LINDA HESS

BODIES OF SONG

Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India

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OXFORD
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Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hess, Linda, author.

Bodies of song : Kabir oral traditions and performative worlds in North India / Linda Hess.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978–0–19–937417–5 (paperback) — ISBN 978–0–19–937416–8 (hardback) 1. Kabir, active 15th century—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Oral tradition—India—Malwa (Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan) 3. Malwa (Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, India)—Religion. I. Title.

PK2095.K3Z696 2015

891.4′312—dc23

2014036589

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

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Acknowledgments

DOING ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ALWAYS reminds me of Thich Nhat Hanh's table. In one of his early books the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher asks, "What is the table and how did it get here?" He starts with wood and carpenter, and eventually, having acknowledged items like merchants, tools, truck drivers, forests, sky, and rain, he demonstrates that we must include the whole world in appreciating what this table is and who made it possible.

That doesn't actually help me write the acknowledgments. True, everything is connected and my debt is incalculable. But even as the Mahayana Buddhists say that form is emptiness (emphasizing the oneness and boundlessness of everything), they also say that emptiness is form, bringing us back to particularities.

First, I bow to the Kabir singers and musicians of Malwa. Among them my greatest gratitude belongs to Prahlad Singh Tipanya, whose fame has grown ever larger since we met at the end of 1999. Prahladji's high spirits, glorious music, astonishing energy, profound knowledge, generosity, and lively sense of humor have changed my life. Since the Rakhi celebration of August 2002, he has been my official brother. He has taught me immeasurably—by singing, discussing, explaining, laughing, hanging out, taking many trips together.

Other performers in Malwa with whom I've become particularly close are Narayan Singh Delmia, Kaluram Bamaniya, Ajay and Vijay Tipanya, and Devnarayan Sarolia—all amazing and wonderful musicians and human beings. I'm delighted and fortunate to know and work with them.

When Prahladji became my brother, his whole family became my sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren (our English kinship terms are poor compared to the Hindi). I embrace Prahladji's wife Shantiji—a welcoming, good-humored, capable, and caring female head of family and manager of the performing artist's home world. His brothers Ambaram and Ashok, their wives Kamla and Sumitra; Shantiji

and Prahladji's sons and daughters-in-law Ajay and Sangeeta, Vijay and Seema; their daughter Sona; all the nieces and nephews and babies; the very old patriarch, Prahladji's father, who was called "Da-ji" and who passed away from this earth at a very old age in 2014—they have become part of my life.

Shabnam Virmani of Bangalore and beyond—filmmaker, singer, media artist, friend, collaborator, soulmate—most recently helped me figure out how to end chapter 8 and how to break through my confusion in booking a flight to India. She taught me not to say "thank you" and "sorry" too much to a real friend.

Smriti Chanchani of the Kabir Project in Bangalore, a beautiful friend, has lent her amazing artistic talents and technical skills on many occasions. Many of the pictures in the book, including the cover, were taken by her.

Anu Gupta and Arvind Sardana of Eklavya in Dewas, unstintingly generous, kind, delightful, living their values at home and in the world, have been my hosts, companions, and advisers over more than a decade of coming and going.

R. N. Syag, the original director of Eklavya's *Kabir bhajan evam vichār manch*, is a wise and kind man with clarity in his commitments, skill in dialogue, and a great smile that lights up the space even when he's respectfully disagreeing with me.

The Soni family of Dewas—Kailash and Garima, Ambuj, Rati, Utkarsha, and Oj—have been my hosts and helpers in countless ways. Ambuj is my go-to person for all sorts of needs. I love the warm, bright, friendly feeling of their home.

I extend warm appreciation to Indore friends in the organization Kabir Jan Vikas Samuh, especially Suresh Patel, who remains dedicated to connecting Kabir's inspiring poetry and song to social justice and equality.

Purushottam Agrawal is a brilliant and passionate Kabir scholar, creative writer, and social-political commentator with Kabirian streaks of irony and satire, underlain by a warm love of humanity. To him and to his wife, the poet Suman Keshari, I offer gratitude for hospitality and many wonderful conversations.

Ashok Vajpeyi—extraordinary poet, prose-writer, cultural leader, a person of effervescent spirits and reliable humanitarian values—has helped me in fundamental ways on two book projects in the last decade. He was the first to direct me to Malwa and Prahlad Singh Tipanya. He was my invaluable liaison to the family of Kumar Gandharva. Here's to the IIC Annexe Lounge, where many of his creative activities flourish!

Ramachandra Guha has been a generous friend, consultant, and inspiration as a writer and historian. Among other gifts, he introduced me to Rukun Advani, whose wonderful Permanent Black I had dreamed might become the publisher of my book in India. The dream came true, thanks to the kindness of Rukun and Ram.

The Berkeley Zen Center has been my warmhearted spiritual home for quite a long time. How improbable and lucky! Lots of emptiness, lots of form. Symbolically, I'll mention Sojun Mel, Hozan Alan, Laurie, Mary, Christy, Colleen, Marie, Susan, Anne, Karen. There could be many more. They all helped me finish the book.

Gay Searcy gets a paragraph of her own. Though quite an everyday thing, I find it mysterious.

Who would have guessed that Stanford University—after a somewhat tormented undergraduate life there in the 1960s, then three decades moving about—would in the 1990s become a nourishing professional home that would give me everything I needed (and thought I'd lost) to imagine and carry out a project like this? Special thanks to the people of the Department of Religious Studies, as well as others, whose generosity, support, and collaboration have opened many doors for me.

Bulbul Tiwari did a very helpful round of editorial work on an earlier draft of the book. Francesca Orsini responded with warmth and learned detail to a penultimate version. Jack Hawley has always been amazingly ready and quick to inform, comment, and advise at my request, and I have requested often. (When he answers an email within a few hours, he apologizes for the delay.) My friend and fellow Kabir scholar David Lorenzen has shared vast knowledge, generous support, and kind suggestions since we met in Varanasi nearly forty years ago. Encouragement and support from Laurie Patton, Kirin Narayan, Ann Gold, Philip Lutgendorf, and Wendy Doniger have been crucial along the way. Carolyn Karcher commented generously on an early draft; my long and precious friendship with her and Martin Karcher has been like the priceless jewel in a Kabir poem.

My good friend Matthew Rahaim, hanging out with me in a café at Stanford, suggested that the sleepy picture I had chosen for the cover was not the best choice, and that the one we have used, bursting with energy, would be a great. He was so right.

The American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) has supported my life and study in India on multiple occasions, from the initial summer language program in 1973 to a senior fellowship in 2002 for the first year of fieldwork on this book. All the India-based work I have ever done is interwoven with gratitude to AIIS. A Guggenheim fellowship in 2011 allowed

me to complete the first draft of the book. I thank all the people who made such generous support possible.

The editorial team at Oxford University Press has been extremely helpful, careful, and in all ways admirable. My thanks to Cynthia Read, Glenn Ramirez, David Joseph, Kay Kodner, and Sudha Ramprasath.

I am unspeakably grateful to have a close family: my husband Kaz Tanahashi, daughter Karuna Izumi Hess Tanahashi, and son Ko Hanshan Hess Tanahashi. Both kids got middle names of great Asian poets (Izumi a passionate/romantic/contemplative woman poet of eleventh-century Japan, Hanshan a laughing Zen hermit of ninth-century China who wrote poems on the rocks and trees of Cold Mountain). Kaz, whose art, writings, and activism have inspired many, also has translated poetry of great Japanese Zen writers like Ryokan, Hakuin, and Dogen. I join the family circle with my fifteenth-century Indian iconoclastic mystic oral poet.

Introduction

THIS BOOK IS about Kabir; about oral tradition and the oral-performative lives of texts; about poetry and music; and about communities that coalesce around Kabir, his poetry, and music. Widening the lens, we could also say that it is about religion, literature, society, and expressive culture in North and Central India—particularly in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh—in the early twenty-first century, as revealed by the study of Kabir oral traditions.[1]

One of the great features of oral tradition is that it is embodied, with givers and receivers physically present in the same place and time. So if you want to meet it, you have to do so through people. Reading this book, you are going to meet a lot of people; I hope you will feel that you have come to know some of them fairly well, and that you are getting to know Kabir through them. Poets of India's vernacular devotional and mystical traditions (commonly referred to as *bhakti*) generally use a signature line, or *chhāp,* that identifies them near the end of the poem. Kabir's *chhāp* is unique in that it nearly always begins with a version of *kahe kabīr suno*: "Kabir says, listen!" It is not, as Ashok Vajpeyi quipped at a literary gathering in Delhi, *kahe kabīr paḍho*: "Kabir says, read!" "Listening" implies live engagement of the body, a wholehearted presence that is contrasted with the insubstantiality of mere words and ideas. Here is one of the Kabir verses that became a joking commentary about me and my scholarly pursuits:

Maiṇ kahatā ānkhoṇ kī dekhī
tū kahatā kāgaz kī lekhī
terā merā manavā ek kaise hoi re

6

A Scorching Fire, a Cool Pool

My poems are soft green,
my poems are flaming crimson.

JOSE MARTI[1]

"THERE ARE TWO main kinds of Kabir songs," said Dinesh Sharma in our first meeting at the Dewas office of Eklavya, an educational NGO, in March 2002. "There are the religious [*dhārmik*] songs about devotion to God, homage to the guru, recitation of the divine name, things like that. And there are the social [*samājik*] songs that criticize caste divisions, intolerance, superstition, pomp, rituals, and so on. We wanted to emphasize the social side."

Two months later I met Dr. Bhagirathi Prasad, an officer of the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS), who held a high post in the Madhya Pradesh state government. He was the chief guest and inaugural speaker for the annual all-night Kabir celebration hosted by Prahladji in Lunyakhedi village. Sitting next to me on stage, behind the singers, Prasad whispered, "I think singing bhajans is a way to get relief from exploitation and suffering. What do you think?" I whispered that we should discuss this later. He proceeded to give an excellent speech, both serious and humorous. He said it's good that Kabir bhajans bring *shītaltā*, literally "coolness"—a word used in this hot climate to signal relief, calm, inner peace. But, he continued, Kabir did not come only to give coolness. He also lit a fire. He held a torch, he was a burning coal. Prasad quoted a famous couplet:

> Kabir stands in the market, a flaming torch in hand.
> First burn your own house down, then come along with me.[2]

What did Kabir want to burn up? Prasad enumerated various examples, starting with dishonesty and false pretensions. Later he said to me, "I wish

Kabir's followers would not just settle into the pleasure of their bhajans to escape their suffering. I want them to go out and change society, to burn up hypocrisy, exploitation, and injustice."

Both Dinesh, the NGO worker, and Prasad, the IAS officer, pointed to two distinct voices of Kabir. One would turn us inward, the other outward. One would speak to our psychospiritual needs, the other to our social consciousness. This polarity became a recurring motif, once I moved from studying Kabir as poetry on a page to meeting Kabir in his living cultural contexts. Some people talked primarily of the religious Kabir who teaches devotion to the guru and recitation of the divine name; the interior Kabir who evokes yogic concentration, inner light and sound, flowing nectar, the boundless *nirguṇ* reality; the austere Kabir who warns of imminent death and the urgent need to seek spiritual insight, to wake up before you die. Others were interested in Kabir as part of the social and economic order, a low-caste weaver who worked with his hands, a protester who blasted the institutions of caste, debunked religious authority, arrogance, injustice, violence, and greed, radically declared human equality, and reminded us that there's no escape from the imperative to think for ourselves and take responsibility for our own actions. This Kabir also spoke of Hindus and Muslims—their identities and motives, their craziness and violence, and the potential for living together in peace.

The present chapter and the final chapter of the book focus on this question of "social-political" and "religious-spiritual." Studying oral traditions includes learning about the social construction of the figure called Kabir and the interpretation of words attributed to him. People do that kind of interpreting in everyday contexts, and they don't publish their interpretations with Oxford University Press. Just as texts take shape and change shape in the process of singing and listening, so do the meanings of texts and the ways of imagining the poet. The political-spiritual question often comes up among people who are interested in Kabir in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

How do these two aspects of Kabir get delineated, separated, and reunited? Who embraces one side while neglecting or rejecting the other? Who sees them as connected? When people set aside or suppress one aspect of the Kabir tradition, what are they affirming and protecting? Are they claiming to represent what Kabir himself said and meant? Merely emphasizing what they feel needs more attention? Or protecting their own belief system against a perceived threat?

In this chapter the discussion is embedded in a story—that of the NGO Eklavya and its far-reaching experiment with Kabir in rural and small-town Madhya Pradesh. From 1991 to 1998, Eklavya hosted a *manch*—literally a stage or platform—for singing Kabir and investigating his social-political as well as his religious-spiritual significance. By studying the records of this remarkable experiment, talking with people who were involved, and participating in ongoing oral traditions, I was able to get a glimpse of how Kabir folksingers and others in these settings dynamically create Kabir.

Kabir is uniquely situated among North Indian bhakti poets as a "platform" for such dialogue. We would not be having quite this discussion about Surdas, Mirabai, or Tulsidas. Among the major Hindi bhakti poets, it is only Kabir who speaks out loudly against social inequality, abuse of power, and dishonesty. He does share with Ravidas an iconic status among Dalits and others with minimal economic power and "low" rank in India's caste hierarchy.[3] And he shares with Mirabai great popularity among these same groups, especially in Rajasthan.[4] But only Kabir is famous as a social critic. Only with Kabir do we find trenchant observation of social issues coupled with evocation of profound inner transformation—an experience that we can label inadequately as mystical or spiritual, that turns the habits of mind and the structures of self "upside-down," liberating the individual from egocentric delusions and fears.

Through this story, we will encounter the rich discourses of Kabir singers, listeners, devotees, and fans, the people who continue to create the oral tradition. It is a revelation to learn about the content and process of their thought and debate. Along with a sampling of the discussions that occurred in Eklavya's Kabir *manch*, three singer-participants are profiled at length, adding their vivid personalities and views to those of Prahlad Singh Tipanya, who is featured in other chapters.

Eklavya and Its Foray into the Worlds of Kabir

Eklavya's history goes back to the 1970s when a group of academics and scientists from Delhi set out to create vital new ways of teaching science to children in government schools beyond the metros. Existing science education, they felt, was worse than dead, not only failing to teach but actually creating antipathy toward the learning process. One of the founders, Vinod Raina, gave up a prestigious job in Delhi University. Others, like my friends Anu Gupta and Arvind Sardana who have been with Eklavya

in Dewas since 1986, and C. N. Subramanium, the director of the organization when I arrived in 2002, could have confidently looked forward to comfortable urban positions. Instead they moved to Madhya Pradesh where they developed what would become a renowned science curriculum.

Historian Harbans Mukhia wrote about Eklavya in a 2002 newspaper article, after the Madhya Pradesh state government terminated a long-standing arrangement by which Eklavya had brought its science program into government schools. Mukhia and others saw this termination as a regrettable political move.

> The group started working in 1972 under the rather prosaic name of Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP), until ten years later when it acquired the present very evocative name [Eklavya]. The idea attracted a large number of scientists, some of them as eminent as M. S. Swaminathan, M. G. K. Menon, Yash Pal, and many others teaching in the University of Delhi, who involved themselves in the development of the programme. … The HSTP and later Eklavya sought to develop the programme well within the framework of the system of school education in Madhya Pradesh and with the approval, cooperation and assistance of successive Governments of the State at costs that were almost ridiculously low. As they went along, they developed expertise in writing new kinds of textbooks, training teachers through short term refresher courses, publishing magazines for children and for teachers, and devising tool kits at a fraction of prevailing costs. In course of time, a social science component was also developed based upon the same principle of proceeding from the familiar to the abstract rather than the other way around. By 2001, the HSTP was operative in 1000 schools in 15 districts and 100,000 children were its beneficiaries. The best testimony to its success has been the excitement and joy the process of learning has brought to the children over the past three decades.[5]

In 1982 the organization adopted the provocative name Eklavya, after the jungle-dwelling tribal character in the *Mahābhārata* epic who, spurned by the high-caste royal guru of archery, dedicates himself to a statue of the guru. He teaches himself, practices independently, and becomes a greater archer than the princes of the land. Perceived as an uppity Untouchable and a threat to the social order, he is rewarded for his achievement by a cruel command from the guru to whom he is unconditionally devoted:

"If you are my true disciple, cut off your right thumb." With this command, the Brahmin military guru Dronacharya and his royal protégé Arjuna intend to disable the brilliantly gifted forest-dweller, ensuring that the status and power of the upper castes will not be threatened. Eklavya complies, demonstrating his courage and devotion as well as the ruthless self-preservation of caste and political power. In choosing this name for their NGO, the founders wanted to highlight the potency of individual initiative and self-education, and the tragic denial of opportunity and waste of talent under an oppressive hierarchical system. In a recent brochure, they say that they intend to rewrite the ending of the story. In the new narrative of democracy, Eklavya refuses to sacrifice his thumb: he now understands and is willing to fight for his right to education.

Harbans Mukhia observes:

> The group of scholars, like the *Mahabharata* lad Eklavya … opted to pursue their search in near wilderness, away from the glare and distractions of a metropolis and settled down in the small town of Hoshangabad on the banks of the Narmada in Madhya Pradesh. There they set out to get the children to generate knowledge for themselves by putting the textbook aside for the moment and going out in the neighbourhood, looking for special kinds of tree leaves, stones, what not and then asking questions and seeking answers. The questions led them to concepts, and the search for answers to the scientific methods of observation, experimentation, analysis and generalisation. They were to be trained in the critical method of acquiring knowledge rather than in the passive acceptance of knowledge generated by teachers. … In life too they would learn the application of reason.
>
> There was also another valuable principle implied in it. In the great energy and resources expended in the pursuit of education for the next generation, the poor should not have to satisfy their quest with second rate, leftover education: what their children get too should be good and worthwhile. (Mukhiya 2002)

In the 1980s Eklavya expanded its scope. Besides adding social sciences, developing new textbooks, magazines, toolkits, and teacher training, they experimented beyond the bounds of formal education. The Kabir work was one such experiment, based in communities and not tied to schooling.

In Shabnam Virmani's film *In the Market Stands Kabir*, Dinesh Sharma describes Eklavya's approach to Kabir as he understood it:

DINESH SHARMA (DS): We felt that those ideas of Kabir that are most needed today haven't been coming through—the ideas that are really relevant today, and that attract people like us. The spiritual part isn't so interesting to us. We don't oppose it either. We don't say that it is not present in Kabir-*sāhab*'s tradition or that Kabir-*sāhab* didn't do that. … We're saying that there's a need at this time to look at these [social and political] things first. That's the kind of work we are doing. We can consider the other things later.

