listeners create *their own* Bulleh Shahs, thus adding to the versions of a living and changing persona who is "variously created and recreated within different discursive spaces (e.g. the various discussions of national, communal, and regional identity in contemporary Pakistan and India)."[108] This is not to say that we disregard his life as a whole, or his background. But it is to say that we must acknowledge how little we can know about the poet as a person with certainty, and instead focus on what Bulleh Shah is telling us in his own words, appreciating his 'portability,' and reflecting on what elements of his poetry might be speaking to different audiences through his word choice, images, and through the voices he inhabits.

Parallels may be drawn between the tradition of Bhakti poetry, to which Kabir belongs, and that of Sufi poetry, to which Bulleh Shah belongs, in terms of the role of the receiving community and the importance of both the oral and written traditions. But while Kabir's poetry might be more easily understood in its own terms, the character of Panjabi Sufi poetry is not easily comprehended without wider understanding and reference to the "larger religious and literary traditions by which it is so intimately informed."[109] In other words, understanding Bulleh

[107] Also like Kabir, the onset of printing texts resulted in a shift toward more emphasis on unchanging textual content and a clearly defined and identifiable individual author who can be assigned the responsibility of the text as a fixed object. See Rinehart p.75 for more.
[108] Rinehart, pp. 78.
[109] Shackle, pp. x.

Shah's poetry requires an understanding of Islam — particularly of Sufi theology and philosophy.

The Sufi Path

According to scholar William Chittick, Sufi teachings can be broadly categories in three ways. The first category can be referred to as "wisdom" or "knowledge" (ʻilm), the second category as "method" or "works" (ʻamal), and the third as "spiritual realization." For Muslims, knowledge is contained within the Qur'an, and method is the application of that knowledge to one's everyday life through the practice of Islam. Spiritual realization occurs when one ascends through the stages of human perfection and experiences proximity to the Divine. These categories can also be understood as the Law, the Way, and the Truth. Knowledge becomes codified in Divine Law, situating the seeker in the universe, defining their nature and responsibilities as a human on earth. This is complemented by the Way, which is determined by the sayings of the Prophet and offers examples of Divinely-directed behavior. As Chittick writes, "to follow the Sufi path is to obey the commands and prohibitions of God according to the model provided by His Prophet."[110] When the Sufi enters the Way, they begin to embark on a process of inner transformation. This arduous journey is toward the Truth, or spiritual realization. This is a process in which the seeker seeks to assume the virtues of the Divine, and, through the grace of the Divine, experience the gradual removal of the veil of human nature, the annihilation (*fana'*) of the ego-self (*nafs*) to reveal the Essence of all things, the Divine, within.[111]

[110] Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī Maulana, and William C. Chittick. The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi. State University of New York Press, 1983, pp. 11.
[111] See Chittick pp. 10-12.

Creation is understood to be a manifestation of the Divine's infinite forms. Thus creation was created in order for the Divine to manifest His own names and attributes, as referenced in the *Hadith* which states, "I was a Hidden Treasure and I longed to be known, therefore I created the world that I might be known."[112] Because all things are a manifestation of the singular Divine's infinite qualities and attributes, dichotomies and opposites are considered to be illusory, real in a sense but not Ultimately Real. The existence of the myriad things in the world only becomes possible through differentiation and opposition, and each individual of a pair of opposites makes the existence of the other individual possible. Each of these correlative terms can only exist and be known because of its opposite, this is true of all things except the Divine, who is alone and has no opposite, who transcends all opposition,[113] who is the only Real. At its highest level, Being or Existence (*wujud*) is the absolute and nondelimited reality of God, the Necessary Being (*wajib al-wujud*). That which is existent is infinite in its multiplicity, that which truly Exists, the Divine, is existing in a state of unicity. Thus, the principle of *wahdat al-wujud* (the unity of existence) is integral to the Sufi path.

Our perception of things in wujud as encompassing both unicity and multiplicity is often explained with the imagery of what we perceive when white light is sent through a prism. Though there are many different colors as light refracts out of the prism and separates out into its many wavelengths, we perceive only light because only light exists. God's loci of manifestation are plural because of the multiplicity of properties and effects they display, but they are also one because of the oneness of the wujud that is manifest within them. As Chittick explains, "unity lies in the things' manifestation — a manifestation that is wujud — while multiplicity lies in their entities, which have no self-existence. God in his oneness is identical with the wujud of the

[112] Chittick pp. 47.
[113] Chittick pp. 49.

things but He is not identical with the things."[114] Each thing is identical with and distinct from wujud at the same time.

In the path of Love and spiritual realization, the lover undergoes two fundamental experiences: union (*wisal*) with the beloved, and separation (*firaq*, *hijran*) from Him. There are infinite degrees of each of these states. The terms *bast* (expansion) and *qabd* (contraction) refer to the experience of various degrees of relative union and separation that the seeker experiences in the oscillative relationship they have with the Beloved. During the spiritual journey, the seeker undergoes moments of separation and union or death and life, but with each movement, each time they die and are reborn they "move closer to the ultimate station of subsistence and 'I am god.'"[115]

Themes in Bulleh Shah's Poetry

Bulleh Shah is known primarily for his *kafis,*[116] poems with a refrain, designed for singing in *qawwali*. Just as with Kabir's corpus, the uncertain transmission of the text makes it difficult to be sure of the exact number of authentic poems, and which versions of the poems are original. Definitive authenticity in the precise wording of any poem generally agreed to be by Bulleh Shah is not expected, given the well-known creative liberties taken by professional singers in the delivery of qawwali (a characteristic of the musical genre itself is interweaving writing by different authors or different poems by the same author) and the uncertainties of oral and textual transmission. But the living corpus provides plenty of evidence of a coherent poetic

[114] Chittick, William C.. Imaginal Worlds: Ibn Al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity. State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 18.
[115] Chittick (1983), pp. 233.
[116] 'Kafi' is a small poem in stanzas followed by a refrain. Though it possesses an essential unity of meaning, the transition from one stanza to the other is not necessarily direct or logical. A Bulleh Shah 'Kafi' is akin to a small-scale drama in which often, diverse and contrasting tones build tension and ultimately converge to create the final meaning.

and mystical imagination, notions of *wahdat al-wujud* (the unity of existence), and the transcendence of worldly categories and conflicts in favor of a vaster understanding of the soul or the self.

Bulleh Shah's kafis tend to be reminiscent of folk songs, invoking common experiences that are familiar to and shared by everyday people to arrive at some kind of understanding that transgresses religious categories and boundaries of 'initiated' and 'uninitiated.' His externalization of experience is a key characteristic of his poetry, as it seems he takes his listener through an experience *as he is experiencing it*, while simultaneously offering reflections that resonate with his listener. Panjabi poetry is often lauded for its tone of simplicity and straightforwardness, accessible language, and brief lines where each word packs a punch. However, this simplicity is not to be confused with a simplicity of thought or message or a naivete. Instead, the poetry is both simple and complex, "reflecting the apparent simplicity and real complexity of life on which it draws."[117]

Particularly interesting about Bulleh Shah's writing is that he pulls from everywhere in his self-expression, adopting different voices and identities to make points to particular audiences. It is also as if he adopts various poetic voices to speak from different layers or levels of himself at different times. At times, he speaks from the voice of one who is deeply and devoutly Muslim (where the personality of the staunch follower of *shari'a* is found). At other times, he speaks from the level of the spirit, or the soul, or the essence of the self that is beyond categorization (where the personality of the Sufi advocate for the oppressed is found). In comparison to Kabir, Bulleh Shah is more overt about his philosophical insistence that one's true

[117] Najm Ḥusain Sayyid. Recurrent Patterns In Punjabi Poetry. Majlis Shah Hussain, 1968, pp. 10 — 11.

identity, the deepest layers of who one is beyond body, mind, and emotions, is about an essence of Being that transcends religious identity. But he also emphasizes the importance of a particular religious practice and worldview for him in his own self-understanding — that of Sufism. As with Kabir, the focus in this section will be on exploring Bulleh Shah's self-conceptions through poems centered around themes of religious identity, and his understanding of Islamic theology and philosophy as evidence that he is a Sufi.

Bulleh Shah engages in devotion with the Divine, the Real who is of infinite qualities, who cannot be articulated, conceptualized, or seen. He articulates the suffering of separation from the One, longs for the One, and begs for presence. Because all of creation is itself a manifestation of the infinite qualities of the One, Bulleh Shah oscillates between the Oneness and the many-ness, honoring the reality of the multiplicity of existence while also understanding that this multiplicity itself is illusory. Like the Bhakti of Kabir, Bulleh Shah explores individual devotion and deep adoration of the Divine in a relationship cultivated between lover and Beloved, seeker and the One who is sought after. He expresses dissatisfaction with worldly and material life, impatience for the pretensions of the religious world and those religious elites who feed off fear and take advantage of common people, and a rejection of any attempts to intellectualize experiential devotion to the Divine. His emphasis on learning about the Divine through experience is at odds with religious orthodoxy and institutional forms of ritual that are applicable to all kinds of religious practice, whether Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim. Ultimately, Bulleh Shah's mysticism is an urging toward recognition of the Divine present within the self — to grasp this mystery of presence. In this process, devotion is all that is needed to worship and experience closeness to the Divine.[118]

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[118] Khan, Irfan M. 2019. Recentering the Sufi Shrine: A Metaphysics of Presence. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, pp. 150.

Bulleh Shah's verses subvert religious identities and institutions, pick away at the hypocrisy of religious elites,[119] interrogate the value of knowledge and intellect,[120] and question the mechanical and thoughtless religiosities people of all faiths practice. Like Kabir, his work lives both within and outside of religious categories, and his verses are popularly known all over the subcontinent by people of all classes, castes, ages, and religions. This is not because Bulleh Shah argues for a dissolving of all categories and an abandonment of all religious practice. It is instead that the Sufi steps into various 'selves,' taking all spiritual and religious practice seriously, and using existing frameworks to make his message more comprehensible. He does not advocate for syncretism or neospiritualism or 'moderate' Islam. Instead, he asks his listeners to pursue religious practice with devotion, with remembrance, and with longing. He asks his listeners to reflect on their internal disposition, because without the correct internal state, external practices will not hold their significance — in fact, they will become acts of hypocrisy.

Bulleh Shah is deeply concerned with the ultimate and the eternal — not because he is planning for his life after death, or engaging in abstract speculation, but because he is actively searching for a lens through which to interpret common everyday experiences. A search for meaning reverberates through his verses, and it is a sound all of us recognize in ourselves, too.

