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## The 'Callewaert Collection'

Winand M. Callewaert

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### The Prehistory

It is a very agreeable privilege to be allowed to give this introductory paper to the 14th 'Bhakti Conference'. For me it remains the Bhakti Conference, after number one in Leuven in 1979. At that time there was no network for communication with scholars, and all communication was via blue aerogramme letters that took weeks to go around the globe. My paper deals with the prehistory of bhakti studies from the 1970s onwards. Those were the days of my great examples, the Hindi scholars Śyāmsundar Dās, Paraśurām Caturvedī, Pārasnāth Tivārī, Mātāprasād Gupta, to name only a few. In those days the study of bhakti literature in North India between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries was often the research hobby of scholars who were academically engaged in the study of Sanskrit or modern Hindi. I have been very lucky in meeting many great and kind people, but one of the great gifts in my life is my meeting with Father Camille Bulcke S. J. in Ranchi in 1965. He directed me in my study of Hindi and Sanskrit. In addition to all his publications he was then working at his English–Hindi Dictionary. One day he advised me: 'Winand, never start work on a dictionary, it is too hard!' In 1996 I started the Bhakti Dictionary.

By 1971 I had spent seven years studying in three Indian universities and came back to my hometown Leuven in Belgium. For one year I went then to Paris to attend the classes of Professor Charlotte Vaudeville at the Sorbonne. She was born in 1918 and died in 2006, after an adventurous and splendid career of great scholarship. I owe her very much. One day she told me: 'Winand, if you want to do something worthwhile with your research career, go to Rajasthan, look for Dādūpanthī



**Figure 15.1** I took this photograph on the occasion of the ‘annual airing’ of the manuscripts in the Vidya Bhushan Sangrah, Rajasthan Oriental Institute, Jaipur branch, in 1973. In the month of May everything was exposed to the dry air and then stored again till the next dry season. © W. M. Callewaert.

manuscripts, copy and edit the texts, and make a translation. And while you do that, look also for other manuscripts.’

How do you find manuscripts in remote temples and collections in Rajasthan, in the seventies of the previous century? Very simple: drink tea, drink tea, and drink tea. The result of my travelling all over India and drinking tea for so many years is now a databank of 15,000 exposures, digitized with a grant from the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, with the scholarly and very devoted help of its senior research fellow Dr. Jaroslav Strnad. In that databank of 15,000 scans, called the ‘Callewaert Collection’, a copy is preserved of 94 manuscripts, copied in 15 different places (in India and in London) over a period of 15 years. These 15,000 digitized pages amount to about 150 Gigabytes! Not a few of these manuscripts have now disappeared or are in a hopeless condition or are no longer accessible.



Figure 15.2 I saw thousands of manuscripts, some of them in a pitiful condition. © W. M. Callewaert.



Figure 15.3 Only the first folios of this manuscript of 1636 ce were brittle. The remaining 133 scans illustrate how the first manuscripts were written. © W. M. Callewaert.

I am very grateful to the Osaka Bhakti Conference for allowing me to discuss in more detail what is available in this databank. I also want to turn to the future. Even today, everywhere in India, hundreds of manuscripts disappear through decay or neglect or because business people use the old paper to produce copies of old paintings painted by modern young artists. In the field of bhakti literature many treasures are waiting for the brave adventurer who is ready to drink tea, and drink tea, and negotiate.

Let me conclude this introduction with a quote from a great contributor to my research in the early 1970s. His name is Bahuraji (Gopāl Nārāyaṇ Bahurā), the then librarian of the City Palace Library in Jaipur. I gladly share his quote which was a continual source of encouragement to me: ‘Winand Saheb, if all the manuscripts of only the City Palace Library in Jaipur are published one day, the history of Sanskrit and Hindi literature will be totally changed.’

During my first tour in search of manuscripts in 1973, I was equipped with a 35 mm Olympus camera and thirty boxes with 25 metres of film. I cut up the films to fit in a cartridge of thirty-six exposures and, when I had located the manuscripts, I copied them (Figure 15.4). In the evening I darkened the bathroom of the tourist bungalow where I stayed and developed the films to make sure I had the texts safely on film. Prehistory and archaeology for many of you. But fortunately, these films were still good enough to be scanned, nearly fifty years later. Around 1980 I was given a grant for a special equipment for my Olympus camera and with that equipment I could fit a film for 250 exposures.