SHABNAM VIRMANI (SV): What other things?

DS: Other things like yogic practice, spiritual things. They're fine, and for some people they may be first in importance. At that time the Ayodhya Babri mosque conflict was in the air. Temple and mosque. The BJP [political party] was highlighting this. These people, the *mandalī* members, were being mobilized and incited. They were using them to join mobs. We felt it was necessary to point out: You and the great tradition you belong to are being used as pawns by the government and political parties.

While the Kabir *manch* was connected to the longer history of Eklavya's commitments (as explained by R. N. Syag below), the political crisis that Dinesh refers to added new urgency. Communal politics, hatred, and violence were on the rise. Hindu nationalist organizations were drumming up anger against a sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya, which they fervently declared stood on the actual birthplace of Lord Ram, an incarnation of God and the hero of the vastly popular *Rāmāyaṇa* epic. They claimed that a great temple to Ram had been destroyed in the sixteenth century by a Muslim king, who had then ordered that a mosque be built over the rubble. Appealing to deep-seated religious sentiments, they demanded that the mosque be demolished and the temple rebuilt on that very spot. At the same time their political party, the BJP, was making impressive electoral gains at the state and national levels.

Throughout this campaign one heard the verses of the beloved sixteenth-century Hindi *Rāmāyaṇa* poet Tulsidas being shouted in rallies. Cries of "victory to Ram" and to Hanuman, his mighty devotee in the form of a divine monkey, rang out. Bhajans and pseudo-bhajans with new texts like *Rāmjī kī senā chalī* (Ramji's army is on the march) and *Mandir wahīṇ*

banāyenge (We'll build the temple on that very spot) were blasted over loudspeakers, disseminated on cassettes and discs, and eventually posted on the internet. People's bhakti—their religious devotion, their love of Ram, the *Rāmāyaṇa* story, and Tulsidas's beautiful Hindi poetry—were effectively channeled into the campaign. Ram's warrior nature was emphasized rather than his tender and compassionate side: he was a hero who fought and destroyed the demon race (Kapur 1993). In the speeches, audios, and videos produced by the movement, demons were equated again and again with Muslims and Muslim sympathizers (Hess 1994a).

Many secularist and anticommunal groups were considering how to counter this successful appropriation of religious imagery, poetry, and emotion. Kabir, the mystical poet who criticized the follies of both Hindus and Muslims and whose identity partook of both traditions, was an obvious ally. Besides providing a counterforce to communalism, Kabir was an apt spokesman for other Eklavya values: the critique of caste and superstition, the importance of testing things with your own experience, questioning authority, and affirming human equality and dignity.

Most important, Kabir already had a vibrant presence in the countryside in the form of bhajan *mandalīs*, groups that met regularly to sing his verses. These groups would sing in a lively folk style with a few instruments. They were often initiates of the Kabir Panth (sect), which regarded Kabir as the supreme guru, or even as God. Most of Kabir's followers were of the lower classes and oppressed castes.

Dr. R. N. Syag was the director of Eklavya's Dewas office in the 1990s. Syag-*bhāī* (brother), as everyone calls him, has an open, friendly face, a shock of white hair, and a habit of ending many sentences with a form of Hindi *hai-nā*? meaning, "isn't it so?" or "right?" He says *hai-nā* while connecting with his conversation partner's eyes—a habit of inviting dialogue. Syag-*bhāī* explained the importance of working with community groups that had a life of their own:[6]

R. N. SYAG (RNS): Highly educated people like us can talk about democracy and civil society. But in the traditional society of the village, people are identified by caste. In that society you have to think: Where can I sit down? Or if you're a woman: How should I behave? Given that identities are formed around caste and gender, how do you begin to do something in a village? You can't do it in an academic way, can you? If you want to talk to people, there are boundaries. There are distances. There

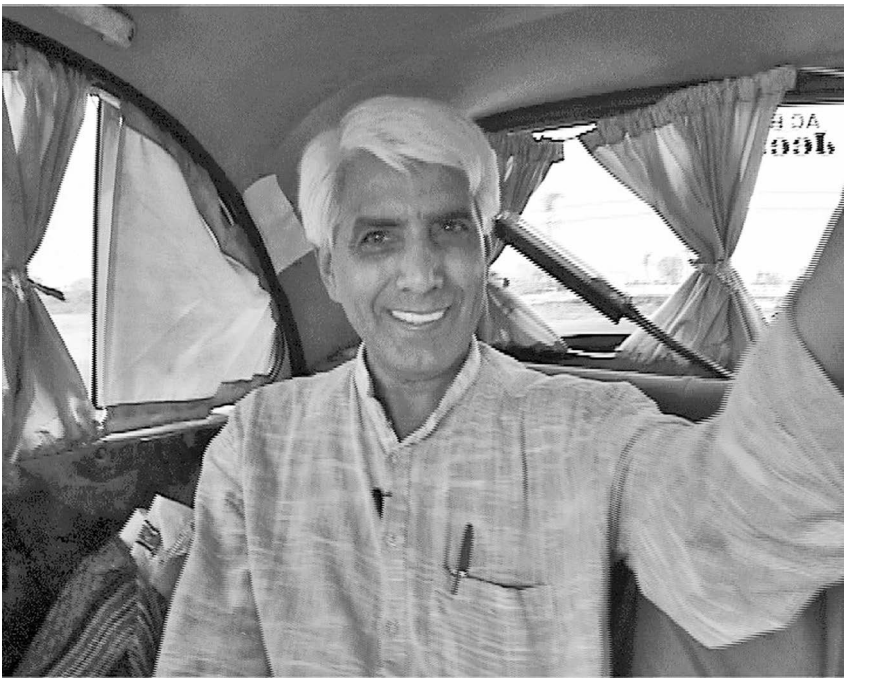

FIGURE 6.1. R. N. Syag, during our car conversation presented in chapters 6 and 8. Photo by Shabnam Virmani.

is untouchability. When we realized that these Kabir bhajan *mandalīs* existed, we thought that they provided a very good community-based institution. We could work with them. We could also strengthen them.

The *mandalī*s arose spontaneously. No NGO created them, no government created them. They were filling people's real needs and aspirations. Only then would they survive—right? We saw that men would labor all day, and then at night they would sit and sing so beautifully, and they would get so refreshed. Sometimes they would sing all night and go straight to work in the morning. What was going on here? We began to meet and make friends with them.

Another thing was that we came out of a background of science education. Children learned about science and rational thinking in school. But at home in the village, everything was traditional. The literacy rate was low all through the country. We were creating written materials, but science education can only spread when literacy rates are higher. We had started an All-India People's Science Network. In

1987 there were five *jātas* [traveling educational groups that used music, theater, exhibits, and so on] moving from five corners of the country, raising scientific awareness. There were different emphases in different places. Here in M.P., we were educating people about the [1982] Bhopal gas tragedy, about Union Carbide, multinationals, and so on.

LINDA HESS (LH): What's the connection between scientific awareness and Kabir?

RNS: Why are there so many differences between human beings? Why is there untouchability? Didn't Kabir teach us to ask questions? Kabir said, "One who searches will find." That search is what scientists do. Kabir had cultural roots in the community. Where people's lives were difficult, where there was a need for knowledge and education, we thought Kabir could be a medium. Our first contact was Narayanji. We met him in a bus, carrying his *tambūrā*. We went to his village, attended a performance, got to know people. This was sometime in 1990.

LH: The conflict over the Babri mosque was intense then. Was the problem of communalism also in your minds?

RNS: It was. But if we went into the villages talking about nonlocal things—communalism, political parties—it wouldn't have much meaning. Kabir talked about hypocrisy in all religions, and he made our common humanity a central value. So he provided a good medium to discuss these things.[7] We were a little concerned about whether his attacking religion, criticizing Islam and Hinduism, would prevent people from joining us. But we felt that his appeal to common humanity was the main point, and we emphasized that his criticism was directed against anything that destroyed that human feeling.

The Kabir Manch*: An Overview*

Having decided to delve into local Kabir culture, Eklavya workers collected books and educated themselves about Kabir's poetry and place in history. Dinesh Sharma did much of the groundwork, moving among villages, collecting lists of bhajan *mandalīs,* and holding preliminary sessions. They named the project the *Kabīr bhajan evam vichār manch*. A *manch* is a stage—literally a place of performance and figuratively a platform or space for expressing ideas. *Vichār* means idea or thought. Doing *vichār*

means thinking, discussing. So it was a platform for singing and discussing Kabir. On July 2, 1991, the *manch* was officially inaugurated. Its central activity was a gathering on the second of every month at the Eklavya office in Dewas. Many groups came. They sang, talked, and drank tea all night.

Such bhajan sessions are not unusual in the countryside. What was special about Eklavya's program was the *vichār* component. Along with singing, participants were encouraged to discuss the meanings of Kabir's bhajans: to raise questions, seek answers, debate points of disagreement, and relate the content of the songs to their daily lives—the conditions of work, society, family, and so on. This was not something they were used to doing. They usually sang for pleasure and release, the pure joy of singing. You need only to sit with a village *mandalī*, seeing how their enthusiasm and enjoyment build over hours of singing, to appreciate why they like to sing. This enjoyment did not require discussion of meanings; in fact such discussion was likely to hinder the flow of feeling.[8]

Another reason why discussing the meaning of Kabir was awkward at first was that the authority to interpret and preach was usually ceded to the Kabir Panth gurus or *mahant*s. Before them, ordinary people kept quiet. Most of the singers had limited formal education. Some were illiterate. Many had dropped out in primary or middle school. Only a few had been to high school or college. Often, when asked to talk about the meaning of a bhajan he had just sung, a singer would just repeat the words. What more was there to explain? But even this presentation of the words without music had an impact, focusing attention on the content and preparing the way for more probing conversations.

Organizers constantly conveyed the message that the singers of Kabir had every right to think and talk about the meanings of Kabir. Their ideas were elicited and respected. Soon they warmed to the format, discussing and debating more freely. Of course singing was always more fun, more physically and emotionally satisfying, than talking. But discussion gradually flourished.

Dinesh Sharma kept extensive documentation of the program: notes and reflections on what happened, audiotapes, press clippings, and correspondence. Sometimes he described his own experience in the logbooks, as in this 1992 note on how it all began:[9] "In 1990, while working on a literacy campaign, I came into contact with many Kabir bhajan *mandalīs* in villages. At the same time I started reading books by and about Kabir, and I discovered that his ideas were quite revolutionary." Dinesh found Kabir proclaiming social equality and calling for justice. He went to his first bhajan program in Tonk Khurd village at the home of Fakirchand—a

FIGURE 6.2. Dinesh Sharma, who organized and documented the Kabir *manch* with the NGO Eklavya, holds a picture of the great Dalit anticaste leader B. R. Ambedkar. Photo by Shabnam Virmani.

member of the sweeper caste. For the first time in his life Dinesh, a Brahmin, entered an "untouchable" home. On another occasion, in the same home, he witnessed his first *chaukā āratī*—the core ritual of the Kabir Panth (about which we will hear a great deal in the next chapter). He collected information on Kabir bhajan *mandalīs* in the area. "I got many names and addresses, but one name was on every tongue: Prahlad Singh Tipanya." So we know that even in 1990, Prahladji was recognized as the most outstanding local singer.

After the first meeting in July 1991, Dinesh sent a letter to the leaders of many *mandalīs*:

> Namaste to all the *mandalī* members.
>
> We met on 2 July in Dewas. Some friends suggested that, along with singing Kabir bhajans, we should try to spread the bhajans and Kabir's thought very widely, and that we should arrange various educational and social activities for the public. The *Kabīr bhajan evam vichār manch* was formed with these aims:

* To bring together Kabir bhajan *mandalīs* so that all could sing and listen.
* To understand and propagate Kabir's ideas.
* To organize Kabir festivals and seminars.
* To encourage activities related to religious tolerance, brotherhood, social and educational change.

Please let all your members know about this *manch*.

In the first two years there was a flurry of activity including performances, discussions, seminars, new youth *mandalīs*, and children's activities. They collected books on Kabir and Ambedkar and set up libraries in villages. They created a play using Kabir bhajans and *sākhīs*—some performers sang while others acted out a play highlighting issues like casteism, superstition, double standards, excessive drinking, and literacy. A small book of socially conscious bhajan texts with an introduction about Kabir's life and thought was published and sold for two rupees. Two audiocassettes featuring *manch* singers went on sale for twenty-five rupees each. They did a brisk business, and the reputation of the Malwa Kabir *mandalīs* began to spread.

Syag-*bhāī* further describes participants and processes in the *manch*:

> The Kabir *mandalīs* already existed. They normally got together to sing in their own neighborhoods every week or two. As to caste—mostly they were Balais, an SC community. But there were others too, some OBCs, some of general castes.[10] There were a few women, not many.
>
> At first they felt there should be a religious atmosphere. There should be a sacred image of Kabir, a disciplined program, no arguments. I said—if Kabir came and saw this program, what would he think? He was the sort of person who liked to get into discussions—right? So if we're doing this in his name, how about trying an experiment? Let's encourage people to have a discussion. We'll have it in one of the rooms of our office, and everyone will sit on the floor, with no sacred image of Kabir, no worship or ritual.
>
> So that's what we did. Tipanyaji and Narayanji were the first ones who got into singing and then discussing the *bhajan*s. People

liked it and more joined in. Word spread and the numbers kept increasing.

People had notebooks with bhajans written in them, and we selected some to publish in inexpensive booklets. We chose *bhajan*s that would help to advance this kind of discussion. We didn't pick out the ones about devotion to the guru and that sort of thing. We took bhajans about caste, superstition, hypocrisy. For instance, there's a song that says you do rituals for your parents when they're dead but don't care for them while they're alive. That type of thing. A lot more people started coming, and Tipanyaji's first cassette was produced.

One booklet had an introduction written by Prakash Kant, a very insightful and educated person. A lot of people objected to it because it described Kabir as a human being, no miracles. How could Kabir-*sāhib* be born from anybody's womb? How could Kabir-*sāhib* die? They saw Kabir in a different way. They had religious faith that wouldn't change in one meeting, or ten meetings. We would just calmly talk about it. We put up some exhibitions, distributed information, showed how people came to believe things that weren't necessarily true. We asked: Where do these misconceptions come from? How are they created?

The *manch* wasn't homogeneous. Some people were educated. Some singers were schoolteachers who had studied science, history, social science. Tipanyaji was one of those. There were some college students. … But the majority of participants had little education and had a lot of faith in their traditions. I emphasized that this was a dialogue. If somebody says something that you don't like, let him speak. Right? This is the meaning of dialogue, isn't it? If someone says something you disagree with, that's what he's been taught, in his family, in his village. It isn't a matter of blame. We used to say this again and again. If someone thinks in a different way from you, still respect him as a human being. Right? What was his learning process? How did he arrive at this understanding?

We didn't do exhaustive research or try to relate to everything about Kabir. We promoted those aspects which inspired us, and we left other aspects alone. If someone liked to touch people's feet as a sign of respect, that was OK. It wasn't an issue. But nobody was told, "You have to touch so-and-so's feet." The main thing was to have dialogue.

The Hindi daily newspaper *Naī Duniyā* carried a story on the meeting that took place on February 2, 1992:

> Twenty-five men and fifteen women were present. They discussed caste, untouchability, various kinds of social conflict in their villages. Two points emerged most clearly:
>
> 1. If we really want people in society to follow Kabir's ideas, we'll have to do more than sing bhajans. To make these ideas concrete, we must develop solid projects in the villages.
> 2. Along with Kabir, we should study the ideas of Ambedkar. At the end of the meeting, Syag-*bhāī* spoke about Ambedkar's life and thought.

B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) was the great leader of the struggle against untouchability and caste oppression in the first half of the twentieth century. A member of the despised *mahār* caste, by a series of near-miraculous circumstances he got educational opportunities that led to his earning a Ph.D. in economics from Columbia University in New York and a law degree in London. Returning to India, he fought unrelentingly for the human rights of untouchables and against the institutions of caste, ultimately becoming free India's first law minister and the chief architect of the Indian constitution. In October 1956, just two months before his death, he converted to Buddhism in a great public ceremony, leading a movement in which millions of Dalits (as many members of the downtrodden castes came to call themselves) have become Buddhists, guided by Ambedkar's writings on the political, social, spiritual, and intellectual suitability of that religion to their aspirations. Ambedkar's parents were members of the Kabir Panth. He sometimes said that he had three gurus: Kabir, Jyotirao Phule (a Maharashtrian who fought against caste in the nineteenth century), and the Buddhist monk who presided at his conversion ceremony. In 1992, Eklavya started an Ambedkar *manch* in Dewas, a smaller forum that ran parallel to the Kabir *manch* for two years. Some of the singers attended both; many attended only the Kabir *manch*.

Here is an example of a dialogue that took place at the Kabir forum, transcribed from an audiotape of the meeting on February 2, 1992. Ramprasad, Narayanji, and Girdharji are members of singing groups; Syag-*bhāī* and Dinesh work with Eklavya.

Ramprasad Golavatiya sang *Pandit vād vade so jhūṭha*.[11]

SYAG-BHĀĪ: For the last 600 years *mandalī*s have been singing Kabir bhajans. And during the same period, Kabir has come to be surrounded by rituals and pomp. This is because Kabir's spiritual bhajans are always sung while his social bhajans remain hidden.

NARAYANJI: Since coming to the Kabir *manch*, we've begun to sing the social bhajans more, because people here like them. In the programs where Panth gurus preside, the spiritual ones are given more prominence. Traditionally you start with homage to the guru. Then *chaukā āratī* (ritual) bhajans, then more about the guru's power, *rekhtā*[12] about the nature of the guru and the individual soul, then bhajans that have to be sung at dawn. Like that the entire night passes. After coming here, I've been freed from many delusions.

GIRDHARIJI: Here we have open discussion. In those programs we have to observe a protocol around the guru. We can't ask questions or discuss anything.

DINESH: In his own time, when Kabir saw social problems and felt the need for social change, he expressed those ideas in his bhajans. If we feel moved by Kabir's philosophy, we should look around and consider the needs of our society today. We should discuss and spread Kabir's social ideas.

SYAG-BHĀĪ: Along with Kabir we should discuss and spread the ideas of Dr. Ambedkar, because Dr. Ambedkar did tremendous work for the awakening of the Dalit community. In our society, even after fifty years of independence, we still have illiteracy, poverty, hunger, unemployment.

