

CHAPTER 1

LEGENDS AND HISTORY

In India, as elsewhere, the appearance of legends about saints and heroes is a mysterious event. It is not just that there rarely exists much independent historical evidence against which to compare the legends. Even in the few cases where such evidence is available, it helps very little to explain how and why the legends have arisen. Most legends contain more fantasy than history, more dreams than everyday reality. Often it is only the embarrassing or inconsequential details of the legends—the warts and blemishes that the process of converting the legends and their heroes into idealized archetypes has been unable to remove—that preserve some memory of what really happened. The rest is imagination.

But imagination takes many forms. Legends do not gather around saints and heroes completely at random. Legends arise from the rich treasury of themes and motifs that history makes available to each particular society, but for each individual saint or hero the creative process is selective. Certain themes and motifs are conserved and others are discarded. The usually unknown authors of the legends, whether individual or collective, construct the legends on the basis of their own and their listeners' or readers' needs, tastes, hopes, and desires. Any episode, fact or fiction, that fails to serve these ends tends in time to be forgotten. Any episode that does serve them is preserved in popular memory like a favorite melody that new singers may reinterpret but not omit from their repertoire.

Simply to trace the evolution of the many retellings of legends is an exacting task, rather like the excavations of the archaeologist who unveils the many reconstructions of the multilayered Mexican pyramids.

This task has its own charms and rewards, but I prefer to pay more attention to two related questions: What are the social and psychological needs, tastes, hopes, and desires that helped create and popularize the legends? And how did these motivations, as they evolved and sometimes mutated in later historical environments, influence the evolution of the legends? One should, as Alan Dundes insists, try to keep the folk in folklore [Dundes 1980: viii].

Unlike myths and fairy tales, which often share similar motivations, legends claim to recount the deeds of *historical* persons in *historical* time [Dundes 1980:231]. In cases where some historical substratum to the legends about a particular saint or hero seems to exist, scholars have often struggled to reconstruct his or her “true” history. Since in most cases the legends provide virtually the only source material on which to base such historical reconstructions, the choice of criteria to determine what is history and what is not is by no means an easy one. Most scholars would agree that miracles and divine or supernatural interventions must be discarded and that the embarrassing events and inconsequential details of the legends are most likely to be true. In between these two extremes, however, one finds a vast amount of material that cannot be clearly classified as either “fact” or “fiction.” Just how far should we go in “demythologizing” our saints and heroes?

Unfortunately, answering this sort of question helps very little to explain why legends about saints and religious founders, hagiographies, play such a key role in the beliefs and practices of nearly all sects and major religions. Whether these legends are based on historical fact or not, they claim to offer historical explanations of how these religious movements arose and how their traditions were preserved, often in the face of adversity, in later years. The legends take the form of stories that the members of the community tell about and for themselves. They are reflexive commentaries that define the imagined shared past of the community, its historical identity, as well as normalize its religious, social, moral, political, and even economic values [Oberoi 1987:26-28; Geertz 1973:448-53].

At the same time, legends can and do serve either to justify or to protest against the asymmetrical relations of power that prevail in the larger societies of which the communities that tell the legends form a greater or lesser part. In other words, the legends embody a socio-religious ideology. By the term ideology, I refer specifically to what John B. Thompson [1984:4] has called a “*critical conception*” of ideology, one that directly links ideology to the exercise of social power. Nonetheless whereas Thompson regards ideologies exclusively as instruments

of domination—"the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination"—I prefer to also regard the various sorts of discourse that protest against such social domination as forms of ideology. Indeed, in the case of the social meanings that are implicit and explicit in the Kabir legends, their primary intention is to protest against social discrimination and economic exploitation rather than any legitimization of existing institutions of domination. The Kabir legends manifest the ideology of the poor and powerless, not the rich and powerful.

Myths—in the folklorist sense of narratives about how things first came to be as they are [Dundes 1980:224]—also embody ideological messages. In the case of myths, however, these messages are mostly concerned with the basic conceptual, social, and psychological structures that define the communities and their members. Legends, on the other hand, are generally more directly concerned with the specific socio-economic and political situations faced by the communities in the course of their historical development. As a result, legends often require, and permit, less "depth" analysis than myths do. It is no accident that both structuralist anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss and religious psychologists such as Mircea Eliade have preferred to work with myths rather than with legends.

This does not mean, however, that legends can be simply left to speak for themselves. Their ideological messages may not have the same character as those of myths, nor are legends as subject to the psychological condensations and distortions typical of myths. Nonetheless, the messages that legends contain are often subtle ones and may be disguised or left implicit rather than openly specified. In the case of the legends about Kabir, the audience of low class peasants, laborers, and artisans for whom—and to some extent by whom—the legends were composed may have tended to absorb the ideological messages more subliminally than discursively. Outsider intellectuals may be better able to analyze and articulate the messages, but they are confronted with an immense historical and psychological gap between themselves and the original creators of the legends. A sympathetic leap of the imagination can help to bridge this gap, but such intellectuals can never have direct or complete access to the original historical and psychological context of the legends. As a result, many of the social, political and psychological implications of the legends are simply beyond the grasp of imaginative reconstruction.

The legends about Kabir have attracted comparatively little attention from academic scholars. Mostly such scholars have been content to try

to somehow derive from the legends a historical "biography" of Kabir.¹ As might be expected, this approach does not lead very far. The rigorous historical criteria used by Charlotte Vaudeville, for instance, cast doubt on all but a few basic "facts" of Kabir's historical biography. Apart from extracting this historical residue, Vaudeville has little interest in the Kabir legends. For the most part, she is content to observe that "the legendary life of Kabir follows well-known patterns of Indian hagiography" [Vaudeville 1974:46]. The same may be said of most other academic scholars. The only partial exceptions are David Scott and a few scholars such as G. H. Wescott, F. E. Keay, Parashuram Chaturvedi, Kedaranath Dvivedi, and K. K. Bhatta (see note 1), who have been interested in the Kabir Panth as well as in Kabir himself. Even these scholars tend to be more interested in extracting a historical biography than in discussing the legends as manifestations of socio-religious ideology.