One day in 1973 I went to Kuchaman City, by train from Jaipur. I slept on a bench in the station and in the morning I walked to the temple of Svāmī Maṅgaldās. He was a Nirañjanī sadhu, but an expert on Dādūpanthī manuscripts. I had with me a long list of more than fifty *bhagats*, Dādūpanthī and others, and I wanted to know where I could find the manuscripts. Just from memory, Maṅgaldās jī told me what their works were and where I might find the manuscripts. I was young and strong and ascetic, but around noontime I asked if perhaps he wanted a cup of tea. In fact, I wanted to eat. But Svāmī jī replied: ‘*Nahīm, thīk hai*’, and he went on dictating till 4 p.m. In 1981 I came again to Kuchaman City, and I wept on his *samādhi*. Later I learnt that Svāmī Maṅgaldās had come to Jaipur to study Ayurveda with Svāmī Lakṣmīrām Dādūpanthī. In 1939 (still British India and under the Maharaja of Jaipur), the Dādū Mahā Vidyālay had started in Jaipur and Svāmī Maṅgaldās offered his services ‘for two years’, but he stayed there for a long time as he had a very good relation with



**Figure 15.4** Around 1980 I was given a grant for a special equipment for my Olympus camera and with that equipment I could fit a film for 250 exposures. © W. M. Callewaert.

the Dādūpanthī.<sup>1</sup> He resigned from both the Dādū Mahā Vidyālay and the Dādū Mahāsabhā in 1966 and went to live in Kuchaman City.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, all the books of Svāmī Maṅgaldās were moved after his death from Kuchaman City and may now be in a Nirañjanī establishment in Navalgarh.

Another similar ascetic scholar from my early days was the Dādūpanthī Svāmī Nārayandās of Ajmer, a very gentle person and prolific writer. He too gave, just from memory, all the information I wanted.

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- 1 B. K. Siṅghal (personal communication) pointed to a tension building up between the svāmī and the Dādū Mahāsabhā, the governing body of the Dādūpanthī, since the publication of his *Mahārāj Haridās ji kī vāṇī*, in which he proved that Haridās was earlier than Dādū (Maṅgaldās 1931).
  - 2 For details of the conflict of the svāmī with the Dādū Mahāsabhā, see Horstmann 2019.

For several years I spent many pleasant days with the Brahman collector Ram Kripalu Sharma in Jaipur. I was one of the first students who was allowed to copy from his immense collection. The last time I was there, I remember, he had more than 60,000 manuscripts.

## Manuscripts of the Sikh Tradition

In 1983, after years of negotiation and with the help of the beloved great Sikh scholar Prītam Singh of Patiala, I received permission to copy the complete volume of the unique Banno manuscript of the *Gurū granth sāhib*, preserved in the Gurdvara in Kanpur.

The problem in Kanpur was that in the shrine on the ground floor where the *Gurū granth sāhib* was kept, there was not enough light for my camera. Again, drinking tea, drinking tea, and drinking tea. Eventually, after long discussions, the custodians agreed to take the sacred volume to the rooftop, in a very ceremonious procession. On the rooftop it appeared that my tripod (in fact a quadruped) was not high enough to stand on top of the *Granth* and I had to copy the 1,430 pages with my camera in my hands. Bending, shooting, standing straight for the next page, 1,430 times. At the end of the day, I had developed a firm belief in the positive results of good *karma*. Or at least the hope for it.

The Banno manuscript is very important for a textual study of the *Gurū granth sāhib*, a study which is very delicate. What also makes this Banno manuscript of Kanpur special is the fact that there is in it one *pad* by Mīrā. How did the Kṛṣṇa *bhakta* Mīrā enter that manuscript of the *Gurū granth sāhib*? Prof. Prītam Singh gave a paper on the Banno manuscript and this *pad* in it at the Bonn Bhakti Conference in 1982 (Singh 1983: 326).<sup>3</sup>

And now comes a sad story. In the spring of 1984, after many cups of tea, I was given permission to copy the oldest manuscripts of the *Gurū granth sāhib* that were preserved in the Pothikhānā of the Har Mandir, the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