RAMPRASAD GOLAVATIYA: To raise consciousness, we can sing and do street theater.

NARAYANJI: Syag-*bhāī*, we who are in the Kabir *manch* need to do some work out in the real world. If we just sit here and have discussions, nothing will happen.

SYAG-BHĀĪ: All movements and projects start with ideas. Discussing ideas brings people together. Then they can raise their voices in the world.

As a title for the book of bhajan texts that they were publishing, participants chose a line from one of Kabir's couplets: *kabīrā soī pīr hai jo jāne par pīr*. The line plays on two meanings of *pīr*. The first *pīr* refers to the Sufi (Muslim mystical) equivalent of *guru*, a wise teacher or spiritual master.

The second meaning of *pīr* is pain or suffering. So the line means, "Kabir says, the true teacher is one who feels others' pain." The newspaper *Naī Duniyā* carried a review written by a friend of the *manch*:

> India's medieval bhakti movement was a social and cultural phenomenon that raised a resounding voice against the social ignorance of the times. ... The actions that saint-poets of the bhakti period adopted to change society, and the poetry they composed, are still relevant today. Kabir had a unique place in the bhakti movement. The bhajans and *dohā*s he composed are still on people's tongues in villages, and the tradition of singing his songs in groups has continued for many generations. ... In the first fifteen pages of this booklet, Prakash Kant has written an essay on the social, political, and religious conditions in Kabir's time. He demonstrates that the bhakti movement was born from contemporary social and religious circumstances. In every society, people arise to speak against prevailing falsehood and injustice. Their efforts come together to begin the process of social change. ... If we look at Kabir's bhajans and *dohā*s, we will see that on one hand he spoke about social transformation, while on the other hand he presented the spiritual aspect of life. In this booklet, most of the twenty bhajans speak out against the orthodoxies that constrict society.[13]

Some faithful devotees of the Kabir Panth objected to Prakash Kant's introduction, which described Kabir as a human being who was born and died in the usual human ways. They believed Kabir was a divine avatar, who manifested himself as a baby on a lotus in a pond, and whose life on earth was replete with miracles. Because of their objections, the introduction was omitted in later editions.

After the demolition of the Babri mosque and subsequent communal mayhem and murder across northern and western India, many groups organized to resist the waves of hatred and violence. The Uttar Pradesh state government sponsored a *Sadbhāv Yātrā* (Goodwill Journey) "to mobilize the public against communalism, spread the message of tolerance, peace, and compassion, and revive the spirit of communal harmony and devotion preached long ago by the *sant* poet Kabir."[14] They asked Eklavya to send *mandalī*s to join the *yātrā*, whose highlight was a weeklong traveling cultural program led by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).

A caravan of actors, writers, speakers, and singers moved along the roads from Varanasi to Magahar, the sites of Kabir's birth and death. Journalist Akhilesh Dikshit "Dipu" almost ecstatically describes the impact of these artists—their exuberance, simplicity and sincerity; their continuous singing through eight days of travel; the beauty of the tunes combined with the power of the words. Malwa's ever-popular song *Zarā halke gāḍī hānko*—"Move your cart along lightly"—became an anthem, with everyone joining in again and again as they walked. Dikshit observes: "The performance of the Dewas *manch* artists released a flow of Kabir poetry in this eastern region that will remain fresh for years to come" (Dikshit 1993).

About midway through the eight-year duration of the *manch*, Eklavya devised a questionnaire to get information on the ages, castes, and education of participants, as well as the history of each *mandalī*. Some of the questionnaires were lost, but in 2002 we were able to find fifty-eight of them, each representing one *mandalī*. The great majority of participants list their caste as Balai (also called Balahi)—in Malwa a Dalit caste with relatively high status among the Dalits (who have their own hierarchies).[15] A scattering of other castes are listed, including Chamar, Raidas, Goswamy, Rajput, Jat, Darzi, Chaudari, and Khati. When asked their occupation, most say *mazdurī* (labor) or *khetī* (farming). A few say they are shopkeepers, handymen, or teachers (*dukān, mistrī, paḍhāī*). Their ages range from the twenties to the fifties, with the occasional teenager. Under "education," we see notations like "3rd," "5th," or "7th" (indicating the highest grade completed), and sometimes *nahīṇ* (none). Many *mandalī*s say that they have been functioning for a long time, ten to thirty years, and that such singing is traditional in their families. Some newer ones cite Eklavya's Kabir *manch* as their inspiration for starting. A few mention the support of Prahlad Singh Tipanya and Narayan Singh Delmiya. One new group says it was inspired by Tipanyaji's cassettes. The groups covered by the questionnaires are 100 percent male. I was told that a female *mandalī* occasionally appeared at the Kabir *manch*, and I have met some women who sing Kabir. But it is clear that Kabir singing in Malwa is almost exclusively a male culture.

Meetings on the second of the month continued until 1998. A 1995 brochure stated that over 500 *mandalī*s had been involved and that monthly programs were being held in three villages as well as in Dewas. In 1993 Eklavya received a modest grant from the Indian Council of Historical Research to support documentation and text collection. Thousands of bhajans were typed up from the handwritten notebooks of *mandalī* members.

In cases where singers were unlettered, or old and frail, special efforts were made to transcribe songs from their oral presentation. Eklavya produced a lengthy report in 1999, with a historical introduction in English and an account of the Kabir *manch*'s activities in Hindi, followed by a collection of bhajan texts transcribed from the Malwa oral tradition, including notes and appendices. As a title for this report, they used the first line of a Kabir couplet:

> Kabir's words are searing, just hearing
> them sets off a fire.

It was interesting for me to discover, when I searched for the rest of the *sākhī*, that the second line changes the point of view to an interior one:

> *kaṭuk shabda kabīr ke, sun to āg lag jāī*
> *gyānī to vāṇ magan bhayā, agyānī jal jāī*
>
> Kabir's words are searing, just hearing
> them sets off a fire.
> The wise are completely immersed.
> The ignorant burn.

Magan, translated here as "immersed," usually refers to total absorption in meditation or devotional love. It could be associated with the coolness of inner peace which, in the opening of this chapter, was described as opposed to the fiery struggle against injustice. In two short lines this *sākhī* welds fiery intensity with calm concentration. Only the ignorant, those who miss the point, burn up.

Other Urban Activists Who Became Involved in the Manch

Kabir bhajan *mandalī*s, mostly but not entirely rural, comprised the core of Eklavya's Kabir *manch*. In addition, city people from Indore, Dewas, and Ujjain, who were not singers or religious devotees of Kabir and who tended to be highly educated, were also drawn to the monthly meetings. These were people who had affinities with Eklavya and with Kabir. Whether artists, intellectuals, NGO workers, or activists in other arenas,

they were interested in strengthening secularism, reducing inequality, and addressing injustices that affected the least powerful and privileged elements of society—seen through the lenses of caste, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, access to education, and so on. For example, there was Prakash Kant, an educator of Dewas who wrote the introduction to the first edition of the published bhajan collection, *Soī pīr hai jo jāne par pīr*.[16] There was Kiran Sahni, an Indore theater director who later put up a production of a famous Hindi play on Kabir.[17]

Suresh Patel of Indore was an officer of the Cotton Corporation of India, a government agency under the Ministry of Textiles. Inspired by Eklavya's *manch*, Suresh embarked on a sustained effort to enlist the power of Kabir's words and music in projects that would support and strengthen people at the lower ends of the economic and social scale. He founded an NGO called *Kabīr jan vikās samuh*—Kabir's Community for People's Development. When I met him in 2002, he took me to see two current projects. The first was a sort of preschool for children of varying ages who had never gone to school:

> [From my notebook, August 3, 2002]
>
> We visit a very poor settlement of Maharashtrian *ādivāsīs* ["tribal" people who had come to the city in search of work]. The children used to be sent out all day to collect plastic bags from the street to be sold by the kilo. Three years ago they started this program to prepare kids to enter government schools. They had to persuade the parents, who wanted the kids to earn money. Now they have a shabby little room with water puddled at one end, but it's clean, and the kids look sparkling. Volunteers from inside and outside the community started teaching the kids, both content and discipline. In three years, 150 kids who were not in school have entered government schools. They're about to start a new batch. A spirited woman leader talked to us, gesturing vigorously. The kids smiled broadly and talked readily.

The other project was an after-school gathering place for children in a lower-middle-class neighborhood, where Kabir's poetry and songs were used to inspire educational activities. It was a small but clean and bright space, with art projects on the walls featuring lines from Kabir. They held a bhajan program the day I came. Narayanji joined Tarasingh Dodve, an excellent singer from Indore, and Arun Goyal, a vivacious young man with

a fine voice who had come from his village for this program. Along with Suresh's coworkers, about twenty children and a few guests were present.

They sang songs that emphasized social issues, touching on religious delusions, hypocrisy, and social inequality. The program did not have a drearily didactic or politically doctrinaire feeling. Everyone plunged into the joy of music, generating experiences that were both personal and social. After three hours, I wrote in my notebook:

> Amazing explosion of selfless, joyful, mutually supportive singing, especially between Arun and Narayanji, younger and older, cascades of love and joy between them. A 13-year-old boy played *dholak*. [He turned out to be Tarasingh's son.] They threw the song verses like a ball between them, each smiling affectionately as the other picked it up, joining forces to build the energy ever higher. Narayanji got up and danced—the first time I ever saw that. The children looked happy and talked easily. When asked to sing, several stood up and sang Kabir *dohā*s without hesitation.

Suresh Patel had a doctorate in Hindi literature. Like many of the highly educated artists, intellectuals, and activists I met in Malwa, and unlike many of my friends in Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai, he spoke with me in Hindi, not English. The following translated excerpts are from a filmed interview conducted by Shabnam Virmani.[18] They are abridged and presented here in a continuous form.

> I grew up in a village near Jabalpur [eastern Madhya Pradesh], where I saw poverty, discrimination, untouchability, hypocrisy. And I saw how human dignity arises even in the worst circumstances. It was a majority *ādivāsī* (indigenous) area. The women had barely enough clothing to cover their bodies. When I saw all this in childhood, I began to think about it. In Tagar village, where my maternal grandfather lived, there were traditions of both folk and classical music. There were always Kabir bhajans and *satsang*s going on. I saw how people worked together and helped each other as they participated in Kabir *satsang*s. Some Kabir Panth sadhus came there. I found them different from other sadhus—not so much hypocrisy.
>
> Later when I finished my education, I took a job with the Cotton Corporation of India and came over to this side, Malwa [western

Madhya Pradesh]. Again I noticed that the cotton farmers hardly had any clothes to wear, though they were providing clothes for the whole world. I was moved to try to understand this. At that time I felt very close to Kabir, who 600 years earlier was facing these same things—hypocrisy, superstition, untouchability, poverty, exploitation, cruelty.

Then I heard that Eklavya had started a *manch* in Dewas, with bhajans and discussions. I wanted to organize something like that in Tagar too. I met Syag-*bhāī*, Dinesh Sharma, Prakash Kant, and they said they could send a group. Prahlad Singh Tipanyaji came with his *mandalī*. These were very interior villages. We had a three-day program, everyone was excited. The girls were drawing pictures, writing *sākhī*s on the walls. They collected money among themselves. Prakash Kantji came. Intellectuals, journalists came. People from other villages heard it was going on and they came.

We felt that Kabir-*sāhib*'s devotional bhajans were very well known, whereas his bhajans about social change and hypocrisy, and his own ways of attacking these things, were little known and rarely sung. Even the bhajans that focused on social issues were somehow changed, turned into something else. Kabir himself was becoming a kind of god, and the full force of his words was being lost. It suited some people to promote that kind of thing, it was convenient for them, so they made sure those bhajans were sung and emphasized. Like this one—

> In seven continents and nine world-divisions
> no one is as great as the guru.
> The creator can fail,
> but the guru always succeeds.

The people who came regularly on the second of each month—mostly they just wanted to sing their bhajans. The majority were poor and from Dalit groups. In Eklavya there was an atmosphere of equality. Everyone ate together, sang and discussed together, raised questions. Everyone had the right to speak. They didn't find these values in their villages or in the larger society. Some *mandalī*s were invited to various places to support communal harmony and social awakening. They went on All India Radio and Doordarshan and became more widely known. But the biggest break was with

Tipanyajī's first cassette, *Soī pīr hai jo jāne par pīr*. We stayed in contact after he visited Jabalpur and we encouraged him to get his bhajans into the market. He was inexperienced, and so were we. The company Sonotek in Jabalpur—they said it's nice, but who will listen to it? We said we were sure about the power of Kabir's songs, though we were also a little worried, since the message is so deep.

> *kabīr kī bānī aṭpaṭi, jhaṭpaṭ lakhi na jāy*
> *Jo jan jhatpat lakhi le, vākī khaṭpaṭ hī mit jāy.*
>
> Kabir's words are tricky, quite hard to get quickly,
> but if you see quickly, duplicity's gone!

[The humor of the verse depends on the rhyming sounds of three words translated as tricky, quickly, duplicity—*aṭpaṭi, jhaṭpaṭ, khaṭpaṭ*.]

But I had confidence people would listen to it. After the cassette came out, the Sonotek guys told me their studio's fortunes were made from it. The demand just kept growing. Who could have guessed? A whole series of results came out of this cassette. Dr. Kapil Tiwari organized programs all over M.P.[19] And things kept developing. Until then nobody was paying any attention to Kabir, aside from the Kabir Panth.

[The camera goes to a picture of Kabir on the wall.] A special feature of this picture is that he is working. He dedicated his life to the culture of work. Here his whole attention (*dhyān*) is on his work. He's wearing little clothing and concentrating fully on his work. I find this very suitable to Kabir-*sāhib*. He was living and working among the people, talking with them, eating and drinking with them, sharing all their sorrows and struggles, and composing his poetry. [This description is in implicit contrast with the usual Kabir Panthi representation of Kabir, seated as a great guru, with a lot of clothing, a tall pointed hat, and a hand raised in formal teaching gesture associated with sages and saints.]

Suresh, his close coworker Chhotu Bharti, and others have continued to link the voice of Kabir with their efforts to support people in the quest for equality, dignity, and equal opportunity. Over the years we have met a number of times—in Indore, in Suresh's ancestral village Tagar, and in Khandwa, a college town where we joined faculty members in a public

forum on Kabir. I had a habit of questioning Suresh and Chhotu about "inside" and "outside." I would say: Kabir taught us to speak out about the pain and injustice in society, but he also taught us to investigate ourselves, to follow some *sādhanā* (spiritual practice), to find a place of profound awakening within. Was it acceptable—was it true to Kabir—to emphasize the first part and ignore the second? Taking my question seriously, for a while Suresh and one of his colleagues tried practicing yoga and meditation. But eventually Suresh commented that I overemphasized the "inner" part.

I often remember the reply of Chhotu when asked what he felt was the most important teaching of Kabir. Without hesitation, he replied, "There is a great power hidden inside of everyone. We should find that power!" Then he and Suresh added, almost in chorus, "But we won't achieve this just by singing. We must do concrete work."

The hidden power Chhotu refers to is usually understood as the presence in everyone of the supreme reality, which reveals itself poetically in images of boundless sound and light, and which makes all bodies and all persons absolutely equal. Countless Kabir poems express this:

> As oil is in a sesame seed,
> as fire is in flint,
> your lord is in you.
> Wake up if you can.
>
> ***
>
> What are you searching for, dear friend?
> What are you running after, dear friend?
> In every body, Ramji speaks.
> In every body, the beloved speaks.[20]
>
> ***
>
> Kabir says, what have you lost? What are you seeking?
> The blind don't see. Light is blazing in your body.[21]
>
> ***
>
> Wherever I look, nothing is empty, nothing is lacking.
> This body is filled with light.[22]
>
> ***

Oh bird, my friend,
why do you wander
from forest to forest?
In the city of your body
is the sacred sound,
in your own green garden
is the holy name.

Oh bird, my friend,
you're sitting in the dark.
In the temple of your body
the light shines,
the guru's teaching gleams.
Why do you wander
from forest to forest?[23]

For many listeners these lines point to an inner spiritual awakening, often implying the necessity of a guru to show the way. For Chhotu, "Your lord is in you, wake up if you can," resonates as a political inspiration. The light that blazes within the body signifies not only enlightenment in the spiritual sense, but *power*.

From our first conversation, in July 2002, Suresh and Chhotu showed how an orientation toward social struggle and service produced a certain consistent way of reading Kabir. With my interest in inner transformation, I would consistently point to the other side.

LH: Was Kabir mainly concerned with reforming society, or was he more interested in the spiritual side?

SURESH PATEL (SP): Kabir was interested in the common people. He showed a way that was simple and open to all, not just the elite.

When Suresh asked why I was interested in Kabir, I touched on various points, emphasizing my attraction to Kabir's fearlessness.

SP: How does a person get free of fears? Why are people fearful? Because they have no security, no money, no education, no legal rights. They have poor health, both physical and mental. We can bring them to fearlessness by changing these things.

LH: But even when we have education, rights, money, and all the rest, we are still not free from fear. Right? (to Chhotu) How can we transform our condition from fearfulness to fearlessness?

CHHOTU: We need to recognize ourselves. When we recognize the strength (*tākat*) within ourselves, we become less and less afraid.

Scenes from the Manch

Though I wasn't present at these events in the 1990s, I could imagine them on the basis of Eklavya's logs and audio recordings, my later conversations with participants, and my many experiences with Kabir singers. Listening to ten-year-old tapes, I reflected on the sheer numbers of songs that the singers knew. Song after song, poetic verse after verse, all through the night, with the vigorous beats of the *dholak*, the ring of cymbals, the clear plucking and strumming of *tambūrā* strings, the single and combined male voices, some melodious, some rough—the room and the people in it were enveloped in Kabir. Together, in mind and body, they possessed immeasurable knowledge of Kabir.

Each meeting began with a bhajan by a group that had been chosen to lead off, after which all present would introduce themselves. Then each group would get a chance to sing, a leader from the *mandalī* would be asked to comment, and general discussion could follow. Though the program continued from 9 p.m. to dawn, often there was time for only one bhajan from each of the many groups that showed up.

