Translating *Bhakti* : Versions of Kabir in Colonial/Early Nationalist Period

AKSHAYA KUMAR

I

Right from pre-independent nationalist period to the post-national globalized era, Kabir's poetry in English translation has appeared with such an uncanny regularity that today the translated Kabir rivals with, if not outgrows, the so-called 'original'[1] in terms of its discourse value. The saint-poet seems to survive more in the alien tongue than perhaps in his 'original one' as with each new translation he bounces back as a poet resurrected all over again. Multiple translations of Kabir have not only taken the poet beyond the frontiers of his native domain to the global market, but have also ensured him an 'after-life'[2] that borders on immortality. What are the cultural imperatives that lend such a rich and resounding posterity to Kabir in his English incarnation? What is it that compels the translators, Indian as well as foreign, to re-write Kabir in or against the shifting cultural contexts? The paper restricts itself to the comparative study of multiple translations of Kabir in English that took place during the colonial/early nationalist period[3] with special emphasis on exploring the cultural politics and poetics that each translation is inevitably implicated in.

Before Kabir was translated into English, he was translated into Italian outside the official Oriental project[4] by missionaries who found his popularity particularly in the northern parts of India too conspicuous to be left unaddressed. What prompted them all the more was their assessment that his teachings were closer to Christianity in terms of their reformatory rhetoric. Thus, though the *desi* Kabir was not the chosen official subject of the *margi* Orientalists, yet his translation into European languages begins as early as the latter half of eighteenth century—a period hardly explored in the making of modern Hinduism[5]—when an Italian Capuchin friar Marco Della Tomba[6] undertook the translation of two important texts – the *Mulapanji* and the *Jnansagar* – attributed to Kabirpanthis. David Lorenzen observes, though Marco's translations are 'accurate', yet he seems to lend a 'decidedly Christian twist to the translation'.[7] For instance, as Lorenzen cites, *mukti* a highly culture-specific terms has been translated as *gloria permanente* — an expression, patently Christian.

II

The early English translations of Kabir, in a way, begin by default. While introducing the credo of Kabirpanthis, HH. Wilson cites hundred *sakhis*, two *ramainis* (no.1 and 6) and two *shabads* (no.56 and 69) of Kabir in his *A Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus*[8] in 1861. The obvious intent is to illustrate and exemplify. He writes, 'The *Sakhis of Kabir* deserve perhaps a more copious exemplification.' (82), and that 'one hundred will be sufficient as a specimen of the whole' (83). The translated *sakhis* are presented more as prose-sayings than rhythmic poetical utterances. A patently matter-of-fact tone knocks out the inherent musical strengths of the sayings of the wandering *bhakti* saint. For instance in the translated *sakhi* – 'The offspring of the five elements is called man; if one element be withdrawn, the whole compound is destroyed' (22, 83) – Wilson reduces the *bhakti*-wisdom into a mechanical statement with scant regard for the aesthetics of *bhakti* iconoclasm. At times the paradoxical textuality of Kabir's *sakhis* is rendered in terms which are plainly moralistic: 'Put a check upon the tongue; speak not

*Department of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

much; associate with the wise; investigate the words of the teacher' (75, 88). The expression is not only formal but rather circumlocutory too. Instead of 'Put a check upon the tongue' a blunt and colloquial expression such as 'Shut your mouth' or quite simply 'Hold your tongue' would have lent a more forthright opening to the translated *sakhis*. The dramatic violence built in the far-fetched yet homespun and striking conceits of Kabir is articulated in a cold-blooded tension-less expression such as this: 'In the concavity of the mirror the image is formed: the dog seeing this likeness barks at it till he dies' (83, 89). The expression is no doubt modern and has thankfully no hangovers of the medieval archaisms, but it is not informal and direct. If one were to invoke famous French structuralist Roland Barthes, the translated expression of Wilson is more 'authorly' than 'writerly', it is more an expression of 'representation' than 'enfiguration'.[9] Wilson fails to register the dialogic dynamics of Kabir's utterances.

III

For quite a long period during the early colonial period, Kabir is translated more as one of the poets of Sikh holy text *Adi Granth*, rather than as an independent poet in his own right. Dr Ernst Trumpp (1828-1885) translates some of the songs of Kabir as part of his translation of *Adi Granth* in 1877. Trumpp—a German[10] professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Munich—undertakes the translation in a 'literal grammatical way'[11] using expression which is admittedly 'unidiomatic' in the hope that such an endeavour would yield a

'translation which should be of any scientific value' (vii). The very purpose of the being scientific in translation itself in a way forbids the translator from being creative and inventive enough within the thematic and structural grids of the original text. No wonder, the holy text is translated with the least empathy of a believer.

