Plurilingualism and the Problem of Translation/Adaptation: A Study of Select Sufi/Bhakti Poems in Bangla/Hindi Translation

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Abstract: While the academic subfields of translation and adaptation are well developed within Indian academia and abroad, the possibility of new theoretical frameworks cannot be ruled out, given the complex, inseparable, and overlapping linguistic, literary, and cultural traditions in South Asia. Among these literary traditions, there are a number of texts by a number of acclaimed Sufi and Bhakti poets from the medieval period, which often pose a challenge to determine their 'language' as such, which in turn problematises their so-called 'translation' and 'adaptation' as independent literary practices. Instead of this, these texts are subject to numerous translations/adaptations and inadvertently draw an ambiguous line between the two. The proposed paper selects some of Tagore's poems which are both creative and translations like *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (1915) and *Song Offerings* (1912) and their Hindi translation to argue that original text written by Sufi/Bhakti poets were *plurilingual* in nature that not only characterise its complex syncretic nature and humanistic fervour but complicates the very process of translation and adaptation by some of the modern Indian poets/translators. Through a detailed analysis of the translation-cum-adaptation of Tagore, the paper argues that, in this context, it is a daunting task for a modern scholar to distinguish between translation and adaptation, given the plurilingual nature of the selected texts. This paper particularly argues that the essence of plurilingualism is not only deeply rooted in Indian humanistic traditions, but also that an inability to translate/adapt them is the central feature of this Sufi/Bhakti literature, nurtured by a diverse, dynamic, and syncretic society throughout the centuries in India/South Asia. The paper engages not only with existing theories of adaptation and translation, literary histories, and linguistic debates, but also proposes an alternative method for understanding modern translation/adaptation of medieval Sufi/Bhakti texts.

Keywords: Adaptation; Translation; South Asia; Plurilingual Literatures; Syncretic; Sufi and Bhakti Literatures

Introduction

The body of scholarship in India and abroad that engages with a section of medieval Indian literature, specifically those in northern India, has more to do with the Sufi and Bhakti literatures starting from the 12th Century AD to the 17th century AD, than declassifying languages, dialects, idioms and vocabulary of the texts. The scholars, from the (mid) twentieth century onwards, are mostly invested in categorising the Sufi and Bhakti literatures within the popular literary framework of the Hindi-Urdu duo, or a few might ascribe importance to the regional dialects or languages still spoken across the Gangetic plains (both upper and lower), Punjab and *Rajputana*. And a vast majority of them, most of the time, underestimate the fact that there were fewer literary dialects than spoken ones in which a number of Sufi, Bhakti and Vaishnavite texts were written. It must be mentioned here that, as much as the colonial scholarship contributed more to the language parochialism than to the linguistic/literary unity, the postcolonial scholars sought to decode the prejudice and malice in colonial historiography and the classification of Indian languages. Instead of this, imbalanced verdicts are still being delivered by a number of recent scholars like Charlotte Vaudeville when she states that, *Awadhi* was a language spoken by the "Muslims" in Awadh and Peter Friedlander when he in his recent book *Kabir in Transformation: A Foundation of Creativity* (2023) argues that there is a manuscript found of Kabir in "Rajasthani" language. One is certainly left to wonder, especially when decolonisation as a process is vigorously taking place in the era of post-truth and emerging trend of "Indian Knowledge Systems" what exactly a "Rajasthani" language is where in the state of Rajasthan (a colonial border-creation) has multiple languages and among others, Mewari and Marwari has distinct literary traditions that dates back long years before the colonization of India?

It is in the spirit of the above proposition of language debates and literary historiography that always keeps new avenues open to change and challenges, comes across an intersectional point when one engages with the texts of a number of *Bhakti,* Sufi and Vaishnavite literatures produced in the

