



# Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India

By Linda Hess

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## Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India By Linda Hess

Kabir was a great iconoclastic-mystic poet of fifteenth-century North India; his poems were composed orally, written down by others in manuscripts and books, and transmitted through song. Scholars and translators usually attend to written collections, but these present only a partial picture of the Kabir who has remained vibrantly alive through the centuries mostly in oral forms. Entering the worlds of singers and listeners in rural Madhya Pradesh, *Bodies of Song* combines ethnographic and textual study in exploring how oral transmission and performance shape the content and interpretation of vernacular poetry in North India. The book investigates textual scholars' study of oral-performative traditions in a milieu where texts move simultaneously via oral, written, audio/video-recorded, and electronic pathways.

As texts and performances are always socially embedded, Linda Hess brings readers into the lives of those who sing, hear, celebrate, revere, and dispute about Kabir. *Bodies of Song* is rich in stories of individuals and families, villages and towns, religious and secular organizations, castes and communities. Dialogue between religious/spiritual Kabir and social/political Kabir is a continuous theme throughout the book: ambiguously located between Hindu and Muslim cultures, Kabir rejected religious identities, pretensions, and hypocrisies. But even while satirizing the religious, he composed stunning poetry of religious experience and psychological insight. A weaver by trade, Kabir also criticized caste and other inequalities and today serves as an icon for Dalits and all who strive to remove caste prejudice and oppression.

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### **Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #96584 in Books
- Published on: 2015-08-27
- Released on: 2015-08-27
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.20" h x 1.20" w x 9.10" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 488 pages



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"[A] rich and complex book *Bodies of Song* is a deeply personal testimony. Hess certainly succeeds in giving the reader a feeling of actually accompanying her on her travels, her interaction and conversations with local people, and her perception of their values, goals, and emotions. She makes us realize the "embodiedness," the physical and social experience inseparable from the performance of Kabir's songs [A]n exceptionally good read for Indologists, scholars of oral traditions and cultural communication, historians of religion, and, not least, the many who are involved in one way or another with the infinite complexity of India. All will, I am sure, find that spending time in Linda Hess's company is not also challenging, but also rewarding."--*History of Religions*

"Recommended. Upper-division undergraduates through faculty."--*CHOICE*

"This wide-ranging and impassioned study will remain a benchmark of Kabir studies for decades to come." -  
-*Religious Studies Review*

#### About the Author

**Linda Hess** is a Senior Lecturer of Religious Studies at Stanford University.

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