Kabir is translated quite literally and mechanically, to the extent that 'the original syntax' with all its punctuations, coordinates and sequence is retained rather fastidiously. The translator does not evince confidence to dovetail propositions that are conditional, contradictory or complementary; instead he separates them halfway by the strong *caesura*. For instance he would write, 'Kabir is the barking dog, he runs after a carcass' (683, 209) instead of 'Kabir is a barking dog that runs after carcass'. Similarly in this utterance, 'sow such a seed, that is bearing fruit during the whole year!' (684, 229), a single complex sentence would have been laconic: 'sow a seed that bears fruit throughout'. Sometimes this incapability of the translator to club clauses causes confusion: 'Kabir (says): at which gate the comers and goers nobody stops:/ How should that gate, which is such a gate, be given up?'

The frequent use of the conjunction 'and' in contexts that are so concomitant unnecessarily prolongs the final message. The use of 'and', for instance in this expression—'Like as ripe fruits of a tree fall to the ground and do not stick back to the branch' (672, 30)—could been totally dispensed away with in favour of a much more continuous and cohesive structure like this: 'Like as ripe fruits fallen,

never return to their branch.' Trumpp employs parenthesis quite often to complete the syntax, otherwise left incomplete in original Kabir's structures. 'By coming in contact with it (people) have become most excellent, (like), the scentless iron (and) wood (is made fragrant by contact with sandal wood)' (675, 77). There is an anxiety to use full grammatical structures, providing even utterly dispensable connectives which are otherwise so well-anticipated or understood.

Rather rarely does Trumpp replace the literal with the idiomatic. He would retain 'idols of clay' (674, 64), instead of the idiomatic 'puppets of clay' (288, 64); 'bones wrapt in a skin' (672, 37) instead of the colloquial 'bones in a bag of skin'; 'juice of the name' instead of the more *bhakti*-specific usage 'the nectar of His name'; a literal expression like 'I remain in the wave of the lotus-foot at the end and at the beginning' (677, 120) could have been translated idiomatically thus: 'I bask for ever in the joy of God's lotus feet' (297, 120).

Instead of the active, Trumpp prefers to use the passive voice, toning down in the process the immediacy and the activist tenor of the saint-poetry. Instead of 'saints eat the butter', the translated expression is 'By the saints the butter is eaten' (672, 19); instead of 'bones burn like wood, and hair like grass', we have 'bones are burnt like wood, the hair is burnt like grass' (762, 36); instead of 'keep in mind', the chosen expression is 'this is to be kept in mind' (673, 44); 'fisherman castes his net' is passivized thus: 'a net is laid out by the fisherman' (673, 49).

The purpose of Trumpp's translation was not to set an example of creative translation but to make

Adi Granth known[12] — to make a text known was indeed one of the major concerns of nineteenth century translators[13]. The enterprise is purely intellectual as the translator does not evince the requisite empathy with the sayings of the holy text. Ostensibly he would ridicule Sikh Gurus and their sayings to denigrate Hinduism as a whole of which, he believed, Sikhism was an offshoot. Max Muller described Trumpp 'by no means a trustworthy translator'.[14] Though Kabir was not a part of the official oriental project, yet, significant aspect of Trumpp's project was that it was supported by 'Her Majesty's Government for India which in due consideration of the importance of the work planned its execution and defrayed its expenses' (viii).

IV

Max Arthur Macauliffe did another translation of *Adi Granth* in 1909 in which Kabir's verses were translated in a different vein altogether. There is an intentional 'political' shift as unlike Trumpp, he does not intend to portray Sikhism as a dwindling religion; rather his effort is to bring out the 'distinct' wisdom of Sikh Gurus and *bhakti* saints. He refers to the 'novel plan' of his translation according to which unlike most of the translations undertaken and accomplished under the Orientalist project, the present work is thrown open to native criticism and its possible approval. He goes on to enlist the support he received on the authenticity of his translation from Sikh clergy.

Macauliffe's plan suggests a subtle shift in colonial ways of negotiating/ appropriating the East. Whereas Trumpp would not miss an opportunity to run down or ridicule Sikh Gurus and *bhakti* saints, Macauliffe would rather appropriate Sikhism and native wisdom in terms which are overtly appreciative. Trumpp's effort was to underline that Sikhism (including Kabir) was a part of Hinduism; whereas Macauliffe championed the cause of Sikhism as separate from Hinduism and hence sought the support of native Sikh clergy. Though both the translators were sponsored by British colonial administrators, yet the shift in their stance marks the shift in the stance of colonial cultural policy. When Trumpp was commissioned to translate *Adi Granth* and to look at Sikh scriptures, he was given the specific task of proving that Sikh theology and cosmology were different from those of the Vedas and the Upanishads. But he found nothing in them to support this view. He found Nanak a 'thorough Hindu', his religion 'a pantheism, derived directly from Hindu sources.' Unsatisfied with Trumpp's assimilative pro-Hindu findings, Macauliffe, a minister of culture himself, undertook the charge of re-translating *Adi Granth* in terms of its distinctness from canonical Hindu texts. His effort was to create a cultural wedge between Hinduism and Sikhism.