In a yellowing register one can read Dinesh's records of the first year, with notes on each monthly meeting, written swiftly as the meeting was going on. The second gathering, on August 2, 1991, was summarized like this:

> Eighteen *mandalī*s sang one bhajan each and were asked to say something about the meaning. We found that most of the *mandalī*s could not explain the full meaning of a bhajan. They all benefited from the discussion in which they heard other people's ideas about the meaning.
>
> As a goal for future programs, they said that people of all castes should sit together and discuss social problems such as casteism, untouchability, etc. Other topics that they wanted to take up were:

- History of Kabir Panth.
- *Chaukā āratī* ritual. Difference between two traditions of Kabir panth—one gives great importance to *chaukā* while the other doesn't. Why? Some say Kabir opposed *chaukā āratī* but later it became a means of involving people in Kabir programs.
- Plan to produce cassettes and booklets.
- Why are there no women participants here?

On September 9, 1991, they took up meanings of words and concepts as well as questions about Kabir's life:

> What are the five *tattvas* (elements) and three *guṇas* (qualities) that Kabir often mentions? What is an *avadhūt* (the wanderer whom Kabir addresses in many songs)? What is the difference between *guru* and *satguru* (teacher and true teacher)? Between *ātmā* and *paramātmā* (the individual divine spirit and the supreme divine spirit)? What is the importance of *satsang* (good company/spiritual companionship)? What are the deeper meanings of *alakh* (unseen) and *adbhūt* (wondrous)? What happened in Kabir's own life? What kind of person was Ramanand (believed to be Kabir's guru)? Why did Kabir speak disrespectfully of Ramanand in one song? [parentheses added by LH]

In one entry, Dinesh made a list of verses that challenged and taunted Brahmins, a second list showing how Muslim clerics were similarly challenged, and a third giving examples of songs devoted to the guru's greatness. The last type, *guru mahimā,* was always cited by Eklavya workers as the sort of thing they were trying to get away from, preferring to emphasize Kabir's radical social thought and anti-authoritarian spirit. For them the constant litanies of homage to the guru represented the hold of traditional religion with its hierarchical structures, which tended to keep people passive and subordinated.

In an early meeting of the *manch,* Hiralal Sisodiya sang the well-known *Santo dekhat jag baurānā* (translation in Hess and Singh 2002, 3–4), then commented on it:

> In this bhajan Kabir says, look, brother, these beliefs we hold on to are false. They have us all tangled up. If we get together, we can break through them—beliefs about temples, monasteries, heavy books, Puranas, Shastras. We keep these conservative traditions,

we say that this is our tradition, but it's not true. All these things have been made by human beings. Nobody has these traditions in them when they're born. If you're born in a Hindu house, you become a Hindu. If you're born in a low-caste house, they call you low caste. And we go around with these orthodoxies loaded on our backs. The religions [he alternates between *dharma* and *mazahab*, Hindu and Muslim terms for religion] go on telling us we have to do rituals, idol-worship, pilgrimage, fasts, we have to put marks on our arms and foreheads, follow rules. Like this, they deceive people. We should be free from these rules. Human beings naturally want to be free.

Kabir also says that if we are really human, we won't harm other creatures. The *sant*s made a strong point about violence. As the divine spirit is in you, so it is also in other creatures. Just as you are conscious, they are conscious. Just as a light is burning within you, it is burning within them. If they are going to die, let them die by themselves, don't kill them. Many commit violence to fill their stomachs or to please their tongues. There are lots of other foods in the world, fruits and vegetables. Why do we have to kill in order to eat? Humans didn't give them [animals] life and don't have the right to take their lives. We shouldn't even kill insects. Kabir said:

Don't torment a living being, we all share one breath.
Though you hear a thousand scriptures, you won't get free of that death.

After the first six months, Dinesh wrote enthusiastically of a change in the gatherings:

Now it seems the people themselves have taken up leadership of the activities, without any formalities. Forgetting differences between high and low, rich and poor, laborer and employer, and other social constructions, they pose questions to each other, going beyond their own limited ideas and beliefs. Sometimes they discuss a single word for thirty minutes, examining it in fine detail. They look at bhajans, mythologies, characters in the traditional literature, philosophy, and discuss everything fully.

Then Dinesh imagined that this could continue and spread independent of Eklavya. He hoped that they would carry this spirit to other social

and religious settings, that they would no longer sit silent, not daring to ask questions or express ideas.

In 2004, I discussed these records with Arvind Sardana, a longtime worker in Eklavya's Dewas office who was present throughout the period of the Kabir *manch* and became director of the whole Eklavya organization in 2011. Arvind suggested that it was a bit too optimistic to imagine that such changes would continue and spread without structural support like that provided by the Kabir *manch*: regular organized meetings; bus fare and tea; someone keeping records in a register; collection and publication of bhajans; outreach to larger worlds as in the Sadbhav Yatra; above all the remarkable mixing of people of different social, educational, and economic backgrounds in an atmosphere of mutual respect, equality, congeniality, and enjoyment. Such support was necessary to create something new, sustained, and far-reaching. When Eklavya discontinued the official Kabir *manch* in 1998, these structures dissolved. But there is evidence that individuals experienced lasting changes, and that the Kabir culture of the region was affected in a number of subtle ways. Some of the individuals are profiled below in their own words. Examples of social and cultural impacts also arise in the story of the *chaukā āratī* ritual and Prahladji's relationship to the Kabir Panth, told in chapter 7.[24]

The organizers succeeded in their goal of raising social issues through the medium of Kabir, but they did not try to control the scope of the conversation. Singers sang whatever they wanted to, including plenty of songs praising the guru or describing esoteric inner experiences. They delved into the meanings of spiritual terminology, history, psychology, and social, moral, and political questions, without any sense of limitation, often making connections that might be missed by someone who is inclined to separate the "political" and the "spiritual."

Social meanings sometimes came out in contexts that were surprising to me. On one occasion in 1992, Prahladji and his group sang the rollicking "*Sāhib (satguru) ne bhāng pilāī, akhiyoṇ meṇ lālan chhāī*"—"the lord (or alternately, the true guru) gave me a marijuana drink, my eyes turned red." Far from being a political song, it evokes the joyful "drunkenness" of getting suddenly enlightened through the guru's grace and seeing the divine in every creature and every particle of nature. The signature lines at the end have the names of both Ramanand and Kabir.

guru rāmānand tumarī balihārī, sir par ṭhokar aisī dīnī
sāheb kabīr bakshīsh kar do, yah agam bānī gāī

Ramanand was a famed Brahmin teacher, a devotee of Ram, who came to Varanasi from the South and is widely believed to have been the guru of Kabir as well as other bhakti poets of diverse castes. For someone familiar with conventional history, an obvious way to translate the verse would be this:

> Guru Ramanand, I surrender to you. You gave me such a bang on the head!
> Lord, give Kabir your blessing as he sings this ungraspable song.[25]

On the 1992 tape, I heard Prahladji briefly explicate the whole song. When he got to this verse, he gave the conventional meaning, then offered another interpretation. Ramanand followed the *saguṇ* devotional path, worshiping the Ram avatar who had form and attributes—the son of King Dasharatha in the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. He must have taught his disciples to worship images. It could be that after meeting Kabir, he came to understand the truth of *nirguṇ* devotion. "When Kabir-*dās* wrote, 'In every bush and tree, everything living, moving and unmoving, my lord is blooming,'" Prahladji suggested, "he [Ramanand] must have realized this in his own experience—the lord is everywhere, in everything. Then Ramanand must have said, 'Lord Kabir, give me your blessing.'"

If we take this interpretation, the "ungraspable song" (*agam bāṇī*) refers to *nirguṇ* expression, and a very different translation emerges:

> Guru Ramanand says, I surrender to you. You gave me such a bang on the head!
> Lord Kabir, give me your blessing as I sing this ungraspable song.

I first heard the story of Ramanand's being Kabir's disciple from one of the leaders of the Dharamdasi Kabir Panth in Damakheda. There was a text, he said, a *goṣhṭhī* or dialogue between Kabir and Ramanand, which concluded with Ramanand having a great awakening to the truth of *nirguṇ* bhakti and taking Kabir as his guru. My initial response to this was urbane amusement. I knew the genre of these *goṣhṭhī*s. Every sect had them: their founder encountered other great gurus and sectarian leaders, debated with them, and vanquished everyone. The idea that Ramanand had become Kabir's disciple ran so wildly counter to received tradition that I just smiled.

But when I heard Prahladji coming up with this interpretation in a 1992 tape from the Kabir *manch*, I got a bang on the head myself. At that

point I could not dismiss it as a generic "my guru is greater than your guru" narrative. Prahladji was citing the lines of a Kabir bhajan that he and many others in the room sang. His interpretation was clearly and reasonably based on the text. Was it a Dalit protest against the superiority of the Brahmin guru?

The Brahminical shadow over Kabir had become a matter of intense debate among the urban cognoscenti following the publication in 1997 of Dr. Dharamvir's *Kabīr ke ālochak* (*Kabir's Literary Critics*). Dharamvir is a scholar who undertook to expose Brahminical prejudice in the way Kabir was treated by the giants of mid-twentieth-century Hindi literary criticism—Hazariprasad Dvivedi, Ramchandra Shukla, and Parashuram Chaturvedi.

Dvivedi's 1942 book *Kabīr*, a classic in Kabir studies, does not attempt to demonstrate historically that Ramanand was Kabir's contemporary and guru. Taking that for granted, Dvivedi waxes eloquent on how the arrival of such a guru must have transformed Kabir. As Dvivedi puts it, Kabir was a rough jewel before that moment, a harsh critic of others' delusions, perhaps excessively influenced by the Nath tradition where cocky, independent yogis valued their own efforts and achievements and belittled others. But when Kabir found his guru in Ramanand, he realized the depth of bhakti—devotion, love, self-surrender. He experienced previously unknown ecstasy and was transformed into something far greater than he could otherwise have been. This, according to Dvivedi, was Ramanand's grace.[26]

Dharamvir asserts that Dvivedi's account has a subtext: For Dvivedi, it is unthinkable that the unlettered Muslim/Shudra weaver Kabir could achieve greatness on his own. This was possible only after he was perfected by and subordinated to a Brahmin guru. Listening to the Eklavya tape, I realized that five years before Dharamvir's book provoked controversies among urban intellectuals, Prahladji had argued that Ramanand had ultimately surrendered to Kabir. The reversal of the commonly accepted identities of guru and disciple shows that objections to Ramanand's authority had a longstanding presence in grassroots Kabir culture. The arguments of Prahladji and Dharamvir are different. The urban writer, based on his reading of Dvivedi, asserts caste bias on the part of Dvivedi and other twentieth-century Brahmin critics. The singer, based on his reading of a Kabir-attributed song text, links the superiority of Kabir to Ramanand with the superiority of *nirguṇ* to *saguṇ* bhakti. But there is a connection between the two arguments. *Nirguṇ* traditions are deeply entwined with

the struggle against caste oppression—a relationship that David Lorenzen explores fully in *Praises to a Formless God*, and that I have discussed in chapter 1.

An interesting sidelight on Ramanand's place in Kabir's life came unexpectedly in a conversation with Narayan Singh Delmia, who is profiled at length later in this chapter. Near the end of our interview in 2002, Narayanji asked me a few questions about my research, including this exchange:

NARAYAN SINGH DELMIA (ND): Did you learn about Kabir? Who were his mother and father? Did you learn that?

LH: About Kabir's life? I read in books various stories that have been told about Kabir. This isn't really historical. From a historical point of view we can't prove much about what happened in Kabir's life. Is this what you're asking me?

ND: Did you learn the names of his mother and father?

LH: I heard that Niru and Nima [Muslim weavers] were his parents. I also found the story that a Brahmin widow had abandoned him and he was adopted by Niru and Nima.

ND: You heard that he was a Brahmin widow's son. And did you hear who his father was?

LH: No, I didn't hear that. Why are you asking? What have you heard?

ND: I haven't read it, but I've heard that he was Ramanand's son.

LH: That's an interesting story! I have never heard that. … I don't believe he was the son of a Brahmin widow. I have always assumed that he was a Muslim, born in a Muslim family. Later when he was recognized as someone very great, the Brahmins wanted to claim him. They didn't like the idea that he was a Muslim. But nowadays many people believe that story about the Brahmin widow. What do you think about the story that Ramanand was his father?

ND: I feel it is likely to be true. I will try to learn more about this. I will buy some books and try to find out.

LH: I would be surprised if that story is written anywhere.

ND: I think it is written in Rajneesh's book.

In this conversation, one of Kabir's Dalit followers simultaneously affirms Kabir's intimate tie with the famous Brahmin guru and radically demotes the guru by suggesting that he broke his vow of celibacy to father an even greater guru, the Julaha saint of Varanasi.

While educated urban participants were interested in Hindu-Muslim communal issues on the national level, the village singers were more likely to apply Kabir's critiques of religion and hypocrisy locally to the religious formation they knew best: the Kabir Panth. The Panth became a focus of debate and criticism. The next chapter provides an introduction to the Kabir Panth and its distinct lineages. Here just a few points will be mentioned. The Panth's relationship to Hinduism is not simple. While it was created partly as an alternative to caste-ridden, Brahmin-dominated, ritual-filled Hinduism, it also came to reproduce many Hindu forms. The Panth tradition to which most Kabir devotees in Malwa belong, based in Chhattisgarh and known as the Dharamdasi or forty-two-generation lineage, is the most elaborately Hinduized of all the organized Kabir Panths. In the Dharamdasi "branch," the head guru's lofty status verges on divinity, and authority is vested in a wide network of *mahant*s who function as ritualists, initiators of disciples, local gurus, and preachers. A particular ritual called *chaukā āratī* is considered indispensable to the Panth's various functions.

The open, egalitarian, and demystifying thrust of the *manch* contrasted with the ritualizing and authoritarian tendencies of the Panth. Dinesh told me that the chief Kabir Panth *mahant* of Dewas had once come to the *manch* and remarked, "Why do you ask such people to interpret Kabir? What do they know? This is something that only the Panth gurus should do." The day he came people were quiet, hardly daring to speak. "Fortunately," Dinesh said with a smile, "he never came back."

Dinesh made a chart in the logbook, comparing the *manch* to Kabir Panth activities. Table 6.1 below provides an abridged version.

A discussion on October 2, 1991, began with a comparison of Kabir *sākhī*s that seemed to have contradictory messages. The singers came up with their own theory of interpolation, considering who might have inserted what false verses for their own self-interest, and what this implied for their understanding of Kabir and themselves. Here is Dinesh's account, written in the logbook:

Narayanji sang a bhajan that included these lines:

> Don't sit with bad companions—
> they never mention Ram.
> A wedding procession without a groom—
> what's the point?

Table 6.1 Comparison of Kabir Manch and Kabir Panth Activities

Activity	Manch	Panth
Opening	No invoking of authority. General welcome, everyone introduces self.	Dedication to guru. *Mahant* gives sermon.
Arrangements	Nothing special.	Tents, lights, loudspeakers, etc.
Status	Everyone has equal status, respect, chance to talk.	Guru sits on a high seat. He talks, others listen.
Expense	No charge, only bus fare.	Must offer coconut, money. Coming "empty-handed" not acceptable.
Discussion	Yes	No
Relating To Organizers	Open, respectful, friendly, approachable.	Ordinary Kabir Panthi doesn't have the nerve to question the guru.
Goals	Focused on well-being in this life, nothing about afterlife or final salvation.	Always talking about *moksha* (salvation) and *satlok* (heavenly world beyond this one).

Prahlad Singh Tipanya raised a question: Did Kabir hate bad people? [As everyone knew, there were many songs and couplets that warned against bad company.] If so, then what about this *sākhī*:

> Kabir stands in the bazaar, wishing everyone well.
> He's not anyone's friend, not anyone's foe.

Narayanji replied with another *sākhī*:

> From good company goodness,
> from bad company grief.
> Kabir says, wherever you go,
> keep your own true company.[27]

Hiralal Sisodiya continued the discussion: If we search through the bhajans and *sākhī*s, we can easily find two that have Kabir's signature, and even though Kabir was one person, the lines say very different things. The two seem to contradict each other. It may be that in certain places, or in response to certain events, Kabir had

particular thoughts. It's all right if there are differences in the ideas he expressed. But if the ideas are totally opposite, then, according to me, somebody has passed some fake coins in the market, calling them Kabir's coins. Here's another example. In Kabir's bhajans we see [criticism of] hypocrisy, pomp, ritual marks on the body, temples and mosques. But we also find some bhajans under Kabir's name that promote guru-worship, ritual, sacred books, homage to Ganesh, and so on. Should we fall into these delusions? What should we do?

Prahlad Tipanya said: There are always people in society looking out for their own self-interest and power. They might have inserted this kind of thing in the bhajans. The gurus themselves are hypocritical and pompous in the way they do the *chaukā āratī* [ritual], making ordinary people throw away their money.

GIRDHARIJI: Why do we do *chaukā āratī*?

NARAYANJI: We sit here and oppose *chaukā āratī*, but we ourselves sponsor *āratī*s when the time comes.

GOVARDHANLALJI: The gurus fill us with false promises and beliefs. They say, if you don't do this, then after you die, you won't go to heaven.

NARAYANJI: Why do we fall into their traps?

MANGILALJI: We lack confidence and courage. We feel weak, so we get caught in their snares.

SISODIYAJI: We need to become courageous. The first step is knowledge. First look at yourself, then you can think about the infinite universe. If we come to know ourselves, it's a big thing.

A note in the register for July 2, 1992, the first anniversary of the *manch*, describes a conversation with several participants in the predawn hours. "After a year," Dinesh asks, "do you see any change in yourselves?" He summarizes their response:

We used to have religious fear [*dhārmik ḍar*]. If you don't do this you'll suffer, you won't get salvation. Now we're not afraid. There's no point. Our self-esteem was weak. Now we feel more power and self-confidence. We used to think of Kabir as a Hindu god, an avatar. Now we think of him as a great human being. Narayanji commented on a *sākhī*: "Gold, virtuous folk, and holy ones can break

> and become whole again and again. / A false person's like a clay pot: one blow, it shatters." Before we just said it, but now we understand it and apply it in our lives.

That same night, Narayanji had sung *Santo jīvat hī karo āshā. . . . man hī se bandhan, man hī se mukti . . .*—"Seekers, fulfill your hopes while you're alive. . . . It's your own mind that binds you, your own mind that frees you." Explicating the song, he emphasized that there's no point in dreaming about happiness or wisdom after death. Our suffering and our freedom, our problems and their solutions, are all right here.