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[119] Reading and reading, you call yourself a Shaikh of Shaikhs, and from your house you devise tricky questions of the law.
You eat by plundering the foolish, and make your obscure pronouncements.
Reading and reading, you perform prescribed and supererogatory prayers, and shout out loud calls to prayer.
You go up into the pulpit and deliver sermons, but your greed has dishonored you.
Reading and reading, you become a mullah, then a qazi, but God is content without all this learning.
Your greed increases day by day, and your pious intent is set on profit.
Reading and reading, you discuss legal questions every day, and you feed on doubts and queries.
You preach one thing and practice another, being false within while seeming true on the outside. (Excerpt of Kafi 26 translated by Christopher Shackle, p.20)

[120] Reading and reading, you amass heaps of learning, with the Qur'an and the scriptures all around you.
You are surrounded by light, but there is darkness within you.
Without the guide, you have no awareness or clue.
From learning, other confusions arise, and the sighted become quite blind.
Holy men are arrested and thieves are released, and you are disgraced in both worlds.
From learning, thousands of obstacles arise, and travelers are stuck on their journey.
Struck by separation, they become sick at heart, and the load of parting falls on their heads. (Excerpt of Kafi 26 translated by Christopher Shackle, p.20)

Bulleh Shah's concern for the vast and the eternal is not at odds with the temporal and transient, but rather an affirmation of "the fact that he is intensively alive to the urgency and seriousness of the questions of this life."[121] He encourages personal reflection and recentering for all religious seekers regardless of practice or ideology, toward an understanding of the vastness of the Divine. He uses the paradigms of Hindus and Muslims to push them to think more vastly about their personal relationship to the Divine. What use is ritual if it does not result in remembrance? What use is pilgrimage if it does not cleanse one from within? What use is any fear-based paradigm of religiosity if even those enforcing and encouraging it are hypocrites? What use is any of this if we are still unable to feel the presence of the One?

God is One, God is Many

In Islamic theology and metaphysics, there is a distinction made between God as the divine Essence (*dhat*) and God as He describes himself in revelation. In the Qur'an, God describes Himself by many different Names: the Merciful, the Giver, the Compassionate, the Pardoner, the Avenger, the Bringer of death, the Giver of life, etc. These Names (asma') allow us to understand part of the larger picture of God in God's infinitude — it is from these Names that the seeker understands the Attributes (sifat) of the One. These are the things that are accessible to the seeker. God in God's Essence is beyond grasp. Thus, the distinction between Essence and Attributes is made — not because there is an ontological distinction between God's Essence and God's Attributes, but because this conceptual distinction is necessary for us to grasp even a part of the Reality of God's Essence. These Attributes are infinite, just as God's Names are infinite, and each of the infinite Names can be manifested through an infinite variety of forms in

[121] Syed, pp. 11.

creation.[122] Bulleh Shah plays with this idea in many of his verses, alluding to the play of the Divine who manifests Himself in various forms,[123] encompasses opposites and erases binaries. In these verses, it is not just that God's Attributes are infinitely manifested in creation, is that God Himself is playfully changing form:

Kafi 133
I have found out, I have found out, that it is you who have
changed your form.
Here you are a Muslim and recite the scriptures. Here you
are a devout Hindu and repeat your muttered prayers.
Here you are plunged into a deep pit. You have
displayed your affection in every house.
Here you are an enemy, here you are a friend. Here you are
a guru, here you are a disciple. Here you are Majnun,
here you are Laila. You are contained in every body.
Here you are careless, here you are punctilious in prayer.
Here you ascend the pulpit and preach a sermon. Here
you are Tegh Bahadur, the warrior for faith. Here you
have created your own way.
Here there is the business of the mosque. Here you
have become a Hindu temple. Here you are an ascetic
wearing matted locks. Here you have come as a female Shaikh.
Bullha, I need the lord. If I meet my sovereign, my task
is fulfilled. The sight of my beloved is my heavenly
ascension. I have fallen in love, so I sing this praise
to him.

Bulleh Shah begins with "I have found out," and repeats this exclamation the way a child might repeat a newfound epiphany when they realize they have been tricked, when they have uncovered the secret to something, or when they have come to understand the workings of the game that is being played. Finally, Bulleh Shah has had his epiphany, and come to understand the

[122] Chittick (1983), pp. 42.
[123] What is this wonderful holy man called? At each moment he comes in many forms.
Lanka and Mecca are mysteries of Sahadev, who demonstrates that the two are one.
Oh yogi, when you are united with God, you give the call to prayer though you sound the conch.
Do not distinguish devotees by their different devotions.
The true devotee is the one who pleases you.
Behold, God is openly revealed, whatever the pandit may then proclaim from the Veda.
If you attend carefully, there are no unbelievers, whether they are called Hindu or Turk.
Whenever I look, only he, only he exists.
Bullah, the all-pervasive One is contained in every color. (Kafi 20, translated by Christopher Shackle).

movement and measure of the world, the game of creation as played by the Creator. It is the Creator, the One, who has changed forms. In some manifestations, God is a Muslim, reading from scriptures. In others, God is a Hindu reciting mantras. God is both the enemy and the friend, the guru and the disciple, Laila and Majnun.[124] This presence transgresses every boundary such that even in a single story, the One dwells within both characters. God is both careless and meticulous, both the one who preaches and the one who fights for faith,[125] and also the one who has created His own *panth*, or path.[126] The One is present in the mosque and in the Hindu temple. The One is the ascetic with matted locks, is the female Shaikh. The play of the Creator is evident in the Creator's presence in every body. The unicity in multiplicity is evident through the Creator's presence in every body. All things are manifestations of the One, the Origin. All categories are illusory. 'Seeing' the Beloved is Bulleh Shah's heavenly ascension. Witnessing the One is equivalent to the Prophet Muhammad's experience in the mir'aj — his ascension to heaven and experience of the Divine presence.[127] Bulleh Shah ends by calling this epiphany-driven listing, this *witnessing*, a form of praise — a dwelling on the attributes of the Creator as an act of devotion to the Creator. Bulleh Shah's expression of radical unicity in multiplicity, however, is not to be confused with a kind of soft humanism that erases his Muslim-ness from his practice, or a kind of syncretic Vedantic Sufism that disregards his rootedness in the Sufi path:

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[124] Laila and Majnun are a famous pair of lovers in Islamic romance. The Arab princess Laila was loved so passionately by Qais, who came from a rival tribe, that he was driven mad and became known as Majnun ("the madman").
[125] Guru Teghbahadar Sahib is the ninth Sikh Guru, known for sacrificing his own life to protect the religious freedoms of the Kashmiri Pandits who were being forced to convert to Islam under Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. He was executed in Delhi in 1675.
[126] Due to the use of the word panth (path) and the context of the preceding line, Christopher Shackle suggests that this is a reference to Sikhi, or the Sikh path that was carved out as a path distinct from Islam or Hinduism.
[127] The Prophet Muhammad was brought into the Divine presence, mounted on the mysterious animal called Buraq, who had been led to him by the archangel Jibrail. According to Sufi understanding, the Prophet's heavenly ascension is an archetypal version of the mystical process.

Kafi 78

Just guess who has come in disguise. A master of
concealment has transformed himself.
No one who has not spoken of pain has glimpsed the city
of love. She drowned and died, with all opportunities
lost. Why was that unlucky wretch born?
You made yourself like the *palās* tree. You turned your
body into leaves and destroyed them. You blackened
your face. What is this blackness you have colored yourself with?
The only treasure is the name of the lord, although it is
reckoned a trifle by thieves and adulterers. Besides the
protection of this mercy, fear was created by the rival.
Get rid of duality, there is no confusion. He is both Turk
and Hindu, there is no one else. Call everyone a holy
man, there is no thief. He is contained in every heart.
Why do you make up stories pointlessly, and read the
Gulistān and the *Bostān*? Why do you quarrel for no
reason? Who has taught you this perverse Veda?
The law is our nurse, the way is our mother. Next came
reality, and we gained something real from gnosis.
It is something seldom to be told. Realize that it is to be
taken to heart. Show some way of pleasing him. What
have you made a secret?
It is necessary to study this science but unacceptable to
reveal it. The one who did reveal it was Mansur, who
was seized and put on the gallows.
You were urged on by the practice of austerity. Bayazid
was separated from his body and became a perfect
adept. Asceticism creates great saints. No one
discovers it without effort.
How long will you flee from this suffering? You remain
asleep; when will you awake? Then when you get
up, you will burst out crying. A fit of obliviousness
attacked you and made you sleep.
A single form was assigned to *ʻain* and *ġhain*. The only
difference between them is a single dot. Once the dot
is removed from the heart, *ġhain* is shown to be *ʻain*.
While the heart is affected by duality, who can say "My
ego is dead"? My whole being became Inayat; then it
got the name Bullha.

The tone in this composition is similarly playful, as Bulleh Shah reflects on the various 'disguises' of the Divine, the Master of concealment, and oscillates between the central subject of the lover and the central subject of the Beloved. He begins by referencing Sohni from the legendary story of Sohni and Mahival. Sohni is the legend's heroine, who used to secretly sneak away at night to the edge of the river Chenab, bringing with her an earthenware pot. Sohni used

the pot as a buoy to help her make the treacherous crossing to the far bank of the river, where she would meet her beloved, Mahival. This legend holds a critical place in the collective psyche of Panjabis, and is the subject of much folk and popular culture even today. What is Bulleh Shah's reason for including this reference? The story is a love story, but it is also a great tragedy. But isn't that the story of all great loves? To even *glimpse* the city of love is to have suffered, to have felt the pain of love. This is the bittersweetness of the play between lover and Beloved. This is the suffering lovers voluntarily consign themselves to in their pursuit of union with the Beloved.

He then addresses the lover, saying, "you have made yourself like the *palas* tree." The palas tree sheds its leaves before it fruits, each bud black until they bloom to reveal bright red petals. In context of the following line, where blackening the face is imagery common to South Asian poetry that denotes shame, Shackle suggests that the imagery of the palas tree encompasses the contrast between outer disgrace or shame (malamat), that is "voluntarily assumed by a Sufi," and his inner integrity, or "red-facedness."[128] The listener is urged to see the value in the Name of the One, and to rid themselves of duality and illusions of separateness. Much like Kabir, Bulleh Shah invokes the common binary of Hindu and Muslim, with Turk being the more common reference for Muslims. He reminds his listener that the Divine is both the Turk and the Hindu — that if we can understand the presence of the Divine in every heart, then we can understand that every heart is that of a holy man.

This does not mean Bulleh Shah is uncritical of the pitfalls of religion and religious tension that he witnesses. He addresses the Muslim, asking why the Muslim reads the Gulistan and Bostan, two story collections that form key texts of the Persian literary canon, written by Shaikh Saadi of Shiraz (d.1292). He addresses the Hindu, asking who has taught the Hindu

[128] Shackle, pp. 153.

‘perverse’ or false teachings of the Vedas. He sandwiches another rhetorical question between these specific addresses that seems to be directed at both the Hindu and the Muslim: Why do you quarrel for no reason? This can be interpreted two ways: why do the Hindu and Muslim quarrel with one another, and why do Hindus and Muslims quarrel with fellow Hindus and Muslims?