Whereas in Trumpp's translation, there is no one 'God', in Macauliffe's translation, more often than not 'God' (or 'Lord') is the general term used for Hari, Vishnu, Rama and even Om. 'Maya' is translated various as 'worldly love' (279, sloka 8), 'the body' (281, 18), illusion etc. This is an obvious strategy of appropriation and assimilation.[15] The Hindu signifiers are translated in secular terms so that the Hindu forbearing of Sikhism could be played down or camouflaged. The attempt is to remove the cultural specific barriers and if it is not easily achievable through easy one-to-one trans-ference of secular lexicon, the translator would go for extended periphrasis. 'The whole world is dead' would be extended to 'The whole world is dead in *spiritual* ignorance' (288, 69). At times such an extension becomes rather explicatory and banal, 'I have seen and examined everything, and I find no one hath a friend' (295, 113). Similarly, instead of saying 'khichri is good food, in which there is nectar like-salt' (681, 188), he would use an extended expression 'an excellent dinner is khichari seasoned with sufficient salt to make it palatable' (307, 188). Instead of leaving the expression open-ended as 'the name of God as water', he would add 'to *extinguish it* (fire)' (143, Gauri, I). What is at times supplemented through the use of parenthesis in Trumpp's translation, is supple-mented through the use of italicized expression in Macaullife's.

Macauliffe tends to be explicit in his translation thereby pre-empting or minimizing the needs of exegetical support from Hindu sources, and making his translation self-evident and autotelic. The authorial extensions are made in the italics, pointing towards the translator's conscious attempt of being explicit and interpretative at the same time. Not only this tendency to extend the phrase forecloses the semantic possibilities, it tends to generate 'unwieldy periphrasis' (xxxi) of the pithy sayings. The enigma of the expression 'One day thou shall sleep stretched out at full length' is undone by the periphrastic addition of '*in the grave*' (298, 127). The uncanny succinctness of *bhakti*-poetry

has always been a challenge often unsuccessfully met by the English translator—foreign as much as native. To overcome the problem, he takes recourse to either long parenthesis or extensions through *italics*.

A very significant aspect of Macauliffe's explanatory additions is that they are selectively done as the translation targets the Sikh constituency mainly. Wherever longer explanations are required, Macauliffe would leave them un-explained or half-explained. For instance in hymn XVII (266), Kabir refers 'to twenty five categories' as worldly entrenchments, the translator would provide the canonical source namely Sankhya philosophy in the footnotes and then would hastily add, 'An enumeration of the categories here would not assist the Sikh student' (226).

Though Macauliffe's translation in its effort to combine the literal with the suggested tends to be explanatory and prosaic, yet at places it reveals his idiomatic and poetical prowess in definite measure: instead of ordinary expression 'the blow of spear is easy', he would rather employ more alliterative expression like this 'slight is the stroke of a lance' (306, 183). Though Macauliffe avoids archaisms, yet he would often use the outdated subjunctive mood (xxx) to retain the peculiar character of *bhakti* poetry. In *bhakti* poetry subjunctive mood is often used to engender some kind of literary deviance through the clever play of incompatible tenses in a single utterance.

Trumpp's English is least poetical or literary; by way of comparison Macauliffe has a greater control over diction. Trumpp's effort is at best a project of translation with no

empathy for the text being trans-lated; Macauliffe translation is not as empirical as the anxiety of native approval always bothers him.

V

Meanwhile Westoctt's book *Kabir and the Kabir Panth* [16] had come in 1907. From the point of view of translation, the book may not be very important as the writer quotes the saint-poet mostly through translations already available (Trumpp's translation of Kabir in *Adi Granth*, primarily), and occasionally through his own translations, yet being the first inde-pendent book in English on Kabir, it generated quite an interest in him, and could be taken as first important venture towards the inter-national-ization of the saint-poet. The Orient-alist hangover is clearly visible in Westcott's enterprise for Kabir is seen as Indian counterpart of European Martin Luther. In fact the book begins with a table that chronicles the rise of saint-reformers both in Hinduism and Christianity in close correspondence. [17] The syncretic character of Kabirpanth is acknowledged, but the underlying impulse is Christian. The very rhetoric of the question asked in the preface points towards the Christian bias of the writer: 'If Christ had been an Indian, would not his Gospel have been welcomed by many who now, refuse to listen?' (not paginated).

Westcott's translations are prosaic and at best can be described as of working nature only. More than the poetry, the emphasis is on its subject matter in terms of the secular approach of the saint-poet to issues pertaining to morality and meta-physics. Also very significantly, he divides different sayings of Kabir along thematic lines such as 'The

World and Religion', 'Religion in Life', 'The Way to God' etc.—a practice which was later on followed by Vaudville in her translations of the saint-poet. There is no attempt at versification, for the translated sayings are used for mere 'illustrations'. Unlike Trumpp and Macauliffe who stick to Kabir compiled in *Adi Granth*, Westcott goes beyond the printed Kabir, and collects 'oral' sayings from the field. He is actually 'guided by the judgement of Kabir Panthis' (45) as much as of his own in the selection of *sakhis* included in the book.