Three Singer-Participants and Their Experience of the Manch

Narayan Singh Delmia, Hiralal Sisodiya, and Prahlad Singh Tipanya were often mentioned as having taken leadership roles in the *manch*. Prahladji receives extensive attention throughout this book, especially in chapters 1 and 7. Here I will profile Narayanji, Hiralalji, and a younger singer whom I came to know in the 2000s, Kaluram Bamaniya.

Hiralalji

Hiralal Sisodiya, in his sixties when I met him in Ujjain in 2002, had long been a politically conscious person. A staunch follower of B. R. Ambedkar, he had converted to Buddhism along with millions of other former "untouchables." He was a member of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which seeks to unite poor and disenfranchised sectors of Indian society, particularly the lower castes, electing representatives who would serve their interests. Hiralalji had studied up to the seventh grade and had worked for many years in a cloth mill in Ujjain.

Dinesh Sharma, Hiralal's brother Lalchand, and I drove from Dewas to Ujjain to meet Hiralalji. He spoke with fluency, simplicity, clarity, and color. His words here are presented largely as a continuous statement, with brief bracketed indications of questions posed by Dinesh and me.

> The main purpose of the Kabir manch was to help people understand themselves, what they truly are inside … Kabir's philosophy first of all is against hypocrisy. People in our country, especially poor people,

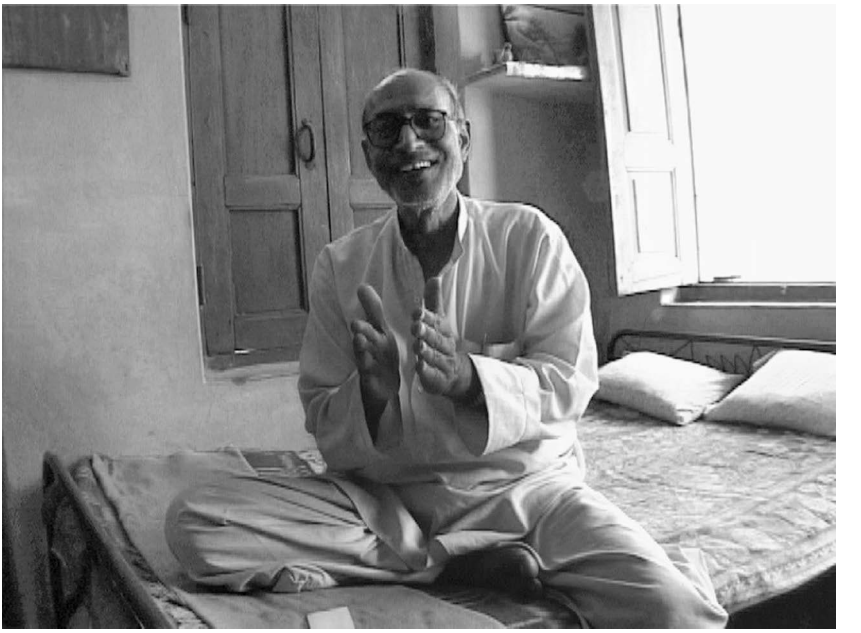

FIGURE 6.3. Hiralal Sisodiya. Photo by Shabnam Virmani.

are deeply entangled in hypocrisy and superstition, and in the caste system. The wall of casteism rises up between human beings. Often there is no love, no sense of brotherhood, between people of different castes. A kind of poison is created, which Kabir wanted to eliminate. Kabir wanted equality. … The Kabir *manch* as I see it tried to shed light on hypocrisy, superstition, orthodoxy, casteism. … In this country there are many delusions about God. Kabir said, brother, God is within each person. It is called *chetan svarūp* (consciousness-form). Some people call it *ātm*ā, or *buddhi*, or *chetnā*. Kabir said:

> Where are you searching for me, friend? I'm right here.
> Not in Gokul or Mathura, not in Kashi or Kailash.[28]

So the temple, the mosque, all these religious places we've created—it's a kind of commercial business (*dukandārī*), a way of perverting our intelligence, when in fact the supreme being (*paramātmā*) is within every person. This is what Kabir taught. And this is what we were doing with the Kabir manch, spreading Kabir's ideas, awakening people, freeing them from all kinds of problems, delusions, superstitions.

[On being asked what they did at the monthly meetings.]

There were bhajans and interpretations. For the listeners who didn't have much knowledge, there were explanations. Those who had some understanding in their own hearts about Kabir's words, ideas, and ideals—they clarified these things. This was helpful to people. Some decided to lead their lives according to those ideals, and even now they are living that way. In that atmosphere, along with Kabir, the words of other sants also were discussed. Philosophy was discussed. That's what happened at the Kabir manch.

[About his own history with Kabir.]

I had been drawn to Kabir's ideas since I was twelve or thirteen years old. Gradually I changed. Gradually I got some joy, peace, and happiness. Through my brother Lalchand I learned about the Kabir *manch*. I started going and even took some responsibility there. When I heard it was ending, I still went [on the 2nd of the month], because I didn't want to believe it was true. I kept thinking about it. There were still many people from Ujjain who I wanted to take to the *manch*. I had already brought several people there, to learn about Kabir's ideas, to get that happiness and peace.

[About Kabir Panthi gurus who occasionally came to the meetings.]

They wore their beads, caps, brow marks, arm marks. But their system, their way of thinking, was tied to ritualism. [The next comment refers to the fact that the Kabir Panth strictly prohibits alcohol, cigarettes, and nonvegetarian food.] It's good if people give up drinking, if they stop being drunkards. But so what, if there's not a revolution of ideas? This is the most important revolution. When it takes place within a person, his whole life is turned around. He is transformed. After a revolutionary change, you can imagine a person becoming Kabir or Buddha or Nanak or Ravidas or Dadu. Kabir's philosophy puts the greatest emphasis on a revolution of ideas. And it's for everyone—not for certain persons or castes. It's universal. In India there are many sects and schools of thought that have spread all kinds of delusion. They won't let some people enter the path. Even today, they don't let people in. Kabir wanted people to understand their own nature (*nij svarūp ka bodh*). Recognize yourself! The supreme being is not far away.

Hiralalji was very critical of the Kabir Panth, and he didn't hesitate to challenge Panth authorities on their own turf. He relished telling us stories of how he provoked the *mahant*s.

> One time I ran into Rajaramji Dangi from Jhonkar village—nowadays he's a teacher here in Ujjain, living in Bhanjushri colony. He was with his guruji, Keshavdasji from Jhonkar. They came to the Eklavya *manch*, and the guruji sang a bhajan with his *mandalī*. Before the bhajan he sang a *sākhī*:
>
> > Step over the bounded—human. Step over the boundless—holy.
> > Step over both bounded and boundless—unfathomable thought.
>
> I asked him to explain the *sākhī*. I said, you are a sant, so *sāhabjī*, please explain it. Instead of explaining, he got angry with me. So I told a story. Two men who lived in the desert went to Australia. In the desert there's a shortage of water. In Australia they found a good hotel with running water. The water came out of the faucets, and they were bathing. They were having a good time. But their passport was only valid for one week. They were from the desert, where there was always a shortage of water. After a week, it was time to go back to India. Their guruji was ready to go, but those two men were unscrewing the faucet from the pipe. He said, "Hey, our plane is leaving soon, we need to go. Where are those two guys?" He went looking for them in their room, and they were unscrewing the faucet. They wanted to take the faucet home. Why? Because water came out of it. They said, "We'll attach it there and water will come out. We're very short of water there." Keshavdasji is like that.
>
> Dangiji was angry with me. He said, "Is this the way you talk to my guruji?" I said, "Brother, you are turning on the faucet, but the water source is far away. You want to get water just by having a faucet. In our society, we have sants and mahants like that: empty faucets. There's no water in them." That's what I said.
>
> Another Kabir Panth guru, Mangaldas Sahib, used to come to our meetings, and so did other sants and mahants. When we would ask them very politely to explain the bhajans, they refused, saying we should have only bhajans here, no explanations. We wanted understanding, but if any of the listeners raised a question, it seemed those gurus had a problem. That's why I had to tell that story.

[He speaks of the *chaukā āratī* rituals that are central to the Dharamdasi tradition of the Kabir Panth. One form of the ritual is *chalāvā āratī*, done on the occasion of someone's death.]

There's not even a religious discourse in a *chalāvā āratī*. I see it as a new orthodoxy, a phony ritual propagated by the gurus. I have spoken against it in a number of places. I have challenged Kabir Panthi gurus and *sant*s. There was one *divānjī* [ritual assistant], his name was Kashinathji. He lived here in Ujjain, in Ashok Nagar. He has passed on. In *chalāvā chaukā āratī* they say that they want to bring peace to the soul of the deceased. So I said to him: "You say you're bringing peace to the soul of this dead man. Do you have any proof of this? Kabirji says,

> Everyone went from here, with loads and loads piled on.
> No one came from there. Run and try to ask.[29]

"The soul of the person to whom you're bringing peace has gone away. Did he send you a letter saying I'm peaceful or not peaceful, hungry or thirsty, happy or unhappy? Have you got any proof?" That guru also got angry with me! He said, you only want to criticize Kabir's teachings, nothing more. I said, I'm not criticizing, I'm talking about Kabir's philosophy. Kabir's philosophy is very pure, and you're ruining it, turning it into a commercial business. That's not acceptable to me. That's why you have these *chaukā āratī*s and *satsang*s so often in the villages. *Chaukā āratī, ānandi āratī*, with Kabir Panthi *mahant*s sitting in the center, wearing their special shirts.

Once I went to Pavasa village. Shyamdasji from Tonk Kala had gone there for a program. He was wearing his pointed cap and marks on his forehead. In full costume, he was sitting under the canopy. I asked him: Are you Dharamdasji? Are you Kabirji? The person who had organized that *chaukā*, who belonged to the Malviya [Balai] community, said to me, "Sisodiyaji, don't say anything, he'll get upset." I said, "I'll definitely say something. When you put on an outfit like that, should I call you Dharamdasji, or should I call you Kabirji? What should I call you? Tell me!"

I am opposed to all this. Kabir never wanted this kind of ritualism. Not a bit! Kabir's wisdom was pure nectar. Anyone who drinks of that wisdom, who grasps it and knows that truth, will experience stillness and joy upon joy. In the villages they often do this ritual without even mentioning Kabir's teaching. It's terrible.

As our conversation drew to a close, Hiralalji pulled together the various threads of what he had told us.

> Eklavya's Kabir manch was a medium for all human communities, a medium for the birth of a revolution in ideas. The goal was to give all people some peace in their hearts and minds and to encourage the broadening of their imaginations. To eradicate confusion and darkness and to create light. That's why I was so very happy to discover the *Kabīr bhajan aur vichār manch*, and that's why I went there so regularly. Whenever I got an announcement, I went there. Whatever I have received from the satguru—four annas, eight annas, whatever I have been able to understand, I want to share it. If someone becomes a Kabir Panthi and puts a rosary or a bead on a string around his neck, does this mean that he has learned how to think? That a revolution of ideas has taken place in him and his superstition and orthodoxy have been erased? These are difficult matters. Kabirji says:
>
> > You're a *sant*? So what? Don't play till you're ripe.
> > Crush half-grown mustard seeds—no oil, no pulp.[30]
>
> So what if someone puts on the dress of a *sant* or a Kabir Panth *mahant*? The mustard seeds have to be ripe before you can extract oil from them. Oil doesn't come out of unripe seeds. *Sant*s and *mahant*s should be ripe, mature. Only if they are ripe can they make others ripe. Most of those *sant*s and *mahant*s wandering around, whether they belong to the Kabir Panth or some other Panth, they're putting on a pious show, they're out to get money. Whether the lives of others improve or don't improve—they don't care.
>
> Finally he turned to Dinesh.
>
> Now I want to make this request to you: please start the Kabir *manch* again. Let the *mandalī*s come, let them sing bhajans. I have a little time left in my life. Whatever little morsels I have, I want to share, so that others can also have a revolution in ideas. I want to share, so that the human community can move on the path of truth. You deserve our gratitude for creating the Kabir *manch*. Please start it again!

Narayanji

Narayan Singh Delmia, a well-known Kabir singer of the area, was employed by Eklavya to help with communications and arrangements—strenuous

tasks in that pre–cell phone era when many villages didn't even have land line connections. Getting to know Narayanji over the last few years, I have seen that he is a wonderful organizer, a person of keen intelligence and clear ideas who has a way of bringing people together, including and encouraging everyone. When others are singing, if the mood is right, he is likely to get up and dance, gracefully whirling and moving his arms, the pleasure of the moment apparent on his face. His social and religious ideas are quite radical; without compromising them, he seems to know how to express them with humor and sensitivity, in ways that won't polarize a group. When the *manch* decided to create youth *mandalī*s, Narayanji was the one who organized and trained them. A few years later, when the Bangalore Kabir Project and Eklavya supported programs to develop women's *mandalī*s and to bring Kabir creatively into schools, Narayanji was the leader they called on. Though his formal education went only up to the third grade, his quest for knowledge has been lifelong.[31] Narayanji has deeply internalized Kabir's poetry. When I met him in 2002, he was fifty-eight, a slender man with white hair and a quick smile. He lived in a small house in Barendwa village, Ujjain district.

On August 1, 2002, I went to Barendwa for a singing session with some of Narayanji's friends and neighbors. He had arranged a room, its walls

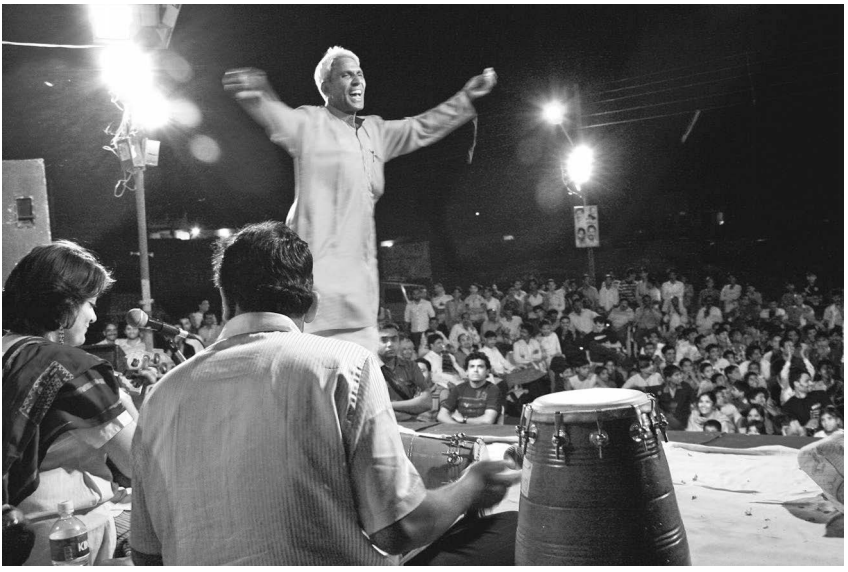

FIGURE 6.4. Narayanji breaks into dance at a village performance. Photo by Hari Adivarekar.

made of smooth whitewashed clay. It had just one tiny window. Outside everything was dripping with rain, the sky densely overcast. And the electricity was down. We couldn't sit outside under a tree, as we would have done in clear weather. Inside it was very dark. Someone lit a "chimney," a small kerosene-fueled lamp that looked like a candle. Then a rope was swung over a ceiling-beam to hang a lantern. They lit the lantern, and the space suddenly became warm, intimate, and lively, with big shadows playing against the white walls. Narayanji led off.

> "Sometimes, Lindaji, I don't know what to think about Kabir—whether he was a human being or God."
> "Which way are you leaning right now?"
> "I think he was human."

He spoke now, as he often did, with a smile that conveyed a combination of amusement and irony.

Then we went around the circle, about sixteen men, young, old, and in-between, and each introduced himself. One tall man with a black beard said he was Raju Das, a *mahant* of the Kabir Panth. "For me, Kabir is God." Most of the others didn't express an opinion. But when the singing started, they were all ready. One man played a *dholak* for everyone. The *tambūrā* was passed around. The *mahant* turned out to be an enthusiastic and tuneful singer, and a virtuoso on the harmonium. His right arm stretched out to emphasize an emotional point while his left hand kept playing on the keys. This gathering had been called for me, but they all knew each other and blended easily. Singing, they were relaxed and in their element. Narayanji had a way of bringing forth many voices, giving everybody a chance.

Later that month we sat in a garden behind the Jain temple in Maksi, the nearby market town. Dinesh was with us. I asked Narayanji to tell me how he got started singing Kabir.

> I liked singing and playing music from the time I was ten or twelve. I was a good dancer too. I danced a lot—in my village, in Maksi, and other places. I also acted in some very good plays, up to the time when I was about fifteen. After that I played instruments and worked in bands. Once I went to a Kabir program in Bhind [near Gwalior]. I was a little scared because some big senior people were there. So I hid myself and sat far off. I didn't even know if they'd

let me come in. But they asked me to sing and play, and the senior people liked it a lot. From about the time I was thirty, I was singing with my *mandalī*. We used to go to Kabir Panth *chaukā*s and other functions. I tried to do every bhajan with care and concentration. I was quite in demand.

I really liked singing, right from the beginning. I sang *kīrtan* and bhajans and played instruments. This went on for years. People started telling me I needed to get a guru, because without a guru I wouldn't get [spiritual] knowledge. So I looked for a guru. I went to Shipra and got initiated by a guru there. I didn't pay attention to what *panth* he belonged to, but he took a lot of *gānjā* and *bhāng* [hashish and marijuana], so he couldn't have been in the Kabir Panth. He was a good guru. Later I went to Radhasoami and made Maharaj Charan Singh my guru.

Tipanyaji and I used to sing together in those days. We sang at All India Radio, and in various functions. We just picked up the *tambūrā* and went off to sing.

One day on a bus, when he was carrying his *tambūrā*, Narayanji got into a conversation with Syag-*bhāī* and Dinesh. That's how his association with Eklavya and the Kabir *manch* began. He helped with the initial organization and attended regularly for all eight years.

At first the other people didn't join the discussions. But I sang bhajans and talked about them. After a while, they started talking too. Syag-*bhāī* asked everyone—why are you singing bhajans? They said because we enjoy it, and because we want to get *mukti* [liberation]. Syag-*bhāī* said you only get *mukti* when you give something up. So you're not going to get *mukti* from this.