In the lines that follow, Bulleh Shah directly invokes Sufi theology and history to reflect on the relationship of the Sufi both with the Sufi path and with the Beloved. Bulleh Shah describes the four stages of the Sufi path: the Law (shari’at), the Way (tariqat), Truth (haqiqat), and Gnosis (ma’rifat). The Law is the nurse or midwife — it delivers the seeker into the world of the Sufi path. It is through shari’a that one becomes a Muslim, following the guidance of which one is bound into the community of Muslims, giving religious significance to one’s daily life, centering one in spirituality despite the multiplicity that surrounds. Shari’a encompasses the outer dimension of one’s spiritual life, and it is the outer dimension that eventually helps to focus one’s attention on the inner dimension of one’s spiritual life. The shari’a is an expression of God’s command for Muslims, and its application involves a system of practices and duties that are incumbent upon Muslims by virtue of their belief, guiding them toward a practical external expression of their religious conviction.

The Way is the mother, who teaches one how to walk the Sufi path. When the Sufi enters the second stage, they begin to embark on a long process of inner transformation. This arduous journey is toward the Truth, or spiritual realization. It is a process in which the seeker seeks to assume the virtues of the Divine, and, through the grace of the Divine, experience the gradual removal of the veil of human nature, the annihilation (*fana’*) of the ego-self (*nafs*) to reveal the Essence of all things, the Divine, within. The third and fourth stages cannot be reached without commitment and dedication to the Law and the Way. Thus, classification of the ‘final stages’

exhibited in Bulleh Shah's poetry — the realization that all divisions and categories are man-made and ought to be transcended — as somehow Vedantic and not deeply Islamic, disregard this important trajectory. Bulleh Shah takes it a step further in emphasizing the importance of this path for each individual who walks it. The final realization of Gnosis cannot be shared or revealed to others. This realization is individual and untranslatable and cannot be understood except through personal experience. It *should not be revealed*. Sufi Mansur al-Hallaj revealed it when, in ecstasy, he proclaimed "I am God" (ana al-Haqq, literally, I am the Truth), proclaiming mystical identity with the Divine. For this proclamation, Mansur became a Sufi martyr, executed for blasphemy in Baghdad in 919. Bulleh Shah ends by urging the listener to awaken to Reality, to extricate themselves from the delusion of duality, to kill the ego. He leaves the listener with the images of 'ain and ghain, letters in the Arabic alphabet that are shaped alike, distinguished only by the dot written above the latter. As Shackle explains, these letters are shaped alike but symbolically opposed, "as the initial letters of 'ain, 'essence,' versus ġhair [allāh], 'other [than God].'"[129] Once the dot is removed from the heart, once the filth within the heart is cleansed, all that is 'other than God' is shown to be of God, of the Essence. There is no difference between Creator and created.

Bulleh Shah plays with the principle of wahdat-al-wujud by using Hindu paradigms to house Muslim ideas, redefining terms to reflect his own understanding of the relationship between the human and the Divine, and weaving in clear references to Qur'anic verses:

> **Kafi 45**
> I will play Holi, after saying bismillāh.
> I wear the name of the Prophet as my jewel, and the
> words *but God* as my pendant. He is the one who
> operates this colorful show, from which the lesson of
> *annihilation in God* is learned.
> When the beloved said, *Am I not your lord*? the girls all

[129] Shackle, pp.378.

> removed their veils. With the words *They said, "Yes,"* they said, *There is no god but God*.
> He played the flute of *We are nearer*, and called out *Whoever has known himself. Then there is the face of God* was loudly proclaimed in the court of God's Apostle.
> I will humbly fold my hands and fall at his feet, and in my helplessness I will entreat him. As my Holi offering, I will fill my lap with the light of Muhammad, *may God's blessing be upon him.*
> I will make *Then remember me* my Holi, and I will delight my beloved with *And be thankful to me*. Such is the beloved to whom I am sacrificed, *glory be to God*.
> The syringe was filled with the dye of God and was squirted on the face of *God the eternal*. The light of the Prophet proceeded from God, the light of Muhammad, *may God's blessing be upon him.* Bullha, the fame of the lord is loudly proclaimed: *There is no god but God.*

Holi is the Hindu spring festival of colors that celebrates the love between the *gopi* (milkmaid) Radha and the god Krishna, and it also acts as a celebration of the triumph of good over evil. *Bismillah* is a decidedly Muslim phrase, meaning "In the name of God," uttered before any undertaking. Bulleh Shah deliberately juxtaposes these two elements and uses the paradigm of Holi as well as references to the Qur'an to reflect on his intimate relationship with the One. The jewel that adorns him is the name of the Prophet Muhammad, and the words *but God*, from the Islamic profession of faith (There is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger) are his pendant. The Divine operates the colorful show of the Holi festival, through which the lesson of *fana*', or the Sufi term for annihilation of the self in the Divine, is learned. The Beloved asks, *Am I not your lord*? This is a reference to Sura al-A'raf (Qur'an 7:172), in which the Divine brings forth the descendants of Adam and asks them to bear witness. Here, the first day of creation is placed in the Panjabi folk paradigm of *Sakhian* and *Sahelian*, or girlfriends, in which all human souls are given a feminine quality and the Divine is given a masculine quality. In bearing witness, it is affirmed again, that there is no God but God, and Muhammad is His messenger.

The imagery of Holi continues, as the Divine inhabits the identity of Krishna, who is often depicted playing a flute. The Divine plays the flute of *We are nearer*, another scriptural allusion to the immanence of the Divine presence in all of creation, from the verse, "We are nearer [to him than his jugular vein]" (Qur'an 50.16). It is due to the perpetual Divine presence within that to know oneself is to know the Divine. *Whoever has known himself* is a reference to the Sufi saying, "man 'arafa nafsahu [fa-qad 'arafa rabbahu]," meaning "whoever has known himself [has known his lord]."[130] Bulleh Shah continues to emphasize the reality of Divine presence by referencing verse 2:115 of the Qur'an: "[Wherever you turn,] then there is the face of God." Bulleh Shah will play Holi, but his offering will be the light of Muhammad.[131] He will play Holi but his Holi will be an act of Remembrance and Gratitude: *Then remember me…and be thankful to me*, from verses 2:152-153 of the Qur'an.[132] In Bulleh Shah's Holi, the tube used to spray colored dye at other people during Holi is filled with the dye of God, such that all who participate in *this* Holi find themselves imbued in Divine color. This references a popular trope in Panjabi poetry that compares being immersed in love with being dyed in the color of the Beloved. When the lover loves the Beloved so deeply, they become of the Beloved, indistinguishable from the Beloved, dyed in the color of the Beloved. Bulleh Shah says this color of the Beloved is being sprayed *onto the face of the Beloved* — a bold declaration of the presence of God in all people, as the lover being imbued in the Beloved's color is still in some way imbuing the Beloved in the Beloved's own color due to the perpetual presence of that Beloved within. Bulleh Shah ends by once again invoking the Prophet Muhammad and the *shahada,* the profession of faith central to Islam. Thus, the argument that even if Bulleh Shah was a Muslim,

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[130] Shackle, pp. 144.
[131] Shackle explains that "God's blessing be upon him" is a reference to ṣallā 'llāhu ['alaihi], which is added onto any mention of the Prophet. In modern English usage, this is often abbreviated as (pbuh), or "peace be upon him."
[132] "Then remember me [and I will remember you]. And be grateful to me [and do not be ungrateful toward me]" (Shackle 144).

his Sufism meant he was engaging in a sort of esoteric and ungrounded 'spiritual but not religious' practice, does not ring true. As this and the previous poem have demonstrated, the Sufi path is inextricably tied to a grounding in the foundations of Islam, shari'a, and the Qur'an. It is not possible to lift the veil of illusion and duality without this foundation.[133]

The Unity of Many-ness and Neither-ness: Bulleh, How can I know who I am?

Just as the One manifests in many forms and hues, Bulleh Shah, in an effort to reflect the many-faced Beloved, reflects on the various identities he has inhabited in search of the One:

Kafi 8 (excerpt)
Now why, beloved, have you taken so long?
What came into my mind to banish all ideas of sorrow and
joy? I set my finery on fire. You have lit a blaze in my
heart.
After hearing such words of wisdom, all names and forms
are mysterious. I cry out through the nights like a *koil*
bird, but you still have not felt pity.
Wearing a deerskin and carrying a skull, I went to beg for
a sight of you. Calling myself a yogini, I wore my hair
long and rubbed ashes on my body.
Love acted as muezzin and gave the call to prayer. They
get up and run there, since it is their religious duty.
They perform their prostrations, then race home,
where you have made your forehead their *mihrab*.

All names and forms of the Divine are mysterious, as is the mystery of separation from the Divine. Bulleh Shah inhabits the identity of the pied cuckoo, the *koil*, who in South Asian poetry comes to symbolize the painful yearning of the lover in search of the Beloved. The pied cuckoo is said to wait for a particular raindrop from a particular constellation in the sky, unwilling to drink anything else, crying out in pain until its thirst is quenched. Bulleh Shah ambles on, in search of the Beloved. He wears a deerskin and carries a skull, donning the garb of a Yogi. He grows his hair out and covers himself in ashes, and calls himself a Yogini (female Yogi), playing

[133] For another example of Bulleh Shah's weaving of Qur'anic references into his poetry, see Kafi 28 in Shackle.

with gender as well as religious garb. Love calls the lovers to prayer, and they pray to the One whose forehead has become the direction of prayer, or *mihrab,* rather than the direction of the Ka'ba. Here, Bulleh embodies the idea of many-ness, or multiplicity, in his desperate search for union with the Beloved who manifests in multiplicity. But this Beloved is also ultimately the only Existent, and all manifestations of unicity are illusions. Thus, Bulleh also endeavors to embody a sense of neither-ness, in which categories are dissolved in favor of the realization of the unity of existence, or Absolute Oneness:

Kafi 40
I am not a Hindu, nor a Muslim. I have forsaken pride
and become unsullied.
I am not a Sunni, nor a Shia. I have adopted the path of
peace toward all.
I am not hungry, nor am I full. I am not naked, nor am
I covered.
I do not weep, nor do I laugh. I am not ruined, nor do
I flourish.
I am not a sinner, nor am I virtuous. I do not know about
the path of sin and merit.
Bullhe Shah, the mind that is fixed on God leaves behind
the duality of Hindu and Turk.

As Shackle points out, kafi 40 seems to be modeled after Rumi's Persian ghazal which begins, "What can I do, oh Muslims, for I do not know myself. I am not a Christian nor a Jew, not a Zoroastrian nor a Muslim."[134] Bulleh Shah lists common categories that are placed in opposition to one another: Hindu and Muslim/Turk, Sunni and Shia. He refers to opposite states of being: hungry and full, naked and covered. He refers to opposite emotions and designations: weeping and laughter, ruined and flourishing, sinner and virtuous. In abandoning the ego, in walking the path of annihilation of the self, these categories and boundaries come to dissolve.

[134] Shackle, pp. 142.

I would be remiss to leave out one of Bulleh Shah's most popular kafis, made even more popular by Rabbi Shergill's 2005 rendition. Bulleh Shah, in his self-address, reflects on who he is:

Kafi 106
Bullha, what do I know about who I am?
I am not a believer in the mosques, nor do I follow the rites
of unbelief. I am not among the pure or the polluted.
I am not Moses or Pharaoh.
I am not in the Vedas or in the scriptures; I am not in
drugs or in liquor. I am not among the drunken
reprobates. I am not in waking, nor am I in sleep.
I am not in joy or in sadness, nor am I in pollution or
purity. I am not of water or of earth, nor am I fire
or air.
I am neither an Arab nor from Lahore, nor an Indian from
the city of Nagaur. I am not a Hindu, nor a Turk
from Peshawar. Nor do I live in Nadaun.
I have not discovered the secret of religion; nor am I born
of Adam and Eve. I have not given myself a name; nor
am I found in sitting or moving about.
I know myself to be first and last, I do not recognize
anyone else. No one is wiser than I am. Bullha,
who is the lord standing here?