In terms of its special attributes as a text of translation, Westcott's endeavour has two distinct features —first, the cultural-specific terms are left untranslated, second, he gives an extended glossary of such terms towards the end of his book. The *desi* expressions are given extended treatment and their semantic nuances are explained in terms of their philosophical import. Kabir was past-master in employing words which have more than one meaning. While translating Kabir, Westcott does refer to the intended ambivalence of his couplets. Another peculiar feature of Westcott's book is that at times he would lift an equivalent Christian source or even a Sufi source, and would place it just after Kabir's *sakhi* to buttress his thesis that Kabir was as much an original thinker as a translator of 'old thoughts'.

VI

Tagore's translation [18] of Kabir's poems is the 'first major translation' of the saint-poet exclusively—a work which he accomplishes just three years after his world famous book of verses named *Gitanjali* appears in

England in 1912. It is major because it is the first exclusive endeavour of translating Kabir, more as a poet, than a mere religious reformer. It is also major in terms of its reception. Coming close on heels of Tagore's Nobel Prize fame it received an immediate international limelight. It has been reprinted many times over and by different publishers, both in India and abroad. No subsequent translation of Kabir has received so much attention. The purpose of Tagore's translations in general was to internationalize Kabir as well his own writings. Sukanta Chaudhuri, a well-known Tagore-scholar observes: 'Their surface [Tagore's translations] intent is to disseminate and institutionalize the poet's work abroad.'[19]

Enamoured as he was by Indian mysticism, Tagore asked his friend Kshitimohan Sen to compile Kabir's songs as they are actually sung by itinerant sadhus all over Northern India (especially in Bengal). Out of the four volumes compiled, Tagore eventually selects hundred songs of Kabir for his translation purposes. Unlike many later translations, Tagore uses the plain term 'poem' for any Kabir's verse, be it a *shabad*, a *ramaini* or a *sakhi*. Since the latter translators used written or printed texts as their source text(s), they naturally tend to be more fastidious about maintaining distinction of form; for Tagore, it is the unlettered 'oral' that constitutes the original. All subsequent translations rely singularly on the printed and the written. Tagore's fascination for the 'oral' over and above the written or the printed is very much evident as he quarrels with the publisher of a book of songs in Bangla thus: 'What we wanted was simple songs of genuine untutored hearts.'[20] Of

course these remarks are made with reference to his love for Baul songs, but they hold true for his fascination for the 'oral Kabir' too.

No wonder, later researchers and translators question the very authenticity of so-called Kabir's song translated by Tagore. Rev. Ahmad Shah who had just compiled Kabir's *Bijak* in 1911, and was in the process of completing its English translation when Tagore's translation came out, in his observations questioned the authorship of the songs translated by Tagore, right then. According to Shah, out of the hundred poems translated by Tagore, there are 'only five which in a mutilated form can be safely attributed to Kabir.'[21] Winand M Callewaert, a well-known Kabir scholar writes thus: 'Having now prepared a critical edition of the songs of Kabir, based on the earliest available manuscript material, it is my guess that hardly any of the Tagore songs was composed by Kabir.'[22] Further he writes: 'I can understand that a translator of Kabir may look for a nice song without bothering about its authenticity. But let us not start writing commentaries on Kabir and fifteenth century Banaras quoting those songs.'[23] Vaudeville, another Kabir scholar and translator has this to say on the authenticity of Kabir's songs in Tagore's collection: 'It was Tagore who suggested to his friend Kshit Mohan Sen the collection of the poems attributed to Kabir and sung by itinerant sadhus all over Northern India (especially in Bengal) and their translation into Bengali. The authenticity of these poems is very questionable; it appears that most of them were probably not composed by Kabir.'[24] As a translator, even of his own works, Tagore seems to have less regard for the original. In at least

26 cases of his translations of his own works, as Sukanta Chaudhuri informs us, 'no original has been found, though a line or phrase here and there might recall some Bengali poem.'[25]

In his selection of Kabir songs, Tagore reveals a conspicuous urge to choose those songs which are more mystical in content and message; the social side of Kabir is underplayed. What one encounters in the translations is an esoteric world where 'flame burns without lamp'; 'The lotus blossoms without a root' (LIII, 58) ; 'a strange tree, which stands without roots and bears fruits without blossoming' (XLVII, 53). Tagore's Kabir is more or less a *vedantin*, his *lok-dharmi* aspect is underplayed if not knocked out altogether. Here Linda Hess's observation is very pertinent: 'This Kabir is less caustic and more constantly ecstatic than the sharp-eyed observer of society who appears in older collections.'[26] Tagore's propensity for the mystical Kabir is understandable, both in terms of his own strong personal inclinations for the metaphysical, and in terms of the cultural imperatives of age in which he was writing.

The Infinite is so ubiquitously present in Tagore's translations that one wonders if Kabir at all had any grasp of the tangible and the concrete:

The infinite dwelling of the Infinite being is everywhere; in earth, water, sky, and air:

Firm as the thunderbolt, the seat of the seeker is established, above the void.

He who is within is without I see Him and none else. (LVI, 62)

The finite as the locus of *bhakti* stands thoroughly compromised, if not erased altogether. Consequently

Tagore's Kabir in translation, appears more as a refined and sophisticated Shankara, than a *desi* poet of the domain of the people. These are translations in what could be termed as 'pseudo-oriental'[27] mould.