In the present study, I will discuss only a few specific historical questions about Kabir's life, namely, his dates, his relation to Ramananda, and his family situation. I shall not discuss in any detail what might be called the "prehistory or archaeology of these legends," that is, the identification of the sources of the stories before they were appropriated by the authors of the Kabir legends. Nor will I attempt to make a detailed classification of the specific folkloric motifs found in the legends. It is, however, necessary to at least outline the main broad narrative themes that characterize most of the legends.

When one begins to compare the main narrative themes of the Kabir legends, it quickly becomes apparent that almost all the legends fall into two or three related categories. Moreover, it can be shown that their themes are characteristic not of Indian hagiography in general, as Vaudeville tends to suggest (see above), but that they are themes particularly emphasized in the hagiographies of the saintly heroes of low-class persons.

The main narrative theme of most of the Kabir legends is a direct test of Kabir by a powerful political, economic, or religious figure: by a king, a sultan, a merchant, a Brahman, a Muslim *kāzī*, a god or a goddess. Not surprisingly, it is the low-class underdog, Kabir, who invariably ends up prevailing over all these figures, who attempt to

1. The more serious attempts to reconstruct Kabir's biography include those of C. Vaudeville [1974: 27-48], David Scott [1985], R. K. Varma [1966, 1971, 1977], K. N. Dvivedi [1965], K. K. Bhatta [1975], P. Chaturvedi [1964: 132-79], H. P. Dvivedi [1971], P. D. Barthwal [1946: 79-127], Mohan Singh [1934], F. E. Keay [1931: 26-50], and G. H. Wescott [1953: 1-27].

discredit or to harm him by either trickery, magic, or brute force. In the legend of Sikandar testing Kabir, Kabir prevails over the attempt of the sultan, inspired by Brahmans and *kāzīs*, to drown, burn, and trample him to death. In the legend of Kabir's wife and the libidinous merchant, Kabir prevails over the efforts of the merchant to sexually exploit Kabir's wife. In the legends of the Brahmans demanding food and the unexpected feast, Kabir prevails over the greed and jealousy of the Brahmans. In the legends of Kabir's encounters with the Brahman devotees Tatva and Jiva, the Brahman scholar Sarvajit, the yogi Gorakhanath, and the Muslim *kāzī*, sheikh Taki, Kabir manifests his spiritual superiority by a display of miraculous powers. Kabir prevails even in a test of his generosity made by God disguised as a beggar of Kabir's cloth and a test of his chastity by a goddess or an *apsarā*.

In several other legends, Kabir abandons the somewhat passive role of the would-be victim (who ends up turning the tables against his more powerful examiners). In these legends, Kabir himself takes on the role of a sort of trickster figure who initiates his own test of the politically and religiously powerful. In the legend of his initiation, Kabir tricks the Brahman guru Ramananda into giving him a mantra of initiation and later proves his spiritual worth to his reluctant guru. In the legend of the visit to Kabir of the Muslim holy man Jahan-gasta, Kabir ties up a pig in front of his own house and uses it to turn the tables on his orthoprax visitor. In the legend of the prostitute, the *paṇḍā* and the king, Kabir tricks the king into doubting Kabir's moral character and magical powers. When Kabir's claims are proven correct, the king is forced to repent and humble himself before Kabir. Even the legend of Kabir's death at Magahar is in part the story of how Kabir uses his supernatural power to "trick" his royal disciples, Bijali Khan and Virasimha, into abandoning their quarrel over the possession of Kabir's corpse.

A few legends, which do not directly concern any test of Kabir's virtues and powers, nonetheless are also intended to reveal his innate, though hidden superiority. Most important in this regard are the various versions of the legend of Kabir's birth. These attempt to show that Kabir was not really a low-caste Muslim by birth. Rather they claim that he was either adopted by Muslims (who in some versions are said to be fallen Brahmans), that he was himself a Brahman in a former life, or that he was a direct incarnation of God.

What all these two or three general narrative themes have in common is a fantasized revenge by the weak against the powerful, by the poor against the rich, by the scorned against the scorners. The legends are in large part typical dreams of glory, wealth, and power dreamed by

low-class persons such as those who became the followers of Kabir.

The narrative themes of the Kabir legends may be profitably compared with those about Mahatma Gandhi discussed in a fascinating article by Shahid Amin [Amin 1988:288-348]. These Gandhi legends were told mostly by poor peasants in the Gorakhpur region of Uttar Pradesh in the early 1920s. Amin identifies four basic themes in the stories [Ibid., 314]: "Testing the power of the Mahatma. . . . Opposing the Mahatma. . . . Opposing the Gandhian creed. . . . Boons granted and/or miracles performed." The similarity to the Kabir legends extends even to quite specific thematic motifs such as the hero's causing a dry stick to sprout leaves [Ibid., 328-30] (above, p. 57) and his ability to produce or otherwise control water and fire [Ibid., 315, 330-33] (see index). Both these specific motifs and the broader narrative themes may arise out of a common storehouse of the building blocks of Indian legends and myths, but they are selected and emphasized on the basis of the social and psychological needs of those who tell and listen to the stories.

The lack of any factual historical basis for the Kabir legends does not mean that they have no historical importance. Quite the contrary. These legends are themselves active historical forces, dynamic manifestations of the evolving values of the community that created them and has been their principal audience. From this point of view, it is clearly a mistake to limit the role of history to that of providing a "background" or "context" in which to locate the legends. History is not a scenic backdrop to the stage on which the legends are performed. History is the play itself, and the legends are important actors in it. However dependent these legends may be, in the last instance, on the economic and political factors that molded the mentalities of their authors and audience, they have also served to create the imagined shared past and the social, moral, and religious values that have defined the historical community and its relation to other constituent groups of society.