In a similar theme to Kafi 40, Bulleh Shah lists all the things he is not. He is not a believer or unbeliever (a binary usually used in the context of Islam), pure or polluted (a binary usually invoked in the context of Hinduism). He is not Moses, nor is he the Pharoah who persecuted Moses. He is not in the Vedas or the *kitaban*, the four sacred books of the Semitic tradition. He is not in a state of wakefulness or sleep, joy or sadness, pollution or purity. He is not of water or earth, fire or air, he is not an Arab or an Indian, a Hindu or a Muslim. In fact, he is not even born of Adam and Eve. It is as if Bulleh Shah has finally experienced one of the small deaths of self in the ever-arduous journey of the Sufi, of the lover making his way toward the Beloved until there is not difference between the two — until the self has disappeared altogether.

The popularity of this poem has arguably led to the simplification of its message as an expression of overwhelm with category and an abstention from religious or spiritual commitment

of any kind. This reading becomes about indifference rather than the passionate concern with the Eternal that Bulleh Shah the lover expresses in his works. Bulleh Shah undertakes a deep questioning of the self in the shape of a riddle, playful in tone. The poet seems to simultaneously occupy both the persona of an adult posing the riddle, and that of a child who is in a state of bewilderment at the riddle. In his bewilderment, he works toward a conclusion through reflection while maintaining a sense of curiosity and open-endedness. Scholar Najm Husain Sayyid suggests that the opening riddle is itself open-ended, as it can be interpreted three possible ways: 1. How do I know who I am? 2. How do I know who He is? 3. How can I know the who-ness?[135]

The 'I' here comes to be a signifier for all humans endeavoring to understand I-ness in relation to the One, or in relation to Oneness. Who are we at our very essence? Who is the Divine? Bulleh Shah, in exploring this question, conjures up the panorama of human experience that convinces us of the reality of binaries and categories. In an effort to know who we are, we search for identity and affiliation with broad categories. But each of these levels of experience with identity and affiliation continue to deceive us, as we come to conclusions about who we are rooted in "a dogma, an institution, a belief, a value, an attitude, or a relationship."[136] Thus, these experiences themselves are negated and dismissed, and the listener is left with a sense of the state of bewilderment or madness that Bulleh Shah has entered into in his exploration of the initial question, and his experience of Absolute Oneness.

Either of these kafis read on their own could lead one to conclude that Bulleh Shah is a kind of secularist or humanist, advocating for a noncommittal and dead oneness and peace. But this understanding misses the clearly Islamic foundations that have made the realizations and experiences he expresses within these kafis possible, and the deep commitment to shari'a and the

[135] Sayyid, pp. 70 — 72.
[136] Ibid, pp. 79.

Qur'an displayed in his other works. To take Bulleh Shah in his entirety is to put his verses in conversation with one another, and to understand that his intense concern with the Ultimate and Eternal is explored primarily through his Muslim-ness, even as he plays with images, tropes, and identities that are outside the broad category of 'Muslim,' even as he understands the transcendence of worldly religious identities, practices, rituals, and disciplines for something Vaster.

Conclusion

Christopher Shackle writes that as modernist interpretations of Islam came to replace active affiliations to Sufism, twentieth-century understandings of Bulleh Shah and the other Sufi poets were "increasingly influenced by the nationalist thinking prevalent among the new middle class of the colonial period."[137] In Panjab, the constructions of nationalist understandings of self and of religious community were complicated by the simultaneous use of three languages that are closely intertwined — Urdu, Hindi, and Panjabi — whose differences were emphasized and manipulated to create and exacerbate a sense of rivalry between the religious and cultural identities of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, respectively. Thus, as an important figure in these new constructions of Panjabi literary history, Bulleh Shah and his corpus(es) became one of the centers of the continued battle over identity and interpretation.

As is the case with Kabir, Bulleh Shah's works contain elements associated with both Islam and Hinduism, from vocabulary to imagery to self-description. His poetry questions the hypocrisy of religious authorities and criticizes thoughtless ritual. Bulleh Shah favors an inner experience of Divinity and the willful engagement in the play between lover and Beloved, of

[137] Shackle, pp. xi.

separation, longing, and union. Due to the perceived paradoxes contained within his corpus, much debate has surrounded his religious identity, with scholars like Robin Rinehart arguing against an attempt at categorization altogether, instead choosing to label him as syncretic. Others argue that because he pulls from various traditions in his own works, Bulleh Shah transcended the category of religion altogether and is a passionate secularist. Interpreters curate their own ideas of who Bulleh Shah was through various signifiers, attempting to categorize him as a Vedantic Sufi, as a Muslim who adhered to shari'a, or as a Sufi who was disinterested in the "dry legalism" of Islam. Although the borders or boundaries of his corpus are themselves amorphous and fluid, as are the ways in which various communities relate to and understand him, Bulleh Shah is unambiguously Sufi in his self-conception and presentation.

Bulleh Shah in his own words makes clear that he has a deep and meaningful relationship with Islamic law and scripture in the form of shari'a and Qur'an, and that he takes seriously the Sufi path, which in turn takes seriously the commitment to shari'a as the first of the four stages of the Sufi path, necessary in the pursuit of Gnosis. William Chittick explains that the highest stage of human perfection is referred to as the station of no station (*maqam la maqam*) because those who reach it participate in every attribute of God, but cannot be limited or defined by any of those attributes. It is as if they can see with one eye their own created uniqueness, and with the other, their identity *with* God. They are able to witness themselves as both in union and in separation, near to God and far from Him, real and unreal, existent and nonexistent. In one respect "they manifest all divine attributes, in another, they conceal them all." It is this station of no station that embodies all contradictions and tensions between the declaration of the incomparability (*tanzih*) and inaccessibility of God, and the similarity (*tashbih*) and nearness of

God.[138] Bulleh Shah's work, faithful to his Sufi practice, arguably inhabits this sense of contradiction, as he explores Oneness, many-ness, and neither-ness through the locus of the self — as he slips into various categories of identity in order to better understand the Reality of Absolute Unity, in which all categories dissolve. Understanding the 'self' or the 'I' as a locus of Divine manifestation allows one to transcend communalism and category and the boundaries of religious identity. Anyone can experience this Unity beyond institutions, rituals, and categories of Sikh-ness, Muslim-ness, or Hindu-ness. For Bulleh Shah, that experience is pursued through his commitment to the Sufi path. His emphasis on devotion can be read as an outright rejection of orthodoxy, or it can be read as a critique of those who go through the motions of prescribed rituals externally without cultivating any internal devotion, virtues, or connection to these external acts. We are urged to cultivate authentic piety, no matter who we are, no matter what path we have chosen.

In India's present political and religious climate, participation, exchange, and the permeability of religious boundaries are increasingly seen as a force of dilution that threatens one's own religious identity. In other words, to engage with other religious categories in a world of hardened boundaries is to dilute one's own Hindu-ness, Muslim-ness, or Sikh-ness. But Bulleh Shah, through his poetry, inhabits religious ritual or practice of a diverse array of communities, understanding these identities and experiences as at once particular and universal. In this current climate, we can turn to Bulleh Shah to remind ourselves of the value of finding spiritual worth in another's religious practice, and exchanging ideas and paradigms to help us better understand our own. This was part of his world, and it took root in his poetry, as he borrowed language, principles, imagery, and practice from others. Bulleh Shah exemplifies for his listeners what it

[138] Chittick, William C.. "Ibn 'Arabi." *History of Islamic Philosophy,* edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Oliver Leaman. Routledge, 1996. pp. 501.

means to take one's own religious practice seriously, to refuse a denial of the *reality* of categories of identity, but to also understand that at the level of the spirit or the soul, there is no ultimate difference between any of us.

Chapter 3: The Unambiguous Shaiva Yogini Tradition of Lalla

Life and Background

Lal Ded was a 14th century Kashmiri poet and mystic whose names are many: Lalla ‘Arifa for Muslims, Lalleshwari for Hindus, and Lalla for Kashmiris at large. Lal Ded is her most common name, used by people of all religious backgrounds. In this chapter, I will refer to her interchangeably as both Lal Ded and Lalla. Lalla lived during a period in Kashmir’s history that was marked by shifts in power, social change, and the establishment of the Kashmiri Sultanate (1320-1586) — the first time that Kashmir was ruled by a Muslim dynasty. In the centuries preceding her, Kashmir was a center of Buddhism and Buddhist institutions, which later gave way to the rise of Shaiva and Shakta sects from the ninth to eleventh centuries.[139] The fourteenth century was yet another time of great transformation of Kashmiri society and identity. It was in this context that Lalla explored her individual spiritual journey and expressed her experiences through poetry, rebelling against the caste system, taking to task social and religious discrimination, and coming to be cherished by Hindus and Muslims alike as a saint, spiritual leader, and teacher. Lalla has become a sort of symbol of *Kashmiriyat*, or indigenous Kashmiri culture, integral to which is the rich tradition of interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue, connections, and influence, against the increasingly common communalism that has come to permeate South Asian society.