medieval India and transferred, transited, reproduced, adapted, carried forward and translated through centuries and reaches down to the hands of a twenty-first century reader. This must not be seen as a separate incident, but rather as part of a longstanding tradition regarding vernacular languages and literary traditions in India and South Asia, in broader terms. Among others, Rabindranath Tagore's translation of Kabir titled *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (1915), in association with his lifelong associate and literary-comrade, Evelyn Underhill, in the English language, is a landmark translation that ignited an interest in Kabir and other Sufi, Bhakti and *Vaishnavite l*iteratures during the time of colonial modernity in the early twentieth century. Tagore, as deeply rooted as he was in the Indian linguistic, cultural and literary traditions, apart from *One Hundred Verses*, continued adapting, translating, and reproducing them in his literary creations like novels, which this paper later terms as intertextuality and places it in line with the longstanding precolonial tradition of what this paper calls *interpolation through translation.* Whereas a number of scholars have already categorised them to have influenced by Sufi, Bhakti and Vaishnavite literatures and assessed their relevance in Tagore's works, there is a significant research gap in understanding them by using theories of adaptation and translation. Tagore, creative as he was, apart from the translations in *One Hundred Poems,* uses texts from the Sufi, *Bhakti* and *Vaishnavite* literatures in his works (such as *Gitanjali*) directly in a creative manner and in such a way that they resist any sort of conventional definition for predominant literary practices like translation and adaptation. By analysing some select excerpts that Tagore uses in his novels and a few translated verses from *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, this paper not only questions the very attempt to categorise the language of the Sufi, *Bhakti* and *Vaishnavite* literatures but argues that most of these texts are plurilingual in nature and this plurilinguality is a part of literary continuity that carries forward through continuous process of translation, adaptation, interpolation, and transition through oral means.

Moreover, there is a certain sort of mobility with those texts, and this mobility is not limited to linguistic exchanges and literary adaptations/translations but philosophical messages too that carry the very essence of harmony, tolerance and promote peaceful cohabitation of the people divided by

multiple religions, religious sects, castes and (often) ideology. This paper further argues that, although a modern scholar like Friedlander dismisses a modern Hindi/Bangla translation of Kabir as *inauthentic*, the very idea of syncretism and the message of harmony characterise the translated text. A scholar of translation studies might certainly note a number of 'additions' and 'omissions', but acknowledges at the same time that this has been the literary tradition of India/South Asia for more than five centuries since the time Indian societies were plagued by growing intolerance before the rise of the social movement like the Sufi and Bhakti.

The first part of the paper introduces the diversity of opinions regarding the language of the select texts and argues that most of the scholars, including the colonial historiographers, poets and writers (including Tagore) of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and the modern Hindi scholars, see them as only "Hindi" texts with some various variations in dialects. By questioning the process of ascribing a single linguistic category to select texts, this paper argues that most medieval Sufi and *Bhakti* texts, including those of Kabir and Tagore, are plurilingual and characterise the very essence of Indian languages before the colonial period. The second part of the paper, with select examples of multiple translations, shows the plurilingual nature of Kabir's poems and their trajectory as a continuous process of translation/adaptation within Indian vernacular literatures.

Language of Kabir: An Ongoing Debate

A number of scholars of the Hindi language claim that Kabir's songs were composed in "Hindi" or "medieval Hindi," which, by default, was carried forward by scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the introduction to the translation by Tagore, Evelyn Underhill writes that Kabir's songs are written in "the popular Hindi, not in the literary tongue, they were deliberately addressed---like the vernacular poetry of Jacopone da Todi and Richard Rolle---to the people rather than to the professionally religious class" (xx). She further underscores the fact the Kshiti Mohan Sen, on which Tagore's translation is based, "translated" from *various* "Hindi" sources including "wandering ascetics and minstrels" (xx). Barun Kumar Mishra summed up by saying that Kabir is

acknowledged as a "Hindi poet," mostly by the scholars of the Hindi language and literature ("Reading Kabir" 525). Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Namvar Singh and Purushottam Agrawal are among others who consider Kabir as a Hindi poet. Often, Kabir is portrayed as a mouthpiece of Hindu reformation movements and fits within the nationalistic discourses. Mishra, in his article, also talks about the *ultabhasi* language in some of Kabir's poems, or the language that is turned upside down i.e., a language with mixed vocabulary and syntax and so on. For Kshiti Mohan Sen, Kabir's language was "bhasha Hindi". For S. S. Das, Kabir's language is *panchmel khichdi* or "a hotch-potch" of multiple languages. Jha, in his article, often refers to Kabir's "localised idioms" (Jha 53). Moreover, a number of scholars named a host of other north Indian languages and dialects as the language of Kabir---from "Rajasthani" to Bangla, including Braj, Awadhi and Bhojpuri. Eminent Kabir scholar Charlotte Vaudeville, in her article "Kabir's Language and Language, Hindui as the Language of non-conformity" (1990), quotes Rev. Ahmed Shah to argue that Kabir wrote in the spoken dialect of his area (Mirzapur, Banares and Gorakhpur) and it is Bhojpuri (259). Grierson is of the opinion that the language of the *bijak* of Kabir is old Awadhi (259). The debate over Kabir's language is ongoing.