Other questions came up. Why do you worship idols? Why do you touch people's feet? Gradually we began to understand more, our knowledge increased. We went to different villages, created new *mandalī*s, had discussions with them. When we saw some confusion, we would talk about it. For example, we would say, "You do ceremonies for snakes, you worship Bhairū Mahārāj or other gods and goddesses. Nothing will come of this." They sang Kabir bhajans but still worshiped idols, believed in gods and goddesses. I would say, brother, many of Kabir's bhajans talk about this. [Narayanji sang some verses

from a harshly critical bhajan, which is translated in full at the end of chapter 8.]

Serve the true guru, you idiot.
Why have you forgotten your country?

The confused gardener tears off leaves. Every leaf is alive!
He offers torn leaves to a god's image that has no life.

You make the goddess's form of mud and worship her,
then grab her leg and toss her in the water. What happened to her power?[32]

You call priests from all over. They march around your house,
break a coconut, offer the shell to god, and eat the meat themselves.

In this way we sang bhajans and moved to higher levels of understanding.

When asked if they had discussed these things before the Kabir *manch* started, he said they had, but not in such depth.

"You always liked singing," I said, "but there are many poets and many types of bhajans. Why did you especially choose Kabir?"

He said he liked other bhajans too, but there was one type that he was especially drawn to, and that Kabir excelled in:

When Kabir saw Hindus and Muslims clashing, he tried to bring them together. This kind of *sākhī*—

Hindu? I don't think so. Muslim? Afraid not.
The hidden essence is in both faiths. I play in both.

A doll of five elements, a trick makes it hang together.
I ask you, pandit, which is bigger? Word or creature?

The hidden came from the unseen—defects stuck to it here.
Reverse, merge with the unseen—defects disappear.

Seeing Hindus and Muslims in that situation, Kabir created this type of bhajan. I loved it. And the ones about gods, goddesses, image-worship—I sang many of those. I also liked singing bhajans about caste and untouchability.

Narayanji spoke of how his experiences in the *manch* had changed him.

I used to believe in gods and goddesses and worship them. When my wife gave birth to sons and daughters, I used to take them to the Brahmin to be named. But when my daughter and son had their children, I didn't take them to any Brahmin. I named them myself, or my wife named them. I was less deluded than before. Now I don't worship gods or goddesses.

There was a young woman in the village, a relative of ours, who didn't have children. People said, go see this god or that goddess, take her to Gujarat. Then she will get children. A lot of people have gone to Gujarat. Maybe children were born afterwards and maybe they weren't, but I don't believe in any of that. I took them both, the husband and wife, to be tested by a doctor in Indore. We found out that he didn't have what you need to make a baby. Seed. If he doesn't have that, where are children going to come from? I didn't go for help to any god or goddess. I gave up all superstitions. I began to think in a scientific way.

And you can be sure of this: I absolutely don't accept any caste distinctions. I take food and water from anyone's house, and I'll bring food and feed it to anyone, in any house. I wasn't like that before. I myself practiced untouchability.[33] I hated people who I thought were below me. But after getting involved in the Kabir bhajan *manch*, it was as if my body had been totally turned around [*palaṭ gayī*]. That's how it was. Turned around. Yes, yes, my ideas completely changed. What was I doing? Where was I going? I realized how wrong I had been. … After that I started reading books. I read Kabir. I read about Islam. I also read Rajneesh. I began to realize something frightening. I was completely on the wrong track. Now I understood clearly, without a doubt, how I needed to change.

Picking up on Narayanji's mention of *mukti*, which usually means liberation of the spiritual self from *saṃsārā*, the worlds of birth and death, I asked if there was really such a thing as *mukti*, and if so, what was it? He explained it in an unconventional way:

If you let go of something, then you are free [*mukt*]. For instance, I smoked *bīḍī*s. Now I'm free from *bīḍī*s. I have no desire. I'm free. I ate meat. Now I have no desire for it. I'm free. I drank liquor. Now I'm liberated. Whatever my religious life used to be—I believed in Bhairū Maharaj or Bajarangbalī or some other

> god—I am liberated from that too. I don't want these gods. The only gods I want are human beings. Living, conscious, you and me, here, having a conversation. Those are the gods I want. They are the ones who can turn me around. If I'm on the wrong path, you can tell me, or you can take my hand and walk with me. If I go to those pictures and statues of gods, nothing will change in me. That's what I think.

I asked Narayanji to say more specifically what happened at the *manch* that changed him so much.

> One thing that I liked very much was that there wasn't any trace of caste consciousness. [Looking at Dinesh, he continues.] Another thing I liked was that, from the very start, you helped me. Months after turning the work over to me, you still helped. When we were together, you washed the cups and plates and mugs. No matter what castes came to the Kabir *manch*, and all kinds of castes came, even though you were a Brahmin, you washed the mugs. So I thought about it. If a Brahmin can do this work, why shouldn't I?
>
> In Anu and Arvind's house, they would always serve me food.[34] They showed me so much love. Even today they love me. Anu and Arvind are 100% pure gold. Sometimes Anu was sitting and talking with me, so Arvind would make the tea. Yes, and sometimes he would make a meal and serve it. He has such a good nature. I liked it so much that in my heart I thought, why shouldn't I help my wife like this, in my own house? And I have helped her, quite a few times. Many times. Syag-*bhāī* also did this kind of work. I went to his house, and there was never any consciousness of caste. I asked him, "Syag-*bhāī*, there are no pictures [of gods] in your house. So who do you believe in?" He said, "Narayanji, I believe in you. What do I have to do with pictures?" Being exposed to these kinds of ideas was refreshing. My mind became more and more open.
>
> Then I went to a lot of different places in organizing the *manch*. I formed new *mandalī*s. I went to the houses of *chamār*s [a caste that traditionally deals with leather and dead bodies of animals]. Where I wouldn't have eaten before, I ate. Where I wouldn't have slept before, I slept. And in my heart I didn't feel—how could I come into this house? I felt—these people are very poor. Where did they get such a good quilt to cover me with? Sometimes I slept on the

> ground. Once I went to the house of someone in a very low caste. I slept with only a cotton *dhotī* to cover me, on a thin straw mat. I didn't think, how can I associate with him? I thought, this brother is very poor. Seeing such people and such circumstances, my way of thinking changed. The old feelings weren't there any more.

In late December 2002, Narayanji organized another bhajan-singing gathering for me in his village. A lot of men, women, and children got together in the verandah in front of his house, spreading out into the open space beyond. I was introduced to a man who, the locals assured me, was 110 years old. As the night went on, I was freezing even while wrapped in a blanket, but the 110-year-old man seemed to be comfortable in minimal cotton clothing, his bare legs stretched out.

The old Kabir singing tradition, Narayanji said, was with the *ektār*—literally "one string," a simple instrument with one or two strings. He showed me an old broken-down *ektār* he had. The practice of using the five-stringed *tambūrā* came later, and the use of other instruments, like harmonium and violin, was much more recent. Now no one uses *ektār* except a few who wander around begging.

The singing started to roll. I noted that while Narayanji didn't have the powerfully penetrating voice or the electrifying presence of Prahladji, he had the gift of building group spirit. He did a call and response with other singers, steadily raising the energy level. Around him were many people smiling, singing, playing instruments, moving their bodies.

Over the next few years, I found myself in a variety of settings with Narayanji. When called upon to sing, he often chose a song that aimed barbs at delusions that he noticed in the vicinity. Once we were in Dinesh's village house. Dinesh's father, a Brahmin priest, was hosting a bhajan session that included but wasn't limited to songs of Kabir. There was a big shrine in the house, replete with Hindu gods, and clearly the site of regular worship. When he got a turn to sing, Narayanij sang the bhajan that begins with the deluded gardener who breaks off leaves and flowers to offer to a lifeless statue. Later I asked him, "Why did you choose that bhajan on that occasion?" He replied, "They had a big temple, didn't they? Wouldn't they be offering all these things to the statues of their gods?"

On another occasion we went to a place that was called a Kabir ashram but was full of images of Hindu gods, along with images of Kabir depicted as a god. They did an elaborate Hindu *āratī* ceremony followed by bhajans. Narayanji sang a satirical bhajan that criticized ritual and spoke irreverently of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The guru of the ashram got angry.

Narayanji also likes to sing rousing songs that touch on current politics. One of his favorites is *Āzādī*, the Urdu word for "freedom." In this simple call and response, he sings out a line, and others participate by shouting the last word, *āzādī*. The chorus is, "Freedom, freedom, everyone wants freedom!" Each stanza mentions a different category of people who want freedom.

This of course is not a song of Kabir. Neither is the *Mandir-masjid* song that responds to the conflicts in Ayodhya and associated communal tension and violence.

> *Temple, mosque, church—you've divided up God.*
> *You've divided earth, divided the sea. Don't divide humanity.*
>
> Hindu says, "My temple! Temple's my true space."
> Muslim says, "My Mecca! Mecca alone is true."
>
> They fight, fight and die, fight and get destroyed.
> Who knows what cruel, cruel things they do?
>
> Who does this? Look! Who walks here? Learn!
> You've divided earth, divided the sea. Don't divide humanity.
>
> For the sake of power, politicians claim to serve the nation.
> They join upholders of religion, while we face desperation.
>
> Your brother's cut to pieces, but the politician's honored.
> Once he gets the votes and wins, it's time for exploitation.
>
> *Temple, mosque, church—you've divided up God.*
> *You've divided earth, divided the sea. Don't divide humanity.*

When asked why he was singing non-Kabir songs in Kabir bhajan programs, he said that he had reflected on what Kabir might have done if he were living now, and that reflection inspired him to sing these songs.

LH: Why do you think the Eklavya people started the *manch*?

ND: They were thinking, OK, these people sing bhajans, but do they understand what they're singing? Do they have knowledge about it? Do they realize its importance? They thought of providing some education that would bring about change. They never said, don't do this or that. Slowly, gently, lovingly they provided a space. If they had talked in another way, the whole thing would have broken up. They worked at a very slow

pace, so that it wouldn't break, but people would come together, and their understanding would increase. I would set up dates to go various places—here the 8th, there the 10th. Whatever I was learning, I would go and tell it to the *mandalī*s.

LH: They came regularly? They liked it?

ND: Yes, if they didn't like it, why would they come?

LH: Why did they like it so much?

ND: They saw that there was absolutely no discrimination [*bhedbhāv*] here. There was no untouchability here. Their superstitions were diminishing from the bhajans and the discussions.

LH: They enjoyed meeting with the other *mandalī*s?

ND: They enjoyed it a lot. And even now, though the *Kabīr bhajan aur vichār manch* is over, they still have a lot of affection for each other. Those few people who were there from the beginning, they still feel a great fondness for each other. When it ended, people felt very sad. Why did it end? What happened?

LH: Do you remember any particular debates or discussions that left a strong impression on you?

ND: People used to talk about Dinesh—he's a Brahmin, he can't really be interested in these things. What does he have to do with Kabir? Why is a Brahmin sitting with us? He's just doing it for money, because it's his job. He's not really sincere. But I didn't agree. I had seen Sharmaji's nature. He put in so much time, drank tea with us, came to our houses and ate food with us. Once he came to my house with Arvind-*bhāī*. I didn't have any good bedding. And it was raining. You know in rainy season, the quilts get a bad smell. But Sharmaji said, I'll use that quilt. I didn't have a fan. It was a place where you might think sleep is impossible. I realized that these two, Arvind-*bhāī* and Sharmaji, they can go anywhere, sit anywhere, sleep anywhere.

LH: Were there were any problems in the way the *manch* was done, anything you'd change if it were to be done again?

ND: I didn't see any problem. There was food, there was tea and water, everyone enjoyed it. If anyone didn't enjoy it, they just didn't come. There was a little trouble about money at first, they were giving everyone bus fare, but it was too much to give bus fare to everyone who came. So we decided to give bus fare to two featured *mandalī*s each time. There was some uproar about Kabir Panth *mahant*s who expected to be placed on a high seat and treated with reverence. They were told that everybody would be treated equally. We wouldn't set up a high seat

for them. They didn't like it. They said no one should go to such a place, where we are insulted, where we aren't respected. Some people would only come for Tipanyaji. They'd come and ask: is he here or not? If not, they left.

LH: Why?

ND: He had a wonderful style of singing. In Malwa there's nobody like that. His cassettes are very good, he has done a great job of spreading Kabir. This is the gift of Eklavya. They introduced him to Suresh Patel, who invited him and recommended him. Then he had cassettes, he was invited to Lucknow, to Doordarshan. This is Eklavya's gift.

DINESH: But he also had a great talent. That's why it happened with him and not other *mandalī*s.

Kaluramji

Kaluram Bamaniya, a well-known Kabir singer in Malwa when I started my work in 2002, was a generation younger than the three singers we have met so far. Recognizing his rich, powerful voice and beautiful repertoire, Shabnam Virmani included him along with Prahladji when she produced the double CD set *Kabir in Malwa* (Virmani 2008e). In the 1990s,

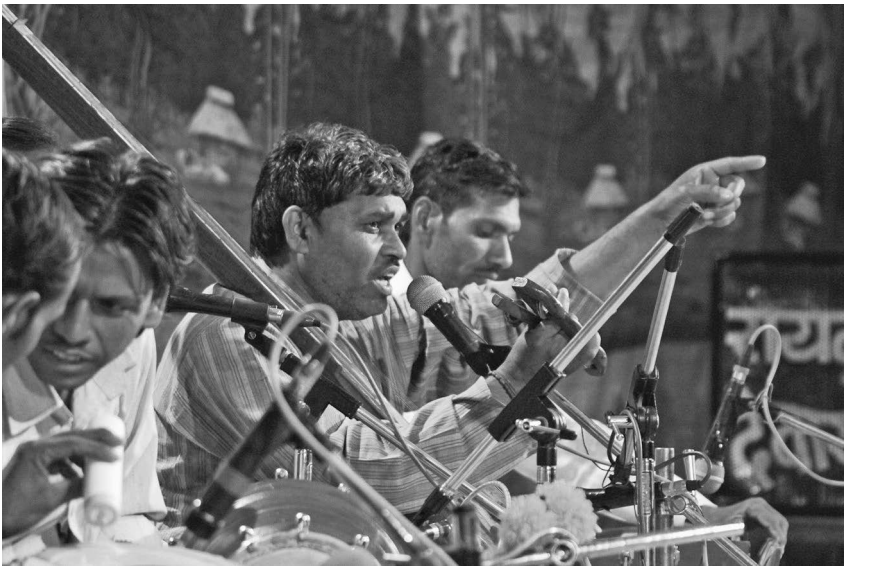

FIGURE 6.5. Kaluram Bamaniya singing. Photo by Smriti Chanchani.

during the Eklavya *manch*, he was a beginner. I knew him and enjoyed his music throughout my decade in Malwa.

The following profile is based mainly on a conversation he and I had in August 2011. In addition, excerpts from Shabnam's filmed interviews (2004–05) are italicized and set off by asterisks. It is interesting to note that Kaluram's name, like those of Prahladji and Narayanji, reflects the common practice among Dalits of adopting names associated with upper castes. "Prahlad Singh Tipanya" and "Narayan Singh Delmia" include Singh, the marker of a Rajput or *kśhatriyā* identity. In talking about his life, Prahladji mentions how upper castes in his village objected to Dalits' using the name "Singh" (chapter 1). "Bamaniya" means "Brahmin"—making for a startling juxtaposition with "Kaluram," which combines the popular name Ram with *kālū*, meaning "black." Such a name would only be found in a Dalit family.

KALURAM BAMANIYA (KB): I was born in Tonk Khurd village in 1970. I went to school till 3rd standard, but our situation was precarious, so I had to quit school and start working for others. I would take the cattle out to graze. Later I did farm work and labor. My grandfather, father, and father's brother used to sing bhajans. I sat with them, played *manjīrā*, and started singing. By the time I was about ten, I could sing bhajans and play the *tambūrā*. While working as a laborer or plowing fields, I kept singing, enjoying it more and more. Then I went to Rajasthan.

LH: Rajasthan?

KB: I ran away without telling anyone. I was a restless kid. I never paid attention to my studies. Instead of going to school I'd go for a swim in the lake.

LH: How old were you?

KB: I think fourteen or fifteen. In Savai Madhupur Bajaria I met Ram Nivas Rao, a wonderful singer. He had such a sweet voice. He was well known there the way Tipanyaji is here. I was working at a restaurant near the bus station. One day Ram Nivas Rao was going off with his *tambūrā* to sing bhajans. I spoke to him, and he told me I should come to the function at a nearby college. That day I sang two bhajans for him. He liked my singing. I stayed in that place twelve or fourteen months. I used to go to his performances and sing bhajans with him. I learned about classical *tāl* (rhythm) and how to play a few instruments. If I'd stayed longer I would have learned a lot more. I was still singing in Malwa

style. When I went back to my village, I kept singing. I was the only one in my family who was performing. They kept trying to stop me, but I continued. Eventually I got a B rating on All Indian Radio, then a B High.

***

[Shabnam talks with Kaluram, Dinesh Sharma, and Dayaram Sarolia as they drive along in a car.]

KB: *I'm not very educated—only 3rd standard pass. But I cleared 8th through the informal system. I got through the 5th because Indira Gandhi died. They promoted everybody without exams.*

SV: *Why?*

DINESH: *Things were irregular, too many holidays. Schools were closed because of riots.*

KB: *I cleared 6th the same way. . . . (Shabnam looks puzzled.) Rajiv Gandhi died. (General laughter.)*

***

LH: Did your family belong to any Panth?

KB: No, they worshiped Hindu gods and goddesses like Bhairu and Durga, and they ate meat and drank liquor. They would sing bhajans while drinking country liquor. I also took meat and alcohol, but when I joined the Kabir Panth I gave them up. That was fifteen years ago.

LH: How did it happen that you took initiation from [Kabir Panth *mahant*] Mangaldasji?

KB: I had gone to Pitampur near Indore with my wife and children to work in a factory. Back home my brothers got initiated in the Kabir Panth. They were asked to sing bhajans, but they weren't good at singing, so they called me. One day they came over to my place, and I got some liquor and meat. But they refused to eat and told me that they had taken *dikśhā* from the guru. They persuaded me to take it too. I was impressed that they could give up meat and alcohol and thought there must be something really powerful about this *dikśhā*. Then I went back home, found a *mandalī*, and started singing. Guruji praised me.