Lal Ded’s poetic and spiritual legacy has also become subject to this kind of communalism and the fight for absolute ownership, increasingly taking the shape of mutually exclusive interpretive frames of Kashmiri Hindu and Kashmiri Muslim nationalism, especially

[139] Accardi, Dean. “Embedded Mystics: Writing Lal Ded and Nund Rishi into the Kashmiri Landscape.” *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation*, edited by Chitralekha Zutshi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, pp. 252.

since the eruption of political turmoil and communal violence in Kashmir in the late 1980s.[140] In framings by interpreters and scholars, Lalla takes many forms. The vast majority of existing scholarship identifies Lal Ded as part of the lineage of medieval Trika or Kashmir Shaivism.[141] Some frame her as a great unifier, bringing together Hindu and Muslim Kashmiris at a time of great transition. Others argue that she is a wholly syncretic figure who brought about a synthesis of the Trika and Sufi philosophies.[142] Others argue that there is no evidence of this synthesis in any of her writing.[143] Some say she was *originally* a Hindu who came to be influenced by Sufi thought, and that after her contact with Shah Hamadan and other Muslim saints, her verses came to expressly reflect Muslim thought.[144] Some works omit mention of her possible interactions with Sufis entirely. Some mention accounts that point to the possibility of Lalla engaging in discourse with Sufis, but dismiss or attempt to disprove them. Some accept the possibility of Lalla interacting with Sufis *with the condition* that there is absolutely no way that the Sufis had any real or lasting impact on her poetry or on her spiritual journey as a Trika Shaiva Hindu Yogini.[145]

Regardless of where scholars make their arguments, the broad category of scholarship surrounding Lalla's work does tell us that in spite of the tireless and age-old forces of fear, otherness, and hate, the exchange of thought persisted. Spiritual discourse did continue through Kashmir's history, and different philosophies and religious communities *did* interact and

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[140] Kashmir has long been a political football in the geopolitical games of India and Pakistan. 1986 saw the Anantnag riots, in which Kashmiri Hindu homes and shops were attacked and Hindu Temples vandalized and set ablaze. 1989 saw a mass exodus of Kashmiri Hindus. Ibid 253.
[141] For examples of scholarship that identifies Lal Ded as a Hindu within the medieval lineage of Kashmir or Trika Saivism, see Richard Carnac Temple, Jayalal Kau, and BN Parimoo.
[142] Bazaz, Prem Nath. *Daughters of the Vitasta: A History of Kashmiri Women from Early Times to the Present Day.* India, Pamposh Publications, 1959, pp. 129.
[143] Kaul, Jai Lal. *Lal Ded.* Sahitya Akademi, 1973, pp. 70.
[144] Sufi, G. M. D.. *Kashīr, Being a History of Kashmir from the Earliest Times to Our Own.* India, Light & Life Publishers, 1974, pp.383 — 385.
[145] Accardi, Dean. "Orientalism and the Invention of Kashmiri Religion(s)." International Journal of Hindu Studies, vol. 22, no. 3, 1 Dec. 2018, pp. 426.

mutually affect one another. We venture into dangerous territory when we attempt to say that it was only through the interaction with Islam that Lalla was able to reach new heights, or that it was only through interacting with Lalla's Shaivism that Sufis were able to reach new heights. Here, it is helpful to recall Robin Rinehart's work on Bulleh Shah and her contemplation on the danger of the language of 'influence,' resulting in a kind of de facto hierarchization in terms of who is influencing whom.

In this last chapter, I will explore the life and works of Lal Ded, who, like Bulleh Shah, is not ambiguous in her presentation of her religious identity within her poetry. Ranjit Hoskote, in his translation of Lal Ded's poetry, writes that since the late 1980s, the study of her poetry has gone through sectarian polarization between Kashmiri Pandit and Kashmiri Muslim scholars, and these groups "hold diametrically opposed visions of Kashmiri culture, literature, religious life and identity. Some of the former claim Lalla exclusively for Kashmir Śaivism and reject any hint of Islamic influence on her beliefs."[146] Among most contemporary scholars, it is agreed upon that Lal Ded was a Hindu Shaiva yogini. But like Bulleh Shah, her *reception* is fluid and permeable, partially due to her strong relationship with the Sufis of Kashmir through her friendship and discourse with Nund Rishi. She adopts particular imagery that is associated with Persian poetry and Sufi works, and she has no issue incorporating these idioms and languages into her works. She gains insights into spiritual life through other practices from the Islamic context. It is this incorporation that is either downplayed or overplayed by some scholars, in an attempt to erase any history of dialogue with Sufi thought and practice, or to induct her into Kashmir's early Sufi culture, erasing her Shaivism altogether. This becomes increasingly relevant as the trend since the late 1980s has been toward the hardening of boundaries between religious identities and

[146] Dĕd, Lal and Hoskote, Ranjit. *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Dĕd*. India, Penguin Books Limited, 2013, pp. 39.

communities and a tug-of-war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir as being more legitimately Hindu or more legitimately Muslim. There is less room for the simultaneity of practice and claim as was common during the time of Lalla. There is less room for the simultaneity of the multifaceted constructions of Lalleshvari or Lalla Yogini or Lal ‘Arifa. Suddenly, it seems, people have decided that only one of these names, only one of these versions of Lalla, can be true. Now, these names, earlier meant to encompass the ways in which Kashmiri saints were revered and shared across boundaries of religious identity, are being “increasingly promoted at the expense of one another.”[147]

Spiritual Exchange: Discourse with the Sufis and the Fluid Reception of the Corpus

Given that Kashmir is now a Muslim-majority region, it is worth noting that Lalla is said to have known Nund Rishi or Sheikh Nur-ud-din Wali (1379—1442) from the time he was a baby, with many hagiographical accounts mentioning that Nund Rishi’s mother was known to Lalla. Anand Koul writes that Lalla said to Nund Rishi’s mother, Sạdru’ Moj, whose first name meant “ocean” in Kashmiri: Soḍras hē chhu mokhtu’ nẏerān (pearls come only out of the ocean).[148] In another story, Nund Rishi as an infant is said to have refused to breastfeed. Lal Ded was asked to help get the infant to latch, and uttered the following now popular Kashmiri saying: “You were not ashamed to be born and yet you are ashamed to suckle from your mother’s breast,” which it is said to have caused Nund Rishi to begin breastfeeding.[149] Another version of this popular account says that when Nund Rishi was born, he, out of his ascetic nature, refused to breastfeed from his birth mother. He was becoming weaker and weaker, and Lal Ded overheard

[147] Hoskote, pp. 13.
[148] Koul, Pandit Anand. “A Life of Nand Rishi.” *The Indian Antiquary*. 1929, pp.196.
[149] Kaul, pp. 18.

his crying as she wandered by. She entered his parents' home and, after chastising him, breastfed him herself.[150] In this way, the life and hagiography of Nund Rishi has been entwined with that of Lal Ded in the collective consciousness of Kashmiris. Nund Rishi is seen as Lalla's spiritual offspring, and she as his first teacher, who (literally and figuratively) nourished and guided him.

These stories, and many others contained in hagiographical accounts, weave Kashmiri Shaivism together with the Islamic mystical tradition to which Nund Rishi belonged. Lal Ded is not only regarded as a foundational figure by the Rishi Order of Kashmiri Sufism, which was initiated by Nund Rishi, seen by many as her spiritual son, but she is also woven into the stories and accounts of Suhrawardi Sufis of the Valley. Her association with Nund Rishi and the Rishi Order as well as other Sufis in Kashmir has in part caused fluidity in her reception, and disagreements over her perceived religious identity.

The earliest archival records on Lal Ded are not contained within written collections of her poetry from the mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries. Instead, the earliest records of Lal Ded are contained within Persian hagiographical accounts (*tazkira*) recorded over 150 years after her death. These accounts are found in Muhammad 'Ali Raina's *Tazkirat al-'Arafin* (1587), in which narration of an interaction between Lal Ded and Nund Rishi is recorded:

> The Exemplar of the Gnostics, the Best of Lovers, an Enraptured One among the Partisans of the Reality of God, the Honorable Second Rabi'a, Bibi Lallamaji — the mercy of God be upon her — although she had the form of a woman, she in fact surpassed noteworthy men. One day while traveling naked and passing Hazrat Nur al-Din [Nund Rishi] — may his grave be hallowed — he stood to honor and serve her.[151]

But her interactions with Nund Rishi are not the only narratives present. Most of the subsequent accounts within the Tazkirat also narrate Lalla's interactions with Suhrawardi Sufis. Within these accounts, the common theme is of mutual respect. In one account, Sufi Jalal al-Din Makhdum

[150] Accardi (2018), pp. 250.
[151] Ibid.

Jahaniyan Jahangasht al-Bukhari undergoes a mystical experience with Lal Ded, and recognizes that she is more spiritually advanced than him. He asks for her blessing, they engage in spiritual discourse, exchanging methods and ideas, and he grants her his *ijazat*, or spiritual license so that she may pass on his teachings to future Suhrawardi Sufis.[152] As Dean Accardi explains, it is actually doubtful whether Makhdum Jahaniyan ever made his way to Kashmir, but these stories are indelibly a part of the collective and widely-known narrative of Lalla and the Sufis. David Lorenzen also mentions that there are some accounts that assert Lalla and Nund Rishi never met, and he simply appropriated her in his works. Both Lorenzen and Accardi choose to refrain from debate about what can be proven and instead take the story of Lal Ded and the Sufis in its own terms, as understood by the everyday Kashmiri. What is the purpose of this interweaving? Lalla's spirituality comes to be framed as surpassing that of other noteworthy saints of her period, and acts a conduit or 'spiritual amplifier' of prominent Sufis, tying them both to the larger Kashmiri story, and to the land of Kashmir. In other words, Lalla, who is of the land, who wandered the land, who had spiritual experiences with the creatures of the land, is linked to the Sufis of Kashmir, integrating them into the story of Kashmir and embedding them into the land.[153]

This is evident in the legacy of Lal Ded being undivorceable from that of Nund Rishi, as Kashmiris venerate both saints in conjunction with one another, and have for almost five centuries. Lalla and Nund Rishi are so deeply tied to Kashmiri identity that their names are used for Kashmiri institutions (airports, hospitals, schools, colleges), and their poems are often recited before Kashmiri cultural events and festivals.[154] Nund Rishi is known to have spoken of Lalla

[152] Accardi (2018), pp. 412 — 413.
[153] Ibid, pp. 414.
[154] Accardi (2017), pp. 250.

with deep reverence, acknowledging the commonly understood lineage of which he is a part, describing her as an *avatara* (divine incarnation, embodiment of spiritual perfection), and expressing a desire to follow in her footsteps:

> That Lalla of Padmanpore
> who had drunk the fill of nectar,
> She was an avatara of ours.
> O God, grant me the same spiritual power.[155]

Lalla is understood to be a foundational figure or spiritual mother of the Rishi Order. The Rishi Order itself exists in constant state of transgressing religious borders, though it is commonly understood to be Sufi.[156] Nur-ud-din and his followers chose to lead celibate lives (uncommon for Sufis), abstained from meat, avoided injuring animals or plants, withdrew themselves from society in favor of caves or forests, and utilized a vocabulary drawn from both the Kashmir Shaivite and Islamic systems. They practiced both to solitary meditation as well as collective devotion, and their followers continue to convene around a constellation of *khanaqahs* or *ziyarats* (shrine complexes that contain mosques, meditation halls, and tombs of saints). As Ranjit Hoskote states, this robust regional tradition continues to remain strong in Kashmir, despite the hardening of boundaries of religious identity, insurgency and warfare, the strong-arm tactics of the Indian State, and the endless cycles of civil unrest and the loss of life, Muslim and Hindu.[157]

What is noteworthy about the narratives around Lalla and the Sufis is that nowhere is she said to have converted to Islam. Her spiritual superiority is clearly a part of her *before* she encounters the Sufis, and in the Persian hagiographies, where she is praised as a saint, she

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[155] Kaul, pp. 29.
[156] Dean Accardi points out that even Nur-ud-din's choice of the term 'Rishi' for his Sufi order and his disciples seems to be a conscious decision to tie his ascetic spiritual practice to the ascetic rishis of Kashmir's past. Accardi argues that this invocation of pre-Islamic rishis illustrates a distinct kind of inter-religious understanding that despite differences in label and practice, all mystics are pursuing connection with the Divine within one coherent universal cosmos, corresponding to the same universal truth. For more, see Accardi (2017), pp. 247.
[157] Hoskote, pp. 23.