In the introduction to his *Shantiniketan Kabir Part 1,* which is in Bangla, Kshiti Mohan Sen admits that the collection is a translation; however, he does not mention the language from which it was translated. It seems from this particular proposition that the literary language of the early colonial and pre-colonial North India was fluid, and one hardly made any attempt to distinguish the language(s) of the literary texts produced during those times. It is hard to determine the language/dialect of Kabir as the collections that Tagore and Underhill used to translate are based on multiple sources, both contemporary and those available in archives. Therefore, the role of translation not just in Kabir in *English* but in *Kabir* in Hindi cannot be left out of the magnifying glass. The 'Hindi' texts of Kabir are *constructed*, rather *reconstructed* and then translated and adapted into multiple Modern Indian Languages. This construction and reconstruction that happens in the hands of Baleshwar Prasad Agarwal, Kshiti Mohan Sen, Tagore, Ali Sardar Jafri, and many others in the Hindi language is what this paper points toward and argues that they pose a specific challenge to the

modern readers to distinguish them as independent literary practices either as 'translation' or 'adaptation'.

By problematising the linguistic discourses surrounding the text of Kabir and questioning their originality, this paper further argues that there is a need to distinguish between dialects or language as such and literary dialects, which often may look detached from society, but this was the literary culture during the medieval period and that the language of the received texts of Kabir is essentially plurilingual. This plurilinguality makes Kabir more accessible, adaptable, and translatable. Both the linguistic and philosophical legacies of Kabir in contemporary India (notwithstanding the paradigm shift from the colonial to the postcolonial period) constitute a shared heritage. This shared heritage is the core essence of syncretism that the Sufi and *Bhakti* poets of medieval India visualised and the role of translation and translations of Tagore and others cannot be undermined in this particular context in carrying forward the same to the twentieth and twenty-first century readers. Whereas most of the scholars acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of Kabir's text, they often overlook the complex and composite nature of Indian societies, otherwise divided on strict religious and caste lines, and thus, this sort of heterogeneity or interpolation or mixing up with other languages, cultures and literary traditions was very common in precolonial north India. Moreover, a number of scholars often overlook the fact that colonialism has left a huge impact on shaping the Indian languages, which later on emerged as Modern Indian Languages, and the language parameters which we have today to assess a language cannot be applied to the languages that had existed during the precolonial or early colonial times. In fact, most of the precolonial literary traditions share similar characteristics. Therefore, by not acknowledging the heterogeneity of Kabir's language/text, one is denying the very legacy of the syncretic nature of medieval Bhakti and Sufi literatures, which only sought to restore harmony and a faith in humanity rather than sectarianism of any kind.

Which Kabir? Exploring Multiple Kabirs through Centuries

Language apart, there is a host of opinions about the manuscripts, which adds further to the ambiguity of Kabir's language. Peter Friedlander, in his book *Kabir Poems in Transformation: A Fountain of*

Creativity (2023), writes that the Bangla *transliterated* text of Kshiti Mohan Sen, on whose text Tagore based his translation, is actually based on another "Hindi translation" by Baleshwar Prasad Agarwal (105). Ninety-seven out of a hundred poems in Tagore's Kabir are based on "Agarwal's translation" (105). Needless to mention, the English translation of Tagore is based on another translation (most probably Hindi, which is why Tagore and Underhill preferred to call it *Hindi*) by Baleshwar Prasad Agarwal. Friedlander points out, through a detailed study, how techniques like "cuts, combination and alterations" are used both in Agarwal and Sen's texts. Thus, one can simply imagine the multiple layers of translation Kabir went through, starting from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first century. Although Sen, in the Bengali introduction in the first part of the book, mentions that he used multiple biblical sources as well as sources recited by a number of Sadhus in and around Banaras.