For Kabir's followers within and without the Kabir Panth, these legends have been a vital source and part of their religious faith, of their communal and personal identities, and of their socio-religious ideology. The legends provide the fullest expression of this faith, identity, and ideology at the same time that they serve to inculcate them in the minds and hearts of these followers. Without these legends the Kabir Panth would, in fact, not exist, just as Vaishnavism would be inconceivable without the legends of Rama and Krishna, Christianity without the legends of Jesus, Buddhism without those of Buddha, Islam without those of Muhammad.

The Early Texts

Two texts compete for the honor of being the oldest to contain a coherent set of legends about Kabir: the *Kabir Parachai* of Ananta-das and the *Nirbhayajnan*. The latter has not been published. I did briefly examine a manuscript of the *Nirbhayajnan* found in the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan library in Allahabad [catalogue no. 3-75/1443], but I was unable to secure a copy or study it in any detail. Kedaranath Dvivedi [1965:3-4] gives a short summary of the text in his *Kabir aur Kabir-pantha*. He also claims that the Nagari Pracharini Sabha library in Varanasi has a manuscript of the *Nirbhayajnan* dated V. S. 1633 (A.D. 1576). I was unable to locate this text in the Nagari Pracharini library in 1985. Dvivedi himself was only able to examine another manuscript of this text copied in V. S. 1856 (A.D. 1799). Dvivedi says that the *Nirbhayajnan* takes the form of a conversation between Kabir and his disciple Dharma-das. This shows that the text must belong to the Dharma-das branch of the Kabir Panth. This fact also puts in doubt the early date attributed to it since Dvivedi himself has shown that Dharma-das probably lived at least a hundred years after Kabir. Unless clearer proof of its early date can be found, I strongly suspect that the *Nirbhayajnan* is more likely a composition of the eighteenth century.

Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai* is a much better known work and one whose early date is not in doubt. A version of Ananta-das's text based on a single, now lost manuscript was published as an appendix to a book on Kabir by Ram Kumar Varma [1983:95-107].² W. M. Callewaert is about to publish a critical edition of most of the *parachais* attributed to Ananta-das including the *Kabir Parachai* as well as those of Nam-dev, Pipa, Dhana, Trilochan, and Ravi-das. The corrected edition and translation of Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai* included in the present book is based on a different manuscript tradition from that used by Callewaert for his base text (See chapter six below for further details).

Ramananda's and Kabir's Dates

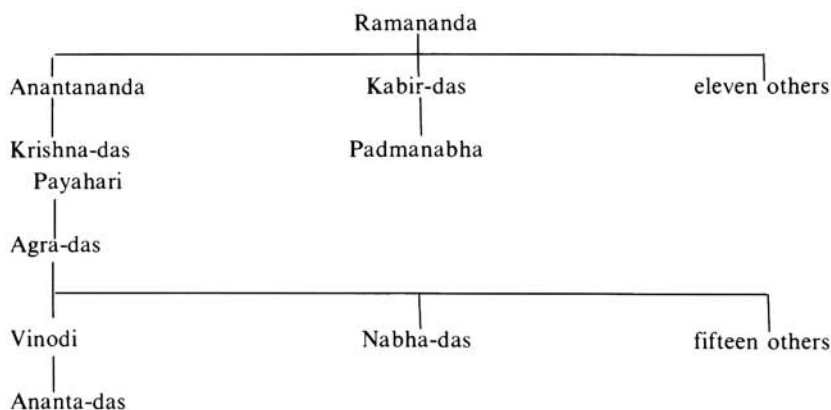
In his *Pipa Parachai*, Ananta-das lists his own spiritual genealogy as follows: Ramananda, his disciple Anantananda, his disciple Krishna-

2. See R. K. Varma [1983:95-107]. In an interview with Varma in 1985, he claimed that he had loaned his manuscript to a student who had never returned it to him.

das, his disciple Agra-das, his disciple Vinodi, and his disciple Ananta [-das].³ If this spiritual genealogy is combined with that given by Nabha-das in his *Bhaktamal*, it yields the genealogical tree given in figure one. Nabha-das mentions all the names except that of Ananta-das himself. Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai*, in both its two main recensions, supports Nabha-das's claim that Kabir was a direct disciple of Ramananda. According to J. N. Farquhar [1967:317], Nabha-das flourished between A.D. 1585 and 1623. The most prominent present-day authority, R. D. Gupta [1969:64], seems to accept A.D. 1624 as the latest possible date for Nabha-das's *Bhaktamal*. Since Ananta-das and Nabha-das are separated by only one spiritual generation (Nabha-das is Ananta-das's spiritual uncle) and could easily have been contemporaries, a floruit for Nabha-das of about 1600, or even 1625, agrees quite well with the 1588 A.D. date Ananta-das himself gives for the composition of his own *Nam-dev Parachai*.

Figure One

The guru genealogies of Ananta-das and Nabha-das



All this leads directly to the vexing and much discussed questions of the historical relation between Kabir and Ramananda and the dates

3. This verse is quoted by L. P. Dube [1968:30-31] in two different versions, one of which omits the names of Krishna-das and Vinodi.

of both. A detailed review of the extensive scholarly arguments on these questions is fortunately not necessary. This has been ably done by P. Chaturvedi [1964: 845-70] in Hindi, and the major points of his long discussion have been well summarized in English by Charlotte Vaudeville [1974: 36-39, 110-17]. Nonetheless, Chaturvedi's and Vaudeville's tentative conclusion—that Kabir probably died about the middle of the fifteenth century—is no longer tenable in the light of the data from Ananta-das's *parachais*. Although Chaturvedi and Vaudeville had access to most of this data, they did not make adequate use of it, particularly the historical synchronism of Kabir and Virasimha Baghel.