Tagore's own foregrounding in the art of versification, his control over English diction and cadences present before us an image of Kabir as one who is a poet of impeccable classical make-up. The directness of speech, its rough and blunt edges—the qualities that stand out as typical Kabiresque hardly emerge in the translation. A reader of Romantic and Edwardian English poetry as Tagore was, he engenders a rare literary touch to otherwise earthy utterances of Kabir, almost compromising in the process the tone and tenor of his protest poetry. Vinay Dharwadkar would term it as 'opacity'[28] in style.

The remarkable aspect of Tagore's translation however is that it redeems Kabir from the alien biblical mould; it approaches him more as a poet of the classical style and stature than just a social reformer. Again by way of comparison, the translations of both Trumpp and Macauliffe were more in the nature of scholarly exercises; Tagore's endeavour is more poetic because it is a poet who translates another poet. Also unlike Trumpp and Macauliffe, Tagore is not attempting an encyclopaedia; he is only presenting those chosen verses of the saint-poet which enamour him most. Another distinct advantage that rests with Tagore's effort is that it comes from a *sahridya* insider, and not from the so-called 'objective' outsider. Tagore's Kabir is not a Martin Luther, but a wandering baul.

While reading Tagore's trans-lation, it becomes difficult to make out as to where Kabir ends and Tagore the poet, takes over. One can read a verse of Gitanjali and a translated song of Kabir simul-taneously as natural extensions of each other, without any sense of rupture or deviance of mood. Look at the first poem in Gitanjali[29]; in imagery, message and paradoxical strain, it is no different from a *sakhi* of Kabir:

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new . . .

The imagery of vessel being filled and emptied is conspicuously Kabiresque. Similarly a few songs of Kabir, particularly the ones trans-lated by Tagore, can easily be read as a poetic utterances of the poet Tagore himself. For instance poem no. XXX is so Tagore-like:

On this tree is a bird: it dances in the joy of life.

None knows where it is: and who knows what the burden of its music may be?

It is this poetic 'echo'[30] which the translations of Trumpp and Macauliffe fail to invoke. Kabir truly becomes the subject of poetic inspiration in case of Tagore, and not an object of scholarly debates.

Inspired translations run the risk of deviating from the so-called sacrosanct original. Tagore's own poetical propensities, it can be argued, tamper with the original text, but they nevertheless enrich and enhance the open-ended dynamism of Kabir. Kabir would continue to be translated for the simple reason that his verses provide enough room to the creative translator for improvizations. The open-endedness and the eternal flexibility of Kabir's verses pose a major challenge to scholar-trans-lators who want to contain the saint-poet in scholastic or reformatory frames; for the poet-translator's they however constitute the right stuff for ontological transformations. Tagore's Kabir, as pointed out early, may be inauthentic but he is at his poetical best.

VII

Two years after Tagore's much-celebrated translation, another translation of Kabir[31] by Rev. Ahmad Shah of Hamirpur (UP) appeared in 1917. The translation remained more or less obscure, except that sub-sequent translators, while making a claim for their respective trans-lations, referred to its 'poor'[32] quality of translation. The complex sub-jectivity of the translator of being an Indian Muslim converted to Christianity, however adds an intriguing dimension to his very enterprise of translation. It is intriguing because Kabir for his anti-sanskritic stance and raw nativity was never on the official agenda of pro-brahminical Orientalists – both native and the colonialist. It is well-known that the official Orientalists were only concerned with the canonical and the classical. Rev. Ahmad Shah's translation, however, is not only financially supported by then colonial government in UP, he is amply assisted by two English Christian missionaries – Rev. E. W. Ormerod and Rev. Canon B.H.P. Fisher—of the Cawnpore Brother-hood as well. Should it be seen as an attempt of appropriation of Kabir in Christianity in the wake of his

marginalization in *margi* Hinduism? Also should it be seen as the beginning of Orientalization of the native and the folk, along side that of the classical?

Interestingly enough, Ahmad Shah shows immense awareness of the body-snatching-game that was being played around the persona and poetry of Kabir. He would dismiss all attempts of his predecessors and contemporaries in projecting 'Kabir as Martin Luther' of Hinduism, or Kabir as a 'protestant' *bhakti* saint. In fact he does not approve of appropriation of Kabir in any canonical religion. His introductory remarks are very informative indeed:

'In modern India, organized attempts, such as that of the Brahma Samaj, to correct the abuses in Hinduism tend to be branded as disguised Christianity. It may be noted that an interesting, if unconvincing attempt to connect the Kabir Panth with the teaching of the Jesuits has been made by Pt. Walji Bhai of the Irish Presbyterian Church. It seems probable that a similar tendency caused Kabir in his own day to be called a Moslem; while the Moslems on the whole welcome his efforts, as a help in combating the idol worship of India, and acknowledged him as a Pir for his self-denying and pious life.'[33] (40)

His approach towards Kabir is refreshingly new and un-precedented. He would treat Kabir as an 'original' preacher-poet—a stance which till date any of the scholars of Kabir have failed to accept and acknowledge. From present day Dalit critic Dharmveer to Christian missionaries of the colonial period, Kabir has been placed in one religious discourse or the other, denying him autonomy of voice. Even in the introduction to Tagore's translation what is highlighted is not Kabir's individuality, but his capacity to 'fuse'[34] various strands of mysticism that run across various religions. Ahmad Shah, on the other hand, would underline the 'enormous influence (that) he [Kabir] exercised upon subsequent religious thinking' (37) and not the other way round. The agency is granted to Kabir instead to the various religions that supposedly shaped him.

