

# Many Souls and Many Worlds: The Kabir Documentaries of Shabnam Virmani

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## Abstract

Shabnam Virmani's Kabir Project is a detailed expedition into the world of the 15th-century mystic poet and philosopher. Through songs, images, and conversations, Virmani builds an atmosphere where the many words of Kabir are explored. The documentaries explore the spiritual and socio-political meanings in Kabir's works. Virmani, an artist-in-residency project at the Srishti Institute of Art, Design, and Technology in Bangalore, travels to pluralist and, hence, diverse musical landscapes, meeting connoisseurs of Kabir's art. This article uses a visual analysis method to review and analyse Virmani's four documentaries created for the Kabir Project.

## Key words

Documentary Films, Kabir Project, Kabir's Poetry

The documentary film the realities on reels realistically depicts the realities. They are the objective journeys towards the subjective truth. With perseverance and patience, several documentary makers have chased the hues and tones of life in diverse manners. Shabnam Virmani is one among them. She chases the soul and songs of Kabir, the 15th-century mystic poet, and philosopher. She has succeeded in her enterprise through the four documentary films that are an integral part of the Kabir Project. Contrary to the inherent dryness of the documentary genre, these journeys are musical, poetic, and touching.

In 1987, Alexander Frater experimented with such a chasing in pursuit of the Indian monsoon and filmed the same for BBC. Following the several 'bhavas' of the Indian monsoon, Frater's expedition and its captivating narrative reveal the exotic and frequently astonishing findings of an ambitious and seductively romantic adventure (IMDB). He started it from Thiruvananthapuram's beaches, traversing Delhi, Calcutta, and all of Bangladesh. The outcome is an illumination of nature's enormous influence on the lives and culture of India's people. Similarly, Anand Patwardhan, India's most internationally acclaimed documentary filmmaker, chased the disasters of nuclear tests and filmed them under the title *War and Peace (Jung aur Aman, 2002)*. That was a four-year trip made due to the most famous/in-famous nuclear experiments conducted in May 1998 in Pokaran, Rajasthan. Patwardhan has been a traveller for the whole of his career, and he visits hotspots well before news of a catastrophe reaches the media (Halberstadt, 2004).

In *War and Peace*, Patwardhan conducted an expedition through India, Pakistan, and Japan in search of the victims of nuclear nationalism. Similarly, Shabnam Virmani journeys through India, Pakistan, and the USA to find out about real friends of Kabir and their musical souls. Both documentary makers extensively use rural/folk music to proclaim their statements and locate and encourage alternative political/cultural folks remaining in India as a safety valve against communalism and fascism. Similarities could be seen in the style and techniques of filmmaking as well. Even in interview scenes, they remain unseen as interviewers, and their sounds and narrations become their signatures. Both emphasized participatory and observational documentary techniques.

Documentaries can be categorized into six modes: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative (Nichols, 2010). Shabnam Virmani's documentaries on Kabir fall and fit in all modes; they are poetic and expository, observational and participatory, and reflexive and performative. From some angles, they are objective and neutral views of the Indian cultural setting. Nevertheless, often, they take an activist approach and make explicit political statements. Documentary films depicting culture, religion, arts, and literature are not new to the Indian audience. The documentary film on Indian Gypsies of Rajasthan depicts the Gypsy culture and its identity politics. Several films with Buddhist themes are also present as precursors to this cultural/religious genre.

### **Why Kabir Project?**

The Kabir Project, which began in 2003, offers via songs, images, and discussions the experiences of trips and inquiries into the spiritual and socio-political resonances of Kabir's poetry: "We journey through a stunning diversity of social, religious and musical traditions which Kabir inhabits, exploring how his poetry intersects with ideas of cultural identity, secularism, nationalism, religion, death, impermanence, folk, and oral knowledge systems" (<http://www.kabirproject.org/>). The project is an artist-in-residence initiative conceptualized and started by Shabnam Virmani at the Srishti Institute of Art, Design, and Technology in Bangalore.