The question of the guru-disciple relation of Ramananda and Kabir cannot be separated from that of their respective dates since several scholars have claimed that Ramananda died too early to have been Kabir's guru. Some scholars have argued that the connection between Ramananda and Kabir (and other *sants* such as Pipa and Dhanna) was invented in order to legitimize, and also to tame, Kabir and the other *sants* by giving them a learned Brahman as their guru. It has also been claimed that this connection served to establish a hypothetical historical link between the *sants* and the important Ramanandi Sampraday reputedly organized by Ramananda's more orthodox Brahman disciples [see B. P. Simha 1957; B. N. Shrivastav 1957; Burghart 1978]. Tradition in fact associates both Nabha-das and Ananta-das with this Ramanandi Sampraday. The modern scholars C. Vaudeville [1974: 30-31, 37-40] and W. H. McLeod [1976: 155-56], in particular, are quite skeptical about the guru-disciple relation between Kabir and Ramananda.

What is the main evidence that *supports* the existence of this guru-disciple relation? Quite simply, it is the unanimous claim of tradition that Kabir was a disciple of Ramananda. The exact correspondence of the names in the genealogies of Ramananda's pupils found independently in the works of Ananta-das and Nabha-das (figure one) is one strong argument in favor of the historicity of the Ramananda-Kabir connection. Both these works were written within about a hundred years of Kabir's probable death. This entire genealogy, minus only the name of Ananta-das himself, is still accepted in the traditions of the Ramanandi Sampraday [B.P. Simha 1957:333-34, 352]. Other early texts that affirm this connection include the *Nirbhayajnan* [K. N. Dvivedi 1965:3-4], Hariram Vyas's (died A.D. 1612) songs [L. P. Dube 1968:31-38; Chaturvedi 1964:134-35], and Raghav-das's [1965:51-55] *Bhaktamal* (A.D. ?1720). The associated legend of Kabir's tricking Ramananda into giving him the "Ram" mantra, first told in the first section or chapter of Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai*, is undoubtedly a pious fiction. Its presence in this first section is in fact one of the principal reasons for doubting that this

section formed part of the "original" text of the *Kabir Parachai*. Nonetheless, the guru-disciple relation between Ramananda and Kabir is reaffirmed in the very first verse of the second section of the *Kabir Parachai*, and the story of Kabir tricking Ramananda is already found in Priya-das's A.D. 1712 commentary on Nabha-das's verse about Kabir. This commentary is almost certainly based on a recension of Ananta-das's work that included the controversial first section (see below, pp. 78-79).

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that none of the three oldest collections of Kabir's works (the Sikh *Adi Granth*, the Rajasthani *Kabir Granthavali* and the Kabir Panthi *Kabir Bijak*) refer to Ramananda as Kabir's guru. Where Kabir's verses refer to a guru, it usually seems to be a divine rather than a human guru. Nonetheless, one verse of the *Bijak* (*shabda* 77.4) does seem to mention Ramananda, and at least one verse from the less authentic collections mentions Ramananda as Kabir's guru [H. P. Dvivedi 1971:260 (no. 29)]. Since most of the other early *sant* poets rarely refer to their human gurus by name, this objection does not seem to me to be a particularly important one.

At first sight, a more serious objection to Kabir's having been a disciple of Ramananda is that Kabir's verses radically break with the Brahmanic orthodoxy that Ramananda supposedly represents. This objection is also of little weight, however, since almost nothing is in fact known about what religious and social doctrines the historical Ramananda actually espoused. Apart from a few short compositions in Hindi and Sanskrit somewhat dubiously attributed to him [Ramananda 1955], he remains a historical enigma. In one of his Hindi songs, he rejects both the Vedas and *smṛiti* and claims that God is immanent in all things, especially in one's heart [Barthwal 1978:69]. This religious stance is obviously closer to Kabir than to Brahmanic orthodoxy. The real question, then, is still that of the dates of Ramananda and Kabir.

The attempts to establish a date of Ramananda without relying on the date of Kabir are, I think, basically futile. Nonetheless, they deserve to be reviewed if only to show that they can in fact be better used to establish a late date for Ramananda than an early one. The only significant evidence for an early date of Ramananda is the A.D. 1299 birth date of Ramananda said to be given in the *Agastya-samhita*.⁴ Since this date is incompatible with most other evidence, it is curious that several

4. There are discussions of the dates of Ramananda in the works cited in note 1 above. See also P. D. Barthwal [1978:197], R. G. Bhandarkar [1965:66-67], B. N. Shrivastav [1957:69-98], Nabha-das [1969:281-96], Farquhar [1967:323], and Shrikrishna Lal [in Ramananda 1955:33-50].

important modern scholars have accepted it. C. Vaudeville, P. Chaturvedi, and P. D. Barthwal all favor an early date for Ramananda. R. K. Varma, J. N. Farquhar, G. H. Westcott, and other scholars prefer later dates.⁵ In what follows, I will argue that the attempts to assign early dates to both Ramananda and Kabir are almost certainly mistaken.

The main arguments for dating Ramananda independently from Kabir and from Ramananda's other spiritual descendants center on Ramananda's supposed inclusion in the spiritual genealogy of the famous South Indian theologian Ramanuja. Ramanuja's traditional dates, themselves the subject of controversy, are from A.D. 1017 to 1137. If we give Ramanuja a floruit of about A.D. 1125 and assign an average of twenty-five years to each following spiritual generation up to Ramananda [see Trautmann 1969:564-77], what do we get? It all depends on which traditional genealogy we use.

In somewhat ambiguous fashion, Nabha-das [1969:281-316, 949-54] mentions the names of three gurus between Ramanuja and Ramananda. This cannot be a complete list. Another text, the *Ramarchana Paddhati* attributed to Ramananda, lists twelve, thirteen, or nineteen names between Ramanuja and Ramananda, depending upon the edition or manuscript consulted.⁶ If we count forward from the proposed A.D. 1125 floruit of Ramanuja, assigning twenty-five years to each generation, we get the following three possible floruits for Ramananda: A.D. 1450, 1475, and 1625. The first two dates are both compatible with the probable dates of Kabir. Nonetheless, it should be clear that the whole procedure of dating Ramananda on the basis of his spiritual descent from Ramanuja is a house of cards of little real value.