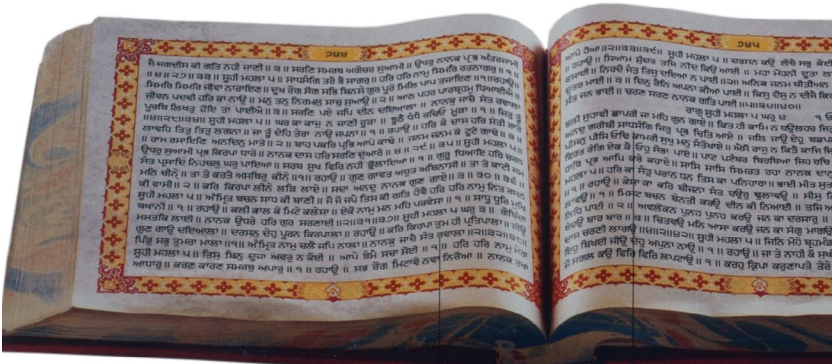
Negotiations were completed and I decided to return home, planning to do the copying of the precious manuscripts in the fall of 1984. But, in June 1984 came the Blue Star Operation of Indira Gandhi and the bombing of the Temple in Amritsar and the destruction of many manuscripts. An attack on the very soul of Sikhism, of course. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Blue\\_Star](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Blue_Star), accessed 9 February

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3 I have published this *pad* in Callewaert 2013: 104–19 (“The “Earliest” Pad of Mīrā (1503–1546)”).



**Figure 15.5** What you see here is of course a printed copy of the Guru Granth Saheb, but it gives you an idea of the size of a volume. Exactly 1,430 pages!  
© W. M. Callewaert.



**Figure 15.6** The first complete copy of the Guru Granth Saheb was scribed as early as 1604. © W. M. Callewaert.

2025. I do not dare to think what turn my career would have taken if in the spring of 1984 I had copied the manuscripts in the Pothikhānā of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, instead of going home.

## Fabulous Memories and Patient Scribes

This is enough about my recollection of the hard but wonderful time I spent searching for manuscripts, and about the text editions and translations of original texts, by me and others, with the motto: ‘Let the editor say what is in the text and let the commentator say what there might be.’ I should now like to introduce you to some precious gems of manuscripts in the ‘Callewaert collection’<sup>4</sup> and present a challenge to young scholars, with the following question, a question that perhaps can be answered looking at all the material in this databank: How did scribes after 1600 CE produce the beautiful texts we can still admire today? How did they do it? Only copying or only from memory, or both?

In quite a few manuscripts we find hundreds of pages, with the number of lines on each page exactly the same from the beginning till the end and nearly the same number of letters in each line. How did scribes do it? The question is: were the manuscripts that were scribed around 1600 in the Dādūpanth produced from memory or from one manuscript or several manuscripts lying in front of the scribe?<sup>5</sup>

Often, I have tried to visualize this scene: shortly after the death of Dādū, in 1603, around the end of emperor Akbar’s life, in the pleasant temperature of the month of October in Jaipur, a Dādūpanthī sadhu is sitting on the floor of a simple residence. He is thirty-seven years old, and has spent his youth listening to travelling singers, and especially to his master Dādū. This young man has a fabulous memory and whatever he hears is stored in that memory. The manuscripts in the ‘Callewaert Collection’ give plenty of material to tackle this intriguing problem: how were the huge compilations created and written down? Scribing the manuscripts is one thing, but how did the collections slowly get their shape?

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4 With Jaroslav Strnad and Biljana Zrnić we completed a detailed list of contents of all these digitized manuscripts (15,000 pages). The scans and the Indexes are now available on the website of the Oriental Institute of the Academy of Sciences, Prague, the beautiful capital of the Czech Republic: [https://hindi-manuscripts.orient.cas.cz/OLD%20HINDI%20MANUSCRIPTS\\_1/](https://hindi-manuscripts.orient.cas.cz/OLD%20HINDI%20MANUSCRIPTS_1/).

5 For the following thoughts on the problem of oral vs. written transmission of texts, I draw on Callewaert 2013.



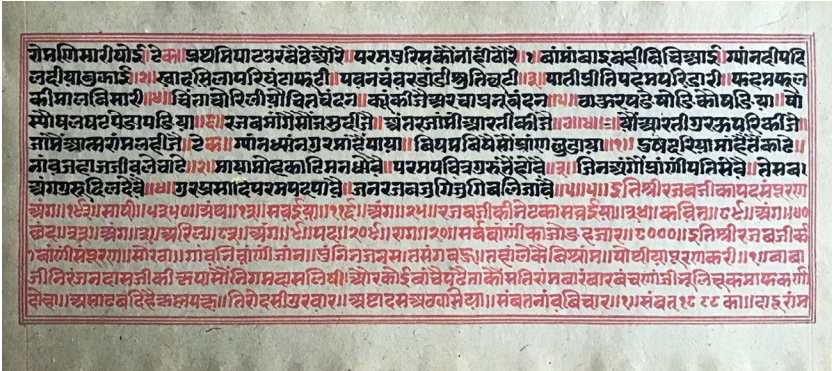


Figure 15.7 From the early 17<sup>th</sup> c. CE onwards even red ink was used for the numbers and titles. This manuscript is dated 1753 CE. © W. M. Callewaert.