continues to be acknowledged as a non-Muslim who "stood toe-to-toe with the greatest Sufis of her time." Despite not being Muslim, she was deliberately woven into the spiritual lineages of the Sufis, as they sought to affiliate themselves with her, with her spiritual authority, and with her connection to the land of Kashmir.[158] The understanding underlying this interweaving is that Lalla's Shaiva Yogini tradition is not a threat to the 'Muslim-ness" of the Sufis who have tied themselves to her. It is instead a thing of great value — an opportunity for the Sufis of Kashmir to learn new methods, new ideas, and new ways of exploring their own spiritual paths. Lalla and her Shaiva Yogini tradition are an important conduit for this dialogue, and to erase her own religious identity would be doing a disservice to the value of the interreligious dialogue in which she partook. Regardless of debates over which Sufis she could have met, what can be proven and what cannot be proven, the narrative of Lalla and the Sufis is potent and integral to the larger story of Kashmir. As Lorenzen points out, to suggest that Lal Ded did not interact at all with Muslims or engage in discourse with the Sufis of Kashmir is to uproot her from her own social environment, "which was undoubtedly exposed to Islamic Influences centuries before the establishment of the Sultanate in AD 1320." Lal Ded was a wandering mystic with an open mind, Lorenzen writes, so one wonders how she could have "shut her eyes to the presence of contemporaries like Saiyid Husain Simnami, Saiyid Tajuddin, and Saiyid 'Ali Hamadani."[159]

Lal Ded and Nund Rishi carry so much significance for contemporary Kashmiris because of the narrative of spiritual discourse and exchange that ties them together, and the dynamic relationship between mystical traditions that all called Kashmir home. The lives of Lalla and Nund Rishi serve as a reminder of the time of the Kashmiri Sultanate (a period many Kashmiris

[158] Accardi (2018), pp. 414.
[159] Lorenzen, David. "The Rishi Movement as a Social Force in Medieval Kashmir." *Religious Movements in South Asia 600-1800.* India, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 134.

identify as 'the last time Kashmiris were ruled by Kashmiris),[160] and a reminder of the significance of Kashmiriyat, or the notion that Kashmir has a uniquely Kashmiri heritage classified by non-communalism and harmony.[161] Lal Ded and Nund Rishi's lives and legacies are embedded in the landscape of Kashmir, and remain central and integral parts of Kashmiri identity and self-understanding. Tying themselves to the stories of a time in which communalism seemed foreign, Kashmiris see Lalla and Nund Rishi as the greatest exemplars of Hindu-Muslim harmony even as their present realities seem to fall further and further into religious disharmony.

The Life and Politics of the Corpus

Lal Ded's poems are referred to as *vakhs*, or utterances, and are among the earliest known manifestations of Kashmiri literature. A total of 258 vakhs attributed to Lalla have circulated in Kashmiri popular culture since the fourteenth century. Ranjit Hoskote writes in his introduction to his translations of Lalla's verses that her vakhs "bear the definite imprint of an ongoing process of linguistic and cultural change, which is recorded at the level of form, imagery, concept and vocabulary."[162] Lalla's works first traveled through oral transmission, just as was the case with Kabir and Bulleh Shah. The vakhs were circulated and maintained by various reciters, Hindu and Muslim, using Kashmiri in a "space of relative freedom and play."[163]

Later, her vakhs made their way into the written word, and oral 'text' was subordinated to the approach of the priestly Brahmin class and their compilers and commentators. These Brahmins, whose practices Lalla criticized heavily in her verses, used Sanskrit and Hindi to "emphasize Lalla's philosophical convictions and draw traditional moral conclusions from her

[160] Many advocates of Kashmiriyat claim that non-Kashmiri rulers over Kashmir brought with them divisive social, political, and religious ideologies that produced and perpetuated the violence and conflict in Kashmir that continues in the present.
[161] Accardi (2017), pp. 247.
[162] Hoskote, pp. xi.
[163] Ibid, pp. xii.

often unorthodox teachings." Thus, it is at the moment of recording that the politics of the written word come into play, much like we saw with Bhagat Kabir's works. Then came the print sphere, in which the text was further codified and formatted within the standards of modern scholarship by various compilers and editors. This looked like colonial scholars and South Asian scholars using various languages (English, Kashmiri, Urdu, and Hindi) to translate, interpret, and make particular claims about Lalla's religious life. Just as in the case of Kabir, Lalla's words were not immune to the politics of print. Conceptions of nation, society, and history were being simultaneously constructed by different communities, and the fluidity and simultaneity of the oral tradition came to be overshadowed by the move toward standardized print editions that were given an air of authority. As Hoskote explains in his introduction, the rivalry of claims surrounding print versions of Lalla's vakhs were "exacerbated by the political and cultural crisis that erupted in 1989 in Kashmir" and continue today.[164]

The politics of the corpus play out in translation as well. Dean Accardi explores *Lalla-Vakyani,* the landmark English translation of Lalla's vakhs, published by George Grierson and Lionel D. Barnett in 1920. This translation was done in collaboration with Mukund Ram Shastri who was principally employed by the Hindu Dogra-ruled state of Jammu and Kashmir as part of their Research and Publication Department. Accardi argues that the version of Lal Ded depicted in this translation "reconstructs Kashmir's culture and past as Hindu, Romantic, feminine, and Sanskritic, a reconstruction that simultaneously served the interests of Orientalist scholarship and Dogra rule," and distorted Lalla's multilayered identity and legacy. It omitted the Lalla depicted in the 16th century Persian hagiographies and recast both her and the cultural heritage of Kashmir as exclusively Hindu. Kashmiri Shaiva Hinduism was framed as the "true" religion of Kashmir,

[164] Ibid.

and any connection (religious, historical, or social) with Islam was effaced — serving the political agenda of the Dogra court.[165] The effects of this were an increased demarcation of Hindu and Muslim in hard-lined categories that are distinct and mutually exclusive, incapable of interreligious dialogue and understanding.[166] This trend has continued, Hoskote explains, as the late 1980s saw the study of Lalla's poetry going through a gradual sectarian polarization between Kashmiri Pandit and Kashmiri Muslim scholars who "hold diametrically opposed visions of Kashmiri culture, literature, religious life and identity." Some of the Pandit scholars claim Lalla exclusively for Kashmir Shaivism and reject any evidence of Islamic influence on her beliefs or any possible interaction with Sufism, citing her invocations of Yogic symbolism and descriptions of spiritual practice in her verses. Some of the Muslim scholars attempt to incorporate Lalla exclusively into Kashmir's Sufi ethos, arguing that her liberatory teachings could not have been born out of a Hindu mileu, and pointing out that the earliest references to her occur in Sufi hagiographies and Persian chronicles written by Muslims, thus delegitimizing those sources as providers of unreliable data points.[167]

What then of the corpus? Much like the framing around Bhagat Kabir's corpus, Ranjit Hoskote argues that the poetry that has made its way to us under Lal Ded's name is not the work of an individual, rather, "it has been produced over many centuries" by what he terms a "contributory lineage," which he defines as "a sequence of assemblies comprising people of varied religious affiliations and of [all] genders, representing the experience of various age groups and social locations, including both literate and unlettered, reciters and scribes, redactors

[165] Accardi (2018), pp. 411.
[166] Ibid pp. 412. Scholars Mridu Rai and Chitralekha Zutshi have explored the dynamics between the Dogra Court and the various religious communities of Muslim-majority Kashmir in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Dogra Court focused on continuing to construct Hindu religious identity as synonymous with Kashmiri heritage even as the majority of the population was Muslim. For more, see pp. 425.
[167] Hoskote, pp. xxvii.

and commentators."[168] Just as we follow Accardi and Lorenzen in engaging with hagiographical accounts in their own terms, we follow Hoskote in engaging with the corpus in its own terms. As with the corpus of Kabir and Bulleh Shah, I will work with Lal Ded's corpus as a separate and alive thing, a collaboration of the audiences and communities through which her work has been passed, adopted, and incorporated into religious practice and understanding, encompassing a literary persona "serving in part to organize a living archive."[169] I will think with Sonam Kachru and Jane Mikkelson, who understand Lalla's utterances as multiforms, embracing them as sites of variance rather than being "plagued by variants," and as sites that create space for "differences of language and culture to be brought into view and experienced."[170] In the pursuit of understanding these utterances, we must first briefly familiarize ourselves with Kashmiri Shaivism.

Kashmiri Shaivism

Lal Ded's thought belongs within the family of teachings understood generally as Kashmir Shaivism, the "commentarial tradition of the Trika school including Vasugupta (c. 875—925) and Abhinavagupta (c. 975—1025)."[171] Central to the Kashmir Shaiva systems is a notion of *atman* (the self) that holds *shakti* (power) of *spanda* (pulsation or vibration). The ultimate Reality is transcendent, and understood to be *Shiva* or *chit* (pure consciousness). *Shakti* is immanent in creation, and acts as the link between microcosm and macrocosm. Kashmiri Shaivism holds that the entire existing universe of matter and energy (Shakti) is a manifestation

[168] Ibid, pp. xxxiii.
[169] Kachru, Sonam, and Jane Mikkelson. "The Mind Is Its Own Place: Of Lalla's Comparative Poetics." University of Toronto Quarterly, vol. 88, no. 2, 1 Apr. 2019, pp. 126.
[170] Ibid, pp. 127 — 128.
[171] Roberts, Michelle Voss, and Michelle Voss Roberts. "Flowing and Crossing: the Somatic Theologies of Mechthild and Lalleśwarī." Journal of the American Academy of Religion, vol. 76, no. 3, 1 Jan. 2008, pp. 642.

or emanation of universal consciousness (Shiva), real, transcendent, and eternal. Thus, the external world is not *unreality*, but instead *Maya* or illusion is considered to be a power or manifestation of Shiva, a veil which conceals Reality from the individual mind. One can remove the veil of Maya through true knowledge (*jnana*), and recognize the Reality of all that is manifested. Spiritual attainment occurs through the discovery of one's own self, and the recognition of the individual self as the universal self. As the embodiment of Divine consciousness, one's true self *is* the universal Self, Shiva. The self shares the attributes of the universal Self, but these attributes are concealed through the illusions of worldly life, and can only be brought out through self-knowledge and discipline.[172]

Poetry and Poetic Themes

In her vakhs, Lal Ded effortlessly switches between awestruck epiphany and blunt provocation, vulnerability in expressing her doubts and bold assured expressions of the insights she has gained through her own reflection. Like Kabir, she can be straightforward and even demanding of the Divine, asking the Divine to reveal Itself. Lalla yearns, laments in her separation, demands union, demands presence, and speaks from various registers of passion, impatience, irritability, bewilderment, and love. She urges the listener toward the complex and laborious task of knowing the self, advocating for the view that self-knowledge is greater than any ritual observance or asceticism. She criticizes the scholar fixated only on scripture, unwilling to move into a pursuit of and individual experience of Divinity. She goes after the priest who "cages his god in a routine of prayers," and she is critical of the renunciates "austere mortification" of the body.[173] Although not as common in her corpus as it is in Kabir's, she

[172] Ibid, pp. 648.
[173] Hoskote, pp. xxxiii.

engages with the Brahmin priests, asking (or demanding) that they rethink their practices and awaken to the nonsensical ritual in which they take part:

> Vakh 58
> God is stone, the temple is stone,
> head to foot, all stone.
> Hey priest-man, what's the object of your worship?
> Get your act together, join mind with life-breath.[174]
>
> Vakh 59
> It covers your shame, keeps you from shivering.
> Grass and water are all the food it asks.
> Who taught you, priest-man,
> to feed this breathing thing to your thing of stone?[175]

In these utterances, Lal Ded confronts the priests and critiques the practices of idol worship and animal sacrifice. In vakh 58, She dismisses the idol and the temple as being of mere stone and emphasizes that the Divine presence can be felt through joining the mind with life-breath — what Hoskote understands as the Yogic practice of *pranagnihotra,* or the "offering of the body's awakened vital energies."[176] In vakh 59, she criticizes the priest for sacrificing a lamb as an offering to the gods. She emphasizes the usefulness of the lamb — its offerings of wool used to create garments that cover the naked body and keep it warm — and the simplicity of the lamb's life (only needing grass and water to survive). She juxtaposes this with the cruelty of the priest who kills the lamb for sacrifice, and the uselessness, wastefulness, and ingratitude of that act. The life of the lamb, the breathing thing, is so starkly placed up against to the coldness and deadness of the stone. In fact, the lamb is in a way framed as a giver, while the idol, to whom the priest gives in expectation of something, gives nothing.