Theoretical Frameworks

Having stated and questioned the authenticity of the original, this paper now proposes to use theories of adaptation and translation to understand this particular case of Kabir in translation/adaptation**.** The so-called translation by Tagore is neither a translation nor an adaptation as such, but stands somewhere in between. This ambiguity has been a longstanding feature of the vernacular literature for centuries. Adaptation as a practice is not new to Tagore, nor is the tradition of *anuvad,* which has existed for a long time. It is widely acknowledged by modern scholars that the indigenous practice of *anuvad* and translation, introduced by Europeans, cannot be equated. Both of them have long, independent traditions in their respective linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical contexts. Tagore harmonised this throughout his literary career, as did many other early modern Indian writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Linda Hutchinson, in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), provides a detailed definition of adaptation, tracing its etymological roots to contemporary practices. She keeps her canvas centred mostly on cinematic adaptations of literary texts and adaptations from one semiotic medium to another, which, in the theories of translation studies, is called *intersemiotic* translation. However,

there seems to be a gap in the research where translation and adaptation are treated as independent creative practices, whether literary or cinematic. In this particular context of Kabir in Hindi/Bangla translation, the translators, compilers, and interpreters of Kabir are exactly following the methods that Hutchinson lays out in her book regarding adaptation: it is an adjustment, an alteration, making something suitable, a reshaping, or the making of something being adapted. Adaptation, for the most part, in literary theories, and for Hutchinson, is '*adjusting*.' This *adjustment* (both linguistic and cultural) has characterised different versions of Kabir across Indian languages, thereby raising questions about its authenticity. Whereas transposition is another literary activity often used in relation to adaptation, but in this particular context of Kabir in translation, it is not a case of transposition.

Discourses related to adaptation most of the time are focused on cinematic adaptations of literary texts and vice versa. Although there are some cases of literary adaptations of another preexisting text, it does not find much place in contemporary theoretical discourses. This paper is more invested in contemplating a kind of literary practice that traverses through any given criteria of translation and adaptation as separate literary practices. In the long, continuous vernacular literary traditions, there are multiple overlaps and overflows that are often plurilingual and inseparable, and Rabindranath Tagore's translation of Kabir is one of them. A simplistic look at the translation may appear to reveal multiple issues, but an in-depth analysis might reveal the patterns of adaptation and translation that are transmuted in the text.

Translating or Adapting: Where does Kabir lie?

Peter Friedlander, Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, Rameshwar Mishra, and scores of others have worked on Kabir in Hindi in the 20th and 21st centuries and have pointed out multiple differences across versions of Kabir and their translations. Whereas a majority of the scholars are concerned with the authenticity of the original manuscript and accuracy of the translation, they overlook the very fact that the concept of 'translation' was very different during the precolonial times, which, to some extent, was carried on during the colonial period, and Tagore is one of those. Tagore's freedom to translate Kabir's verses

without paying much attention to their authenticity can also be seen as a longstanding tradition that has characterised precolonial *Bhasha* literary exchanges. He is like one of those vernacular poets in precolonial times who took the liberty to translate Kabir as he deemed fit. The process of translation or adaptation, which this study is concerned with, did not start and end with Tagore; rather, it must be seen as a continuous process of literary exchange in the context of Indian/South Asian *Bhasha* literature. A few examples from the 'claimed' different versions of Kabir and the translations of Tagore shall reveal the journey that lasted up to several centuries.

"*Tohi mori lagan lagaye re fakirwa*" is one of the celebrated *bijak* of Kabir found a place in Tagore's translation and subsequently several other translations in Bangla and Hindi. Interestingly, Tagore's translation and the popularity of the translation kicked off a new interest in Kabir. The text in Rameshwar Mishra's 'Hindi' books reads:

तोहिं मोरी लगन लगाए रे फकीरवा ।

सोवत ही मैं अपने मंदिर में,

सब्दन मरी जगाये रे फकीरवा।

बूड़त ही भाव के सागर में,

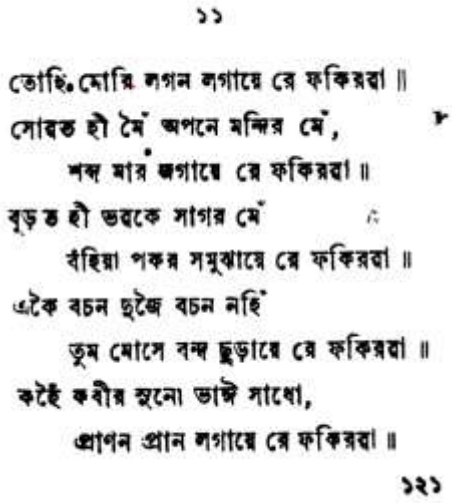
वहियाँ पकरि समुझाए रे फकीरवा।

एक वचन वचन नहिं दूजा

तुम मोसें बंद छुड़ाये रे फकीरवा।

कहै कबीर सुनो भाई साधो,

प्रानन प्राण लगाये रे फकीरवा।



১১

তোহি মোরি লগন লগায়ে রে ফকিরবা ॥
সোবত হী মৈঁ অপনে মন্দির মেঁ,
শব্দ মার জগায়ে রে ফকিরবা ॥
বুড়ত হী ভবকে সাগর মেঁ
বঁহিয়া পকর সমুঝায়ে রে ফকিরবা ॥
একৈ বচন দুজৈ বচন নহিঁ
তুম মোসে বন্দ ছুড়ায়ে রে ফকিরবা ॥
কহৈঁ কবীর সুনো ভাঈ সাধো,
প্রাণন প্রান লগায়ে রে ফকিরবা ॥

১২১

The text of Ali Sardar Jafri is the same; however, Mishra notes there is a missing line in Tagore's and adds the same in the footnote. The difference is clear between them. Now, let us look at the Bengali transliteration by Kshiti Mohan Sen that Tagore used for his translation in *One Hundred Poems*. Tagore's translations are done not from the *transliteration* of Sen's but from the explanatory paragraph or commentary, or a prose translation that follows. Interestingly, it is not known whether Tagore consulted the original version of Kabir in their original scripts. This is how the transliteration reads/looks:

(Sen 121)

The prose translation by Sen follows:

> হে ফকীর, তুমি আমাকে কি প্রেমে টানিয়া লইলে ? আপনার মন্দিরে ঘুমাইয়া ছিলাম, সংগীতের আঘাতে আমাকে জাগাইলে হে ফকীর। ভব সুমুদ্রের মধ্যে ডুবিতেছিলাম, বাহু ধরে আমাকে রক্ষা করিয়াছ হে ফকীর। একটি মাত্র কথা, আর দ্বিতীয় কথাটি নাই, তুমি আমাকে দিয়া সব বন্ধন ছাড়াইয়াছ হে ফকির ! কবীর কহেন, প্রাণে আমার প্রাণ লাগাইয়াছ হে ফকীর! (Sen 122)

Tagore translated the same in the *One Hundred Poems* as:

> To Thee Thou hast drawn my love, O
>
> Fakir!

I was sleeping in my own chamber,

And Thou didst awaken me;

Striking me with Thy voice, O

Fakir!

I was drowning in the deeps of the

Ocean of this world, and Thou

Didst save me: upholding me with

Thine arm, O Fakir!

Only one word and no second—and

Thou hast made me tear off all

My bonds, O Fakir!

Kabir says, "Thou hast united Thy

heart to my heart, O Fakir!"

One can simply note the differences in form, structure, and diction that Tagore used, and use them to make the translation more creative, which is close to an adaptation or what P. Lal would have called a transcreation. In the hands of Tagore, a different Kabir emerges.

Friedlander translated the same in such a way:

O Fakir! My devotion is fixed on you

O Fakir!

My devotion is fixed on you.

I was sleeping in my home

when your words pierced me, and I awoke.

I was drowning in the world ocean

when you grasped my hand and rescued me.

I am promised to you alone, to no other;

You freed me from bondage.

Kabir says, Listen, brother sadhs,

I sing of the virtue of the true name. (140)

Friedlander's translation is certainly one of the closest to Kabir's. But one must distinguish between the translational practices that existed in the Indian vernacular languages, those that continued among poets like Tagore, and the standard and professional practices of translation that emerged with the establishment of colonial institutions (such as the Fort William College, the Srirampur Mission, and other missionaries) in the nineteenth century. Friedlander's translation can certainly be defined as a "translation," but it poses a challenge to categorise Tagore's translation, given the liberty he took. In Tagore's translation, Kabir and the translator's persona become more important than the authenticity of the text.