*The Kabir Project* was born in the context of the Gujarat massacre in 2002, which intensified the polarisation induced by religion and identity. When the Godhra event occurred, the filmmaker was residing in Ahmedabad and started to explore Kabir. "Immediately, Kabir seemed to call out, 'Sadho, dekho jag baurana! (Oh seekers, see the world's gone mad!)'. I instinctively felt, yes, this man is saying what I feel" (Virmani 2010). She found a healing voice in Kabir, and in a journey spanned six years; she chronicled the saint's poems and ideas by traveling across various locations in India and Pakistan. Apart from the four documentary films, several audio CDs of Kabir's songs sung by folk musicians were compiled, and some books also were published as part of the project. These documentaries were officially screened at a large festival, Kabir held in Bangalore in 2009 (Virmani, 2010; Abhinav, 2009, cited in Ancin, 2013).

It is believed that Kabir was born in Varanasi in a weaving family that had lately become Muslims. After mastering the family trade, he pursued religious activities under the tutelage of a Hindu guru and emerged as a teacher and bard. As he was illiterate, his poems and songs were circulated orally and collated by his pupils and fans (Hess, 2002). Kabir was against the caste/creed divide and fought against meaningless religious practices. His thesis was that one's ideas and actions are useless without significant personal experience and self-awareness. Virmani contemplates the poet: "Kabir himself is the perfect icon to reflect this, because he inhabits many cultures and opposing social paradigms, and yet refuses to be contained or defined by any one of them" (Virmani, 2010).

Kabir has developed his school of thought: Kabir's Nirguna School. He believes in an impersonal God. His devotion does not depend on the concept of God's "otherness" but instead on a clear sense of God and man's intrinsic oneness. His Nirguna-bhakti stems from the monistic stream of Hindu thought, which was as old as the Hindu concept of the Nirguna Brahman. According to Krishna Sharma, Kabir "is full of ridicule for those who have no knowledge of the true nature of bhakti but are called bhaktas and pride themselves in it" (Sharma, 1987).

### **Documentary Films.**

As mentioned earlier, Shabnam Virmani started her journey in 2003 in pursuit of the soul and songs of Kabir, and six years later, she came out with four documentary films. Her journeys ventured into pluralist and diverse musical settings, where she encountered ardent individuals who imbibed the poetry and meanings of Kabir into their lives. Each of the four documentaries travels through borders and imprints our mental landscapes (Virmani, 2010).

#### **1. *Chalo Hamara Des (Come to My Country)***

##### **Journeys with Kabir and His Friends.**

96.85 Minutes duration.

The film depicts the relationship of a rural Dalit folk singer, Prahlad Tipanya (The Kabir of rural Malwa), and an American scholar and translator, Linda Hess (The Kabir of urban America). The relationship mediated by Kabir emphasizes cross-cultural friendship. It "traverses hearts and minds, crossing bridges of understanding, despite difference" (Virmani, 2010).

The documentary begins with extreme close-up shots of the strings of the musical instrument, the Thambura. It was the beginning of an odyssey of a rural rock star Prahlad Tipanya, a famous folk singer and school teacher. He sings popular verses of Kabir *Hare, Kahaan Se Aaya, Kahaan Jaoge*, meaning "Where did you come from? Where are you going?" With that musical piece as the title song, the documentary maker begins her narration, not through her voice but with sub-titles: "*I was searching for Kabir- the 15th-century mystic poet whose songs are still sung all over north India. His songs beckoned to his "des"- a mysterious country where a million suns blaze. In some folk songs, I could hear the call of that elusive land.*"

With this, Shabnam follows Kabir through Tipanya, accompanying his Kabir bhajans and concerts held in near and far places, and talks to him extensively about his turn of Kabir during the intervals. She even stays at his home, chats with his wife Shanti, and explores her insights and perspectives on Kabir, which all become an enlightening experience for the viewers. Prahlad Tipanya introduces us to a shrine, a memorial to Kabir he built opposite his house. Citing the verses on the shrine's walls, he explains: "Kabir's vehicle is made of words."

The documentary camera takes us to the other side of the world, stating that one can enter Kabir's country through different doorways. We meet Prof. Linda Hess, a renowned and learned Kabir scholar, at the Department of Religious Studies/Buddhist Studies, Stanford University, California. She refers to Kabir's poem: "In India, it is literature, but more than that, it is oral, performative, musical, living utterances."