Hoskote explains that animal sacrifice has traditionally been done in worship of Shakti, and there are still centers of Shakti worship in which animal sacrifice is still done. Meat has also

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[174] Ibid pp. 60.
[175] Ibid pp. 61.
[176] Ibid pp. 181.

traditionally been used as an offering in certain rituals of Kashmiri Hinduism.[177] Lalla questions this outward religious practice not just for its performance, but also for its cruelty. In her utterances, she interrogates the worship of icons and images, and shakes the listener out of the habit of going through the motions of the externalities of religion — whether that is idol worship, animal sacrifice, pilgrimages to shrines, or rote recitation of scripture. This is not abnormal for a Shaiva yogini, who is to perform daily prayers (*Sandhya*) without incantation (*mantra*) and water; who is to meditate without sacrificial fire (*homa*) and beads (*japa*); who is to perform sacrificial *yajna* without flowers or other objects of worship (*puja*).[178] As Hoskote explains, Kashmiri Shaivism emphasizes the shift of all outward observances to "visualizations and experiments in consciousness so that the idol is replaced by the mental image and the sacrifice of an animal by the deliberate extinction of the lower appetites."[179]

In Lal Ded's vakhs, we find tangible manifestations of her life as a yogini, trained in the demanding spiritual disciplines and devotional practices of Kashmir Shaivite mysticism. She points to the importance of a Guru as an embodiment of the Divine, one who can guide a seeker through the trials and tribulations of worldly life in pursuit of an experience of enlightenment and Divine presence. In accordance with Kashmir Shaivism, Lalla sees the world as replete with traps and illusions for those who are unsuspecting and careless, for those who sleepwalk through life unaware of the true nature of the self within. When one is awakened to the realization that the world is merely an expression of Divine play, and that the self and the Divine are one, the pain of life before this realization is removed, and replaced by "the joyful recognition that all dualisms are illusory." [180] When Lalla expresses this in her poetry, she rejoices at the collapse of

[177] Ibid.
[178] Kaul, pp. 15 — 16.
[179] Hoskote, pp. xxiii.
[180] Hoskote, pp. xxii.

identity, the erasure of the dichotomy of "You" and "I," and the experience of Divine presence:

> Vakh 15
> Wrapped up in Yourself, You hid from me.
> All day I looked for You
> and when I found You hiding inside me,
> I ran wild, playing now me, now You."[181]

How does Lalla experience this presence? She treats the body as the locus of all efforts in self-refinement and self-knowing. Unlike Kabir, she is less devotional in her tone, less concerned with a kind of *bhakti* spirituality, and, as is expected for a Kashmiri Shaiva yogini, more concerned with *jnana*, or knowledge. She seeks to delve within through Yogic cultivation of the breath,[182] and to work toward a transformation of her own consciousness in hopes of recovering "the identity of the self with the Divine."[183] Lalla turns away from received knowledge and hierarchical religious institutions in favor of experiential learning resulting from disciplined practice based on the sensory knowledge of the body. She concentrates on this inner world and seeks the eventual dissolution of the individual microcosmic self into the macrocosmic Self or *Parama Shiva.* This dissolution causes ecstatic joy, or wildness, as the play of awareness oscillates between the self and the Self, between "me" and "You," until eventually there is no separation. As Mark SG Dyczkowski elucidates, when the yogini experiences *Parama Shiva*, she experiences "a state of transcendence in immanence and immanence in transcendence." The inner and the outer worlds become one unified experience of "undivided consciousness," and she eventually reaches the highest level of "undifferentiated consciousness," free from thought, free

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[181] Ibid, pp. 17.
[182] Throughout her vakhs, Lalla alludes to the subtle nodal points and channels of the Yogic body. She focuses on the breath and its location within her body, manipulating the breath in order to bring about particular spiritual experiences that impart the knowledge of the self that she has committed to seeking. For example:
I trapped my breath in the bellows of my throat:
a lamp blazed up inside, showed me who I really was.
I crossed the darkness holding fast to that lamp,
scattering its light-seeds around me as I went.
[183] Hoskote, pp. 26.

from distinctions of immanence (Shakti) and transcendence (Shiva).[184] It is by realizing the self that we realize the Divine, and in that realization, the worldly dichotomies which we took to be truths melt away. Lalla shows her listeners that it is in this higher plane of understanding that one's narrow-mindedness, bigotry, and persistent discrimination of fellow beings based on arbitrary external markers of identity, is eliminated. This is how one can come to understand the essential unity of all creation, and the Divine, present and pervading in all of creation:

> Vakh 104
> Shiva lives in many places.
> He doesn't know Hindu from Muslim.
> The Self that lives in you and others:
> that's Shiva. Get the measure of Shiva.[185]

This is often cited as evidence of Lalla's understanding of sectarianism and distinctions of religious identity. It is worth noting that this is not a result of a kind of uncommitted non-religious humanism but rather the great efforts Lal Ded undertook within the structure of her own religious and spiritual practice in order to come to this understanding. This understanding can be framed both within Kashmiri Shaivite and Kashmiri Sufi systems, as the Shaivite understands the seamlessness between the lover and the Beloved, the self and the Self, the seeker and the Sought, and the Sufi understands the Oneness of God (*tawhid*) and the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*). Her invocation of Shiva as the Real resonates with the Kashmiri Shaivite belief that any differences between self and other are illusory, as all dualities are pervaded by the principle of Shiva, or transcendence.

Incorporating Sufi Vocabulary

Before I conclude, I will briefly tie in a discussion on the vocabulary Lalla uses in some

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[184] Dyczkowski, Mark S. G.. *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism*. State University of New York Press, 1987, pp. 120.
[185] Hoskote, pp. 106.

of her vakhs, as evidence of an openness to new paradigms, vocabularies, and understandings that she might have been presented with in her discourse with the Sufis of Kashmir:

> Vakh 29
> My soul is an elephant, an elephant that trumpets for food
> every hour on the hour.
> Out of a thousand, out of a hundred thousand, only one survives.
> Thank God, or they'd have trampled all creation,
> these hungry tuskers."[186]

This poem invokes imagery of the self as an insatiable elephant — one that must be fed every hour if it is to refrain from engaging in vice or mischief. The elephant is also invoked in South Asian poetry to point to the stubbornness of the self or the mind. Lalla alludes to the belief expressed in Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, that the gift of human birth is rare and precious, expressing gratitude that there are not more humans (tuskers) in existence, lest they trample all of creation, destroying the world with their unending desire. What is significant about this vakh is that the word used for 'soul' is the Perso-Arabic *nafs*, as it is placed within the invocation of the familiar Indic symbolism and imagery of the elephant. The use of this word points toward a borrowing from Sufi frameworks, as nafs appears in the Qur'an in part as a reference to the lower self, or the ego that causes one to engage in sin, which one must refine and bring under control through prayer and discipline.[187] In the teachings of Kashmir's Rishi Order as well as in Sufi thought more generally, the nafs refers to both the self and the ego, and the seeker is encouraged to dedicate themselves to the disciplined purification of the nafs — to polish it like a mirror so that it may reflect more and more clearly the Divine and the Divine's attributes, and to eventually annihilate it (*fana'*) so that all that remains is the Divine.

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[186] Hoskote, pp. 31.
[187] "And I do not acquit myself. Indeed, the soul (nafs) is a persistent enjoiner of evil, except those upon which my Lord has mercy. Indeed, my Lord is Forgiving and Merciful." (Qur'an 12:53)

In another vakh, Lal Ded utilizes the well-known trope of wine and enlightenment as is popular in Sufi poetry:

> Vakh 14
> I wore myself out, looking for myself.
> No one could have worked harder to break the code.
> I lost myself in myself and found a wine cellar. Nectar, I tell you.
> There were jars and jars of the good stuff, and no one to drink it."[188]

This poem takes the reader along for a journey within, as Lalla understands that she must look for the self within herself rather than looking for the One outside. Upon journeying within, Lalla finds a wine cellar (*maykada or maykhana*), an especially potent metaphor common in Sufi poetry. In the Sufi paradigm, wine is a reference to the sweetness and intoxication of the ecstasy of deep spiritual states, and invokes a sense of imbibing a subtle substance that makes its way through the body, becoming a part of the seeker, satiating the seeker. The wine cellar often invokes a sense of being taken to another place within the heart, hidden, where one will be able to meet the Beloved.

Cyrus Zargar writes that the wine-house is used as a setting to turn on its head the phenomena of pious spaces possibly leading to insincere modes of worship. The wine cellar is a contrast to explicitly pious spaces, as it is considered a space *devoid* of piety, where the lover is able to unabashedly express their love for the Beloved, losing oneself to "a carnal and ultimately divine Other." To be drunk, then, is to be besotted, to be overcome, to be so immersed in love that one "loses one's sense of discernment."[189] The wine cellar is where the seeker can experience a state of absolute oneness, where there is no distinction between lover and Beloved. Zargar points out that the cellar or tavern is one of the spatial references popularized by 'Attar that is used to describe sincere love. Lalla has reached this space within herself, but, it seems,

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[188] Hoskote, pp. 16.
[189] Zargar, Cyrus Ali, and Cyrus Ali Zargar. "Sober In Mecca, Drunk In Byzantium: Antinomian Space In the Poetry of ʿAṭṭār." Journal of the American Academy of Religion, vol. 89, no. 1, 1 Jan. 2021, pp. 272 - 271.

struggles between the intellectual realization of the self as the Self, and the experiential realization of this oneness through devotion and ecstasy. It is unclear whether she herself imbibed the nectar of the realization of the Self within, or if she too is not able to let her knowledge go in pursuit of that deeper feeling. Hoskote offers the suggestion that Lalla's last statement is meant to convey that all beings have the potential to seek within themselves and find the nectar of enlightenment or the realization of absolute Reality, but few pursue the discipline and spiritual practice that would prepare them to drink it.[190]

Although it is quite evident from Lalla's verses that she is a disciplined and dedicated Shaiva yogini, she does adopt particular imagery that is associated with Persian poetry and Sufi paradigms, and she has no issue incorporating these idioms and languages into her works. She gains insights into spiritual life through other framing from the Islamic context, and uses the locus of her poetry to bring together ideas from different traditions to better communicate her message to her listeners.

