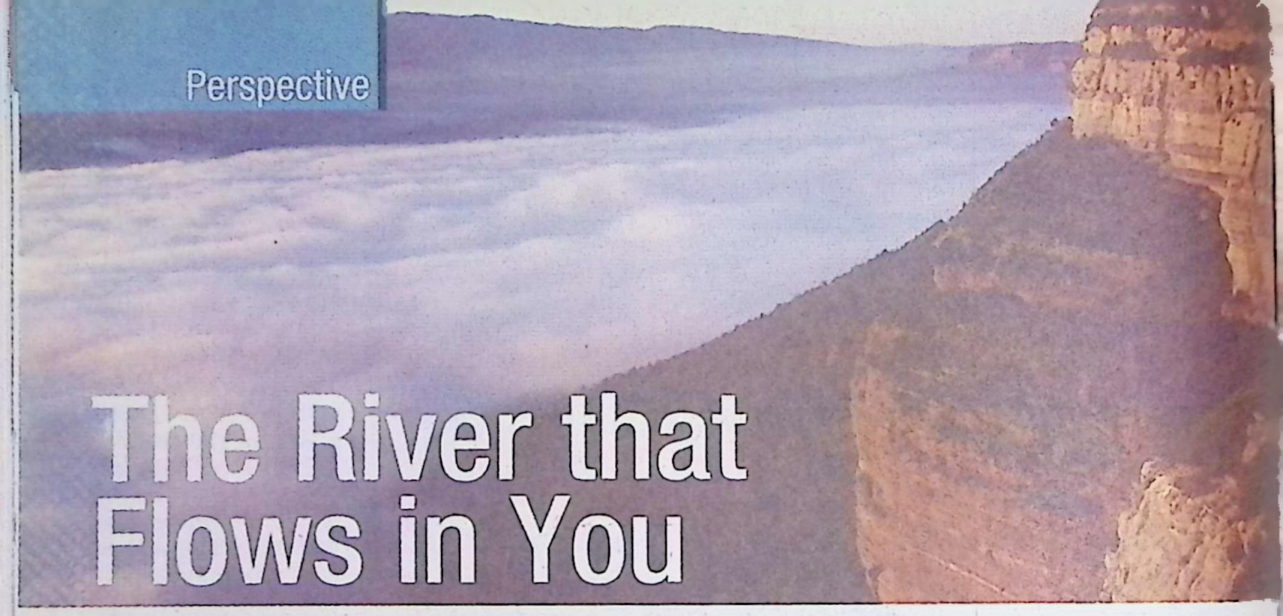


The River that Flows in You

The saint-poet Kabir is one of the most interesting personalities in the history of Indian mysticism. His poems and songs have relevance even in today's world.

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Kabir, a historically shadowy figure, is made more shadowy still by the hagiographies and unreliable narratives that surround his life. He was probably born around the end of the 14th century in Benares, India to parents of the weaver class, recently converted to Islam. Later he became a disciple of the celebrated 15th century ascetic Ramananda, a great religious reformer. Kabir was illiterate, and his poetry was composed aloud and never written down in his lifetime; later it would be transmitted by acolytes, scholars and admirers. There exist thousands of poems attributed to him without any single reliable text. Translation of Kabir by Ezra Pound, Robert Bly and most notably Rabindranath Tagore has brought the poetry of the great 15th-century saint-poet to life to the english reader.

Still, most scholars agree that Kabir came out of what's called the *Bhakti* movement, an anticlerical, anti-authoritarian tradition that originated in South India, in the sixth century A.D. and made its way to North India, where it flourished from the 15th century to the 17th. *Bhakti* encouraged the informal over the formal, the spontaneous over the prescribed and the vernacular over Sanskrit. It disregarded class distinction in the Hindu social structure. It regarded no single religion as providing the exclusive way to God. Scripture was seen as an impediment to the union of man and God, a union Kabir describes: "Lying beside you, / I'm waiting to be kissed. / But your face is turned / And you're fast asleep. . . . / I have one husband: you. / You have one wife: me. / Who's there to come between us?"

The structure of his poems varies within a limited range and is deceptively simple and straightforward. Kabir favours the rhetorical method of apostrophe, addressing someone absent: "Friend, / You had one life, / And you blew it." Many of the poems conclude with a summing up, with the poet citing himself as the final authority on the matter at hand, enjoining, pleading, prescribing, scolding, giving forth, usually in the form of a miniaturized homily: "Listen, says Kabir, / I have a prayer to make. / I'm handcuffed to death. / Throw me the key." "Seeing that she's got the butter, / Seeing that the pot is smashed, / The dairy-wife, Kabir says, / Rejoices."

Kabir liked riddles. He enjoyed play, the ludic impulse that encourages the reader or listener out of habituated patterns of thought into some deeper experience or recognition, in Kabir's case toward a heightened consciousness. "How do you, / Asks the chief of police, / Patrol a city . . . / Where frogs keep snakes / As watchdogs, / And jackals / Go after lions? / Does anyone know / What I'm talking about? / Says Kabir." These riddles have an affinity with the Zen koan — "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" — that are likewise designed to trick the mind into greater clarity and realization. And the Zen Buddhist notion of not mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself is a central theme throughout Kabir's poetry.

In Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's *Songs of Kabir*, considered by critics and readers alike one of the best translation of the poet, the final poem begins as "I won't come / I won't go / I won't live / I won't die" and ends with "I'm nothing / says Kabir / I'm not among the living / Or the dead."