Then we meet Ram Prasad Aradiya & Group at Ghunsi Village. They enthusiastically testify to the role and influence of Prahlad Tipanya in democratizing Kabir.

They say that when Prahlad sang, the audience was enthralled, and even youths were attracted to Kabir. Some saw Kabir as a Dalit icon and compared him with Ambedkar. The documentary travels to Banaras, UP, with Linda Hess and Tipanya. The blend of music with beautiful visuals of rituals gives the audience a meditating experience. Prahlad Tipanya sings throughout the boat journey, and Linda shares her nostalgic memories of Banaras while she was chasing Kabir in her prosperous research days. Meeting with Ganga Sharan Shastri, the mahant (Cleric) of the Kabir Panth sect whom Linda knew in her early days in Banaras, is a different encounter. He has been compiling Kabir's poetry into a book titled *The Maha-Bijak of Kabir*. They vigorously argue about the spiritual as well as poetic aspects of Kabir. The documentary cuts to a foreign trip of Tipanya with Linda to various parts of the USA, organized by their friends of Kabir. Tipanya leads long sessions of Kabir concerts, and the American audience is enthralled.

The documentary ends with informal singing sessions of Tipanya. The filmmaker also joins with her inherent singing skills. We rarely see Shabnam Virmani's face in films—only on one or two occasions. Sometimes we see her shadows holding the camera on her shoulder, and often we listen to her humble voice. They sing the meaningful verses of Kabir zealously: “A boat was made of paper

*Then filled with a ton of iron  
The true Guru will get it to the shore  
A saint's words are calling out to you  
In your own body see the light.....”*

## **2. Had-Anhad (Bounded-Boundless)**

### **(Journeys with Ram and Kabir)**

102.18 Minutes duration

Focussing on the communal harmony envisaged by Kabir, the documentary probes into the depth of the Hindu-Muslim and India-Pakistan divide created by religion and nationalism. It informs audiences of their common history with the neighbouring Muslim countries from the perspective of intercultural dialogue and of “bonds that are deeper than blood” (Virmani, 2010). This journey is in pursuit of the real Ram, the Kabir's Ram.

The opening scene is at Ayodhya. Even after a decade of demolition incidents, the divide created by it is still profound. The filmmaker wants to know about it and talks to people who stand in front of a shop selling video CDs of the Babri Masjid demolition. The people who talk to her argue vigorously in favour of the incident. They see Muslims as cruel invaders and opine they deserve humiliation and atrocities. The salesman also substantiates that the CDs are sold like hotcakes. The documentary maker clears her stance by cutting to the song of Prahlad Tipanya on Kabir's Ram: “*There is no place without Ram.*”

We meet Mukhtiar Ali, a Mirasi Folk singer from Pugal village in Western Rajasthan. He shares the experience of singing Kabir and other Sufi pundits. He says Muslim pundits and clerics attack Sufi songs and poems, citing that they are anti-religious. He asks that if God does not like it, why did he create singers and poets on earth? He sings Kabir's lines:

*“Reading book after book,  
This world went to dogs!  
No one became a learned one,  
The one who studied the four letters of “love” was the real wise one.”*

He further criticizes the attitude of people who search for Kabir without understanding the real meaning of Kabir. He asks them to introspect into themselves to find the real Kabir in them:

*“Why cry, Kabir, Kabir?  
Be aware of yourself!  
Get the five senses in control,  
And you’re Kabir himself!”*

Mukhtiar Ali’s father, Vasaye Khan, and his sons join the Kabir singing. That shows the generation link of his family with Kabir.

The documentary also traces the evolution of the stories of Kabir’s birth and death and the myths attached to them. People give different versions of it, as do the clerics of both Hindu and Muslim sects. Then it follows a theatre group in Indore doing a play on Kabir who wishes only to focus on his humanist aspects than religious myths. The writer-turned activist Krishna Nath quotes Kabir:

*“In the market stands Kabir  
Flaming torch in hand!  
Burn down your home  
Then come, walk with me!”*

He challenges the contradiction of religious sects to put him in their rigid frames. He states that Kabir is the man who has set out to burn down people’s houses, but they are trying to put him in a house.