In reality the only reasonable way of dating Ramananda is to count backward from the better known dates of Kabir, Ananta-das and Nabha-das. If Ananta-das is given a floruit of A.D. 1600 (on the basis of the A.D. 1588 date of the composition of the *Nam-dev Parachai*), then Ramananda's floruit would be about A.D. 1475. If we give Nabha-das the same floruit of about A.D. 1600, then Ramananda's floruit would be pushed back to about A.D. 1450. Both these dates are again perfectly compatible with the probable dates of Kabir, as we shall see, and also with the more doubtful date of A.D. 1425 often given as the birth date of Ramananda's reputed disciple Pipa [Farquhar 1967:323; Chaturvedi 1964:235-36].

5. See note 1 above.

6. See B. N. Shrivastav [1957:155-57], R. Burghart [1978:121-39], and R. K. Varma [1977:10-15]. Burghart bases much of his article on B. P. Simha [1957]. Burghart and Simha both prefer the genealogical list with twelve intervening names.

Despite the fact that the dates of Kabir have provoked so much discussion and disagreement, I think it is now possible to establish his approximate floruit with considerable confidence. Although different traditional verses give different dates for Kabir's death and birth [Chaturvedi 1964:846], the dates now accepted by most followers of the Kabir Panth assign him a life span of 120 years, from 1455 V. S. (A.D. 1398) to 1575 V. S. (A.D. 1518). This long life-span is obviously a pious invention, and these dates cannot be independently confirmed in any case. What we are left with are essentially four independent tests: (1) the genealogical count back from Ananta-das, (2) the similar count back from Nabha-das, (3) the legendary synchronism with Sikandar Lodi (ruled A.D. 1488-1512), and (4) the legendary synchronism with king Virasimha Baghel. Both these last two synchronisms are found in Ananta-das and most early and later legendary texts. The synchronism with Virasimha Baghel is particularly interesting since no modern Kabir scholar seems to have noted that Virasimha Baghel was in fact a historical person whose approximate dates are known.

Before giving the results of these four texts, it is necessary to review what is known about king Virasimha Baghel. In Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai* [6.1], Virasimhadev Baghel is identified as the king who does penance before Kabir during the episode of the *paṇḍā* of Jagannath Puri (below, pp. 29-32). Virasimhadev Baghel is apparently the king of Varanasi although Ananta-das's text never directly says so. Later legends also associate Virasimha Baghel (as well as an otherwise unknown Muslim named Bijali Khan) with the events of Kabir's death at Magahar. This death legend is also found in Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai*, but this text does not mention the presence of any king at Kabir's death, much less Bijali Khan or Virasimha Baghel.

The Baghel dynasty is historically associated with the Baghelkhand region of northern Madhya Pradesh (centered in Satna, Rewa, and Shadol Districts) and not with Varanasi. A verse chronicle of the dynasty in Sanskrit, the *Virabhanudayakavyam*, was written in A.D. 1540 by a Madhava, son of Abhayachandra [1938; H. Shastri 1925]. Another historical chronicle of the Baghel dynasty, the *Baghelavamshavarnan*, was published as an appendix to the A.D. 1906 Venkateshvar Press edition of the *Kabir Bijak* [Kabir 1906:659-731]. This text was written in Hindi by Yugal-das at the behest of the Baghel king Raghurajasimha (A.D. 1823-1879).⁷

7. I would like to thank Shukdev Singh and Linda Hess for making their copy of this Venkateshvar Press edition available to me.

Madhava's [1938; H. Shastri 1-14] *Virabhanudayakavyam* contains no mention of Kabir, but the text does make Virasimha Baghel a contemporary of the Mughal emperor Babur (ruled A.D. 1526-1530). Virasimha Baghel is also mentioned in Babur's own memoirs [Babur 1970: 521, 562, 639]. Madhava further claims that Virasimha's son Virabhanu, the hero of the *Virabhanudayakavyam*, was a contemporary and friend of the Mughal emperor Humayun (ruled A.D. 1531-1540, 1555-56). Hirananda Shastri [1925] claims that Virabhanu must have died in 1540, the year in which Madhava's text was composed, but historians generally place his death a few years later [Srivastav 1964: 97-98]. It seems likely that Virasimha died in about A.D. 1530. Some Persian historians seem to claim that Bir Singh (alias Nar Singh) died after an unsuccessful battle against Sikandar Lodi in about A.D. 1494. Apparently, however, this claim confuses him with his cousin (uncle's son) Vahararaya [A. B. Pandey 1956: 126-27]. In Madhava's *Virabhanudayakavyam*, Virasimha is said to have ruled from his capital at Gahora, a still unidentified site in the Baghelkhand region [Madhava 1938; H. Shastri 1925: 12]. He should not be confused with king Virasimhadev of Bundelkhand who was responsible for the death of Akbar's famous minister Abu'l Fazl in A.D. 1602 [Rizvi 1975: 487-91]. Nor is he the same as the hero of Keshav-das's *Virasimhadev-charitra* [D. Varma 1986: 107, 389-90, 577].

Yugal-das's *Baghelavamshavarnan* does connect Virasimha Baghel and other kings of the dynasty with Kabir. The text is in fact couched in the form of a dialogue between Kabir and his reputed direct disciple Dharma-das (despite its references to kings later than both). The text makes all the kings of the Baghel dynasty followers of Kabir. Virasimha Baghel is said to have lived first at Prayag (Allahabad) and then to have been given control of the fort of Bandhogadh (Shadol District) by the *bādashāh* of Delhi. This *bādashāh* must be Babur although Yugal-das does not identify him by name [Kabir 1906: 672-77] as Madhava does in the *Virabhanudayakavyam*. Yugal-das [ibid., 677-80] does describe Virasimha's son Virabhanu as the contemporary and friend of Babur's son Humayun as does Madhava.