Conclusion

One might be inclined to read the same ambiguity and elusiveness of Kabir's religious identity into the works and life of Lal Ded, especially given the Rishi movement's centering of Lal Ded as part of their history and lineage. However, although Lalla adopted different languages, framings, and idioms to better understand her own spiritual journey, she was unambiguously Shaiva in her practice. This is in part seen in her corpus, in the ways she dwells on breath work and the discipline of her spiritual practice, and in the ways she expresses Shaiva yogini ideas. Lal Ded's poetic and spiritual legacy has become part of a tug-of-war, as Hindus

[190] Hoskote, pp. 158.

and Muslims look to claim absolute ownership over her at the expense of obfuscating the fullness of her life and poetry.

Within her poetic corpus, Lal Ded is unambiguous in her presentation of her religious identity. Among most contemporary scholars, it is agreed upon that Lal Ded was a Hindu Shaiva yogini. But her *reception* is and has been fluid and permeable, partially due to her strong relationship with the Sufis of Kashmir through her friendship and discourse with Nund Rishi and through the common practice of invoking her spiritual accomplishments in the Persian Sufi hagiographies of the sixteenth century. She becomes core to the story and lineage of the Rishi Order, a Sufi order which, despite its loose categorization as Sufi, still frustrates attempts toward religious categorization. It is Hindu Shaivite Lal Ded whom Nund Rishi explicitly invokes as one of his Gurus.[191] The interweaving of her story with that of Nund Rishi and the Sufis of Kashmir has come to be the story of Kashmir that hearkens back to a time in which spiritual discourse and exchange was common and valued. Lalla's poetry hints at this exchange in her use of Persian poetic imagery and Sufi vocabulary. She gains insights in reframing her practice and spiritual life through other paradigms from the Islamic context. It is this incorporation that is either downplayed or overplayed by some scholars, in an attempt to erase any history of dialogue with Sufi thought and practice, or to induct her into Kashmir's early Sufi culture, erasing her Shaivism altogether.

Nitasha Kaul writes that the Kashmiris of the post-1990 generation are comprised of two main groups: Kashmiri Muslims who have grown up in a Kashmir characterized by militarization, violence, 'encounters', civilian deaths, curfews, arbitrary blackouts, restrictions on rights and liberties, and daily news of crackdowns, and Kashmiri Pandits, many of whom have

[191] Laldyada, and Odin, Jaishree Kak. *Mystical Verses of Lallā: A Journey of Self Realization.* India, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2007.

grown up as refugees in India "away from their ancestral communities, surrounded by the ascending Hindu-majoritarian redefinition of the Indian nation and inheriting the pain and loss of life of many members of their community in the 1990s."[192] As a result, the centuries-old narrative of Kashmiriyat as a non-communal pan-Kashmiri identity and sense of belonging and identity has faded into the background as a figure like Lalla who once occupied multiple modes of existence for multiple religious communities is more rigidly placed in a singular category of religious identity as an attempt to lay exclusive claim to her life, her legacy, and the land of Kashmir in which she is embedded.

Dissociating Lal Ded from Islam directly impacts the legacy of Kashmiriyat and the mutual respect and value given to interreligious dialogue and understanding. It restricts her poetry, her legacy, and her life in favor of an exclusivist claim to her and to the land of Kashmir. It disrupts the long tradition of incorporation and interweaving that Kashmiris have been continuing for centuries, tying important Kashmiri saints, figures, and histories together as part of the larger fabric of the Valley beyond categories of religious and political affiliations. It obscures Lalla's collaboration with Sufi saints and effaces the history of religious understanding and dialogue she exemplified — a history that has the potential to serve as a powerful bulwark against current hardened boundaries of religious identities, and the ever-spreading belief that interreligious interaction, exchange, and discourse somehow dilutes one's own religious identity. If we can plug into the history of Lalla and what she has come to represent for Kashmiris, if we can internalize her reflections on the Oneness of Reality and the dissolution of dichotomy, we can begin to remedy the exacerbation of communal and national tensions that continue to make Kashmir (and the subcontinent at large) a potent locus of conflict.

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[192] Kaul, Nitasha. "India's Obsession with Kashmir : Democracy, Gender, (anti-)nationalism." Feminist Review, no. 119, 1 Jul. 2018, pp. 129.

Conclusion

Kabir, Bulleh Shah, and Lal Ded, each lived in their own periods, each with their own spiritual practices, mentors, and communities. Despite their words resonating with many people, common and royal alike, none of them were court poets tasked with praising the powers that be. Their utterances have survived and continue to circulate among the masses, alive and dynamic, an integral part of folk culture. It is due to their widespread popularity that their poetic corpuses have all become loci of conflict and appropriation, framed by interpreters, scholars, and politicians in great departures from the self-understandings they articulate in their works.

In Chapter 1, I argued that Bhagat Kabir is fluid in his self-presentation, and the larger reception of his poetry is also fluid and permeable. Kabir's poetic corpus and personality has been variously understood by the different religious traditions that revere him. For Sikhs, he becomes part of the story of Guru Nanak Sahib. For Muslims, he is placed within the lineage of the Sufi tradition. For Hindus, he is placed in the story of Vaishnavites. For the Kabir Panth, Kabir is their Guru. In my exploration of Kabir's work, I hoped to push the question of what it means to lay *absolute* claim to a figure versus what it means to *incorporate* a fluid figure into one's own narrative — to find a version of that figure that is important and to cultivate reverence for them with the understanding that they shapeshift — in meaning and in role — as they make their way through various communities and traditions.

Postcolonial appropriations of Kabir attempt to incorporate Kabir into a Hindutva narrative through the pacification of his message. His life and work become about brotherhood and unity as a surface-level principle in the National narrative even as brotherhood and unity between the Hindu-nationalist majority and religious minorities has all but disappeared. As I write this, Hindu mobs parade the streets of Muslim-majority neighborhoods in celebration of

Ram Navani, celebrating the birth of Rama by terrorizing their countrymen and vandalizing their places of worship. By tracing Kabir's ideas to particular Hindu schools of thought, the Hindu claim over him is bolstered, even as he refuses to make such claims about his own identity in his verses. And in this game of claiming, minority religious communities decide they have to play the game too — they too employ Kabir to respond to the forces of Hindu Nationalism that have redefined what it means to be Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh.

Kabir attempted to rise above both Islam and the Hindu tradition. He accepted them as legitimate paths to enlightenment, and took them seriously with the constant reminder that none of these paths are useful if they are centered solely around ritual and the motions of performing piety. They are certainly not useful if they have become engulfed in motivations of bigotry, superiority, otherness, and fear. Kabir reminds us that the most important thing a seeker of any religious identity can do is to cleanse themselves from within, to search for the One within.

In Chapter 2, I argued that Bulleh Shah, contrary to some scholarly framings, is unambiguously Muslim in his self-conception, although his larger reception is fluid and permeable, with Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs all laying claim to him. I dwelled on the danger of the rhetoric of 'influence' and 'evolution,' and explored how Bulleh Shah inhabits various 'selves' in his poetry, sometimes a Hindu, sometimes a Muslim, sometimes a devoted Sufi impatient with religious orthodoxy and discipline, sometimes a Muslim invoking the importance of *shari'a*. Bulleh Shah speaks from various perspectives and identities to address various layers of the self, while also inviting his listeners into these experiences so that they too may reflect on their personal relationship with the Divine. His incorporation into the national narrative minimizes his Islam and amplifies a kind of humanistic non-religious spirituality, to make the

point that to be a Muslim who is compatible with the State, one must be a Muslim who does not adhere to shari'a or practice Islam in a serious and committed way.

In Chapter 3, I explored the life and works of Lal Ded, who, like Bulleh Shah, is not ambiguous in her presentation of her religious identity within her poetry, but whose corpus sits at the center of competing scholarship and competing narratives that are subject to sectarian polarization between Kashmiri Pandit and Kashmiri Muslim scholars Some of the former claim Lalla exclusively for Kashmir Shaivism and reject any hint of Islamic influence on her beliefs, while the some of the latter attempt to incorporate her exclusively into the story of Kashmiri Sufis. Among most contemporary scholars, it is agreed upon that Lal Ded was a Hindu Shaiva yogini. But like Bulleh Shah, her *reception* is fluid and permeable, partially due to her strong relationship with the Sufis of Kashmir, and the interweaving of her story with theirs. I followed Dean Accardi and David Lorenzen in taking the hagiographies that mention Lalla at their word rather than arguing about authenticity, and I followed Ranjit Hoskote's lead in taking the corpus as it is as well. I ended with a brief exploration of two particular references in Lalla's poetry that hint at Persian and Sufi influence as evidence that she sees spiritual discourse and exchange as valuable in helping her gain insights on her own spiritual path.

In India's present political and religious climate, participation, exchange, and the permeability of religious boundaries are increasingly seen as a force of dilution that threatens one's own religious identity. For all religious communities, the persistent and growing belief is that to engage with other religious categories in a world of hardened boundaries is to dilute one's own Hindu-ness, Muslim-ness, or Sikh-ness. These three poets, through their own words, show us how to inhabit various identities, to inhabit particular ritual practice, to understand diverse communities, and to see the diversity of experience as at once particular and universal. In this

current climate, we can turn to these figures to remind ourselves of the value of finding spiritual worth in another's religious practice, and exchanging ideas and paradigms to help us better understand our own. This was part of their worlds. It is housed in their poetry — in the language they use, and in the 'selves' they inhabit. They show us what it means to take one's own religious practice seriously, to refuse a denial of the *reality* of categories of identity, but to also understand that at the level of the soul, there is no essential difference between any of us.

These communities existed, and they did often engage in conflict — that is not a recent phenomenon, and I am not of the misunderstanding that there was a mythical past in which conflict was foreign. But the constant reminder by the mystics is that the Truth is deeper than these identities that cause us to see one another as separate — that the essence of Being and the Origin of all of creation is only One. We are certainly people in a world of categories. We will continue to be. It is under our categories that we unite and form strong bonds — they give us direction, bind us through practice and belief and sometimes ritual. These identities can be useful to us, and these paths fruitful, if we walk them in devotion, if we make efforts to delve within the self, if we make efforts to transcend them in pursuit of the experience of the deepest Truth. In our outer worlds, if we can comprehend how religious identity has been understood, written about, and lived, we can start to understand how to reframe and even push back against current notions of what it means to be a Hindu or a Muslim, and what it means to be an Indian. We can start to push back against a Hindu Nationalist project that seeks to demonize, other, and eventually rid India of its religious minorities in some great return to the mythologically homogenous Hindu homeland. We can begin to pull at the threads of this myth.

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