***

SV: *When the Eklavya forum started, were you part of it from the beginning?*

KB: *We joined very early on. I had the position of* divān, *assistant, to the most important mahant in Dewas. I was with him for at least ten years. I would*

prepare the space for the rituals, make the kanthīs *[wooden bead on a string, given at initiation, worn around the neck] and distribute them. I did all kinds of work. I walked around carrying a stick, with my sleeves rolled up like a goon. If anyone said anything against the guru, I would hit them. So no one said anything (laughs.) But the ideas we got from the Eklavya forum gave us a new kind of strength. We realized that Kabirji was saying that these things are false. Then I lost interest in all that.*

SV: *So you're not a* divān *anymore?*

K: *Only in name. I don't do the work anymore. . . .*

SV: *When the Eklavya* manch *started, were you and Tipanyaji and Narayanji all together?*

KB: *No, we were opposed to each other. Sometimes we were close to fighting.*

DINESH: *Kaluram was very traditional, and Tipanyaji was very progressive at that time. We asked Tipanyaji to be a leader of the Kabir manch. People respected him a lot. He was a teacher, like a guru, and received a lot of respect. We felt he was a capable person to facilitate the meetings. . . . Narayanji and Tipanyaji were both leaders. Kaluram belonged to the more traditional faction. They opposed our discussions. But still, Kaluramji used to come regularly to Eklavya and stay through the night.*

KB: *I wasn't opposed to the discussions. I just thought, "They are deluded, and I will set them straight." They thought I was deluded. It was a kind of competition. But they won, I lost! (laughing)*

***

KB: At the ashram I was Guruji's assistant, and I wouldn't let anyone speak against him. But after going to Eklavya for a while, I started feeling distaste for the superstitious and showy ways of the Kabir Panth. Initially I didn't like Eklavya because they sang less and talked more. But gradually I realized how important it was to know the meaning of those words and the power behind them. . . . I started disliking going to the ashram. I developed an allergy [uses English word] toward Guruji. I actually started having arguments with him. Guruji told me that he had no connection [*lenā-denā*] with the outer world. I said to him, "You are living in this world, so how could you not be connected to it? Why not just leave this world and go live somewhere up in the sky?" . . . Now I haven't seen him for six or seven years. I never go there.

LH: Was your guru angry with you?

KB: Very angry. So angry that he wanted to bring me down. He tried to keep me poor, to prevent me from singing. He wanted me to come back and beg forgiveness. But I stuck to my position. … The Kabir Panth mostly consists of lower classes of people. But they offer up coconuts, flowers, money. They are exploited. Eklavya didn't say you should do this or that or follow any particular belief. The Eklavya people would ask questions. Is it a good thing that you go out to meet your guruji while your children are at home doing nothing? And they encouraged discussion about the bhajans.

LH: Now after all these stages of your life, you have a lot of opportunities to perform as a singer. What is your experience?

KB: Because of Kabir's *vāṇī* [words], because of singing, I get opportunities to meet many people and exchange ideas. All this has happened because of the *vāṇī*. *Sant vāṇī* is very powerful. I am fortunate that my father and grandfather taught me these bhajans. Because of media, cassettes and modern technology, *sant vāṇī* has spread very far. I am grateful to you and Shabnam for helping me to get access to stages in such good places. But there are many other good singers. Tipanyaji and Kaluram aren't the only ones. Bhairu Singh Chauhan, Dayaram Sarolia, and others are also very good singers who deserve to be on the stage and aren't getting such good opportunities. It's unfortunate that they haven't been able to share the stage with us.[34]

Eklavya Organizers and How They Were Changed

Syag-*bhāī*

One day in 2003, Shabnam and I unexpectedly ran into Syag-*bhāī* in Bhopal. As we were all heading back to Dewas, a four-hour journey away, we shared a hired car. Shabnam had her camera and shot a long conversation on the road (more of it will be offered in chapter 8). Here we include the portion where Syag-*bhāī* speaks of how the *manch* affected him. The main change he describes was in an enhanced appreciation of the capacities of ordinary people, independent of institutional connections, schooling, and economic status. While he still wanted everyone to have access to established structures of power, including formal education, his orientation had changed. The starting point now was what ordinary people had, rather than what they lacked. This vision played a role in his leaving

Eklavya a few years later, to join with others in forming another NGO, Samavesh, that worked more directly with people wherever they were and not just through formal education.

SV: You have talked a lot about dialogue. It was two-way. Did you feel there were changes in the Eklavya people?

RNS: The Eklavya people also learned through dialogue and experiments.

LH: Did you personally learn anything from the people in the *mandalīs*?

RNS: I learned a lot. I learned how much strength is in common people, much more than I had realized. My faith in common people increased a lot. I became less attached to formal education and realized how much could be done with people [who had little or no schooling]. My conviction about this became firm. Now the work I'm doing is all community-based. Previously I worked to improve school education, train teachers, create curricula and materials. Gradually I changed emphasis. We started to work with literacy, with the *panchāyatī rāj* policy in M.P. through which women become officers in the *panchyat*—women who were illiterate, who belonged to scheduled castes. … Some of us decided to create Samavesh, whose entire focus is this [community-based] work. … The Kabir bhajan *mandalīs*—they had a spiritual, or you might say nonmaterial inspiration. We wanted community groups that were focused on people's basic life needs—for women, small farmers, etc. Autonomous groups that wouldn't be dependent on government or NGOs. …

We saw a struggle between two types of systems. One, as I said before, was our traditional system, in which people believe in different castes, different status for men and women, different treatment of girls and boys, everywhere difference. On the other hand we have modern democracy where you are a citizen. As a citizen you are equal. If you go to vote, they aren't going to say you're a woman so you can't vote. Equal citizenship. How can we convey these things to people: these are your rights, you can work in the schools, you can work in the *panchāyat*. As Kabir said—there is a power inside of you, and you should connect with that power. Some are searching for that power outside (he gestures outwardly), some inside (he gestures toward his chest). We are saying there are social powers through which the schools run, the *panchāyats* run. Recognize those powers. What are they? In our elections, some people aren't allowed to advance, although they can really do this work. The power to become *sarpanch*, to direct others, to sign

orders. Who would really be the best *sarpanch*? We are encouraging this kind of debate. What is our agency? Where is our money going? Why are we poor? Are we poor because of our past lives, or because of the systems that are operating in this life?

As Kabir in his time tried to understand a whole spiritual world, we are preparing people to understand the social and economic realities of today's world. … Can people read the constitution and understand it? Can they understand the law? Can women understand what their rights are? From the Kabir *manch* I got a stronger conviction that this is possible. If people can devote this much time and energy to a spiritual world, they can also devote time to changing this world. And these very people are the ones who will change our world!

Dinesh Sharma

While Syag-*bhāī* oversaw the whole project and was the principal guiding hand from Eklavya's side, Dinesh did most of the groundwork, attending to countless details, traveling, organizing, keeping records. He underwent a personal change on a very different level. As the son of a Brahmin priest living in a large village with his parents, wife, daughter, and son, he confronted his own deeply embedded caste identity and changed his life in concrete ways, encountering resistance in himself and in his family along the way. The following is from a filmed interview conducted by Shabnam (Virmani 2008b). Dinesh is driving a car, she is in the front seat with him, and in the back seat are Kaluram Bamaniya and Dayaram Sarolia, two Dalit Kabir singers who have a relaxed and friendly relationship with Dinesh.

My family has been connected to the Singaji Panth for generations—my father, his father, his father, I don't know how far back it goes.[35] So I've been hearing this since childhood, it's in my blood. Our house was a Singaji ashram. My father was the head of a *mandalī* that sang bhajans of the *sant*s. They always sang Kabir, along with many other *sant*s. The Singaji Panth is all upper caste. My father is a respected *yagyachārī*, a conductor of rituals. For the busy season, two or three months a year, he's hardly in the house. Rituals were always going on at home, and the bhajan *mandalī* met three times a month … singing for four or five hours.…

> Before joining Eklavya I completely believed in caste distinctions. Even after joining Eklavya, I had those ideas. I was brought up in that kind of family. When we started the *manch*, I was going to people's houses … talking about these things. It was very challenging for me. The first time I had to eat [in a lower-caste home] … really, Dayaram (he turns toward the back seat), I was in a state. I'm telling you the truth. Daya, when I had to eat a meal, I mean I had to stay there and night came, there was no way out. In my mind this question was going round and round—to eat or not to eat. It was a big thing. Half of my mind was saying, hey man, get out of here, eat somewhere outside. Then after eating, I felt—what have I done? What have I eaten? This conversation kept going on inside of me.
>
> But I came to realize I was not wrong to do this. If I want to do this work with all my heart, then I must first break these patterns in myself. Gradually all these worries decreased. A little example, a very small thing but still … . In our family we always put the vegetable on one plate and the *roṭī* [bread] on a separate plate. But you (turning to the guys in back) put the vegetable and *roṭī* all on the same plate. When this happened it seemed very weird to me. Very very strange. I took my pen and moved the *roṭī* away from the vegetable on the plate. That's what I had learned. Then the water was in the big pot, and there was a dipper on the pot, and they served everyone from that dipper. I felt anxious. They were putting the dipper on the floor. What if something dirty got into the water pot? Then the children drank directly from the dipper, they put it to their mouths, and then they gave me water from the same dipper. I worried about that.

Kaluram tells how surprised he was the first time Dinesh ate with them, not separately. Dinesh comments: "Because I was a Brahmin, some people had doubts about me. They thought this is his job, that's the only reason he's doing it. But those who got to know me understood that it was sincere." Dayaram fondly remembers a night when they reached someone's house at 2 a.m. and all ate sweet *roṭī*s out of the same plate. Dinesh continues:

> Everything worried me, eating, drinking water, taking tea. But gradually I learned to do everything, I accepted it, and my courage [*himmat*] increased. Eventually my old ideas went away. When I went

home to my family, they weren't happy about it. Even today my wife won't eat the leftover food from my plate.[37] She says—who knows where you've been going, whose food you've been eating? So she won't take what's on my plate. (Kaluram and Dayaram are laughing in the back seat.) …

Changes have taken place in my family. We've become much more open—my brothers and sisters-in-law, the children, even my parents. The Singaji bhajan *mandalī* members were all upper caste, but gradually we invited Kabir *mandalī* people to sing with us. Narayanji came several times and led bhajans. Everyone ate and drank. I said if we're talking about the *sant* tradition, singing these bhajans, and in our own house we don't act accordingly, what does that mean? They granted that this was right.

I have learned many things from spending time with the bhajan *mandalī*s. I have learned humanity [*insāniyat*].

Toward a Conclusion

Participants in Eklavya's Kabir *manch*—NGO workers, city activists, village singers—carried a range of beliefs and aspirations that could be channeled through Kabir bhajans. Cross-cultural conversations occurred as people who were primarily motivated by political concerns met with people whose lived experience with Kabir was primarily religious, musical, emotional. Sometimes these varying aspects were present within the same person—an internal dialogue. Some people changed a lot, some a little, some not at all.

At one end of the spectrum Prakash Kant, a Dewas teacher, left-leaning social activist, and friend of Eklavya, responded to my usual questions about "political" and "spiritual":[38]

PRAKASH KANT (PK): We have one clear goal—working for social justice. Social struggle. To the extent that Kabir supports this struggle, we embrace Kabir. If Tulsi is useful, we'll use Tulsi, just as we'll use Mira, Ambedkar or Karl Marx. I don't deny Kabir's spiritual side. That is of course present in his works. It's because of that that he still lives today, after 600 years. If that weren't there, we would never have heard of him.

LH: You are interested in social change and find Kabir useful for that. Do you personally find any importance in the spiritual side?

PK: Personally I don't believe anything of that kind. For me it's useless. I see problems in society that I want to solve. Other people may sing and be happy. They don't feel the need to change society. That's fine, let them be happy. But I can't be happy with that. I need to work for something else. So I'll use Kabir as much as possible. Kabir was human, he had his limits. So for some things, he won't be helpful in my work. I'll have to look elsewhere.

On another occasion Anu and Arvind introduced me to an Urdu poet named Naim, who lived in Dewas and had been a student of Namvar Singh at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi.[39]

LH: For you, what represents Kabir's core message, his actual personality? What's most important for you in Kabir?

NAIM (N): The courage [*himmat*] with which he was able to criticize contemporary society. There's no one to compare with him in this. Maybe Nirala has something of that quality, 500 years later. Kabir was of the "fourth class" [*chauthā varg*, i.e., a *shudra*—those born to serve the upper three classes in the classical Hindu caste system]. He had nothing to do with temples, mosques, or sects. He was completely against these things. But now they make temples and sects in his name. Even his wife and children disagreed with him according to the stories we have heard. He was an all-around *vidrohī*, a resister.

LH: You have talked about the songs that look outward, the social criticism. What about the songs that look inward, the spiritual ones?

N: (with a broad smile and a dismissive gesture) I'm an atheist, I don't have anything to do with God. But probably in India, without the spiritual part, nobody would listen to him or remember him. In this country you need God to get your message out.

This reminded me of a similar remark by a journalist in Raipur, Chhattisgarh. Sunil Kumar loved Kabir and hosted a Kabir bhajan program in his house when I was visiting. Like Naim, he told me he was an atheist and had no interest in Kabir's religious message. "But," he joked, "without the religious content, Kabir would have lasted about as long as a communist slogan."

It was interesting to me that the first example Naim cited to illustrate Kabir's courage was the great bhajan sung by Dewas's own brilliant classical vocalist, Kumar Gandharva—*Nirbhay nirguṇ guṇ re gāūngā*. I have written elsewhere about this song (Hess 2009a, 38–40, 88). The first word, repeated many times, is *nirbhay*—fearless.

NAIM: When Kumar Gandharva sang Kabir, he sang with such power, from deep within. One could understand even difficult things just from the way he sang. *Nirbhay nirguṇ guṇ re gāūngā*! "Fearless, formless, that's the form I'll sing!" He sang that with tremendous energy and courage.

LH: What is meaningful for you in that song?

N: Whatever you know to be true and right—you should speak it out and be afraid of nothing.

LH: You keep mentioning the short refrain—*nirbhay nirguṇ guṇ re gāūngā*. "Fearless, formless, that's the form I'll sing." What about the rest of the song, all the stanzas? (pause) Do you know what the other stanzas are? Do you remember them?

N: (laughing) I don't remember them!

LH: It's all about yoga practice. The first stanza is about sitting in a firm posture and getting control of the *muladhār* chakra, the lowest center. Later it's about breath, the right, left, and central energy channels, and so on. He arrives at the pinnacle of emptiness where the limitless, unstruck sound resounds—*shūnya shikhar par anahad bāje*. From that peak he makes his music—*chhattīs rāga sunāūngā*, "I'll sing thirty-six ragas." Do you think that even symbolically, that peak of emptiness where you hear such music might be relevant for your social and political meanings? [At this point the conversation was interrupted and did not resume.]

With these and earlier examples, we sketch out a category of educated people with urban backgrounds who are interested in Kabir as a social critic and as an ally in political struggle. They may ignore, block out, or criticize the religious-spiritual aspects of Kabir. They may find that side of their admired ally annoying, embarrassing, or irrelevant (a position that Nehru often found himself in vis-à-vis Gandhi). When pressed to explore the matter further, they may say that Kabir was interested in religion/spirituality, as are his present-day devotees, but that they are not. They feel perfectly justified in enlisting Kabir in their struggles in this selective way—using what is useful, disregarding what is not useful or what might

be counterproductive. Some activists who have engaged deeply with Kabir and with the community of Kabir lovers and devotees in rural Malwa discuss the question with sensitivity and nuance, still clearly coming down on the side of social engagement, outward-turning vision.

In a very different camp, there are hard-line Kabir devotees who attempt to suppress secular and social-activist readings of Kabir. In one program Syag-*bhāī* gave a welcoming speech that linked the teachings of Kabir with the importance of spreading the benefits of education to all. A local Kabir Panth *mahant* stood up and objected: "What does Kabir-*sāhib* have to do with the issues of schools, government policies, textbooks? Kabir-*sāhib* is telling us only to repeat the divine name and revere the guru. Don't misguide us!" Just as political activists foreground Kabir's politically relevant messages, Kabir Panthi *mahant*s and devout disciples shine a light on what suits their ideology, emphasizing guru worship, ritual, and recitation of the divine name.

When Kabir devotees defend their "religious" views, they are not necessarily being apolitical. In some cases they are enforcing their own views and suppressing others, by means that range from argument to violence. When some Kabir Panthis objected strenuously to the way Prakash Kant represented Kabir in his introduction to the Eklavya bhajan booklet, a decision was made to remove the essay from later editions (see references to Prakash Kant, p. 261 above). This was a direct clash of "truths." Prakash Kant said, "Kabir was human, so he had his limits." The protesting devotees said that Kabir was not human but an incarnation of the supreme being, who manifested himself as an infant on a lotus in a pond. They were in no way willing to countenance Prakash Kant's talk of Kabir's being born to a woman in a Muslim family, and so on.

Elsewhere I have shown how this kind of censorship has taken a much more serious turn. Television director Anil Choudhury was attacked and harassed for years because of an episode of his *Kabir* serial where Kabir appeared to be simply human. He was ultimately forced to shut down the serial. Singer and actor Shekhar Sen was threatened with violence if he didn't cut certain parts of his performance at Magahar (stories told in chapter 7). The most serious incident involving our Malwa friends was when a squad of Gujarati Kabir Panthis attacked Prahladji and Shabnam after a 2010 music performance and screening of *Kabīrā khaḍā bazār meṇ* in Vadodara. The film (Virmani 2008b) focuses on Prahladjī's relationship with the Dharamdasi Kabir Panth and the nature of its central ritual (treated at length in chapter 7). Displeased with the content of the film and

the murmur that Prahladji was an opponent of their guru, they beat up Prahladji and threw rocks at the window of a car in which the two of them were trying to escape. The glass shattered over their bodies.

The censorship of Prakash Kant's introduction gives a hint of what was at stake for both social-political activists and orthodox Kabir Panthis. Sectarians were protecting the ideology and authority structure of their Panth, which was threatened by the historical, human-centered, rational and egalitarian approach of Prakash Kant's essay. Eklavya members and their urban allies, insofar as they "demoted" the popular devotional, spiritual, and guru-centered poetry, were protecting their more materialist worldview, their belief in scientific rationality and social equality.