The Baghel dynasty and region have many historical ties with the Kabir Panth [Lorenzen 1981: 277]. The ethnographers R. V. Russell and Hira Lal [1969: vol. 4, pp. 434-35] reported in 1916 that the members of the ruling Baghel family of Rewa State were traditionally Kabir Panthis. According to Gangasharan Shastri [1976: 153-57], not only king Virasimha Baghel but also king Ramasimha Baghel of Bandhogadh became direct disciples of Kabir. Yugal-das's *Baghelavamshavarnan* [Kabir 1906: 677-81] identifies this latter king as the grandson of Vira-

simha Baghel and son of Virabhanu. All three are said to be direct disciples of Kabir, however chronologically unlikely this may be.

Madhava's *Virabhanudayakavyam*, although it does not connect the dynasty with Kabir, also notes [Madhava 1938; H. Shastri 1925:10] that Udayakarna, Virasimha Baghel's brother, went and settled in Orissa (Utkala). In Puri there is still a small but well-known monastery of the Kabir Panth that claims to house samadhis of Kabir, Dharma-das, and several other important Kabir Panthi saints [K. N. Dvivedi 1965:178-79]. This samadhi of Kabir is already mentioned in Abu'l Fazl's *'Ain-i-Akbari* (A.D. 1598) [Vaudeville 1974:33-34]. Two important legends also connect Kabir with Puri and the Jagannath temple (below, pp. 29-32, 48-49). My guess is that the original responsibility for this connection between the Kabir Panth and Puri may well lie with Virasimha Baghel's brother.

A much later Baghel king of Rewa named Vishvanathasimha (A.D. 1789-1854) wrote the well-known *Pakhanda khandini* commentary on the *Kabir Bijak*. This commentary was included with the earliest published text of the *Kabir Bijak*, lithographed in A.D. 1868 [Vaudeville 1974:333; Sadhusaran Gosvami 1978:255-70]. Vishvanathasimha's grandson Ramanujaprasadasimha financed the 1906 Venkateshvar Press edition of the *Kabir Bijak* that includes this commentary and the *Baghelavamshavarnan* appendix [Kabir 1906].

The Baghel dynasty is also associated with other leaders of the *sant* movement. Legend claims that Kabir's fellow disciple Sen, although a barber by caste, became the guru of king Rajaram of Bandhogadh [Chaturvedi 1964:232-35; Garg 1963:316]. Yugal-das's *Baghelavamshavarnan* [Kabir 1906:677-81] seems to make Rajaram and Ramasimha alternate names of the same king, the son of Virabhanu and grandson of Virasimha. This text claims that the barber (*nāpita*) Sen treated the wounds of king Ramasimha after an attack that took place previous to an interview with Akbar. This text does not, however, have Sen replace Kabir as the king's guru. Another Baghel king, Raghurajasimha of Rewa (A.D. 1823-1879), the son of the *Kabir Bijak* commentator Vishvanathasimha, wrote an important commentary on Nabha-das's *Bhaktamal* [D. Varma 1986:575].

Although no historical source directly associates king Virasimha Baghel with Varanasi, Madhava's *Virabhanudayakavyam* does claim that Virasimha's grandfather Bhaidachandra had conquered Gaya, Varanasi, and Prayag [Madhava 1938; H. Shastri 1925:6]. The Baghelkhand city of Rewa is located only about 190 kilometers (in a straight line) to the southwest of Varanasi. There is little doubt that the Virasimhadev Baghel mentioned in Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai* is the same as the Virasimha Baghel of the *Virabhanudayakavyam*. However

unhistorical the *pañḍā* of Jagannath legend may be, the indicated historical synchronism of Kabir and Virasimha Baghel is still important.

The situation with regard to the synchronism between Kabir and the Muslim Sultan Sikandar Lodi (ruled A.D. 1488-1512) is similar. In this case, Sikandar is known to have visited Jaunpur and possibly Varanasi in about A.D. 1495, but there is no independent mention of his having met Kabir [Vaudeville 1974: 38]. Many scholars have justifiably doubted the historicity of the legends of Kabir's persecution by Sikandar. Nonetheless, I cannot agree with the statement by Vaudeville [1974: 38] that "there is no historical evidence—not even any probability—that Kabir was Sikandar Lodi's contemporary, as is shown by Mohan Singh, [P. D.] Barthwal, and Parashuram Chaturvedi." Whether or not the legends are historical in any strict sense, the chronological synchronism is still of value.

Two other points need to be mentioned before summing up the results of the four tests of Kabir's probable floruit. First is the claim by A. Führer [1891: vol. 2, 224] that the Muslim tomb (*rauzā*) of Kabir at Magahar in Basti District near the city of Gorakhpur was "erected in A.D. 1450 by Bijli Khan and restored in 1576 by Nawab Fidai Khan." This of course implies that Kabir died in 1450 or shortly before. Unfortunately it is not clear on what evidence Führer based his statement. I visited Magahar in 1976 and 1985 but was unable to find any information to support it. The Muslim caretaker of the tomb did tell me that several land grants relative to the tomb at Magahar were preserved in the Sunni Vaqf Board in Lucknow. My then assistant, Mr. Anand Ghildayal, was able to examine the documents and make a summary of their contents. The oldest is a Mughal grant from the reign of Alamgir (Aurangzeb). It bears the date 1110 *hijri* (A.D. 1698-1699). The grant registers the gift of the village Kabirapur Karmua for the upkeep of the Muslim tomb of Shah Kabir. Three later grants have to do with law suits between various persons and the managers of the lands and the tomb. The managers claim to be descendants of Kabir. None of the documents can be used to either confirm or deny Führer's statement about Bijali Khan having built the tomb in A.D. 1450. Given the strength of opposing evidence, I prefer to reject Führer's claim.