Let us imagine we are travelling through northwest India in 1550, around the beginning of Akbar's reign. We walk on bumpy roads after the rainy season, from Banaras to Vrindavan, or on sandy tracks in Rajasthan. We spend the nights on the floor in temples, and we watch the audiences drawn by travelling singers singing songs of bhakti. These singers, like the puranic bards, received extended hospitality depending on the quality and depth of their performance. They may not have belonged to a particular *sampradāy* and they sang what appealed most to local feelings. We are on the way to Rajasthan after a visit to Banaras, where a few years earlier Raidās had died, and where the oldest member in the family of singers had heard *about* a person called Kabīr.

The singers sang the songs which were most in demand, such as those of Nāmdev and Kabīr, which they had learned from their fathers. But these singers too were artists and inspired by a particular environment, and they added new, sometimes their own, songs to the repertoire. Memory was the only way of recording for these singers, and as the repertoires grew bigger and bigger, some musicians started to keep little (or big) notebooks as an aid to their memory. The earliest manuscripts I have seen and copied may have had these notebooks as their basis.

Travelling singers knew no borders. They easily walked from the kingdoms in and around Banaras through the Mughal territories to the princely states in Rajasthan, or from the Maratha country to the Punjab. With amazing ease they moved from one language to another, using a super-regional medium, while at the same time picking up local idioms and words in an effort to adjust to local audiences. This

practice is responsible for the chaos of variants which we find in the manuscripts.

## A Masterpiece of Dādūpanthī Scribing: The *Pañcavāṇī*

With this in mind let me look at a few masterpieces of Dādūpanthī scribing after 1600 CE. We know that travelling singers classified the *paḍs* of their performance according to the *rāg*. Scribes kept that *rāg*-label when they brought together hundreds of *paḍs* in one volume. One of the earliest, *rāg*-oriented collections made in the Dādūpanthī in Rajasthan is the *Pañcavāṇī*, ‘Songs of the Five’. These five *bhaktas*, highly respected in the early Dādūpanthī, are: Dādū (1544–1603), Kabīr (c.1398–1448), Nāmdev (c.1270–1350), Raidās (c.1450–1520), and Hardās (floruit c.mid-sixteenth century). Such a *Pañcavāṇī* collection has more than 1,000 *paḍs*. Later, several compilers wrote the huge collection on paper and it became known as the *Pañcavāṇī*.

Scores of manuscripts with *different versions* of the *Pañcavāṇī* are even today found in manuscript collections in Rajasthan, Punjab, and Banaras. I have copied several of them and they are now in this ‘Callewaert Collection’. It is not only the enormous size of the *Pañcavāṇī*, at first definitely only available in the memory of singers, that makes it an amazing creation. What amazes us even more is the fact that different singers, possibly in different places, had memorized the five repertoires. We do not have one *Pañcavāṇī* recension, but several, each one relying on a different oral tradition – each one different in size and in the order of the *paḍs*.

Kabīr scholars like Pārasnāth Tivārī thought that the numerous *Pañcavāṇī* manuscripts found in Rajasthan all go back to a single, scribal archetype, compiled by one of the learned disciples of Dādū. He thought that this archetype served as the basis for all later copies of the *Pañcavāṇī*. Such an idyllic thought must be given up. The *Pañcavāṇī* manuscripts now at hand do not go back to one archetype or to one single compiler. There must have been several *Pañcavāṇī* compilers, each working separately either from existing manuscripts – which I doubt – or in direct contact with the oral tradition.

A critical analysis of the *Pañcavāṇī* manuscripts takes the researcher much further into the period of oral transmission than was possible, for example, for S. S. Dās, who published his study in 1928, or Pārasnāth Tivārī who published his in 1962. All this is explained at length in the study of Nāmdev which I made with my good friend and great scholar from Jaipur, Mukund Lath (Callewaert and Lath 1989).

## Some More Masterpieces: *Sarvāṅgī* and *Guṇagañjanāmā*

Besides the *Pañcavāṇī* there are three vast anthologies created in the early Dādūpanth that deserve a special study:

- 1) the *Sarvāṅgī* created by Dādū's disciple Rajab, with 88 identified *bhaktas* quoted in 144 *aṅgs* or thematic chapters (Callewaert 1978);
- 2) the *Sarvāṅgī* created by the Dādūpanthī Gopāldās, with 138 identified *bhaktas*, quoted in 126 *aṅgs* (Callewaert 1993); and, finally,
- 3) the *Guṇagañjanāmā* by Dādū's disciple Jagannāth, with 179 *aṅgs* (Sirñhal 2021).