Through the *manch*, some of Malwa's Kabir singers were awakened in a new way to Kabir's social teaching and its relevance to their lives. They also came to realize how they had been conditioned by their religious sects to think narrowly about what it meant to be Kabir's devotee. The three profiled in this chapter—Narayanji, Hiralalji, Kaluramji—took a sharp turn away from institutional guru-worship, faith in ritual, and acceptance of inequality in the social order. Hiralalji had moved in this direction long before the *manch* began and was thrilled to discover a forum where his convictions about Kabir could be expressed in a nourishing environment. Influenced by the *manch*, Narayanji and Kaluramji moved away from sectarianism and toward social commitment, assertion of their rights, an agenda of equality and liberation—all linked to Kabir. But none of them was moved to debunk or deny the deeper meaning of the "guru," the appropriateness of singing songs venerating the guru, or the value of spiritual practice and experience. They could see a link between Kabir's poetic evocations of sublime sound and light within the clay vessel of the body, the dignity of their own bodies, and the absolute equality of all bodies. They held these spiritual views together with a healthy skepticism about institutions and the corruptibility of individuals.

The political activists seemed more wedded to the idea of a split between spiritual and political than the singers. They tended to be put off by the language of worshiping and abjectly surrendering to the guru. Though they really respected and liked the singers and said they had no objection to religious faith, views, and songs, many of them had an alert system about religion in their minds. Religion was trouble. The Kabir singers described here were less likely to imagine a sharp divide between social and spiritual. Inner and outer connected for them. Kabir's emphasis

on inner freedom, equality and dignity as consequences of *nirguṇ* devotion, the presence of the highest reality within this body, the nearness and here-and-now immediacy of what they were seeking, the importance of *karma* in this life, not some vague future life, the power of the mind to bind or liberate—all this was empowering to them.

In a filmed conversation, Shabnam asked Narayanji directly about the social-spiritual split. "Some say Kabir *bhajan* singing inspires oppressed and exploited groups to struggle against injustice. Some say it's an escape. People enjoy singing, get lost in the emotion and withdraw from the world of struggle. What do you think?" Narayanji replied with his usual look of amused irony: "It depends on the personality. Both things are possible." His smile suggested to me that the political zealots and the religious zealots could both easily get things wrong. Understanding Kabir called for a more subtle appreciation of his rich multidimensional messages.

A Last Story

[From my notebook] August 28, 2011
I haven't stayed in touch with Dinesh Sharma since he left Eklavya in 2003. About three weeks ago we ran into him in Tonk Khurd village. He was in a car with his wife; we were in another car going to meet one of the "old men's" *mandalī*s. We stopped to talk. He was very thin and told us he had a liver disease. He had been to Mumbai for surgery. Some days later we heard he was feeling sad and forgotten by his old companions. So today we organized a visit to his house in Devali village: Anu, my dear friend from Eklavya; Prahladji; Narayanji; Kaluramji; and me. He was very weak. He sat up with us for a while, but had to keep lying down. He showed Anu all the hospital reports. One of them said, in English, that he had carcinoma of the liver. He indicated to her that most of his family didn't know this. We stayed for three hours. There was tea and conversation. We looked at the wedding album of his daughter, who got married in 2009. She was sitting with us, holding her six-week-old baby. At one point, infused by a warm feeling, he got up and insisted that someone go out and buy samosas to serve us. I convinced the singers to sing, though they had hesitated. There were no instruments. Dinesh made a request: *Ab thāro kai patiyāro pardesī*.[40] Prahladji closed his eyes for at least a minute, then started singing in a soft, sweet voice.

Now how can I rely on you,
you foreigner
you traveler
from far away?

The walls have crumbled, the roof has collapsed,
the roof has mingled with dust, ah yes,
you foreigner,
you traveler
from far away. Ah yes.

As long as there was oil in the lamp, ah yes,
your temple glowed brightly,
you foreigner. Ah yes.

Now the oil has run dry, the wick has sputtered out, ah yes,
your temple has gone dark
you foreigner. Ah yes.

The shopkeeper's departed,
the market's deserted, ah yes.
The lock remains
but he's taken away the key
you foreigner. Ah yes.

Kabir says, listen seekers, friends, ah yes.
Your swan has flown
to a town
beyond death
you foreigner. Ah yes.

Dinesh had tears in his eyes. When we left, he got up and walked outside with us to the car, twenty yards away. We made plans for old friends to keep visiting him.

August 31, 2011
Prahladji called early in the morning. "Dinesh has expired." Today we all went to his cremation—Anu, Arvind, Dinesh Patel and Shobha of Eklavya, and me. We reached the village cremation ground from Dewas just before they covered his body with fuel and lit the fire. In fact they waited for us. Prahladji kept calling on the phone, saying where are you now, how soon will you be here? There was a platform on the edge of a big pond. Dinesh's

body was wrapped in white, but his face was showing. It looked warm, not dead. We each knelt at his feet, then moved toward his head to say a last goodbye. His son was crying hard, and a few young men kept their arms wrapped around him. Anu, Shobha, and I were the only women present. They lifted the bamboo litter (which Kabir calls a "wooden horse") and placed it on stacks of large round cowdung cakes, then piled many more cowdung cakes on top. They put straw bundles around the edges. The son and some other relatives went around lighting the straw. It flared up; a blast of heat hit us. Then everyone sat down across the road to wait. About a hundred men. They wait till the body is pretty much burnt. It was really hot, someone guessed 42°C. After a while Prahladji stood up and suggested we have a *shraddhānjalī*, "reverent offering," in which people could say a few words about Dinesh. He started, then Anu, Arvind, me. Dinesh's older brother spoke briefly. Dinesh was only forty-four, the youngest of all the siblings. The brother asked for a minute of silence before we dispersed. Everyone was given some pieces of cowdung to throw on the pyre. They called it something like *panchānjalī*, "five-offering"—for the five elements.

We went to their house in the village where all the women sat crying, neighbor women along with family members. Such a clear division of labor—men outside burning the body, women at home crying. His poor wife was sitting in a dark corner facing the wall. It was stifling. When Anu approached and touched her, she cried more and more. The corner was so hot and airless. I never saw her face but touched her back with my hands. After some time we left, making eye contact and hand contact with every member of the family.

Move your cart along lightly,
My Ram is riding.
Move your cart slowly, slowly,
My Ram is riding.

My cart is colored brightly
with wheels of rosy red.
A pretty lady holds the reins.
The passenger is Ram.

What if the cart bogs down in mud
with the destination far?
Those who do good will get across,
the criminals will crash.

Healers came from every land,
they brought their herbs and roots.
The herbs and roots were of no use
since Ram had left the house.

Four fellows met and soon agreed
to build a horse of wood.
They hauled it to the burning ground.
It blazed up, just like Holi!

The woman sobbed and cried:
We were joined, now we're broken!
Kabir says, listen seekers:
the one who joins
is the one who breaks.

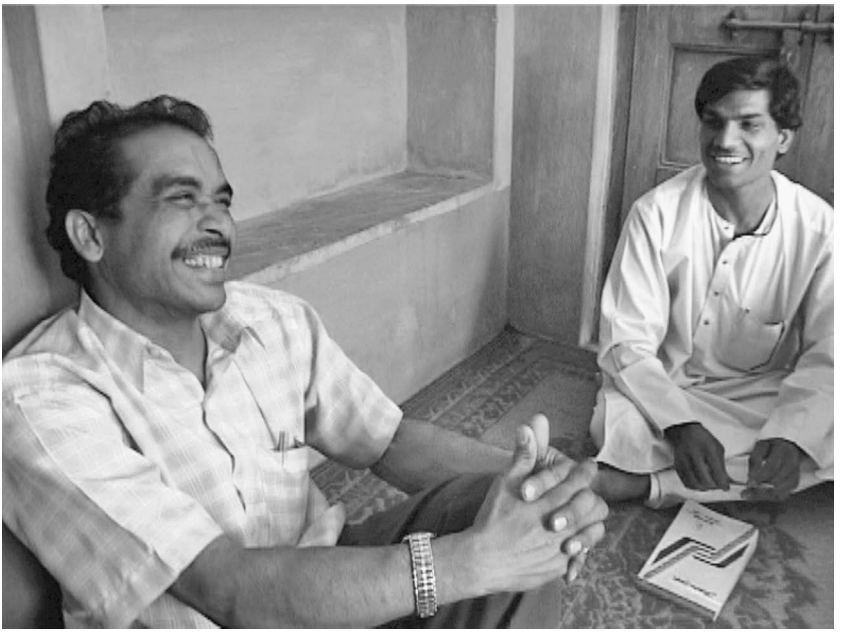

FIGURE 6.6. Dinesh Sharma with singer Dayaram Sarolia. Photo by Shabnam Virmani.

Notes

CHAPTER 6

1. Pete Seeger's famous song "Guantanamera" is a setting of the Cuban poet and freedom fighter Jose Marti's poem. Seeger gives a translation on CD 2 of the album *We Shall Overcome: Complete Carnegie Hall Concert* (recorded on June 8, 1963).
2. Eklavya chose another fiery line as a title for the official report on its project with Kabir singers: *kaṭuk vachan kabīr ke, sun ke āg lag jāī*, "Kabir's words are searing, just hearing them sets off a fire" (Eklavya 1999).
3. Official government designations include Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Castes (abbreviated as SC, ST, OBC). The first two roughly line up with "Dalit" or former "untouchable" groups, the third with groups loosely affiliated with Shudra castes.
4. See, for example, Mukta 1998; N. Martin 1999, 2000, 2002; Hawley and Juergensmeyer 2007, chap. 1.
5. Harbans Mukhia, "Eklavya loses thumb again." *The Hindu*, Aug. 5, 2002, <http://www.thehindu.com/2002/08/05/stories/2002080500251000.htm>, accessed in August 2011.

6. Translated from a conversation in Hindi.
7. Eklavya workers were interested in a wide range of social-political issues, including caste, poverty, religious authority, superstition, exploitation, communalism. Many urban artists, intellectuals, and activists in the 1990s and 2000s were attracted to Kabir and the Sufi-*sant* heritage because of their dismay at the country's communal turn, the resurgence of religious nationalism and resulting social division, hatred, and violence. Shabnam Virmani began the Kabir Project because she had been so disturbed by the extreme communal violence in Gujarat in 2002. But Malwa Kabir singers had different priorities. The two top issues for them were caste and organized religion, particularly the Kabir Panth with which many of them were affiliated. Communalism was a more remote topic that didn't affect their daily lives. The politics of nationalism was even more remote. All the musicians in the Kabir *manch* were born as Hindus in the broadest sense of the term. There were no Muslims. Rather than prejudice or exclusion, this reflects the fact that historically in India, Kabir has been embraced by and folded into the Hindu community far more than the Muslim. (See interviews on Muslim views of Kabir in Virmani 2008d and Lorenzen 1981a.) The disconnect between Malwa Kabir singers' views and national politics was shown by a younger musician who told me in 2004 that he was considering going into politics with the BJP. I was appalled. Did he realize that the BJP was linked to the Sangh Parivar and Hindu nationalism, and that the Sangh Parivar's values were terribly opposed to Kabir's? He didn't.
8. In March 2002 I visited Dinesh Sharma's home in Devali village. His father was the leader of a large *mandalī* that sang in a different style from the Malwa style, associated with the Singaji Panth in the Nimar region of M.P. They obviously got pleasure and a high out of it, singing loudly for several hours in a call and response fashion with drums and cymbals. Many closed their eyes for concentration. There wasn't much melody. The tempo regularly changed from slow to fast and back again. The drummer seemed to dance with his upper body and head as he played. But when, at my request, the leader started giving long explanations in Hindi of each verse, he went to sleep on his drum. I then said the explanations should stop, and he came back to life. I ask how their bodies and minds changed after hours of singing. He answered, "We feel love for *paramātma*." I asked again, emphasizing the body. "We feel lightness" (*halkāpan*). They didn't seem to have any interest in the critical, socially relevant songs of Kabir. From the words I picked up, their songs featured mythologies of Kabir's career as an avatar; moral admonitions ("having received a human body, why don't you keep it pure?"); yogic imagery. Toward midnight they built up to an intense pitch, cymbals swinging and banging, drummer in the middle totally absorbed, his head dancing. They gestured, their bodies went up and down vertically, voices got fuller. A smaller circle of about twelve at that point, they were all very

concentrated. I retired but heard that they started singing a folk genre called *phagun*, and from jumping in their seats started jumping on their feet, dancing and shouting till 3 a.m.

9. All material from Kabir *manch* tapes, registers, and files has been translated by LH from Hindi unless otherwise indicated.
10. See n. 2 above.
11. The poem, from the *Bījak* (Hess and Singh 2002, 54–55), goes like this:

> The pandit's pedantries are lies. / If saying Ram gave liberation, / saying candy sweetened the mouth, / saying fire burned your foot, / saying water quenched your thirst, / saying food banished hunger, / the whole world would be free. / The parrot gabbles *God* like a man / but doesn't know God's glory. / When he flies off to the jungle, / he'll forget God. / If you don't see, if you don't touch, / what's the use of the Name? / If saying money made you rich, / nobody would be poor. / If you love lust and delusion, / you can't get a glimpse of God. / Kabir says, God is one. / Love the one or shuffle off in chains / to the City of Death.

12. See chapter 4, n. 8.
13. Article dated February 6, 1992.
14. Lucknow edition of the *Times of India*, April 22, 1993.
15. Much information on the Balais (or Balahis) in this area, including some of the Kabir singers I knew and worked with, is available in "Caste, Class and Sect: A Study of the Balahis in Malwa circa 1940–1994," a master's thesis submitted to the History Department of Delhi University by Shahana Bhattacharya in 1996. At the time of this writing, Bhattacharya is on the faculty of Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi. She was kind enough to provide me with a copy of her thesis, which I had seen in the Dewas Eklavya office. She notes in her preface that the Malwa lower castes in general, and the Balahis in particular, have a striking familiarity with Kabir's teachings, though only about 15 percent of the Balahis she surveyed were formally members of the Kabir Panth. About their status, she wrote: "balahis, both by their own standards, and those of most other castes in the area, are considered to rank the highest among all the 'untouchable' groups in the caste hierarchy in Malwa. The ritual distance that exists between, say, the balahis, and the bagris, chamars, and other scheduled castes … seems to be enhanced by the distinctly higher economic status of the balahis today" (vii).
16. The same title was given to this booklet of socially conscious song texts (discussed and translated above, p. 263–264) and to the first audiocassette by Prahladji's group, produced by the *manch* in 1993 (see reference to the cassette in Suresh Patel's interview).

17. The play was *Kabīr* by the great Hindi writer Bhisham Sahni (1915–2003). Were the director and the playwright related? I don't know. Kiran Sahni and his group are shown rehearsing and discussing the play in the film *Kabira khaḍā bazar meṇ* (Virmani 2008b).
18. Around 2004. Shabnam's tapes aren't marked with dates, but they are classified carefully for easy retrieval. This cassette is marked MP Raj DV1, the interview beginning about 22 minutes into the tape.
19. On Kapil Tiwari, see chapters 3 and 8.
20. This song, *Kaī ḍhūnḍhtī phiro mhārī helī*, is sung by Prahladji in an early section of Shabnam Virmani's film *Chalo hamārā des/Come to My Country*.
21. This song, *Guru sam dātā koī nahīṇ*, is sung by Shabnam and Prahladji during the closing credits of the film *Chalo hamārā des/Come to My Country* (Virmani 2008a).
22. Bhajan: *Sāhib ne bhāng pilāī*.
23. Bhajan: *Panchhīḍā bhāī*.
24. In 2014 Narayan Singh Delmia took the lead in reorganizing the Kabir manch, with monthly meetings and some financial support from private donors. In 2015 I heard that it had taken off and the groups were gathering enthusiastically.
25. The word translated as "blessing" is *bakśhīśh*, which in common parlance is a tip or gratuity. This is an unusual usage. Discussions of how best to translate it led to this imperfect solution. It seems to be a rough and whimsical use of an unexpected marketplace image—like *bhāng*.
26. For a rigorous examination of the historicity of Ramanand, see Agrawal 2009a, chap. 5 (Hindi); and Agrawal 2009b, 135–70 (English). Agrawal (2001) has sharply criticized what he regards as the extreme identity politics and other issues in Dharamvir's later writings. He draws scholars Winand Callewaert and J. S. Hawley into his criticism insofar as they accept Dharamvir's critique of Dvivedi's "brahminical bias" (see chapter 3 above). See also Horstmann 2002,115–42 (her essay, "Hazariprasad Dvivedi's Kabir," in the volume she edited).
27. The implication is: stay in touch with yourself, let your own nature bring forth good company.
28. Holy places associated with Krishna and Shiva.
29. A *sākhī* from the *Bījak*. Hess and Singh 2002, 121.
30. This is a variant of *sākhī* 280 in the *Bījak* (Hess and Singh 2002, 123). Oil was sold for cooking, pulp for animal fodder, so both were useful.
31. He once told me a story about how his wife sent him out with money to buy *rākhī*s, the ornamented string bracelets used for the Raksha Bandhan festival. This important family-oriented holiday celebrates the relation between brothers and sisters. Females tie the bracelets on the arms of males who are in their actual families or with whom they have created a ritual relationship. Narayanji took the money and couldn't resist spending it on a book—in this case one by Osho (Rajneesh), whose commentaries on Kabir and other spiritual matters

have received much praise. He went home without the *rākhī*s and was in big trouble with the women in the family.

32. The verse refers to Gangaur, a festival devoted to Gauri (Parvati), popular in Rajasthan and parts of M.P. and Gujarat, with fervent participation by women devotees.
33. There are hierarchies and degrees of untouchability practiced even among those castes whom upper castes lump together as untouchable.
34. Anu Gupta and Arvind Sardana, who have worked for Eklavya in Dewas for many years. They are always my hosts when I stay in Dewas. In 2011 Arvind became the director of the whole Eklavya organization.
35. Shabnam and I are both outsiders to rural Kabir culture in different ways. The fact that we had power to open doors for local people shaped our relationships in various ways, which we often reflected on and talked about—with each other and with Malwa friends.
36. Singaji was a *nirguṇ sant* of Madhya Pradesh, born in the late sixteenth century, whose followers tend to be of higher castes.
37. In a culture where people generally avoid touching leftover food, a wife's eating her husband's leftovers is a kind of intimate practice, as well as an expression of purity hierarchies.
38. The conversation occurred in August 2003 with Arvind Sardana and Prakash Kant at the Dewas Eklavya office.
39. Namvar Singh is a very eminent Hindi literary scholar and critic who has written important works on Kabir. It was he who first told me about the Eklavya Kabir *manch*, when we met at a conference in Heidelberg in 2000. He urged me to go there and write about what Eklavya and the *mandalī*s had done together.
40. See chapter 1 for a description of another poignant occasion on which this song was sung.