The second point that should be mentioned is the supposed contemporaneity of Kabir and Guru Nanak. This claim is not found in the early legends about Kabir. It is found in some of the early Sikh *janam sākhis*. W. H. McLeod, the academic authority on these texts, argues [McLeod 1968: 85-86] that "as they stand the *Miharban* and the B40 accounts can certainly be rejected. They are completely different, they are vague as far as location is concerned, they offer no recognizably

genuine information concerning Kabir, and their obvious purpose is to exalt Guru Nanak by having Kabir acknowledge his superiority." Later Kabir Panthi texts also mention the meeting of Kabir and Guru Nanak, but of course make Guru Nanak acknowledge *Kabir's* superiority (below, pp. 68-69). Guru Nanak's dates are known (A.D. 1469-1538) and are in fact quite compatible with a possible meeting between him and Kabir, but in this case the legends are so late and so obviously tendentious that it is difficult to assign much importance even to the synchronism they assume between Kabir and Guru Nanak.

What, then, can we conclude from the four proposed tests of Kabir's date? The first test, counting back from a floruit of about A.D. 1600 for Ananta-das, gives Kabir a floruit of about A.D. 1500. The second test, counting back from an approximate 1600 floruit for Nabha-das, gives Kabir a floruit of about 1525. The third test, the synchronism with Sikandar Lodi (ruled A.D. 1488-1512), gives Kabir a floruit of about 1500. The fourth test, the synchronism with Virasimha Baghel (died c. A.D. 1530) and Babur (ruled A.D. 1526-1530), gives Kabir a floruit in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. Taken together these tests give Kabir a floruit of between about A.D. 1500 and 1525. Although this floruit goes against the early death date proposed by C. Vaudeville and Parashuram Chaturvedi, it does agree quite well with Kabir's traditional death date of A.D. 1518. Common sense in fact would suggest that tradition is more likely to be correct about Kabir's approximate death date than his traditional birth date of A.D. 1398. If we also suppose that Kabir had a relatively long life (although not the 120 years traditionally assigned to him), we can date his birth to sometime around the middle of the fifteenth century.

Kabir's Family

Did Kabir have a wife and children? This question would be of comparatively minor importance except for the fact that it has become a matter of controversy between the sadhus of the Kabir Panth and academic scholars. For most Kabir Panthi sadhus, the idea that Kabir could have had a wife and children is an anathema. For them, Kabir was a celibate sadhu like themselves.

Nonetheless, the balance of historical evidence clearly suggests that Kabir had a wife and children. This evidence includes the text of Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai* and of Priya-das's commentary on Nabha-das, several "autobiographical" songs and verses attributed to Kabir found in the Sikh *Guru Granth Sahib* or *Adi Granth* and the Rajasthani *Kabir Granthavali* collections, and verses attributed to Kabir's son

Kamal. The Kabir Panth *Kabir Bijak* collection, not surprisingly, omits all such references.

C. Vaudeville [1974:39-48] has ably discussed the autobiographical material found in texts attributed to Kabir. These texts mention Kabir's mother, his father, a wife perhaps named Dhanīa, and his son Kamal.⁸ Kamal was apparently a religious figure of some importance in his own right. There still exist a number of verses attributed to Kamal in which the signature line (*bhaṇitā*) identifies him as the "son of Kabir" [see K. K. Bhatta 1975:12, 29-30, 36-47]. Kamal is not mentioned by name in Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai*, Priya-das's commentary on Nabha-das's *Bhaktamal*, nor other earlier versions of the Kabir legends, but he does appear in later Kabir Panthi versions. Kabir Panthi texts also mention a daughter named Kamali. These texts, however, claim that Kamal and Kamali were *adopted* by Kabir after he had miraculously raised them from the dead and were not his natural children (below, pp. 50-51).

The strongest evidence in favor of Kabir's having had a wife and children comes from Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai*. Verse 6.12 mentions the quarrels of Kabir's mother and her daughter-in-law (*bahū*). Verse 1.7 mentions Kabir's father-in-law. Verse 2.5 mentions the children in Kabir's house who cried because they had to go hungry. The corresponding verse in Priya-das's commentary on Nabha-das, which is here mostly based on Ananta-das's text, refers specifically to Kabir's "wife, child(?ren) and mother" (*tiyā suta māta*) [Nabha-das 1969:483]. Similarly, several Sikh legends collected by Macauliffe [1963: vol. 6] refer to the wives and mother of Kabir. There is also an interesting legend about Kabir and his wife in Muhsin Fani's *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* and in the *Bhaktavijay* of the Varakari author Mahipati (below, pp. 49-50).

Given all this evidence, one has little choice but to accept that Kabir probably married and had children including a son named Kamal. To argue otherwise obviously takes special pleading similar to that of Roman Catholic scholars who would deny the existence of Jesus's brothers and sisters.

The Later Texts

Since Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai* is apparently the oldest existing collection of legends about Kabir, the legends it contains have a certain

8. As Vaudeville [1974:43-44] points out, the word *loi* in Kabir's works probably means "people" and is not the name of a wife of Kabir as Sikh tradition claims. Similarly, the term *Rām janiā* is probably a generic one meaning "Ram's handmaid."

priority over those that are found only in later sources. Likewise, its *versions* of legends that are also found in later texts are particularly interesting. This does not mean, however, that the legends of Ananta-das's collection are necessarily those that are most important to the present-day followers of the Kabir Panth. Since Ananta-das's text is now virtually unknown to the sadhus of the Kabir Panth, its *versions* of the Kabir legends are to them much less important than the versions found in popular texts such as the *Kabir Manshur*.

Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai* is of particular interest from several points of view. It is, first of all, the oldest collection of Kabir legends, and as such it brings us closest to the historical epoch of Kabir. Nonetheless, its contents are clearly only minimally useful for any attempt at reconstructing a historical biography of Kabir. Ananta-das's text *can* be used to reveal the ideological messages its author wanted to convey to his listeners. Nonetheless, Ananta-das's text cannot be used to reveal some hypothetical timeless "essence" of the legends any more than any other versions of the legends can be used for the same purpose. Every version of each legend must be located and analyzed in its own social and historical context.

For me the primary importance of Ananta-das's text lies rather in the fact that the Kabir legends it contains can help us to trace the historical evolution or "genealogy" [Foucault 1984: 78-79] of the Kabir legends over a long time span. As a result, we can get a much more complete idea of the changes in the ideological messages of the legends as conveyed in different historical epochs by different authors for different audiences. From the point of view of the historical and sociological impact that the legends have had, however, it must be kept in mind that the most important legends and versions of those legends are those that have been most popular and not those that are the oldest.

In the following chapters, I shall discuss first the cycle of legends found in Ananta-das's *Kabir Parachai* and then the legends found only in later sources. Wherever possible, I shall trace the more significant changes in the different versions of each legend. The later legend collections to be discussed in some detail include Priya-das's *Bhaktirasa-bodhini* commentary (A.D. 1712) in Hindi on Nabha-das's [1969] *Bhaktamal*; the *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* (A.D. c. 1650) in Persian attributed to Muhsin Fani [1843]; Raghav-das's [1965; 1969] *Bhaktamal* (A.D. ?1720) in Hindi;⁹ Mahipati's [1982] *Bhaktavijay* (A.D. 1762) in Marathi;

9. Callewaert [1988: 14] argues quite persuasively that this work was most likely compiled in A.D. 1720 instead of the date A.D. 1660 preferred by other scholars.

Paramananda-das's *Kabir-i-manshur* (A.D. 1887) in its translation from Urdu to Hindi;¹⁰ Chandradatta's [1926] *Sanskrita-bhaktamala* (A.D. c. 1850) in Sanskrit; Brahma-linamuni's [1960] *Sadguru-shrikavira-charitam* in Sanskrit with his own Hindi commentary; and Gangasharan Shastri's [1976] *Kabir Jivanacharitra* in Hindi.

I shall not discuss in detail a number of other texts that were either not available to me or whose versions of the legends are not significantly different from those found in the texts just mentioned. One work not available to me was Mukunda Gugli's *Kabir Charit*, a Gujarati text reputedly written in A.D. 1651 [Sethi 1984:5, 14; Bhatta 1975:21]. Also unavailable to me were a number of the post-Priya-das commentaries on Nabha-das's *Bhaktamal*. For the verse hagiography of Kabir written by Garib-das (A.D. 1717-1778), I had access only to those parts that are quoted at considerable length in Paramananda-das's [1956, 1984] *Kabir Manshur* and in the *Kabir-charitra-bodh* [Yugalananda 1953: vol. 11].

Of the texts that I did have access to but have used only sparingly, the most important is a collection of mostly verse texts in Hindi edited by *svāmi* Yugalananda Bihari [1953] and published in eleven small volumes under the general title of the *Kabir Sagar*.¹¹ Most of these texts seem to date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Several of them recount various Kabir legends. Particularly important in this regard is the *Kabir-charitra-bodh*, a work in mixed prose and verse (including many of Garib-das's verses) that may in fact have been written by Yugalananda himself in about the early 1930s [P. D. Barthwal 1978:281]. A quite popular work collected in the *Kabir Sagar* that contain versions of several of the Kabir legends (unfortunately mostly legends about Kabir's previous lives) is the *Anurag Sagar* [Yugalananda 1953: vol. 2]. This text has been recently translated into English [*Anurag Sagar* 1984].

Most of the works collected in the *Kabir Sagar* are texts of the Dharmadasi branch of the Kabir Panth. Their versions of the Kabir legends generally closely follow those of the *Kabir Manshur* and Brahma-linamuni's *Sadguru-shrikavira-charitam*, two texts that I do discuss

10. Paramananda-das's work has two versions, one long and one short, both of which have been translated into Hindi. In this book I will use the short version translation unless otherwise indicated. The short version translation [1956] is by Sudhadasaji Saheb "Sukavi." The long version translation [1984] is by Madhavacharyya.

11. This collection seems to have been first published in the early 1930s. Some of the texts included in it are summarized in K. N. Dvivedi [1965], P. D. Barthwal [1978], F. E. Keay [1931], and G. H. Wescott [1953]. See also U. Thukral [1979].

in some detail. The same may be said about two other Dharmadasi texts, the *Kabir Kasauti* (A.D. 1885) of Laihana Simha alias Haridas [1962]¹² and *shri* Tapasvi's [1976] *Satya Prakash Satik*. Similarly, Ramananda-das's [1974] *Shri Sadguru Kabir*, a work of the Kabir Chaura branch of the Kabir Panth, contains versions of the legends that do not significantly differ from those found in Gangasharan Shastri's [1976] *Kabir Jivanacharitra*. An interesting but somewhat anomalous life of Kabir from the smaller Jagu-das branch of the Kabir Panth, Shankar-das's *Shri Kabir Charitamrit* [1955], will be discussed only in passing. This verse text claims, rather dubiously, to be based in part on a lost manuscript of *shri* Hamsa Sahab copied in V. S. 1582 (A.D. 1525).

12. The introduction to this work claims that it was written in the year 1942, evidently of the Vikrama era [= A.D. 1885]. M. A. Macauliffe [1963: vol. 6, p. 123], in a work first published in 1909, refers to the "*Kabir Kasauti* of the late Lahina Singh of Panjor in the Patiala State." G. H. Wescott [1953: 3], in a work first published in 1907, mentions "a Hindi pamphlet entitled *Kabir Kasauti* published at Bombay in 1885," which was "the joint production of five members of the Kabir Panth." The legend about Kabir that Westcott seems to attribute to this *Kabir Kasauti* does not occur in the 1962 edition.