The camera then exposes the ridiculous changing-of-guards ceremony on the Wagah border between India and Pakistan and warns about the intensity of division that causes among the people of both nations. After the third attempt, the film crew enters Pakistan through the Wagah border and meets Fariduddin Ayaz, the famous Pakistani Qawwali singer living in Karachi. He says he has read Kabir in great depth; not only read him but also has met Kabir. He has seen Kabir, not in the literal sense. He says that “Kabir is my subject; he is my topic. I am not willing to bargain with anyone on Kabir. I won’t compromise on Kabir....In order to understand Kabir, you must clear your mental level...wipe it clean...First, consider Kabir a human being. Then you might reach him. If you treat Kabir as a supernatural thing...You will never attain him.”

The filmmaker also meets another friend of Kabir in Pakistan named Shafi Faqir, a Manghaniar Folk singer who lives in the same city, Karachi. He also gives his account of Kabir and questions the negative attitude of religious clerics towards Sufis and their verses. The documentary ends with the long sessions of Qawwali recitals by both the stalwarts.

### ***3. Kabira Khada Bazaar Mein (In the Market Stands Kabir)***

#### **(Journeys with Sacred and Secular Kabir)**

93.11 Minutes duration

This documentary's underlying quest was the filmmaker's tension regarding the conflicts between religious and secular Kabir. It reveals the contradiction of secular Kabir hijacked by the sacred Kabir. Further, It searches for the impulses and paradoxes that manifest in Prahlad Tipanya's life. He is a member of Eklavya, an alternative cultural

activist organization. At the same time, he chooses to join the Kabir Panth (religious group) as a mahant (cleric). The film chases "the opposing pulls of the individual and the collective, the spiritual and the social, the contrasting calls of autonomy and social authority, as he tries to conscientiously translate the ideas of Kabir into his own life practice" (Virmani, 2010).

The documentary begins with the rituals of a temple in Banaras. The Kabir Panthis organize Artis (Poojas) in the name of Kabir there. The filmmaker expresses her uneasiness and states, "I leave Kabir in his temple in Banaras - confused. Can this 'God' be my revolutionary?" Without giving up optimism, she meets Kiran Shani, director of a theatre group in Indore that works on a play on the "rebel street poet" Kabir. He recollects from the oral history that in Banaras, Kabir declared that they would gather only to sing. Then they would gather in public to eat together! Shani highlighted that like a lion, Kabir roared, people of all castes—upper, lower, even untouchables— would sit and eat together. Shani emphasized that one and only Kabir could take such a revolutionary stand in those times.

In 2003, Prahlad Tipanya decided to become a mahant for the Kabir Panth, embarrassing many of his friends and activists. The filmmaker decided to interview him on a trip to Damakheda village in Chhattisgarh for the annual festival of Kabir Panthis. Rituals and activities held there are similar to a festival of organized religion. When the spiritual head of the Dharamdasi branch of the Kabir Panth, Prakash Muni Naam Saheb, arrives, people receive him as a Godman and pay artis. During the interval, the filmmaker chats with the accompanists of Tipanya; Manoj, and Teju. They boldly say that Kabir had not asked anybody to build temples.

Besides Tipanya's family and accompanists, others were critical of his decision to become a Mahant, particularly activists of Eklavya group, a forum of Kabir singers in Malwa. He was also part of that group as a lead singer, and it lasted for eight years with the simple agenda of connecting Kabir's poetry with the everyday life of rural masses. The documentary provides a forum to express their views on 'sacred Kabir,' and they frankly express their disagreement with Tipanya's shift. We also meet Hiralal Sisodiya, an intellectual leader of Eklavya, and Narayan Delmia, the folk singer-turned activist.

The camera focuses on an annual event by Prahlad Tipanya in his home village, Lunyakhedi. As a Mahant, he leads the rituals and announces that they will start Chauka Arti after midnight. People queue in line to get his blessings. However, a year later, he was informed by the head of the Dharamdasi Panth that they revoked his authority to practice as a mahant. The documentary ends with the last encounter with him a year later, at the same annual event put up in his village. We meet Vivek Das, head of the Banaras sect of the Kabir Panth, an ex-Naxalite from Bihar. He says that most of Kabir Panthis support Hindutwa politics, and so does he. Another mahant underlines it and goes a step further, saying that Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena, Sangh Parivar, and VHP are needed to protect our nation; likewise, a Kabir's army is required to teach traitors a lesson. Prahlad Tipanya strongly opposes this opinion arguing that armies can only kill people, invade a nation's borders or secure domination over others. He affirms that Kabir was not interested in domination, and he won people over through his experience, simplicity, and purity. The documentary ends with these words projecting optimism for those who believe in secularism, pluralism, and the very humanism.