Having advocated or asserted the 'originality' or 'agency' of Kabir, does Shah translate Kabir differently? In other words do Kabir's verses in English translation look different from, say, the messages of Bible or any other religious text? Despite the fact that Shah presumably translates Kabir not under any appropriating agenda, yet his translation has biblical tones in terms of its syntax, diction, tone and tenor. F.E. Keay, in his *Kabir and His Followers* quotes many passages from Kabir which bear similarity with biblical messages. And interestingly he deploys some of the verses translated by Ahmad Shah and also by Westcott for this purpose. While he does so, he makes a very pertinent comment on the limitations of translation, especially when the translator himself is foregrounded in the Bible, thus: 'With regard to such passages as these, it may be remarked that in translating them into English, a translator who is acquainted with the Bible tends to assimilate his language to the words of the Bible, and this often makes the connection seem closer than it really is.'[35] Unlike Tagore, neither Ahmad Shah is not a poet in his own right; nor does he reveal any understanding of contemporary English poetry anywhere. The Bible happens to be his only model.

As against Tagore's reliance on the 'oral' songs of Kabir, Shah's sources are written and printed. Also in comparison to Tagore's very sophisticated and poetical translations, Ahmad Shah's translation never intended to be literary, for its purposes were more or less religious. It tends to be prosaic and message-oriented. There is no attempt at precision as structures are retained literally without even experimenting with the given punctuation:— 'Renounce self and recite the name of Hari: efface defects from head to toe./ Have no fear of any creature: this is the essence of *sadhu*'s faith' (197, 138).

Unlike any other translation of Kabir, besides the customary preface, Shah's translation contains full five chapters dealing with life of Kabir in legend, the design and layout of original *Bijak*, the teaching of *Bijak*, the cosmology of *Bijak* and the principles of the Kabir Panth. These five chapters run into as many as 45 pages. The extraordinary space given to prose essays in the book amply proves the fact that Shah's endeavour was not just contained to the translation of the saint-poet, it was to introduce Kabir and Kabir-panth to the Western audience in a comprehensive way. Shah's book is therefore as much a translation of *Bijak*, as it is a critical account of Kabir and Kabir Panth.

Very much like Westcott, Ahmad Shah sticks to culture-specific vocabulary as native words like *ghat*, *mahavat*, *amrit*, *sadhu*, *pandit*, *ghi* etc. are retained in italics. There is no extensive footnoting also. There is no such anxiety to forge an assimilationalist idiom—an idiom which Macauliffe aimed at. Even

Tagore fails to show as much confidence in retaining the native words in his translation of Kabir. The unique feature of Shah's translation is that towards the end it contains a rather unusual glossary of proper names mentioned in the *Bijak*. Of course most of the entries in the glossary have been lifted from Dowson's *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology*, yet what stands out is Shah's concern for the specific detail.

VIII

Translating *bhakti* thus remains an endeavour that never receives the official support of the Orientalists. It nevertheless flourishes on the margins of the project of Oriental Studies with no different motives. It rather extends and enlarges its scope and reach by way of appropriating the counter-canonical and native discourse of *bhakti* in terms which are either patently Christian or brahminical. Not only the discourse of *bhakti* is denied its autonomous character; it is also translated as a *desi* derivative of the lofty classical religions. Kabir is reduced to a countryside version of either a Martin Luther or a Sankara, and if at all he is granted originality, it is translated in terms, which are overtly so classical and scriptural that the people-centric discourse of *bhakti* remains under-expressed. It is so much lost in 'evangelical entangle-ments'[36] and Oriental imperatives that the entire enterprise of trans-lating Kabir amounts to forging a vernacular form of Christianity.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The binary of the 'original' versus the 'translated' becomes quite contentious and even untenable in case of Kabir because the so-called original Kabir is itself elusive. Rev. G.H. Westcott puts the entire debate in perspective thus: 'We may safely credit Kabir with a considerable amount of originality and; even where originality seems unlikely, feel grateful to him for the genius with which he has given expression to old thoughts' (*Kabir and the Kabir Panth*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2nd revised ed. 1986, p. 45). In other words, the 'original' Kabir is always already partly translated and therefore in this sense his subsequent translations could be seen not as versions of Kabir, they are rather extensions of Kabir in another tongue. Vinay Dharwadkar, employing post-modern terminology, would approach Kabir's corpus as 'collective experi-ments in the aesthetics of palimpsestic textuality' ('Introduction' to *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs*, Penguin Books, 2003, p.65) thus enlarging Kabir beyond source-target dualism.

