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Kabir

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Kabir

Kabir was a weaver who taught one formless God and mocked both pandit and mullah. This lesson covers his life, his verses and the legends that grew around him.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Trade**Weaver of Banaras.

02 **God**Nirguna, formless.

03 **Books**Bijak and Adi Granth.

04 **Death**Maghar; flowers legend.

When and where was Kabir born?

1 Dates and Birth

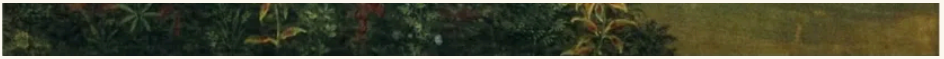
1.1 Why is Kabir's birth year disputed?

Kabir was a poet-saint of Varanasi, then called Banaras. He is closely tied to the **Bhakti movement**.

His dates are not firm. Some historians favour **1398 to 1448**. Others favour **1440 to 1518**.

An early English introduction to his songs says he was born about 1440. The record is thin, and later life stories are mixed with legend. So a careful answer names the range, not one year.





Kabir shown weaving, in a Mughal-era painting from the early 18th century. British Museum, London, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

1.2 Who raised him?

He grew up in Banaras in the home of a **Muslim weaver**. The most likely tale makes him the real or adopted child of that weaver.

His very name points to a Muslim family. Panth tradition names the couple **Niru and Nima**.

1.3 What are the birth legends?

One tale says an infant lay on a lotus flower in the Lahar Tank. Nima found him there and carried him home.

Another tale says a Brahman widow was his mother. She was afraid of dishonour, so she left the baby. A weaver's wife then took him in.

Treat both stories as legend. The weaver household is the part that explains his life.

1.4 What was his trade?

All the legends agree on one point. Kabir was a **weaver**, a simple and unlettered man who earned his living at the loom.

A verse in the Adi Granth backs this. It calls him a weaver by caste, calm of mind, who sings the praise of Ram.

> 8. **Think it through:** Why does a weaver make a sharp critic?
>
> See answer ↓

Quick check 1. True or false: Historians agree on one single birth year for Kabir. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: archive.org

Was Kabir a disciple of Ramananda?

2 Ramananda and Ram

2.1 Was Kabir a disciple of Ramananda?

The usual account says yes. Ramananda was a famous Hindu ascetic of Banaras.

An early Persian text on religions also calls Kabir a **Bairagi**, a Vaishnava yogi, and a disciple of Ramananda.

So the link is old and widely told. The exact meeting is still a story.

2.2 How did the initiation happen, in the story?

Kabir learned that Ramananda visited a certain bathing ghat. He lay down on the steps, hoping to be stepped on.

It worked. The holy man cried out in astonishment, **“Ram, Ram.”**

Kabir said those words were the mantra of the order. So he claimed to hold the mantra already.

2.3 What did Kabir mean by Ram?

Ram was his favourite name for God. But he did not mean a God with a body.

A Panth collection speaks of the true God who has **neither form nor shape**. That is the sense of the formless, or nirguna, Ram.

Where God is, in one song

Place	Kabir's answer
Temple or mosque	God is in neither
Kaaba or Kailash	God is in neither
Rites, yoga, renunciation	God is in none of these
The breath	God is the breath of all breath

From the Tagore and Underhill English version of the song that begins "O servant, where dost thou seek Me?"

9. **Think it through:** Why would Kabir keep the name Ram but change its meaning? See answer ↓

Quick check 2. True or false: Kabir's Ram was a God with a body, shown in temple images. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What did Kabir teach about God?

3 One Formless God

3.1 What did Kabir teach about God?

God is close, not far away. In his song, God says, **“I am beside thee.”**

God is not found in a shrine or a rite. God is the very life in each breath.

3.2 What did he think of ritual?

Asceticism, fasting and almsgiving had **no value** without worship. Hymn singing, or bhajan, counted for more.

He also told people to let every man worship God as he is convinced. He did not want slaves of tradition.

3.3 Did he spare one religion?

No. He had no preference for either religion. His teaching was heard by Hindus and Muslims alike.

In the words of the English editors, the whole show of piety was denounced. That included temple and mosque, idol and holy water, scriptures and priests.