#### **4. *Koi Sunta Hai (Someone is Listening)***

**(Journeys with Kumar and Kabir)**

96.13 Minutes duration

This documentary, the most musical and mind-blowing of the four, examines our limits on information, literature, art, and music. It shows how the musical maestro Kumar

Gandharva burns down the so-called citadel of classical learning. He dared to break the rule and walk over to the other side—the marginalized folk genre. The documentary maker appreciates this kind of radical move by Kumar Gandharva, which is crucial in social strife and politics: “And that is why his Kabir defies musical boundaries, is impossible to label like Kabir himself and is experienced by many listeners as so movingly authentic” (Virmani, 2010).

The documentary begins with the magical rendering of “*Sunta Hai Guru Gyani*” and acknowledges that Kumar Gandharva was the first to bring the 15th-century mystic poet Kabir to the classical stage in the 1970s. It attempts to explore his connection with Kabir through his disciples and friends. First, we meet PC Rele, the classical singer from Mumbai, and he was very excited to say that his guru Kumar was a conference artist at the age of 11, and he dominated the conference.

Vinay Hardikar, writer-turned-activist, delineates how Kumar embraced Nirgun (abstract). In 1947, when he was 23, Kumar was diagnosed with tuberculosis and told he could never sing again. On the doctor’s advice, he moved to Dewas town in Malwa, Madhya Pradesh, for its cleaner, unpolluted air. For about five years, he was thinking about music, not singing. Vinay Hardikar says that this experience of Nirgun churned in Kumarji’s consciousness. In the early 70s, it arrived on stage in a musical form neither Kabir nor classical had seen before. In another scene, we hear the words of Kashi Ba, a street fruit seller who recites Kabir through Kumar in her vital voice and reveals how both Kabir and Kumar moved poor people like her.

Again we listen to the magical voice of Kumar singing, “*Ud Jayega..Hans Akela.*” Ashok Vajpeyi, poet and friend of Kumar Gandharva, expounds on what Kabir meant and how it is perceived. He interprets the famous and most quoted verses of Kabir:

*In the market stands Kabir  
Flaming torch in hand!  
Burn down your house  
Then come, walk with me.*

He says that Kabir calls them to the market, not to the jungle, to meet him. Kabir asks them to free themselves of their attachments and cravings, get free of them, extinguish them, burn down their houses, and then join him in the street so that they can walk with him.

The documentary follows several urban musicians, artists, and authors whom Kumar’s Kabir inspired. One among them is Shubha Mudgal, Kumarji’s disciple. She sings for us: “*Hamare ram, rahim kareema keso...Alaha ram sath soyi* (meaning for me, Ram, Rahim, Karim, and Keshav are all perceptions of the same truth). Like Prahlad Tipanya, Shubha also reveals that there is a paradox in her personal life. Leaving Kabir, she got initiated into the Gaudiya sect and found pleasure in listening to the music of the Krishna temple. We meet Vidya Rao, a Tumri singer who enthusiastically and emotionally touches Kabir through Kumar. She sings, “*Yeh Tan Thaat Thambure Ka...*” and in her attitude of singing, we feel Kabir through her guru, Kumar Gandharva. Pratheeksha Sharma, a young classical singer, shares her experience in singing Kabir. She says that, in the initial years, she used to get very annoyed with Kabir, and she even assumed Kabir was a male chauvinist. Slowly, she understood more, and her inner journey became fierce. Later she realized that Kabir was not singling her out as a woman! Nevertheless, he addressed the soul in that way.