The amazing phenomenon is the fact that the *pads*, *sākhīs*, and *ślokas* collected in these anthologies are classified according to themes, in *aṅgs*. In the Callewaert Collection you will find three manuscripts with the *Sarvāṅgī* of Rajab and one manuscript with Gopāldās's *Sarvāṅgī*. There is one manuscript with the *Guṇagañjanāmā* (and one manuscript with a short version of that text).<sup>6</sup>

When in 1973 I discovered the huge manuscript with the *Sarvāṅgī* of Gopāldās, I was overwhelmed by its size: 364 folios, that is, 728 pages – in the computer 1.6 Megabytes, or half the size of the *Gurū granth sāhib*. Only after the entire text had been input into the computer could I grasp the importance of this document. I found 1,670 *pads* of 138 identified *bhaktas*. Of Kabīr, only the compiler Gopāldās quoted 360 *pads*; of Dādū, 403 *pads*, and so on. It has taken me years to rid myself of the notion that Gopāldās or Rajab compiled their *Sarvāṅgī* from existing manuscripts lying on the floor in front of them.<sup>7</sup> It was hard to imagine that without manuscripts a person could produce, from memory, such a wonderful selection of *pads* and *sākhīs* of so many *bhaktas* and that he could classify them according to theme, in 144 *aṅgs*. That man must have spent many days listening to performances of singers and storing all that literature in his extraordinary memory. In my young days I have witnessed several such extraordinary memories during my travels in India.

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6 For Callewaert 1978 and 1993, see also <https://kuleuven.academia.edu/WinandCallewaert>, accessed 9 February 2025.

7 Horstmann (2021: 54, note 94), however, points out that besides relying on his memory, Gopāldās also used manuscript sources.

But I keep wondering: how did the compiler bring the *pads* or *sākhīs* together according to theme? Was there a particular word that connected two *pads*, a particular mnemotechnical device?

## Intentional Changes

All this is very exciting, but what is the real reason why we look for manuscripts, why we look for the earliest manuscripts, and, if possible, why we try to reconstruct the autograph, that is, the very first manuscript? The reason is very simple: scribes made mistakes when they wrote down from memory or when they copied a manuscript. Some mistakes were not accidental, because the scribe changed a word or half a line thinking he knew better, or because a particular idea had become controversial. Some mistakes were not intentional, because the scribe felt drowsy or simply because he could not read the letters of his original, or his memory failed him. Another unintentional mistake of a scribe was the fact that he skipped a line, by mistake. For that reason, we know, every page of the 1430 pages of the *Gurū granth sāhib* and every line in that huge text has to start and end with the letter as it is seen in the original.

I should like to refer to one example of a text with intentional changes, a text that was much tampered with within one generation after the original was created: the *Biography of Dādū*, the *Dādū/janma-līlā*. It was very necessary to search for the earliest manuscripts of this text as I had noticed that in a later set of manuscripts the text was enlarged and that in those later manuscripts the life of Dādū had become very miraculous (Callewaert 1988).

There is another reason why we should look at the manuscripts and search for the very earliest manuscripts. If the Rajput princess Mīrābāī died at the age of 43, possibly in 1546, it is remarkable that at the beginning of the twenty-first century there should be as many as 5,200 *bhajans* with her name attached. It has become commonplace in studies about Mīrābāī that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to decide which and how many songs are most probably by Mīrā. And yet, ever expanding collections go on appearing. In some editions the question of authenticity is solved on the basis of content, in others on the basis of language. Rarely do scholars bother to look at the manuscript material. It remains a mystery for me why the written tradition, in the case of Mīrā, seems to have started so late, around 1800 CE. Very late indeed when compared with the spate of manuscripts with bhakti literature in Rajasthan or the Braj area from 1600 CE onwards. Some

argue that sadhus did not like to write *pads* created by a lady and that female scribes did not exist in the early days.

So, when Charlotte Vaudeville in 1971 in Paris told me to look for manuscripts, I had a very clear plan: I would go to Rajasthan, drink tea, and copy manuscripts; I would reproduce the archetype and prepare a critical edition on the basis of scribal mistakes. I discovered I was partly wrong with this plan when in the 1980s I worked on Nāmdev with Mukund Lath, who introduced me to the exciting world of the *geya-vikāra* or the changes brought about by singers (Callewaert and Lath 1989).