Ranjit Saha, a scholar of Tagore of in Hindi and a prolific contemporary translator of Tagore into Hindi in his translation of the *One Hundred Verses of Kabir* titled as *Kabir ke Sau Pad* (1924) translated the same as:

अरे फ़क़ीर, तुमने मुझे अपने प्रेम पाश में बांध लिया।

मैं तो अपने कक्ष में सोई हुई थी,

और तुमने अपने स्वर के आघात से जगा दिया।

अरे फ़क़ीर, भाव सागर में डूब रही थी

लेकिन तुमने अपने हाथों मेरी बाँह पकड़ मेरी रक्षा की।

मात्रा एक ही शब्द द्वारा, बिना किसी और बात के,

अरे फ़क़ीर, तुमने मुझे समस्त बन्धनों से छुड़ा दिया।

कबीर कहते हैं, "अरे फ़क़ीर, तुमने अपने प्राणों से

मेरे प्राणों को जोड़ दिया। " (Saha 57)

This practice of translation is something close to what Mona Baker calls "back translation." Back translation occurs when a translated text is translated back into the language of its origin, which is no longer available. The condition is interesting here; the original text is available, but whereas it is claimed to be in Hindi, there is a need for an updated translation in "Hindi" to suit the temperament of a contemporary reader who might have difficulty in understanding Kabir in its original language. Saha adds the original text of "O Fakirva," the translation, and then supplements it with his own translation. This is something William Radice also did in his 2011 translation of *Gitanjali*. In all these cases, the translated texts read more like adaptations than translations.

Needless to mention, the second decade of the 20th century was one of the productive decades of Tagore's life. As much as he produced in creative writing, he also translated multiple works of Kabir and his own translation of *Gitanjali*. It is interesting to note that there are similarities between his self-translation in *Gitanjali,* which turned up as *Song Offerings* (1912), and there are striking similarities between the translation of Kabir and *Song Offerings*, which certainly is the case where Tagore's creativity and philosophy, especially the mystique one, are influenced by Kabir and his philosophy. Song no 16 of *Song Offerings* reads:

You came down from your throne and stood at my cottage door.
I was singing all alone in a corner, and the melody caught your ear. You came down
and stood at my cottage door.

Masters are many in your hall, and songs are sung there at all hours. But the simple carol of this novice struck at your love. One plaintive little strain mingled with the great music of the world, and with a flower for a prize, you came down and stopped at my cottage door.

The original text is the song no 16 in Bangla *Gitanjali*: it reads:

তব সিংহাসনের আসন হতে এলে তুমি নেমে--

মোর বিজন ঘরের দ্বারের কাছে দাঁড়ালে নাথ, থমে॥

একলা বসে আপন-মনে গাইতেছিলেম গান;

তোমার কানে গেল সে সুর, এলে তুমি নেমে,

মোর বিজন ঘরের দ্বারের কাছে দাঁড়ালে নাথ, থমেকে॥

তোমার সভায় কত-না গান, কতই আছেন গুণী--

গুণহীনের গানখানি আজ বাজল তোমার প্রেমে!

লাগল সকল তানের মাঝে একটি করুণ সুর,

হাতে লয়ে বরণমালা এলে তুমি নেমে--

মোর বিজন ঘরের দ্বারের কাছে দাঁড়ালে নাথ, থমেকে॥

Conclusion

As this paper remains focused on the English translation of Rabindranath Tagore to argue about the inseparability of adaptation from translation as independent literary practices, it traces upon a number of issues like language, dialect, scripts, and manuscripts. It is generally observed that contemporary scholars who deal with texts produced during the medieval times often overlook the linguistic and cultural aspects of the text, which were and still are in a constant flux. As much as scholars of Hindi and other languages/dialects claim Kabir as their own, this paper merely emphasises the plurilinguality of Sufi and Bhakti texts as they travelled across geographical locations and thus incorporated linguistic, cultural, and literary traits. And, these are often inseparable. This paper argues for the syncretic nature of Kabir's text, which resists accurate translation or adaptation. The plurilingualism and multicultural cosmopolitanism, which are deeply indigenous to precolonial South Asia, are distinctly visible. In fact, a so-called modern successful translation is to do away with the very features of Sufi and Bhakti literatures.

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