2. Walter Benjamin dwells on how through multiple translations of a work, transcend its organic corporeality: '. . . a translation issues from the original — not so much from its life as from its after-life. For a translation comes later than the original, and since important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks the stage of continued life. . . In them [translations] the life of the originals attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding.' – 'The Task of the Translator', *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. I, 1913-1926, Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University: Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 1996, pp. 254-5.

3. In the early phase of Third World nationalism, First World nationalism was perceived to be the modular form of nationalism, till it was challenged or at least theoretically questioned by Gandhian ideal of *swaraj*. In the paper, it would be maintained that nationalism remains very much the flip side of colonialism.

4. In fact William Jones was very much aware of the verses·of Kabir, but due to their heretical tenor, he chose to ignore them. Peter Gaeffke informs, 'When it was shown to William Jones, he read it but suppressed it because of the many heretical statements in it. In the times of Jones, it was not advisable to discuss Kabir in Muslim circles.'—'Kabir in Literature by and for Muslims', *Images of Kabir*, ed. Monika Horstmann, Delhi: Manohar, 2002, p.158.

5. David Lorenzen's observations in this context are pertinent: 'The lives and writings of the European missionaries who worked in India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have still not been adequately studied. The best known of these missionaries is the Italian Jesuit Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) who lived for many years in South India. Some of his works have been published and the modern Jesuit scholar S. Rajamanickam has written about him. The writings of four other early missionary intellectuals have also been at least partially published: the Portuguese Jesuit, GonAalo Fernandes Trancoso (1541-1621), the British Jesuit Thomas Stephens (15491619), the Lutheran Bartholomous Ziegenbalg (1683-1719), and the Italian Franciscan monk, Marco della Tomba (1726-1803). One important unpublished text is a long dialogue between a Christian and a Hindu written in Hindi and Italian by another Italian Fransciscan, Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano, who was in North India from 1749 to 1761." – 'Who Invented Hinduism?' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, No.41, Vol.4, 1999, pp. 638-39.

6. 'The Italian Capuchin friar Marco Della Tomba, born in 1726 as Pietro Girolamo Agresti, arrived in Pondicherry in 1757. From there he travelled to Chandernagore and in 1758 set out for Patna and the small state of Bettiah on the border of Nepal. Apart from two years spent in Chatrapur and several short stays in Patna, he was mostly in Bettiah until his return to Italy in 1773. He returned to north India, and died at Bhagalpur on March 1803.' — David Lorenzen , 'Marco Della Tomba and the Kabir-Panth', *Images of Kabir*, p. 33.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

8. H.H.Wilson, *A Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus*, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1977, Ist published in 1861. All the quotes from the book have not been given separate notes. The page no. along with the *sakhi* no is mentioned in the parenthesis in the text of the paper itself.

9. Roland Barthes makes a very pertinent

distinction between 'representation' and 'enfiguration' in his *The Pleasure of the Text*. According to him, 'figuration is the way in which the erotic body appears . . . in the profile of the text. [T]he text itself, a diagrammatic and not an imitative structure, can reveal itself in the form of a body split into fetish objects, into erotic sites . . . Representation, on the other hand, is embarrassed figuration, encumbered with other meanings than that of desire: a space of alibis (reality, likelihood, readability, truth etc.)' – *The Pleasure of Text*, tr. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1976, p. 57.

10. The German subjectivity of the translator is significant. Dorothy Matilda Figuira in a study on the translations of Kalidas's *Shakuntala* mentions, 'For the most part [during the 19th century] German translations were characterized by an accurate and literal rendering of the original' – Translating the Orient, Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1991, p. 27.

11. E. Trumpp explains his methodology way thus, 'As I went on, I noted down all grammatical forms and obsolete words I met with, and thus I gradually drew up a grammar and a dictionary so that I could refer to every passage again, whenever I found it necessary for the sake of comparison' – 'Preface' to *The Adi Granth or The Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1978, 3rd ed., vii. The quotes from the book have not been given separate notes, the page number along with the couplet number quoted from Kabir are given in parenthesis at the end of each quote.

12. Trumpp explains: '. . . though I can hardly expect that the granth will not attract many readers, the less so, as Sikhism is a waning religion . . . The Sikh Granth, which will always keep its place in the history of religion, lies now open before us, and we know authentically what their Gurus taught.' – 'Preface' to *The Adi Granth*, pp. vii-viii.

13. Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, London and New York: Routledge,1991, p. 69.

14. Max Muller quoted in Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909, Vol. 1, p. xv. No separate notes are given for the quotes taken from Macauliffe's translation. The page number and the verse number however are mentioned in the parenthesis.

15. Assimilation prepares cultural background for conversion. John Assmann describes the dynamics of assimilation thus: 'Assimilation, the giving up of a traditional cultural identity in favour of a dominant culture, is necessarily accompanied by religious conversion' – 'Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)translatability', The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between', eds. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996, pp. 28-29.