3.4 What did he say about caste?

One song opens with a plain rule. It is needless to ask a saint the caste to which he belongs.

The point is simple. A holy person is known by wisdom and conduct, not birth.

> 10. **Think it through:** Why does his attack on both religions matter? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: Kabir criticised ritual in only one religion. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What forms and language did he use?

4 Voice and Language

4.1 Could Kabir write?

He is described as a simple and **unlettered** man. He is also said to have had little book learning.

Even so, he picked up much through talk and debate. Tradition says he argued with learned pandits who came to challenge his master.

4.2 Why did oral teaching matter to him?

Books were out of reach for the poor and unlettered. So he stressed teaching by the spoken word.

He also wanted holy books written in the vernacular, so all could gain knowledge of God.

4.3 What forms did he use?

He taught through **ramainis, shabdas and sakhis**. Shabda means word.

Panth writers say these forms reached Hindus and Muslims alike.

4.4 What language did he use?

His poems drew on many dialects. These include Khadi boli, Braj, Bhojpuri, Marwari and Awadhi.

The mix was deliberate. He wrote in the speech of ordinary people, not the language of scholars.

Dialects in Kabir's verse

Dialect	Place in the mix
Khadi boli	Drawn on
Braj	Drawn on
Bhojpuri	Drawn on
Marwari	Drawn on
Awadhi	Drawn on

Dialects as listed in a modern reference summary.

> 11. **Think it through:** Why does oral composition make authorship hard to prove? See answer ↓

Quick check 4. True or false: Kabir taught only in Sanskrit, the language of scholars. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What are the Bijak and the Adi Granth verses?

5 Bijak and Granth

5.1 Which books carry his name?

Works with verses attributed to Kabir include the **Bijak**, the Parachai, the Sakhi Granth and the Kabir Granthawali of Rajasthan.

The Adi Granth of the Sikhs also carries his verses.

5.2 Are all versions the same?

No. Except for the Adi Granth, the other texts exist in significantly different versions. It is unclear which is more original.

The Bijak alone survives in two major recensions.

5.3 How did the Sikh Granth come to hold Kabir?

The first Adi Granth was compiled by the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan. It was completed on **29 August 1604**.

Kabir stands among the Bhakti saints whose verses it holds, with Ramananda and Namdev.

5.4 Why did Nanak take to Kabir?

On more than one occasion Nanak quoted Kabir's verses with clear approval.

One writer links this to personal contact between the two. That claim is a tradition, not a proven fact.

> 12. **Think it through:** Why are the Sikh versions seen as more stable? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: The first Adi Granth was completed in 1604 under Guru Arjan and holds verses of Kabir. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Why did he die at Maghar?

6 Trial, Maghar and Flowers

6.1 Was he ever tried by the Emperor?

A Panth tradition tells of a Muslim saint who accused Kabir of claiming divine attributes. He urged that death was the fit penalty.

The story says **Sikandar Lodi**, the Delhi Emperor, had Kabir arrested. Many such tales are legend, so use them with care.

6.2 Why did he die at Maghar?

All accounts agree that his earthly life ended at **Maghar**, in the Gorakhpur district.

A belief of the time said that all who died in Kashi went straight to Ram. Those who died at Maghar would return as an ass.

Kabir rebuked them for their want of faith.

6.3 What happened to his body?

Hindus and Muslims argued over his body. Then Kabir appeared and told them to raise the cloth.

Under it lay only **a heap of flowers**. The Hindus took half and burnt them at Benares. The Muslims buried the other half at Maghar.

6.4 What stands for him today?

There are two temples to Kabir at Benares. Hindus maintain one, and Muslims maintain the other.

Songs of Kabir are sung daily in both.

13. **Think it through:** Why does the flower legend suit Kabir so well? See answer ↓

Quick check 6. True or false: Tradition says Kabir died at Maghar and left only flowers under his shroud. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What is the Kabir Panth, and who claims him?

7 Panth and Legacy

7.1 What is the Kabir Panth?

His followers are called Kabir Panthis. Kabir did not plan to found such a group.

In north and central India the Panth has two main divisions. One has its seat at **Kabir Chaura in Benares**, with a branch at Maghar. The other was founded by **Dharm Dass**.