## Some More Impressive Manuscripts

In Film 42 of the Callewaert Collection we find a huge manuscript bearing two colophons, one of 1615 CE and the other of 1622 CE, from the Rām Kṛpālu Śarmā collection (the Sharma manuscript) in Jaipur (Strnad 2016; Horstmann 2021b: 40–51). It has 671 folios, with folios 21–54 and an unknown number of folios at the end missing in the scans. It is not only the earliest *Pañcavāṇī* manuscript known to me, it is also an encouragement to go on searching for manuscripts and to use them for new critical editions.

I should like to point out an interesting feature in this Sharma manuscript: of the 370 *pads* of Kabīr quoted in this early *Pañcavāṇī* manuscript, three *pads* are not found in any other manuscript source which I used for my critical edition of Kabīr (Callewaert 2000). The Sharma manuscript is the earliest manuscript found so far, but three *pads* are not found in later manuscripts (129/231 and 331 in Callewaert 2000). How do we explain that? It is also interesting to note that in this old manuscript of 1615/1622 CE less *sākhīs* of Kabīr are given than in the Mātā Prasād Gupta edition; the oldest manuscript which Gupta consulted was dated 1658 CE. The later Mātā Prasād Gupta manuscript gives more *sākhīs* than the earlier Sharma manuscript. That is of course more understandable.

Besides the *Pañcavāṇī* texts (the *Vāṇīs* of the Five), there are more than 100 *bhaktas* quoted in this Sharma manuscript. If anyone still clings to the *saguṇa–nirguṇa* distinction, I am happy to announce that in this manuscript we also find 141 *pads* of Sūrdās, and many of Nānak (on scans 154–9), of Kājī Mahmūd, and of others. The *pads* of Sūrdās have, with great expertise, been studied by Dr. Biljana Zrnic. Sūrdās is also found in Film 12 and Film 18 of the Callewaert Collection and it would be interesting to look at the context of these manuscripts. Dr. Zrnic has also discovered eighty *pads* by Sūrdās in Film No. 2 (scans 157–67,

folios 430b–5b). That manuscript is dated 1676 CE. In Film 15, too, of Amritsar, we find *pads* by Sūrdās, among all the so-called *nirguṇa* texts.

## Kabīr

When around 1420 the Muslim Kabīr sang his songs in Banaras, nobody could imagine that in the twenty-first century he would be the most frequently quoted bhakti saint in North-India, having an equal only in Tulsīdās. Even South Indians pride themselves in having memorized some of his lines. In the beginning of the twentieth century Rabindranath Tagore translated 100 of his songs and made Kabīr known all over the world. Having now prepared a critical edition of the *pads* of Kabīr, based on the earliest available manuscript material, I am convinced that hardly any of those *pads* translated by Tagore were ever composed by Kabīr.

When more than 30 years ago Bahadur Singh of Hamburg recorded about 500 songs of Kabīr, then commonly sung during performances by travelling singers in Rajasthan, he noted that hardly any of these were found in the earliest manuscripts which I studied. David Lorenzen, specialist of the Kabīrpanth and its literature, made a survey of the twenty most popular songs of Kabīr in the Kabīrpanth: hardly any of these is found in the earliest manuscripts (Lorenzen 1996: 205–23).

I can understand and appreciate that a translator of Kabīr may look for a nice song without bothering about its authenticity. All right, beautiful and enjoyable work. But let us not start writing commentaries on Kabīr and on fifteenth-century Banaras quoting those songs.

Interaction in the oral tradition and corruption in the scribal tradition act like fog and pollution, creating an environment in which it becomes very difficult to find the original version of the songs of the fifteenth to seventeenth century *bhaktas*. Five hundred years after Kabīr was born in Banaras and after at least 100 years of scholarship, do we have any certainty that the songs attributed to him and published in critical and uncritical editions and translations, are by Kabīr? I doubt it more and more. Between Kabīr and our computer age lie 150 years of oral transmission (which never stopped) and nearly 400 years of scribal transmission. We have no oral recordings of Kabīr scolding his audiences, and I take it for granted that he did not write down his compositions. What we have are manuscripts in which his popular repertoire was written down, first by travelling singers and later in a more respectful and professional and organized manner, by devoted scribes. But what do we have of Kabīr in those repertoires?

This question can be raised for many *bhaktas* of the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries.

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