16. Rev. G.H.Westcott, *Kabir and the Kabir Panth*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2nd revised ed. 1986. All the subsequent quotes from the book have been taken from this edition; the respective page number has been given in the parenthesis. The book was originally published by Christ Church Mission Press, Cawnpore, 1907.

17. Westcott makes an interesting chronological table in which he places Hindu and Christian saints in corresponding time frames. Ramanand (1300-1400) is seen to be a contemporary of Wycliffe (1324-84), Gorakh Nath (1420-85) is placed against Erasmus (1467-1536), Kabir (1440-1518) is shown to be contemporary of Luther (1483-1546), Nanak (1469-1538) is placed against Cranmer (1489-1555) etc. not paginated.

18. Tagore, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, London: Macmillan, 1961, Ist ed. 1915.

19. Sukant Chaudhuri, *Translation and Understanding*, Delhi: OUP, 1999, p. 46.

20. Tagore while reviewing a book entitled *Sangit Sangraha: Bauler Gatha*, takes exception to the inclusion of 'Brahmo songs and songs of modern English-wallahs into the book' – 'Baul Songs: A Review of the Book *Sangit Sangraha: Bauler Gatha*', in *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, eds. Sisir Kumar Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri, Delhi: OUP, p. 47.

21. Ahmad Shah quoted by F.E. Keay, *Kabir and His Followers*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1995, Reprint, 1st ed.1931, p. 62.

22. Winand M. Callewaert, 'Preface' to *The Millennium Kabir Vani*, Delhi: Manohar, 2000, p. vii.

23. *Ibid*.

24. Charlotte Vaudeville, *Kabir*, Vol 1., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, p. 18.

25. Sukant Chaudhuri, *Translation and Understanding*, p. 45.

26. Linda Hess quoted in 'Introduction' to *The Millennium Kabir Vani*, Winand M. Callewaert, p. 14.

27. Sukant Chaudhuri, *Translation and Understanding* , p. 44.

28. Vinay Dharwadker, 'Translator's Note', *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs*, p. xi.

29. Tagore, *Gitanjali*, London: MacMillan, 1952. The quotes from the book have not been given separate notes.

30. It is significant to note that Walter Benjamin uses the word 'echo' also: 'The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original' – 'The Task of the Translator', p. 255. A translator thus produces the echo of the original and not the originality of the original.

31. Ahmad Shah, trans., *The Bijak of Kabir*, Delhi: Asian Publication Services, 1977. Shah finished the translation of *Bijak* in February, 1916, which was subsequently revised and corrected by Rev. E.W. Ormerod. It was finally published in May, 1917. The quotes from the book have not been given separate notes.

32. This is how one later translator refers to Shah's translation: 'Ahmad Shah's English translation of the *Bijak* was hailed by Grierson with enthusiasm, not so much for its literary achievement – which was rather poor – as for Kabir's extraordinary personality.'– Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir*, OUP, 1993, 2nd Impression, 2001, 135. Winand M. Callewaert while acknowledging the non-selective nature of Shah's translation observes, Rev Ahmad Shah's, *The Bijak of Kabir*, Hamirpur, India, 1917, while a very poor translation, remains the only complete English version of the *Bijak*. 'Introduction' to *The Millennium Kabir Vani*, p. 4. Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh have this to say on the quality of Shah's translation thus: 'Ahmad Shah's 1917 translation of the Bijak is stiff and far from the original style of Kabir, and lacks notes on dubious points of translation.' – 'Preface' to *The Bijak of Kabir*, Delhi: OUP, 2002, p. xii.

33. Ahmad Shah, "The Teaching of the Bijak", *The Bijak of Kabir*, p. 40.

34. Evelyn Underhill introduces Tagore's *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* in terms of their capacity to fuse various cultures

thus; 'We may safely assert, however, that in their teaching two — perhaps three — apparently antagonistic streams of intense spiritual culture met, . . . and it is one of the outstanding characteristics of Kabir's genius that he was able in his poems to fuse them into one. – pp. vii-viii.

35. F.E. Keay, *Kabir and His Followers*, pp. 169-170.
36. Saurabh Dube's long essay 'Colonial Registers of a Vernacular Christianity' (*EPW*, Vol. XXXIX, NO.2, Jan. 10-16, 2004, 161-171) explicates a great deal on 'questions of vernacular translation that lie embedded within the processes of evangelical entanglements between missionaries and 'natives'.

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CONTENTS OF THE ISSUE

Mahābhārata: The End of an Era (Yugānta) *edited by* Ajay Mitra Shastri

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The Mahābhārata War was, or thought to be, such a momentous event as to leave an indelible impact on the life and culture of not only the Indian subcontinent but on all the other countries where Indians migrated in strength and lived for some time. There were several important personages in India and abroad named after the Mahābhārata characters and places in far-flung areas are found christened after them. The *Mahābhārata* is still being lived by Indians and by those imbibing Indian culture elsewhere. One cannot think of Indian religion, philosophy, thought-pattern and literary genres without the *Mahābhārata*.

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