The film leaves urban friends of Kabir and meets rural folk. Rai Chand, an older man from Lunyakhedi, a village in Madhya Pradesh, recites a poem written by him about Kabir. Then it cuts to the Adivasi Lok Kala Parishad in Bhopal, where the folk-invented Kabir is meticulously documented. One thousand seven hundred fifty poems of Kabir in 10 dialects have been collected for publication. Dr Kapil Tiwari, the director of Parishad, romanticizes Kabir. He says that to sing Kabir's truth, one need not be a musical expert. Many maestros lack Kabir's life force, faith in Kabir, and a yearning to search for his truth. However, a folk singer, to some extent, lives Kabir.

We witness a very rare, emotional, and inspirational encounter between a guru and shishya when Prahlad Tipanya meets his folk guru Chenaji Maru. They sing together and recollect the good old days of long singing sessions. Leaving this reunion, a memorable singing session, Chenaji Maru passed away after one month of this shoot. Munda Das Chhattisgarh and Madhup Mudgal sing the songs of both Kabir and Kumar. Madhup Mudgal emotionally recollects the last moments with his guru Kumar Gandharva. When Kumarji passed away, several folk groups had come to his cremation. They sang the song "*Hum Pardesi*." Mudgal says that he was at the cremation ground and had never heard singing with such emotion: "The ambiance...it was dusk time...the light and that song I cannot explain. It was too much ... my hair stood on end".

The documentary cuts to another old rural folk singer, Dhulichand, from Kathbaroda village. He was asked since when he started to sing Kabir. His spontaneous reply was that he had been singing Kabir all his life. The documentary ends with the words and songs of Vijay Sardeshmukh, Kumar Gandharva's other disciple.

### **Craft and Camera**

Compared to the process of feature filmmaking, a documentary maker cannot go with a pre-planned blueprint. That is the main limitation of this genre and the advantage as well. The camera will lead a filmmaker to the subjects, and the imperfection of the camera sometimes adds to the meaning of those realistic films. Here in the above-mentioned four documentary films, a viewer could feel the beauty of the shaking of the camera. Natural lights and shades were well utilized in these films. As they are the journeys chasing a beautiful mind, the films extensively make use of point-of-view shots. In many scenes, we only see the shadows of the filmmaker, which emphasizes the objectivity and neutrality of her approach. Usual train shots with the background of popular Kabir songs illuminate the scenes and make the film musical.

Documentary films often give emphasis to aesthetic elements and capture the beauty and quality of rituals as well as the colours of our country. Beautiful visuals of objects from nature are occasionally used. The potentials of animations and graphics were also well-utilized. The dedication of the filmmaker is seen in her modes of traveling for filming. Sometimes she travels by car and sometimes as a fellow rider on a bike holding camera on her shoulder.

All four documentaries are well-edited. A blend of songs with words is made to avoid the monotony of long conversation segments, usually seen in many documentaries. Like in Patwardhan's documentaries, the creative use of folk music is another highlight. In the documentary *Koi Sunta Hai*, Kumar Gandharva lives again through his songs and memories of his friends and disciples. Even still photographs are intelligently used to make it lively. Another specialty is that documentary maker rarely interferes with the flow. The documentary moves only with subtitles, not with commentary.



## Conclusion

Shabnam Virmani's documentaries are the journeys in search of truth, songs, and souls of a legend who lived in the fifteenth century. Through the routes paved by the forerunners like Frater and Patwardhan, she chases Kabir. These films explore the astounding range of Kabir's social, religious, and musical traditions.

*Chalo Hamara Des* depicts the relationship between a rural Dalit folk singer, Prahlad Tipanya (The Kabir of rural Malwa), and an American scholar and translator, Linda Hess (The Kabir of urban America). *Had Anhad* probed into the depth of divides between Hindu and Muslim and India and Pakistan, created by religion and nationalism. *Kabira Khada Bazaar Mein* reveals the contradiction of secular Kabir hijacked by the sacred Kabir. It investigates the drives and paradoxes that manifest in Prahlad Tipanya's life. *Koi Sunta Hai* examines the limits we impose on knowledge, literature, art, and music. It shows how the musical maestro Kumar Gandharva burns down the so-called citadel of classical learning and blends his music by embracing Kabir. When Shabnam Virmani was asked the reason for choosing Kabir, she famously replied that she did not choose Kabir, but Kabir chose her. There lies the beauty and quality of her documentary films.

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