7.2 What are the two divisions called?

The first is known as **Bap**, meaning Father. The second is known as **Mai**, meaning Mother.

Relations between the two have at times been strained.

7.3 Who owed a debt to Kabir?

Nanak Shah of the Punjab, founder of the Sikh community, owned a debt to him. So did Dadu of Ahmedabad (1544) and Jag Jiwan Dass of Oudh (1760).

7.4 Was Kabir a believer in one God?

A Kashmir chronicle calls him a **muwahid**, a believer in one God.

The word was not used by Muslims for idolaters. It marks him as a theist, not a pantheist.

14. **Think it through:** Why can so many groups claim one poet?

See answer ↓

Quick check 7. True or false: The word muwahid describes a believer in one God. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember this

- **Dates:** disputed; ranges 1398 to 1448, 1440 to 1518.
- **Community:** weaver in a Muslim household.
- **Teaching:** Nirguna Ram; rejects caste, idols and empty ritual.
- **Forms:** ramaini, shabda, sakhi.
- **Collections:** Bijak, Kabir Granthawali, Adi Granth (1604).
- **Death:** Maghar; flowers under the shroud.
- **Legacy:** Kabir Panth; Bap and Mai divisions.

Explain it back: Say what Kabir meant by Ram, and why the Maghar legend fits his teaching.

Practice MCQs

1. What was Kabir's trade?

A. Potter

B. Farmer

C. Weaver

D. Goldsmith

See answer ↓

2. What kind of God did Kabir teach about?

A. Saguna, with form

B. Nirguna, formless

C. No God at all

D. Many gods

See answer ↓

3. Which Bhakti teacher is traditionally named as Kabir's guru?

A. Ramananda

B. Namdev

C. Tulsidas

D. Surdas

See answer ↓

4. What is a doha?

A. A four-line chaupai

B. A prose sermon

C. A song for kirtan

D. A two-line rhyming couplet

See answer ↓

5. Who compiled the Adi Granth in 1604, including Kabir's verses?

A. Guru Arjan Dev

B. Guru Angad

C. Guru Nanak

D. Guru Gobind Singh

See answer ↓

6. What did the mourners find under Kabir's shroud, says the Maghar legend?

A. A manuscript

B. Only flowers

C. Gold coins

D. Ashes

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.**
   He worked all his life as a julaha, a low-caste weaver.
   ↑ Q1
2. **B.**
   His Ram is the Nirguna Ram, a formless God.
   ↑ Q2
3. **A.**
   The dominant tradition holds that Kabir was a disciple of Ramananda.
   ↑ Q3
4. **D.**
   A doha is a two-line rhyming couplet.
   ↑ Q4
5. **A.**
   Guru Arjan Dev compiled it in 1604.
   ↑ Q5
6. **B.**
   The legend says they found only flowers and divided them.
   ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** Some favour 1398 to 1448 and others 1440 to 1518. ↑ 1
2. **False.** He spoke of a God with neither form nor shape, who is not found in a temple. ↑ 2
3. **False.** He had no preference for either religion and rejected empty ritual in both. ↑ 3
4. **False.** He urged use of the vernacular so that all could understand. ↑ 4
5. **True.** It was completed on 29 August 1604 and includes Kabir among its saints. ↑ 5
6. **True.** The legend says his followers found only flowers and divided them. ↑ 6
7. **True.** It means a believer in one God, and was not used for idolaters. ↑ 7

8. **Think it through.** He lived by his own labour, not by temple gifts or court favour. He had no reason to defend any priest, Hindu or Muslim. ↑ 8
9. **Think it through.** Ram was a familiar word to his listeners. He used it to point to a God beyond any image. ↑ 9
10. **Think it through.** A critic of only one religion would be a partisan of the other. Attacking both showed he belonged to neither camp. ↑ 10
11. **Think it through.** A verse passes through many mouths before it is written. Each copyist can change it. ↑ 11
12. **Think it through.** They were written down early and then guarded as scripture. The oral and sect copies had more time to drift. ↑ 12
13. **Think it through.** It shows him refusing to belong to either community, even in death. The story may be a parable, not a record. ↑ 13
14. **Think it through.** His words refused to belong to anyone. So everyone could find something of their own in them. ↑ 14

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